

**THE EFFECT OF CONSUMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY ON THE EVALUATION
OF ONLINE POLITICAL NEWS MEDIA CREDIBILITY**

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Communication

by

Janna Rose Irons

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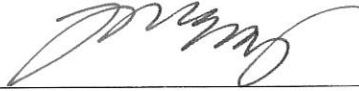
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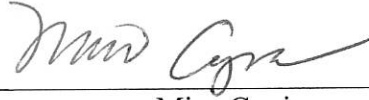
The Effect of Consumer-Based Brand Equity on the
Evaluation of Online Political News Media Credibility



Yang Feng, Chair
School of Journalism and Media Studies



Joel Davis
School of Journalism and Media Studies



Miro Copic
Marketing Department

4/13/17

Approval Date

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Effect of Consumer-Based Brand Equity on the
Evaluation of Online Political News Media Credibility

by

Janna Rose Irons

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The divisive election of 2016 brought online news credibility to the forefront, motivating further study into how our perceived self-congruence with a media brand affects our perception of news article credibility. Using the marketing concept customer-based brand equity (CBBE), this study examines the relationship between media brand attachment, ideology, and readers' perception of credibility. Past studies have shown that CBBE is significantly related to media channel credibility. This study will further that research to explore how participants' CBBE and self-image congruence with an online political news outlet affect their perceptions of article credibility.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The 2016 Presidential election highlighted not only the ideological divide in the U.S. electorate, but also the role that news media plays in disseminating the stories that bolster that divide. Online news outlets, as well as the social media channels where their articles are circulated, have provided our bipartisan electorate with the ability to consume news that reinforces our ideology—thus resulting in further polarization (Slater, 2007).

Consumers' perception of news media credibility has consistently dropped since the 1970s (Meyer, 2004). Simultaneously, we have seen a shift toward partisanship in news; in particular, the branding of Fox News and other outlets as conservative alternatives to what they refer to as “liberal media.” This research seeks to understand how consumers' personal ideology and connection to media brands affect viewers' perception of credibility.

Research into selective exposure has indicated that consumers seek out news that is consistent with their pre-existing beliefs and that consumers prefer news sources that share their point of view (Metzger, Hartsell, & Flanagin, 2015). In addition, studies have shown that people perceive biased sources that are consistent with their beliefs as more credible than unbiased sources (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985).

With the proliferation of news outlets and content over the last decade, especially online, news media began targeting specific groups rather than consumers at large in order to attract audiences (Nelson-Field & Riebe, 2011). Further, Stroud (2011) provided evidence of an increase in news media bias as a means to appeal to partisan U.S. audiences. This deliberate shift from a focus on neutral, unbiased news toward a media landscape where differentiation and branding are now increasingly more important necessitates further study into how news “brands” affect viewers' perceptions of the news stories they tell.

This study aims to use the marketing concept of Consumer Based Brand Equity (CBBE) to help understand how our self-perception affects our perception of media outlets and their credibility.

Keller (1998) defined customer-based brand equity (CBBE) as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (p. 8). Put simply, CBBE accounts for the accumulated brand awareness, familiarity, resonance, and image customers attribute to a particular brand. In this study, as in past research, we will focus on consumer-based brand equity, given that the population being studied are news consumers and not necessarily customers. Past research has revealed that when a person reports high CBBE with a brand, he or she is more likely to view that brand as positive, have higher purchasing intent and, in the case of media outlets, rate individual messages (articles) higher.

Past studies have found that when the same text into the layout of different media, the content is perceived differently. For example, Fichter and Jonas (2008) placed the same content into a newspaper participants viewed as “innovative and accurate” and one that was perceived as “inaccurate, tabloid magazine,” and found that participants viewed the content as far more favorable in the magazine that they had a positive perception of than the one that they did not.

The concept of brand image and media has been studied extensively (Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2002; Kim, Baek, & Martin 2010; Lin, Atkin, & Abelman, 2002; Machin & Niblock, 2008) and the concept of Consumer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) and its effects has also been widely studied (Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005; Tong & Hawley, 2009; Yoo & Donthu, 2001), but few studies have looked specifically at the way in which brand image of specific news media affects perceptions of the brand and the accuracy and veracity of the stories/content reported by that brand.

According to Pew Research Center (2016), 38% of Americans often get news online, either from news websites/apps (28%), on social media (18%), or both; and the portion of Americans who ever get news on a mobile device has gone up from 54% in 2013 to 72% today. This fact confirms the need for further research into online news specifically, and the relationship between ideological self-congruence, CBBE, and perceptions of content credibility.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

CONSUMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY

CBBE occurs “when people have a high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand and hold strong, favorable, and unique brand associations in memory” (Keller, 1998, p. 86). Past research has used two methods to measure brand equity: measuring the source of brand equity and measuring the outcome of brand equity (Keller, 1998). This study will focus on the outcome of brand equity, evaluating a brand from the consumer’s perspective to understand the brand’s value to news media consumer. Strong brand equity means that customers have high brand-name awareness, maintain a favorable brand image, perceive that the brand performs better the other, comparable brands, and are loyal to the brand.

Aaker (1991) divided the measurement of brand equity into five categories: perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand association, and other proprietary brand assets such as patents, trademarks, and channel relationships. The first four represent customers’ evaluations and reactions to the brand that can be readily understood by consumers, so they have been widely adopted to measure customer-based brand equity in previous studies (Oyedeji 2007, 2010; Oyedeji & Hou, 2010).

Brands with high CBBE enjoy a host of market advantages, including relatively greater audience perception of media credibility and news quality, higher levels of brand loyalty, and price premiums, compared with competitors with lower CBBE (Keller, 2001; Oyedeji, 2007).

BRAND IMAGE, CBBE, AND MEDIA

While few studies have examined brand equity or CBBE specifically as it relates to political media outlets, several have more generally looked at the branding of news and its

effects. For example, Chan-Olmsted and Kim (2002) looked at the image of the PBS (Public Broadcasting Station) brand compared with other broadcast television channels (i.e. Nickelodean, Discovery A&E), and found that despite the high level of competition among cable channels, the uniqueness of PBS makes it still a valuable media outlet. This research confirmed the importance of having a unique and positive brand image in this multi-channel environment.

Building upon that, Chan-Olmsted and Cha (2007) provided further evidence for the value of branding media as it is applied to television news. Comparing the brand personalities of CNN, CBS, MSN/CB, ABC, and Fox, the study looked specifically at whether the concept of brand personality could be applied to news networks, and found a correlation between personality distinction (different from the rest) and opinion toward the brand. The research also revealed a positive linkage between superior brand images and viewership in this product market.

Hovland and Weiss (1951) were the first to look at the way in which the perception of the media outlet affects the way users comprehend the information. In this research, participants were presented with the same news message apparently originating from a source with either high or low credibility, and then the participants' message retention and opinion change were measured. This study found that participants have higher message retention and opinion change when the message appeared to have come from the source they believed was more credible (even though the message was the same).

Fichter and Jonas (2008) built upon these findings, focusing on brand image and general product ratings. In this study, participants were exposed to the same story laid out to look as if it appeared in New Zealand tabloid newspaper, *Blick*, or traditional quality newspaper, *NZZ*. The research revealed that brand images affect both the rating of the article overall and users consumption experience, so that the article appearing in the newspaper that had a positive image was rated more positive and vice versa.

Research by Kim et al. (2010) revealed that “people pay more attention to and become more reliant on media they consider credible” (p. 127), but that consumers want more than credibility—they want brand personality. While their research did not look at personality in terms of political ideology, it did suggest that news consumers don't simply want the most credible, neutral news source; they also want news with the right personality

(defined in their research by five dimensions: trustworthiness, dynamism, sincerity, sophistication, and toughness). They suggest that media brands should “fine-tune their images to survive competition” (p. 128).

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND MEDIA

Conceptually, ideology has been defined by researchers in many ways. For the purpose of this study we will focus on political ideology as defined by Lyons and Scheb (1992): “an abstract, integrated view of the political world giving rise to a logical structure of attitudes toward policy issues, political parties, and candidates” (p. 573).

Ideological identity has been most frequently measured along a liberal-to-conservative continuum, although researchers debate whether the terms “liberal” and “conservative” are interpreted by participants in the same way researchers define them (Lyons & Scheb, 1992). Studies have shown, however, that individuals’ self-identification on the liberal-conservative spectrum affects their perception (Holm & Robinson, 1978).

In more recent studies, researchers have looked at the psychological and behavioral differences between people who self-identify on different ends of the political spectrum. Wicks, Wicks, and Morimoto (2014) found that conservatives were most prone to use conservative talk radio, Christian radio and TV, and Fox News, and that liberals were more prone to use PBS and Facebook. They also found that people appear to seek out partisan media and messages consistent with their political leanings.

Hollander (2008) analyzes national survey data from 1989 to 2006 and found that news audiences have become more partisan and that they prefer media that is friendly to their own political belief. In addition, research (Oyedeji, 2008) has shown that partisanship affects perceptions of news media credibility; specifically, that political alignment results in perceptions of higher message credibility. Likewise, Baum and Gussin (2008) found that political ideology predicts perceptions of news bias. They found that conservatives perceive more bias on CNN and liberals more on Fox News.

Fox News is known for its conservative bias (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). According to Collins (2004), Fox News’ ideology-based branding strategy is different from MSNBC and CNN in that their focus is specifically along ideological lines. In his book, he notes that Fox News has been successful because they’ve been able to identify a distinct segment

(conservatives) and market specifically to them. According to Pew Research Center (2014) conservatives “are tightly clustered around a single news source, far more than any other group in the survey, with 47% citing Fox News as their main source for news about government and politics” whereas liberals “are less unified in their media loyalty; they rely on a greater range of news outlets, including some – like NPR and the New York Times– that others use far less.”

SELF-CONGRUENCE

Another important component in brand evaluation is self-image congruence— whether a brand matches a person’s self-image, and the effect that has on evaluation and purchasing decision. Studies have looked at physical product brands (Govers & Schoormans, 2005; Sirgy, 1985) and have found that people prefer products with a brand personality that matches their self-image and that they attempt to bring their self-identity in congruence with the images of the brands they prefer. These studies suggest that not only is a brand’s images (credible, likeable, positive, etc.) important, but it’s also important that the brand’s image matches the self-image or desired self-image of consumers.

In the CBBE model, “the most valuable brand building block, brand resonance, occurs when all the other core brand values are completely ‘in sync’ with consumer wants, needs, and desires” (Keller, 1998, p. 87). We must therefore consider not only the associations people make with a brand, but also whether they connect with those associations. Past research (e.g. Dolich, 1969; Grovers & Shoormans, 2005) has confirmed that people prefer brands in which the brand or product personality matches their self-image.

According to Keller (1998), “a brand with the right identity and meaning can make a customer feel it is relevant and ‘my kind of product’” (p. 87). The strongest brands will be those to which consumers become so attached and passionate that they, in effect, become evangelists or missionaries and attempt to share their beliefs and spread the word about the brand” (Keller, 1998, p, 87). But this preference for products that we have brand-personality congruence with has other significant effects. Research has found that when consumers have a sense of self-congruence with a product, not only so they prefer it, but in the case of media, they also find it more credible. Gunther (1992) argues that, “among the many variables posed

and tested as predictors of credibility, a person's involvement in situations, issues, or groups will show the greatest explanatory power" (p. 152).

Building upon the idea that self-congruence plays a major role in whether CBBE will affect attitudes or behaviors, Oyedeji (2010) tested this hypothesis using the Credible Brand Model, which he developed based on the principles of CBBE and past research on group membership and credibility. Oyedeji (2010) argued that ideological congruency, which he defined as "the extent to which news audience members believe that a media outlet's worldview mirrors their own personal worldviews" (p. 85), predicts CBBE, and that CBBE predicts media credibility, and media credibility predicts message credibility. The results of this study confirmed that this sense of membership into an ideological group (that is, your self-congruence with it), ultimately affects whether a consumer will find a particular piece of media credible.

CBBE AND CREDIBILITY

Oyedeji (2007) extended brand image research by applying the customer-based brand equity model, specifically, to the media. The study used an experiment method to measure participants' perceptions of media credibility and CBBE for several news stations. The results revealed that perceived quality, brand association, and brand loyalty were significantly related to media channel credibility. That is, when participants perceived a brand as high quality, had positive associations with the brand and had high brand loyalty, they were most likely to view the brand as credible.

Based on this model and research, this study will also measure whether participants feel a sense of self-congruence or group membership with the news media outlets and the effect that has on CBBE and perceived article credibility.

- **H₁**: If self-congruence with a media brand is related to CBBE, then individuals in the self-congruent condition should display higher levels of CBBE with that media brand than those in the not self-congruent group.
- **H₂**: If high CBBE is related to media brand credibility, then individuals with higher CBBE with a media brand should display higher ratings of that media brand's content credibility.
- **H₃**: Individuals in the self-congruent condition will display higher ratings of that media brand's content credibility than those in the not self-congruent condition.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

The experiment is web-based and used Amazon Mechanical Turk to recruit an online convenience sample. Participants completed the questionnaire on their home or work computer. Participants were required to be in the United States. No other stipulations were given as to who could participate. Each participant was paid \$.50 for their completed experimental survey.

A total of 320 participants initially completed the questionnaire. A total of 14 participants' responses were removed from the data set. Thirteen participants' responses were removed because they incorrectly answered the comprehension question that was included in the survey to ensure participants read the news article presented as part of the treatment. Incorrect answers to this question indicated that they either did not read the article or did not understand it, both of which disqualify them from being able to assess the credibility of the article in the subsequent questions. One participant's responses were also removed from the data set because he or she failed to answer the first survey question regarding his/her personal political ideology.

Therefore, the total sample size for this study is 306, of which 191 (62%) male and 114 (37%) female. Participant ages ranged from 20-77, with 34% in the 20-29 range, 36% in the 30-39 range, 15% in the 40-49 range, 9% in the 50-59 range, and 6% older than 60. Seventy-five percent of participants identified as white (non-Hispanic), 10% as black or African-American, 7% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 4% as Hispanic, 3% as mixed race, and 1% as Native American/American Indian.

PROCEDURES

This study consists of an online questionnaire, which first asked for participants' personal political ideology and perceived bias of online news media sources. Then each participant is placed into one of two experimental conditions where he or she was asked questions measuring his or her CBBE with that news media outlet, as well as the credibility of a neutral article laid out to look as if it appeared on that news outlet's website. Studies have shown (Johnson & Kaye, 1998) that the online version of news media outlets are perceived as no less credible than their print or broadcast counterparts, therefore the websites for Fox News and The New York Times were used for the treatment in this study. The survey measured how self-congruence with an online news media outlet affects perception of journalism quality.

Given the importance of these manipulations, two pretests were needed. The first pre-test surveyed a convenience sample of 25 people to confirm that online news sources used in the main study were accurately classified as liberal and conservative, respectively. Participants were exposed to a list of 10 online political news media sources representing a range of political orientation (FoxNews.com, NPR.org, CNN.com, NYTimes.com, MSNBC.com, WSJ.com, HuffingtonPost.com, WashingtonPost.com, ABCNews.com, USAToday.com) and were asked to rank order them from most liberal to most conservative. The outlet ranked most liberal (NYTimes.com) and most conservative (FoxNews.com) were used in the main study (see Appendix A).

The second pre-test also surveyed a convenience sample of 25 people to confirm that that the news article used in the main study is considered credible and unbiased. Participants were asked to read the text of three short political news articles, pulled from various news outlets in the first pretest. Participants only viewed the text of the articles; no cues were given as to where the articles appeared or who wrote them (see Appendix B). In order to reduce presentation order bias, the article presentation order was randomized for each respondent. Further, to reduce other aspects of presentation bias, all articles were formatted identically and were of the same length. Participants were asked to rate each article using the credibility index adapted from Gaziano and McGrath (1986) and modified by Meyer (1988), which uses the mean of five factors contributing to credibility (fairness, bias, accuracy, trustworthiness, and completeness). The article rated most credible was included in the main study.

Qualtrics was used to build the experimental survey and store data collected. Qualtrics is specifically designed to meet and exceed industry standards for Internet security as well as IRB standards for the protection of research participants. The company's servers, database, and web presence employ multiple forms of enterprise-level security features to accomplish these goals. Qualtrics's servers are housed in a secure data facility and are monitored 24 hours-per-day and 7 days-per-week by network operations personnel for all aspects of operational security.

MEASURES

Personal political ideology was assessed using a 6-point Likert scale (very conservative to very liberal). Participants who self-identified as very conservative, conservative, or slightly conservative were classified as "conservative." Likewise, participants who self-identified as very liberal, liberal, or slightly liberal were classified as "liberal."

News media bias was assessed using a 6-point Likert scale (very conservative to very liberal). Participants were asked to rate five political news media websites (FoxNews.com, MSNBC.com, WashingtonPost.com, NYTimes.com, and CNN.com). This question was used to ensure that the two media outlets used in the treatment (FoxNews.com and NYTimes.com) were accurately perceived by participants as conservative and liberal, respectively. The other three news media sources were included to avoid priming.

Self-congruence with a political news media outlet was defined as having the same political ideology as the perceived bias of that media outlet. For example, a participant who identified himself/herself as liberal is randomly assigned in the treatment group with the liberal news media outlet (The New York Times) he/she would be classified as "self-congruent." If that participant was randomly assigned to the conservative news media outlet (Fox News), he or she would be classified as "not self-congruent."

Consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) is defined by previous research (Aaker, 1991; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). CBBE was measured using the mean of the 15 items. Each item was measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The questions address the four dimensions of CBBE: perceived quality, brand awareness, brand personality, and brand loyalty. These 15 items were averaged to form an index for

CBBE. Overall reliability for the index was acceptable with $\alpha = .93$. Past research has adapted measures to fit the media context, therefore this study used a combination of measures used to assess the four dimensions.

Perceived quality was adapted from Aaker (1991) and Pappu, Quester, and Cooksey (2005). Items measure consumers' subjective judgments about a brand's overall excellence or superiority. The four statements on the survey measuring perceived quality ($\alpha = .96$) are: News site X is a high-quality news site; Overall, News site X is a superior news site compared to other news sites in its category; News site X's editorial content is superior to other news sites in the category; News site X's photos are superior to other news sites in the category.

Brand awareness was based on the measurements used by Aaker (1991) and Yoo and Donthu (2001). Items will measure the strength of the brand in a consumer's memory as reflected by the consumer's ability to identify various elements of it. The three statements on the survey measuring brand awareness ($\alpha = .86$) are: I am aware of News site X; I can recognize News site X among competing news brands; I know what News site X looks like.

Brand personality assessed both the uniqueness of the brand and the associations they attribute to the brand as well as how well that brand matches their own personality. Items developed based on Aaker (1991), Keller (1998), and Pappu et al. (2005). The four statements on the survey measuring brand personality ($\alpha = .64$) are: Some characteristics of News site X come to my mind quickly; I can quickly recall the logo of News site X; News site X is a news site I relate to; News site X has a style and tone that I connect to.

Brand loyalty used measures borrowed from Yoo and Donthu (2001) and Pappu et al. (2005). Items in this section will capture the consumer's overall commitment to being loyal to each brand. The four statements on the survey measuring brand loyalty ($\alpha = .94$) are: I would not visit another news site in this category, if News site X was accessible; News site X would be my first choice; I consider myself to be loyal to News site X; News site X is one of the preferred sites I visit.

Credibility was assessed using the credibility index adapted from Gaziano and McGrath (1986) and modified by Meyer (1988), which uses the mean of five factors contributing to credibility ($\alpha = .93$): fairness (includes different points of views vs. does not include different points of views), bias (opinions are well-founded vs. opinions are not well

founded), accuracy (the information given usually would be verifiable and true if examined vs. the information given usually would not be verifiable and true if examined), trustworthiness (statements are usually true/correct vs. statements are usually not true/correct), and completeness (the essential points are included vs. the essential points are not included). Each item is measured on a 7-point Likert scale.

Participants assessed the credibility of the neutral article, as defined in the pre-test (see Appendix C). An image of the 276-word article, “Trump to Meet with Four Possible Candidates for National Security Adviser,” designed to look as if it appeared on either FoxNews.com or NYTimes.com (see Figure 1 and 2), was shown to participants before being asked the five credibility questions. A comprehension question was also asked to ensure participants read the article. (See Appendix D for complete survey.)

The image shows a screenshot of the Fox News website. The top navigation bar includes 'FOX NEWS', 'FOX BUSINESS', 'FOX NEWS GO', 'FOX NEWS RADIO', 'EYE+NAJON', and 'FOX NEWS INSIDER'. Below this is the 'FOX NEWS Politics' header with a search bar. The main content area features the article title 'Trump to meet with 4 possible candidates for national security adviser' under the 'NATIONAL SECURITY' category. The article text discusses President Trump's plans to interview four candidates for the national security adviser position in Florida on Sunday. It mentions that Trump said he had 'many, many that want the job.' and that he also hinted he had a favorite to fill the position. The article also notes that Trump has been thinking about someone for the last three or four days and that he plans to 'make a decision over the next couple of days.' The candidates mentioned are retired Army Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, John Bolton, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Army Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, and the superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Lt. Gen. Robert Caslen. The article also mentions that White House spokesman Sean Spicer said more meetings for the job could happen, which is now open after retired Gen. Michael Flynn was asked to resign earlier this week. It also notes that Flynn resigned at Trump's request Monday after revelations that he misled Vice President Mike Pence about discussing sanctions with Russia's ambassador to the U.S. during the transition. Trump said in a news conference Thursday that he was disappointed by how Flynn had treated Pence, but did not believe Flynn had done anything wrong by having the conversations. Trump's first choice to replace Flynn, retired Vice Adm. Robert Harward, turned down the offer. Trump tweeted on Saturday that he 'will be having many meetings this weekend at The Southern White House.'

On the right side of the article, there is an advertisement for 'Smartphone deals from AT&T' with a 'Shop now' button. Below the advertisement, there is a section titled 'More from Fox News' with several small thumbnail images and headlines: 'Rich Lowry on report Obama WH left trail', 'West Wing' actor slams Ivanka Trump, 'Why Trump should ride the wave of', 'Laura Ingraham's advice for the', 'Dems already cranking up Trump', 'Ex-Clinton volunteer slammed, loses job', 'ABC sportscaster suspended for', and 'Sen. Rubio booted from Florida office'.

Figure 1. FoxNews.com version of the article

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POLITICS

Trump to Meet with 4 Possible Candidates for National Security Adviser

President Trump is scheduled to interview at least four candidates for the U.S. national security adviser position in Florida on Sunday.

Speaking to reporters on Air Force One Saturday, Trump said he had "many, many that want the job."

Trump also hinted he had a favorite to fill the position.

"I've been thinking about someone for the last three or four days, we'll see what happens," Trump said. "I'm meeting with that person. They're all good, they're all great people."

Reuters reported that Trump also told reporters on Air Force One that he plans to "make a decision over the next couple of days."

Scheduled to discuss the job with the president at Mar-a-Lago were his acting adviser, retired Army Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg; John Bolton, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations; Army Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster; and the superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Lt. Gen. Robert Caslen.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer said more meetings for the job could happen, which is now open after retired Gen. Michael Flynn was asked to resign earlier this week.

Flynn resigned at Trump's request Monday after revelations that he misled Vice President Mike Pence about discussing sanctions with Russia's ambassador to the U.S. during the transition. Trump said in a news conference Thursday that he was disappointed by how Flynn had treated Pence, but did not believe Flynn had done anything wrong by having the conversations.

Trump's first choice to replace Flynn, retired Vice Adm. Robert Harward, turned down the offer.

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Figure 2. NYTimes.com version of the article

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The first hypothesis predicted that self-congruence with a media brand is related to CBBE with that brand, so that those with high self-congruence would also have high CBBE. To test this hypothesis, the data was divided into two groups: self-congruent and not self-congruent. The congruent group ($n=142$) consists of participants who were randomly assigned to the treatment condition that aligned with their personal political ideology (so participants who identified as liberal who were randomly placed in NYTimes.com treatment group, as well as participants who identified as conservative who were randomly placed in the FoxNews.com treatment group). The not self-congruent group ($n=164$) consists of participants who were randomly assigned to the treatment condition that did not align with their personal political ideology (so participants who identified as liberal who we placed in the FoxNews.com treatment group, as well as the participants who identified as conservative who were placed in the NYTimes.com treatment group). (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Participants: Ideology by treatment group

	FoxNews.com	NYTimes.com
Liberal ideology	110	88
Conservative ideology	54	54

Results from t-test indicated a significant difference between the congruent group ($M=4.94$, $SD=1.21$) and the incongruent group ($M=3.38$, $SD=.83$) in terms of CBBE ($t(df = 243.22) = 12.97$, $p < .05$). The df here has decimals because the t-test table provides results for two assumptions “equal variance assumed” and “equal variance not assumed.” Results indicated that the assumption that “equal variance assumed” was violated and therefore, results for “equal variance not assumed” were reported here.

The second hypothesis predicted that high CBBE with a media brand would result in higher credibility ratings for that media brand's content. Results showed that CBBE ($M=4.10$, $SD=1.29$) and credibility ($M=3.60$, $SD=.97$) were positively correlated, r ($df = 304$) = .45, $p<.05$, supporting H_2 .

The third hypothesis posited that high self-congruence with a media brand would result in higher ratings of content credibility for that media brand. To test this hypothesis, a t-test was conducted, which confirmed H_3 , t ($df = 304$) = 4.87, $p<.05$. Data showed that participants in the congruent group are more likely to rate articles as credible ($M=3.88$, $SD=.92$) than those in the incongruent group ($M=3.36$, $SD=.96$).

Additional t-tests were conducted to compare the congruent group with the incongruent groups in terms of the four dimensions of CBBE: perceived quality, brand awareness, brand personality, and brand loyalty (see Table 2). Results from t-test indicated a significant difference between the congruent group and incongruent group in terms of perceived quality (t ($df = 304$) = 13.56, $p<.05$). Results from t-test indicated no difference between the congruent group and incongruent group in terms of brand awareness (t ($df = 304$) = 1.40, $p=.16$). Results from t-test indicated a significant difference between the congruent group and incongruent group in terms of brand personality (t ($df = 242.25$) = 9.98, $p<.05$). Results from t-test indicated a significant difference between the congruent group and incongruent group in terms of brand loyalty (t ($df = 253.95$) = 12.19, $p<.05$). The df for brand personality and brand loyalty have decimals because the t-test table provides results for two assumptions "equal variance assumed" and "equal variance not assumed." Results indicated that the assumption that "equal variance assumed" was violated and therefore, results for "equal variance not assumed" were reported here.

Table 2. Overall and subscale CBBE means by congruency group

	Congruent Group	Incongruent Group	Significance	Level of Significance
CBBE total	4.94	3.38	*	<.001
Perceived Quality	4.91	2.57	*	<.001
Brand Awareness	5.89	5.68		.16
Brand Personality	5.16	5.69	*	<.001
Brand Loyalty	4.02	1.91	*	<.001

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The rationale for this research was to better understand the effect that media branding and political self-congruence with a media brand has on our perception of journalistic content. The results showed that all three hypotheses were supported, meaning that when participants were self-congruent with the news site, they showed high CBBE with that news site, and that those who displayed high CBBE and high self-congruency with a media source displayed higher ratings of content credibility. This research suggests that media branding and the connection media brands create with consumers is important to the perception of journalism quality.

While past research has shown that high CBBE predicts that consumers will act more favorably toward a brand or product (Aaker 1991; Keller, 2001), including newspaper brands (Fichter & Jonas, 2008) and broadcast news brands (Oyededeji, 2008), this study extends the findings to online news brands. With many consumers now utilizing online and mobile platforms to consume news (Pew Research Center, 2016), this research confirms that past research can be extended to online news platforms as well.

This study validated the first hypothesis that participants in the self-congruent group would display high CBBE. Since self-congruence in this research refers to political self-image congruence, the results confirm that there is a connection between our political ideology and our connection to a news brand. This suggests that, in the case of media, shared political viewpoints fosters CBBE, although future research is needed to explore that relationship further.

While it's logical that self-congruence would be related to brand equity, in this study, self-congruence was defined as having the same political ideology as the news media outlet one was assigned. Extrapolated, this means that political alignment is correlated with the

dimensions of CBBE (brand loyalty, brand personality, brand awareness, and perceived quality). Examined from that perspective, the connection between the two variable is less obvious. Yet, results showed that there is a positive correlation. Researchers should explore this relationship to better understand causation (for example, does political alignment cause feelings of brand loyalty?), whether more extreme political views engender greater effect and whether it is possible to have brand-equity with a news outlet that you are not politically aligned with.

While this research confirmed the first hypothesis, results also showed that when studying news media specifically, all four dimensions of CBBE may not be relevant. In particular, brand awareness was not significant. This is likely because both Fox News and New York Times are well known media brands, therefore participants can identify both news outlets used in the study, regardless of whether they feel a connection to the brand. This confirms the findings of Oyedeji (2008): that ideology doesn't affect the awareness-based constructs. This suggests that self-congruence is more directly tied to the other three perception-based constructs of CBBE. This finding suggests that future research should explore each of the dimensions of CBBE in-depth to better understand whether CBBE is, in fact, the best measure for media brands or whether there is another index that can be created specifically for media that better measures brand-equity.

With the second hypothesis, the relationship between CBBE and credibility was established, confirming that the positive outcomes of CBBE include a more favorable perception of credibility as well. These results suggest that media brands—and perhaps even journalists themselves—should be focused on not only high-quality, well-researched reporting, but also of the perception of their new media outlet. If the finding of this study (and past research) accurately reflects news consumers at large, it begs the question whether “credible journalism” is objective concept, or whether it is dependent on the opinion of the audience.

The third hypothesis confirmed that participants who were congruent with a media brand displayed higher ratings of credibility than participants in the not self-congruent group. These findings are perhaps most relevant today, given the polarization of American politics. These findings suggest that audiences are more likely to believe and trust a source that they

are ideologically aligned with, and likewise, are less likely to believe and trust sources that they are not aligned with.

This makes a key contribution to this area of study in that it supports the theory that our personal worldview has a greater impact on perceptions of credibility than the actions of the news media outlet itself. Theoretically, this research contributes to the nascent research that suggests that it is not the message or even the channel that dictates whether a message will be perceived as credible; instead, it's the ideology of the recipient of that message—and whether that matches the ideology of the channel—that has the greatest effect. Future researchers should explore this relationship further to understand the extent of this phenomenon. Specifically, at what point does the message itself become relevant? Or, put differently, how bad does a news article need to be in order for our logical judgement to supersede our own bias? This study utilized a relatively neutral, unbiased article, but what happens when the article in question is actually biased and untrustworthy? Does brand-equity and self-congruence always influence our perceptions of credibility, or only up to a certain point? Future research could explore these limits.

IMPLICATIONS

For those in the media business, this research suggests that concerted branding efforts are becoming increasingly important. This study confirms the power of building brand equity, though it might present a bleak image for the future of journalism, where media brands with the most resources have the potential to sway public opinion through branding efforts rather than through the highest quality reporting.

The fact that participants rated the same exact same article as less credible when it appeared in a media outlet that they were not ideologically aligned, confirms what we've experienced anecdotally over the past political cycle, with the public and pundits using the term “fake news” to refer to any news they don't agree with. This is a troubling trend for many reasons, namely that well-researched news from established news outlets is no longer assumed to be trustworthiness. While a steady decrease in news media trust was evident long before this election cycle (Meyer, 2004) and more recent shift toward news partisanship, raises the question as to whether this is a trend that will continue.

If consumers view quality journalism as not credible because it is not aligned with their political ideology or they don't feel a connection to that media outlet, as this research suggests, the result will be an increasingly polarized society.

Taking a less pessimistic view, these findings can help marketing managers to develop strategies for promoting their news outlets and specific content that targets audiences. Early 2017, there were two prominent examples of news media building their media brand: In February, the Washington Post updated their tagline to “Democracy Dies in Darkness,” which pundits inferred was a reaction to President Trump's attacks against “the fake news media,” including other news sources like The New York Times and CNN. Also in late February, The New York Times released a 30-second commercial addressing the issue, stating, “The truth is our nation is more divided than ever... The truth is more important now than ever.”

While these branding efforts are not explicitly designed to build CBBE, they represent the type of messaging that will build connections to those who are ideologically aligned.

As technology and mobile/online capabilities continue to proliferate, we're faced with infinite choices for how, when, and where we consume our news. It's easier than ever to insulate ourselves with viewpoints that reinforce our own. While this hyper-personalization of our current events consumption is convenient, it will continue to create a divide—not only in our perceptions of what is “credible news” and what isn't, but also in our perceptions of reality.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While the hypotheses were supported by this research, there are several limitations to this study. First, this study use a convenience sample from Amazon Mechanical Turk, which may not be representative of the United States population. While it did reflect a wide range of ages, it skewed more male and had a disproportionate number of white participants. In addition, this study did not include questions around geographical location or income. Future research could look at different demographic populations and whether the results found in this study are true for all populations, and whether they are more prevalent within specific groups.

Many consumers do not visit the homepage of the news sites like NYTimes.com or FoxNews.com; rather, they read articles on those websites and others that were shared by friends on social media. Therefore, further research could look at whether the source of the article (whether a friend shared it on Facebook, or your co-worker emailed it to you, etc.) influences perception of credibility.

Finally, by focusing on just one liberal media source in this research (The New York Times), perhaps this study did not reveal the results that would have been seen had we included multiple liberal news sources. For example, future studies could include stories from multiple news sources to better understand how the degree of CBBE with different media brands affects perceptions of credibility.

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APPENDIX A

PRE-TEST 1

Please rank order the following political news outlets from 1 (very conservative) to 10 (very liberal).

Fox News - Foxnews.com

CNN - CNN.com

The New York Times - NYTimes.com

The Huffington Post - HuffingtonPost.com

NPR - NPR.org

MSNBC - MSNBC.com

The Wall Street Journal - WSJ.com

The Washington Post - WashingtonPost.com

ABC News - ABCNews.com

USA Today - USAToday.com

APPENDIX B

PRE-TEST 2

1. Read the article below, then answer the questions that follow.

Trumps Navy secretary nominee on the verge of withdrawing

Washington, DC -- Two sources close to the situation report that President Trump's Navy Secretary nominee Philip Bilden is likely to withdraw his nomination.

The sources said Bilden, a former Army Reserve military officer with little naval experience, has drawn resistance to his lack of familiarity with Navy issues and has encountered difficulty separating himself from his financial interests. But the White House has publicly denied that Bilden is reconsidering his nomination.

In a tweet Saturday responding to the report, White House press secretary Sean Spicer said the sources were "wrong" and that Bilden was "100%" committed to the post.

The Pentagon said in a statement that Defense Secretary James Mattis spoke with Bilden Sunday, and Bilden "remains fully committed to serving as Secretary of the Navy...and Secretary Mattis remains fully committed to helping him."

The statement continued, "Secretary Mattis remains confident that Mr. Bilden is the right leader to rebuild the readiness of our Navy and Marine Corps."

Bilden ran the private equity firm HarbourVest in Hong Kong from 1996 to 2014 and has an undergraduate degree from Georgetown and an MBA from Harvard. Bilden never served in

the Navy but has a son enrolled at the Naval Academy and another who is an academy graduate. Bilden has served on the Naval Academy board and has donated generously to the U.S. Naval Institute.

But Bilden, like Mr. Trump's one-time Army Secretary nominee Vincent Voila, swooped in at the last minute to secure the nomination. Viola withdrew his nomination earlier this month. Viola, owner of the Florida Panthers NHL hockey team and a majority shareholder in Virtu Financial, also had difficulty separating himself from his business interests.

The White House has not named a replacement nominee for Viola.

The sources close to the situation said Bilden could withdraw as soon as this weekend.

Please rate the article you just read.

Fair—Unfair (*Includes different points of views vs. does not include different points of views*)
(1 = very fair, 7 = every unfair)

Unbiased—Biased (*Opinions are well-founded vs. opinions are not well founded*)
(1 = extremely unbiased, 7 = extremely biased)

Tells the whole story—Does not tell the whole story (*The essential points are included vs. the essential points are not included*)
(1 = tells the whole story, 7 = does not tell the whole story)

Accurate—Inaccurate (*The information given usually would be verifiable and true if examined vs. The information given usually would not be verifiable and true if examined*)
(1 = very accurate, 7 = very innacurate)

Can be trusted—Cannot be trusted (*Statements are usually true/correct*)
(1 = can be trusted, 7 = cannot be trusted)

2. Read the article below, then answer the questions that follow.

Trump to Meet with 4 Possible Candidates for National Security Adviser

Washington, DC -- President Trump is scheduled to interview at least four candidates for the U.S. national security adviser position in Florida on Sunday.

Speaking to reporters on Air Force One Saturday, Trump said he had "many, many that want the job."

Trump also hinted he had a favorite to fill the position.

"I've been thinking about someone for the last three or four days, we'll see what happens," Trump said. "I'm meeting with that person. They're all good, they're all great people."

Reuters reported that Trump also told reporters on Air Force One that he plans to "make a decision over the next couple of days."

Scheduled to discuss the job with the president at Mar-a-Lago were his acting adviser, retired Army Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg; John Bolton, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations; Army Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster; and the superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Lt. Gen. Robert Caslen.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer said more meetings for the job could happen, which is now open after retired Gen. Michael Flynn was asked to resign earlier this week.

Flynn resigned at Trump's request Monday after revelations that he misled Vice President Mike Pence about discussing sanctions with Russia's ambassador to the U.S. during the transition. Trump said in a news conference Thursday that he was disappointed by how Flynn had treated Pence, but did not believe Flynn had done anything wrong by having the conversations.

Trump's first choice to replace Flynn, retired Vice Adm. Robert Harward, turned down the offer.

Trump tweeted on Saturday that he “will be having many meetings this weekend at The Southern White House.”

Please rate the article you just read.

Fair—Unfair (*Includes different points of views vs. does not include different points of views*)

(1 = very fair, 7 = every unfair)

Unbiased—Biased (*Opinions are well-founded vs. opinions are not well founded*)

(1 = extremely unbiased, 7 = extremely biased)

Tells the whole story—Does not tell the whole story (*The essential points are included vs. the essential points are not included*)

(1 = tells the whole story, 7 = does not tell the whole story)

Accurate—Inaccurate (*The information given usually would be verifiable and true if examined vs. The information given usually would not be verifiable and true if examined*)

(1 = very accurate, 7 = very innacurate)

Can be trusted—Cannot be trusted (*Statements are usually true/correct*)

(1 = can be trusted, 7 = cannot be trusted)

3. Read the article below, then answer the questions that follow.

Petraeus out of the running for national security adviser

Washington, DC -- Sources close to retired Gen. David Petraeus say the White House eliminated the former CIA director from consideration for the open national security adviser post after he weighed in on the job during a conference in Germany this week.

“Whoever it is that would agree to take that position certainly should do so with some very, very significant assurances that he or she would have authorities over the personnel of the

organization -- that there would be a commitment to a disciplined process and procedures,” Petraeus said at the Munich Security Conference.

That pronouncement angered the White House as it deepened the sense the next national security adviser must assert authority over staff and the inter-agency process -- highlighting the reason Vice Adm. Robert Harward refused to take the job earlier this week. Two sources confirmed to that Harward had demanded his own team, and the White House resisted.

Sources close to the situation said the White House is content for the time being with acting National Security Adviser Keith Kellogg and does not have a coherent replacement plan in place. Kellogg, a former commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, had been serving as chief of staff and executive secretary of the National Security Council when he took over as the national security adviser.

Retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, President Trump’s first national security adviser, offered his resignation Monday night, following revelations that he had numerous phone calls with foreign counterparts, which included a conversation in December with the Russian ambassador about lifting sanctions. Mr. Trump has said it was Flynn’s falsehoods to Vice President Mike Pence about such conversations that prompted his dismissal.

Petraeus was under consideration for the post and had been considered for secretary of state during the transition. But early stumbles in the first three weeks of the Trump administration led Petraeus to draw a list of conditions -- chief among them authority over hiring senior National Security Council staff -- before he would take the national security adviser job.

The conditions would have been a hurdle in any serious White House consideration of Petraeus, but the impulse was there until Petraeus’ comments in Munich.

Please rate the article you just read.

Fair—Unfair (*Includes different points of views vs. does not include different points of views*)

(1 = very fair, 7 = every unfair)

Unbiased—Biased (*Opinions are well-founded vs. opinions are not well founded*)
(1 = extremely unbiased, 7 = extremely biased)

Tells the whole story—Does not tell the whole story (*The essential points are included vs. the essential points are not included*)
(1 = tells the whole story, 7 = does not tell the whole story)

Accurate—Inaccurate (*The information given usually would be verifiable and true if examined vs. The information given usually would not be verifiable and true if examined*)
(1 = very accurate, 7 = very innacurate)

Can be trusted—Cannot be trusted (*Statements are usually true/correct*)
(1 = can be trusted, 7 = cannot be trusted)

APPENDIX C

NEWS ARTICLE FOR MAIN STUDY

Trump to Meet with 4 Possible Candidates for National Security Adviser

Washington, DC -- President Trump is scheduled to interview at least four candidates for the U.S. national security adviser position in Florida on Sunday.

Speaking to reporters on Air Force One Saturday, Trump said he had "many, many that want the job."

Trump also hinted he had a favorite to fill the position.

"I've been thinking about someone for the last three or four days, we'll see what happens," Trump said. "I'm meeting with that person. They're all good, they're all great people."

Reuters reported that Trump also told reporters on Air Force One that he plans to "make a decision over the next couple of days."

Scheduled to discuss the job with the president at Mar-a-Lago were his acting adviser, retired Army Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg; John Bolton, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations; Army Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster; and the superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Lt. Gen. Robert Caslen.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer said more meetings for the job could happen, which is now open after retired Gen. Michael Flynn was asked to resign earlier this week.

Flynn resigned at Trump's request Monday after revelations that he misled Vice President Mike Pence about discussing sanctions with Russia's ambassador to the U.S. during the transition. Trump said in a

news conference Thursday that he was disappointed by how Flynn had treated Pence, but did not believe Flynn had done anything wrong by having the conversations.

Trump's first choice to replace Flynn, retired Vice Adm. Robert Harward, turned down the offer.

Trump tweeted on Saturday that he “will be having many meetings this weekend at The Southern White House.”

APPENDIX D

SURVEY

1. Indicate your political stance (1= very conservative, 6= very liberal).
2. Rate the following political news outlets (1= very conservative, 6= very liberal).

Fox News - Foxnews.com
 CNN - CNN.com
 New York Times - NYTimes.com
 HuffingtonPost.com
 Washington Post - washingtonpost.com

[Participants placed into either NYTimes.com treatment group or FoxNews.com treatment group. In the survey, "News site X" was replaced with either "NYTimes.com" or "FoxNews.com"]

3. You have been randomly assigned to News site X. Please rate News site X on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

News site X is a high-quality news site
 Overall, News site X is a superior news site compared to other news sites in its category
 News site X's editorial content is superior to other news sites in the category
 News site X's photos are superior to other news sites in the category
 I am aware of News site X
 I can recognize News site X among competing news brands
 I know what News site X looks like
 Some characteristics of News site X come to my mind quickly
 I can quickly recall the logo of News site X
 News site X is a news site I relate to
 News site X has a style and tone that I connect to
 I would not visit another news site in this category, if News site X was accessible

News site X would be my first choice
 I consider myself to be loyal to News site X
 News site X is one of the preferred sites I visit

[Participants asked to read the article in Appendix C, designed to look as if it appeared on NYTimes.com or FoxNews.com]

4. Please rate the article you just read.

Fair—Unfair (*Includes different points of views vs. does not include different points of views*)

(1 = very fair, 7 = every unfair)

Unbiased—Biased (*Opinions are well-founded vs. opinions are not well founded*)

(1 = extremely unbiased, 7 = extremely biased)

Tells the whole story—Does not tell the whole story (*The essential points are included vs. the essential points are not included*)

(1 = tells the whole story, 7 = does not tell the whole story)

Accurate—Inaccurate (*The information given usually would be verifiable and true if examined vs. The information given usually would not be verifiable and true if examined*)

(1 = very accurate, 7 = very inaccurate)

Can be trusted—Cannot be trusted (*Statements are usually true/correct*)

(1 = can be trusted, 7 = cannot be trusted)

5. What was the topic of the article you just read?

President Trump hiring new Vice President

Education Reform

President Trump interviewing new National Security Advisor

Health Care Reform

6. What is your gender:

Male

Female

7. What is your race?

White, non-Hispanic

Black or African-American

Hispanic

Asian or Pacific Islander

Mixed race

Native American/American Indian

Other, please specify_____

8. What is your age?