

# **Better Liked Than Right: Trustworthiness and Expertise as Factors in Credibility**

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*A persuasive message on the subject of international maritime boundaries was presented in pamphlet form to 1055 students in four countries. Trustworthiness and expertise of the source were manipulated in a 2 x 2 x 4 factorial design of the after-only type to assess the relative impact of each component on the communicator's persuasiveness. Main effects were found for both country and trustworthiness. Overall, the expert and trustworthy source generated the most opinion change. However, the trustworthy communicator was more persuasive, whether expert or not.*

It has been well documented that a highly credible communicator, other things being equal, is more effective at persuasion than one who is less credible (McGinnies, 1973). Furthermore, it appears that *trustworthiness* and *expertise* are the two most important components of credibility (Hovland et al., 1953; Schweitzer & Ginsberg, 1966, Giffin, 1967). Simply defined, expertise refers to competence and knowledge, whereas trustworthiness is the apparent honesty and integrity of the source. Not infrequently, communicators convey a mixed impression; they may have a reputation for expertise but lack trustworthiness; for example, President Nixon following the Watergate scandal. Or a source may be viewed as trustworthy but not particularly expert, as in the case of a friend offering advice on stock options.

If the presence or absence of expertise is paired with a presence or absence of trustworthiness, which combinations will prove the more effective in persuasion? In an attempt to answer this question, we conducted the same basic experiment in four countries—the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and Japan. A factorial design, with the four pairings of high and low expertise and high and low trustworthiness, enabled us to assess both the main effects and interactions of these two variables.

McGuire (1968) concluded that while expertise affects persuasiveness in the expected direction, evidence for a trustworthiness component “is small almost to the vanishing point” (p. 185). It is this conclusion of McGuire's that we have

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subjected to empirical examination. The cross-cultural nature of the experiments provided a broader basis for generalization of the results.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Subjects in the American sample were 289 students at the University of Maryland. The 275 Japanese subjects were recruited primarily from three colleges in the Tokyo area. In New Zealand, 221 students from the University of Auckland served as subjects. Finally, in Australia, we studied 270 students at the University of Sydney. About two-thirds of the subjects were female, and all were enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses.

### Materials

The same experimental booklet was used in all of the experiments. The first page, which was the same for all conditions, explained only the following: "The purpose of this study is to find out how college students react to certain problems of international affairs." The subjects were then instructed to go through the booklet page by page without skipping any pages and without looking backward or forward.

Next in the booklet came a one-page description of the author of the message, followed by a four-page argument which was identical for all subjects. This argument was entitled "The Case for Extending Territorial Boundaries Further Out into the Seas." This one-sided presentation took the position that the traditional three-mile maritime limit was inadequate in the modern world and dealt specifically with the alleged plight of Gambia, a small country on the northwest coast of Africa with which we were reasonably certain the subjects were unfamiliar. After describing how other countries had already acted to extend their maritime boundaries, in some cases as much as 200 miles, the communication concluded by advocating an extension to 25 miles for Gambia.

The first independent variable, the expertise of the communication's author, was manipulated by means of two different descriptions which preceded the message in the booklet. Briefly, the expert source was described as a West German authority on international law who had represented his country at an international conference dealing with the problem of maritime limits. His remarks were described as having first appeared in the "International Law Review." In the nonexpert condition, the source was identified as a journalist whose prior writings had dealt primarily with the arts and theater in Western Germany. His article was said to have appeared in a recent issue of "*The Daily Press*" in that country.

The second independent variable, trustworthiness of the source, was also varied by means of two different descriptions. In the trustworthy condition, the author (in addition to whatever had been said of his expertise) was described as being viewed by his contemporaries as honest, sincere, and trustworthy. He was

further described as having developed an interest in Gambia's maritime concerns during a vacation there at his own expense. In contrast, the nontrustworthy description implied that the author was sympathetic to the Nazi party and had a reputation among journalists for being devious, calculating, and inclined to place personal gain above public welfare. His interest in Gambia was said to have developed while he was employed there briefly as a public relations spokesman.

The several descriptions of the communication's author were combined factorially so that each level of expertise was paired with each of trustworthiness. Since the experiment was conducted in four countries, we had a 2 x 2 x 4 factorial design. In a control condition, no information was given concerning the identity of the author of the article.

Immediately following the communication was a page containing five converging questions in rating-scale format which measured the respondent's opinion on the issue (for example, "How necessary is it for Gambia to extend her territorial sea further than three miles?" "How many miles at sea do you think Gambia should be allowed to claim as falling within her territorial waters?"). Each question was accompanied by an appropriate five-point rating scale. These scales were summed during the data analysis to yield a composite score that could range from 5 to 25, with 25 representing the most favorable attitude toward extension of Gambia's maritime boundaries. The five item-total correlations for the composite measure in each of the four countries sampled ranged from .67 to .78.

The booklets for all experimental conditions were intermixed in random order. These were then distributed and collected during regularly scheduled class periods by the usual instructors. This procedure not only allowed all experimental conditions to be run at the same time, but also assured that the subjects were randomly assigned to each of the five conditions. After the experiment was completed, written explanations were distributed to the participants. In the Japanese experiment, all materials were translated into Japanese, and physical distance were expressed in kilometers rather than miles.

## RESULTS

### Manipulation Checks

The effectiveness of the experimental manipulations was measured by two abbreviated versions of McCroskey's (1966) scales, one of which related to the communicator's perceived expertise and the other to his perceived trustworthiness. Analysis of variance for the four countries revealed the main effects in each instance to be highly significant ( $p < .001$ ), thus confirming the success of the manipulations. (When trustworthiness was evaluated, the main effect for expertise did not reach significance at even the .10 level; similarly, the trustworthiness main effect was not significant at the .10 level when the effectiveness manipulation was evaluated.)

### **Between-Countries Analysis**

A 2 x 2 x 4 least squares ANOVA was carried out on the composite attitude scores, which measured the extent to which the subjects would favor a unilateral extension of Gambia's maritime boundaries. The control groups were not included in this analysis. The trustworthiness main effect was significant,  $F(1, 797) = 23.52, p < .001$ ; with the trustworthy source producing more change in the advocated direction than the untrustworthy source. Neither an expertise main effect ( $F = 1.20$ ) nor an expertise x trustworthy interaction ( $F = 1.28$ ) was significant. We did, however, find a main effect due to country,  $F(3, 797) = 37.10, p < .001$ , with the Japanese subjects revealing the most favorable attitude toward extension of maritime boundaries, followed by the subjects from New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, in that order. The Neuman-Keuls procedure modified for unequal Ns (Kramer, 1956) showed all of the country means to differ from one another except those from Australia and the United States. The mean data are given in Table 1. It will be noted that the control means fall in the same order as those for the country main effect.

### **Within-Countries Analysis**

A 2 x 2 least squares ANOVA of the attitude measures for each country confirmed in three instances (Japan,  $F(1, 271) = 4.33, p < .05$ ; Australia,  $F(1, 266) = 8.85, p < .01$ ; U.S.A.,  $F(1, 285) = 8.46, p < .01$ ) the main effect of trustworthiness obtained in the between-countries analysis. Only in the case of New Zealand was trustworthiness not a significant source of variance. No other comparison reached significance.

It can be seen in Table 1 that the attitude scores for the control groups are in every instance higher than the corresponding combined measure for the experimental groups. A separate analysis of these differences shows them to be significant only in the case of Australia and New Zealand. Nevertheless, it seems that, in general, the mere presentation of information about the source had an inhibiting effect on the persuasiveness of the argument.

## **DISCUSSION**

Averaged across countries, the results provide convincing evidence that the trustworthiness of the source was more important in our study than expertise. The most favorable condition for persuasion in both the American and New Zealand samples was one in which the source was described as both expert and trustworthy. In Australia and Japan, the trustworthy source was more effective regardless of whether it was paired with high or low expertise. These patterns are seen clearly in Table 1, where it is also evident that the least persuasive source, in general, was neither expert nor trustworthy. Expertise undoubtedly lends credibility to a communicator, but it may be less important under some circumstances than trustworthiness, or even physical attractiveness (Mills and Harvey, 1972).

TABLE 1 Mean Attitude Scores<sup>a</sup>

Country	U.S.A.	Japan	Australia	New Zealand	Combined
Nonexpert					
Nontrustworthy	13.51	16.82	13.42	15.88	14.73
Trustworthy	14.93	18.62	15.71	15.17	16.11
Expert					
Nontrustworthy	13.85	16.72	15.13	16.00	15.27
Trustworthy	15.12	18.08	15.45	16.45	16.12
Combined	14.34	17.59	14.94	15.91	15.56
Control	15.33	18.45	17.12	17.44	17.30

a. Higher values represent more favorable attitudes toward extending maritime boundaries.

Another general finding was that attitudes were more favorable toward an extension of maritime boundaries among the control subjects, where the source of the message was not identified. One possible explanation for this result is that our subjects attributed greater credibility to the unknown source than we were able to devise in our description of the expert and trustworthy communicator. This is unlikely, however, since the ratings of the source's perceived expertise and trustworthiness were consistently higher in the most credible condition than in the control condition. We are inclined, therefore, to interpret the greater persuasibility of the control subjects in the same manner as Kelman and Hovland (1953), who suggest that the presentation of positive and negative credibility information, because of its emotional impact, may distract subjects from attending to the content of the communication.

The significant main effect for country demonstrates that the particular message used—advocating extension of maritime boundaries—had its greatest appeal in those countries (Japan and New Zealand) where the ratio of shoreline to total area is greatest and a lesser appeal in the two countries (Australia and the United States) where this ratio is smaller. Self-interest as regards fishing and off-shore mineral rights, with an empathic extension of this concern to the small nation described in the message, logically might be invoked to explain these differences in receptivity to the argument.

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