

Novel Moderators of the Reception and Detection of Pseudo-Profound Bullshit

Emma Neybert¹, Donald R. Gaffney¹, Liang Shen¹, Stephanie Flout², Maxwell Richards¹,
Frank Kardes¹, Sarah Elizabeth Perry¹, and Zoey Phelps¹
University of Cincinnati¹, Ohio State University²

Theoretical Background:

Self-Identity

One's general acceptance of weak claims appears to drive one's belief in bullshit (Pennycook and Rand 2020). Therefore, we posit greater self-esteem and/or lower self-monitoring, should lead to greater likelihood of bullshit receptivity due to one's decreased need to look to others for validation.

Religion & Spirituality

A strong correlation exists between one's religious and paranormal beliefs and their reception of bullshit (Pennycook et al 2015). Similarly, receptivity to pseudo-profound bullshit should increase as spirituality, religious importance, and religious activity increase because of their greater tendency to seek higher meaning in the world around them. Conversely, greater belief in science may result in greater contemplation and subsequent rejection of bullshit statements.

Epistemic Predictors

Generally, humans tend to accept incoming information as true before assessing its validity (Gilbert, Krull, and Malone 1990). However, recent research has suggested that in some circumstances this may not be the case. Mayo (2015) found that those engaged in a distrust mindset may be less prone to accepting subsequent information as true prior to assessing the validity of the incoming information. Our measure of trust (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994) indeed suggests that this may indeed be the case for pseudo-profound bullshit as well.

Additionally, we also explore the role of uncertainty and need for cognitive closure (NFCC). Those high in NFCC should be more likely to accept incoming information as true as prior research has shown that uncertainty and ambiguity (Kruglanski 1989; Kruglanski and Fishman 2009) are typically avoided by those that are high in need for cognition. Furthermore, we look to understand the role of uncertainty in reception and detection of pseudo profound bullshit by investigating different variants of perceptual and subjective uncertainty (Fox and Ülkümen 2011).

References:

Fox, C. R., & Ülkümen, G. (2011). Distinguishing two dimensions of uncertainty. *Perspectives on thinking, judging, and decision making*, 14.
Gilbert, D. T., Krull, D. S., & Malone, P. S. (1990). Unbelieving the unbelievable: Some problems in the rejection of false information. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 59(4), 601.
Kruglanski, A. W. (1989). The psychology of being "right": The problem of accuracy in social perception and cognition. *Psychological Bulletin*, 106(3), 395.
Kruglanski, A. W., & Fishman, S. (2009). The need for cognitive closure. *Handbook of individual differences in social behavior*, 343-353.
Mayo, R. (2015). Cognition is a matter of trust: Distrust tunes cognitive processes. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 26(1), 283-327.
Pennycook, G., Cheyne, J. A., Barr, N., Koehler, D. J., & Fugelsang, J. A. (2015). On the reception and detection of pseudo-profound bullshit. *Judgment and Decision making*, 10(6), 549-563.
Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2020). Who falls for fake news? The roles of bullshit receptivity, overclaiming, familiarity, and analytic thinking. *Journal of personality*, 88(2), 185-200.
Yamagishi, T., & Yamagishi, M. (1994). Trust and commitment in the United States and Japan. *Motivation and emotion*, 18(2), 129-166.

Methods:

A questionnaire consisting of the Bullshit Receptivity (BSR) scale and measures of potential moderators was provided first to a student sample (study 1A; N = 313), then to an online sample (1B – mTurk; N = 309) to increase the generalizability of our findings.

Results:

| | | Study 1A | Study 1B |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------|----------|
| Self-Identity | Self-Esteem | -.049 | -.076 |
| | Self-Monitoring | .032 | .032 |
| Religion & Spirituality | Religious Importance | .183** | .387** |
| | Religious Activity | .117** | .361** |
| | Spirituality | .215** | .385** |
| | Belief in Science | -.019 | -.035 |
| Epistemic Predictors | Trust | .130* | .173** |
| | NFCC | .253** | .226** |
| | Creativity | -.086 | -.175** |
| | Epistemic Uncertainty | .140* | .187** |
| | Aleatory Uncertainty | .160** | .289** |

Table 1: Pearson correlations of proposed moderators with bullshit receptivity scale for lab (1A) and online samples (1B). NFCC = Need for Cognitive Closure. ** p < .01, * p < .05.

Discussion:

This initial set of studies provides an avenue for three different streams of research on the reception and detection of bullshit. While social influencers like self-esteem and self-monitoring are not significant predictors of one's receptivity to bullshit, ties to one's religious identity are. Moreover, epistemic predictors that are more cognitively driven such as trust, need for cognitive closure, and uncertainty are strongly correlated with one's receptivity of pseudo-profound bullshit. Interestingly, creativity was only significant in the online sample, however, this may be due to the high levels of homogeneity within our student sample.

Fake news, deep fakes, and general misinformation has become an increasingly prevalent issue in society, especially as technology advances. We aim to advance the current work on truth perceptions by understanding when someone is likely to not only reject false information, but also question what is true.

Click here to access our virtual office hours: <https://meet.google.com/vbd-paqa-zdj>