



Investigating Perception of Bias in U.S. News Outlets

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what degree do consumers perceive bias among major American news outlets?
2. How do political ideology, political engagement, and brand name influence consumer perception of bias in major American news outlets?

INTRODUCTION

In our polarizing political environment, the claim that the media is biased is leveraged almost daily. This begs the question: does bias exist? If it does, what implications does this have for our democracy? If it does not, why do people perceive bias where none exists? D'Alessio and Allen (2005) concluded that the newspaper industry contains no biases to a significant degree. Furthermore, most studies are in conflict in terms of severity and direction of bias, leading Baum and Gussin (2008) to conclude that perception of bias is, to a significant degree, in the eye of the beholder. Therefore, this study investigates *where* consumers perceive bias, and *why*.



PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Hostile media effect. Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) present a theory that perception of bias is attributable to the “hostile media phenomenon”, where an individual will perceive bias if reporting conflicts with an individual’s political views. Additionally, the individual will predict that the supposedly biased coverage will sway nonpartisans in a hostile direction. This effect is amplified when an individual holds stronger views about politics.

Perception of bias. Baum and Gussin (2007) found that audiences exposed to the same news article would perceive either liberal or conservative bias when told the article was from CNN or FOX, respectively. They concluded that individuals use a brand name as a shortcut to measure bias.

Bias against bias. Feldman (2010) found that partisans will not perceive bias in an opinionated news piece if the news piece confirms the partisan’s view.

METHODOLOGY

1. **Survey.** Students read articles from four news outlets and ranked the bias of the article (Figure 1).
2. **Dissemination.** 144 Palo Alto High students responded to the survey over a period of 2 months.
3. **Analysis.** Both descriptive and inferential statistics were applied to the data.

* 2. The coverage of President Trump in the above excerpt was...

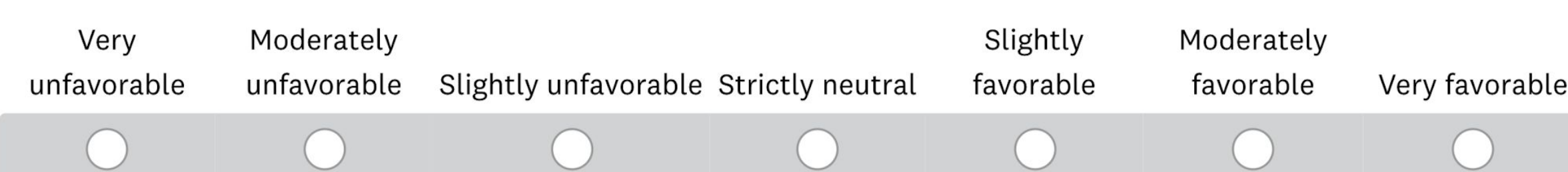


Figure 1. 7-Point Likert Scale for assessing bias of an article.

DATA

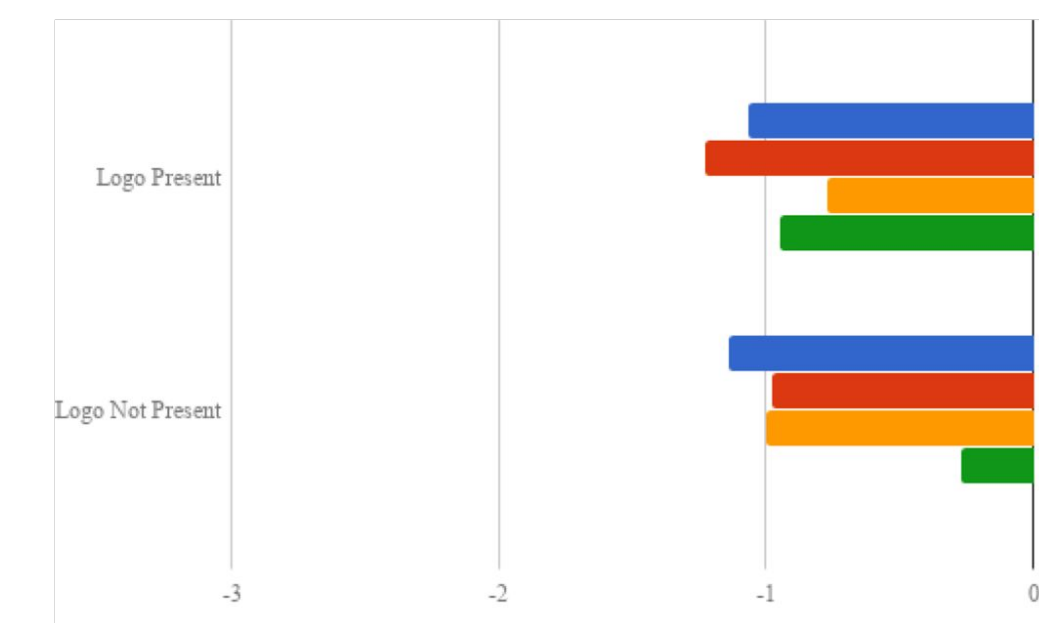


Figure 2. Average bias perception of Story A, Travel Ban.

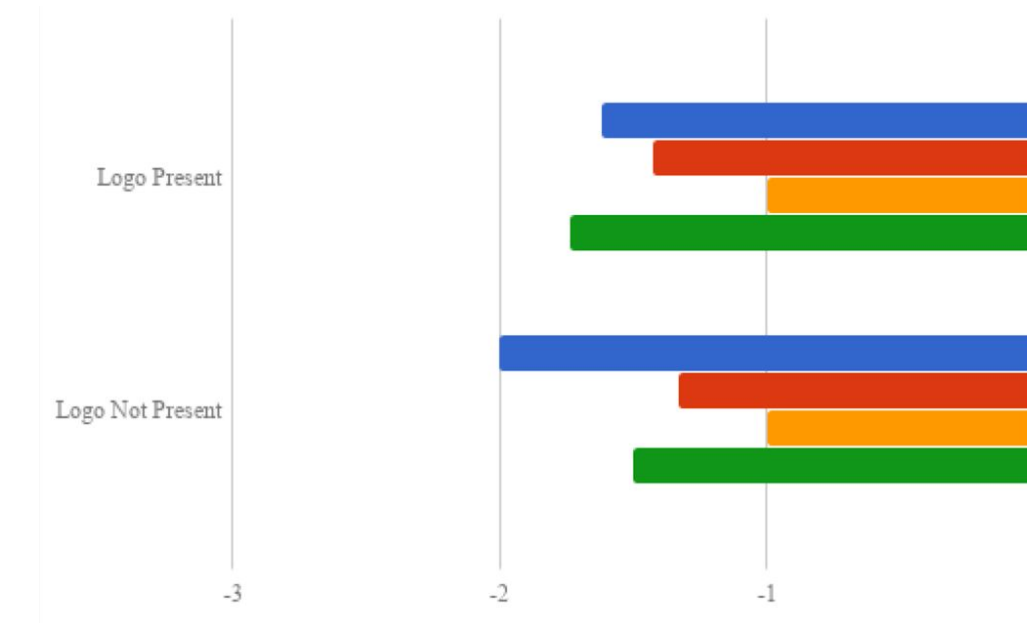


Figure 3. Average bias perception of Story B, Charlottesville.

● NYT ● WSJ ● FOX ● CNN

Travel Ban							
Article	Very unfavorable	Moderately unfavorable	Slightly unfavorable	Strictly neutral	Slightly favorable	Moderately favorable	Very favorable
Logo Present							
NYT	6.3%	31.3%	31.3%	25.0%	6.3%		
WSJ	23.1%	15.4%	23.1%	38.5%			
FOX	18.2%	18.2%	18.2%	18.2%	22.7%	4.5%	
CNN	15.8%	21.1%	21.1%	31.6%	5.3%	5.3%	
Logo Absent							
NYT	18.2%	27.3%	18.2%	27.3%	4.5%	4.5%	
WSJ	10.0%	20.0%	25.0%	30.0%	10.0%	5.0%	
FOX	25.0%	12.5%	25.0%	18.8%	12.5%	6.3%	
CNN	6.7%	6.7%	33.3%	33.3%	6.7%	6.7%	6.7%

Figure 4. How respondents rated the bias of each article.

Charlottesville							
Article	Very unfavorable	Moderately unfavorable	Slightly unfavorable	Strictly neutral	Slightly favorable	Moderately favorable	Very favorable
Logo Present							
NYT	15.4%	38.5%	38.5%	7.7%			
WSJ	21.4%	28.6%	21.4%	28.6%			
FOX	23.1%	23.1%	26.9%	7.7%	7.7%		11.5%
CNN	36.8%	26.3%	21.1%	5.3%	10.5%		
Logo Absent							
NYT	29.4%	47.1%	17.6%	5.9%			
WSJ	28.6%	19.0%	23.8%	14.3%	14.3%		
FOX	6.7%	33.3%	33.3%	20.0%			6.7%
CNN	33.3%	27.8%	5.6%	22.2%	11.1%		

Figure 5. How respondents rated the bias of each article.

Average Bias Perception By Article								
	Story A: Travel Ban				Story B: Charlottesville			
	NYT	WSJ	FOX	CNN	NYT	WSJ	FOX	CNN
Logo Present	-1.063	-1.231	-0.773	-0.947	-1.615	-1.429	-1	-1.737
Count	16	13	22	19	13	14	26	19
Logo Absent	-1.136	-0.98	-1	-0.267	-2	-1.333	-1	-1.5
Count	22	20	16	15	17	21	15	18
Difference	0.074	-0.251	0.227	-0.681	0.385	-0.095	0	-0.237
Average of Present/Absent	-1.105	-0.939	-0.868	-0.647	-1.833	-1.371	-1	-1.622
Average for Outlets Across Stories								
	NYT	WSJ	FOX	CNN				
Logo Present	-1.339	-1.33	-0.886	-1.342				
Logo Absent	-1.568	-1.156	-1	-0.883				
Difference	0.229	-0.173	0.114	-0.459				
Total average	-1.454	-1.243	-0.943	-1.113				

Figure 6. Average bias perception by article.

FINDINGS

- **On average, all articles were perceived as unfavorable.** Based on Major’s (2012) exploration of the effectiveness of the “liberal media” talking point, one can conclude that perception of unfavorability is a direct result of the narrative that the media is biased against President Trump.
- **CNN had the largest difference in logo presence, while FOX had the smallest.** However, the difference is not significant, with $p > 0.05$.
- **NYT was perceived as the most liberal.** This is consistent with previous studies, as NYT has a liberal reputation, a liberal audience (Mitchell et al., 2014), as well as a tendency towards liberal bias (Budak et al., 2016).
- **FOX was perceived as the most conservative, but still liberal.** Previous studies (Baum and Gussin, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2014; Budak et al., 2016) indicate that FOX has a strong tendency towards conservative bias, as well as a conservative reputation and a conservative audience. However, Budak et al. placed FOX as solidly right leaning, which was not shown in this data, as FOX was still perceived as unfavorable to Trump.
- **Strength of political ideology and political engagement had no effect on perception of bias from articles,** with $p > 0.05$.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data, it cannot be concluded that logo presence, political ideology or engagement have any significant impact on perception of bias. People perceive outlet bias on the following spectrum, from liberal to conservative: NYT, CNN, WSJ, and finally FOX.

Areas for future exploration: studying perception of gatekeeping bias (i.e. story selection) as opposed to bias within individual articles, and use articles about Democratic/liberal politicians in the survey.

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