



Digital Media Attention
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MISSING THE MARK:

Effects of Trust Mark positioning and language on news article credibility

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SUMMARY

In order to help guide future studies into optimizing the positioning and display of the Trust Project's Trust Mark logo, and to gauge the impact of noticing the label on participants' perception of credibility, an online experiment was conducted using a regional metro daily website (n=843). Each study participant read one of four different news articles containing the Trust Mark logo in a label, and were asked to read the article as they would if they had found it on their own. After reading the article, participants answered a series of questions about their perceptions of the article and the publishing news site, and then some questions asking about their recall and perceptions of the label itself. Results showed that both positioning and design treatment of the Trust Mark logo affected participants' recall of seeing it. Participants who noticed the Trust Mark logo had higher perceptions of the credibility of the article and greater news engagement intentions regarding the article. Analyses showed this effect was mainly driven by an increase in site credibility perceptions among those participants who had low levels of general trust in news.

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STUDY OVERVIEW

KEY FINDINGS

- Positioning of the Trust Mark logo above the text column made it more likely that participants would recall seeing the label.
- Two Trust Mark logo design treatments increased the likelihood that readers would recall seeing the label.
- Participants who noticed the Trust Mark logo reported greater levels of perceived credibility of the news site and intentions of additional news engagement with the site than those who did not notice the label.
- The largest increase in perceived credibility for those users who noticed the label occurred among readers who reported low levels of general trust in news.

BACKGROUND

A perceived decline in trust in news media over the past few decades has been cause for concern both with respect to the business of journalism and the future of democracy (Mourao et al, 2018). Prominent among the non-profit organizations that have sought to address the crisis in news trust is The Trust Project (thetrust-project.org), a labeling and standards initiative backed by the Knight Foundations that counts nearly 250 local, regional, national and international news organizations as part of its consortium. By choosing to take part in the initiative, news organizations commit to adherence to a series of 8 Trust Indicators related to transparency and avoiding bias and conflicts of interest.

Once they are approved to do so, member organizations indicate their adherence to Trust Project standards by displaying the Trust Project's "Trust Mark" logo on their site, and linking the T-mark to either their own policies and standards or an explanatory page on The Trust Project's website. One potential threat to the effectiveness of such approaches, however, is that users may not be noticing the transparency elements news publications display on their articles. A recent experiment by Curry and Stroud (2019) found that the addition of transparency-related elements to an online news article did lead to increased perceptions of article credibility, but that many users did not see the elements.

In order for any labels on online content to be effective, online news readers need to be able to first notice them, and then to understand them (Oeldorf-Hirsch et al 2020; Wojdyski et al, 2017). The present study sought to examine the role that the design of such labels may play in both users' noticing and their interpretation of such labels. Furthermore, the present study sought to build on

METHOD

previous literature in this area (Curry & Stroud, 2019) by isolating the effects of a single article credibility label.

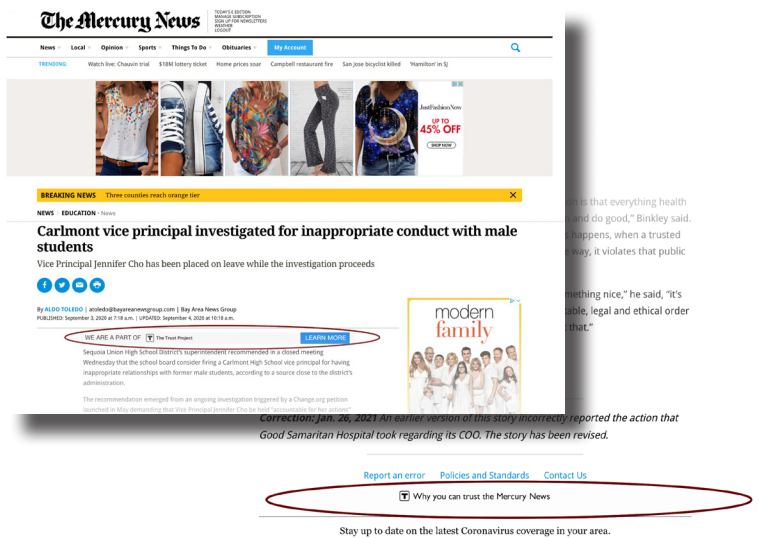
OVERVIEW

To test the effects of Trust Mark logo positioning and design in the context of real online news, we conducted an online experiment in which each participant read an online news article containing the Trust Project Trust Mark logo and 8 Trust Indicators and subsequently answered a series of questions about their perceptions of the article and Trust Mark logo itself. Four different articles were used in the experiment, and six versions of each article were created that varied in the positioning of the Trust Mark logo (top of the text column vs. bottom of the text column) and the design of the label containing the logo. Three different label designs were chosen from existing labels used by Trust Project partners.

Materials

Four news articles from an existing Trust Project news partner, the San Jose Mercury News, were selected for use in this study. Based on earlier research on concerns that low-news-trust consumers have about news practices, two news articles were selected that included a correction to the story, and two articles were

EXAMPLE ARTICLES WITH TOP AND BOTTOM LABEL POSITIONS



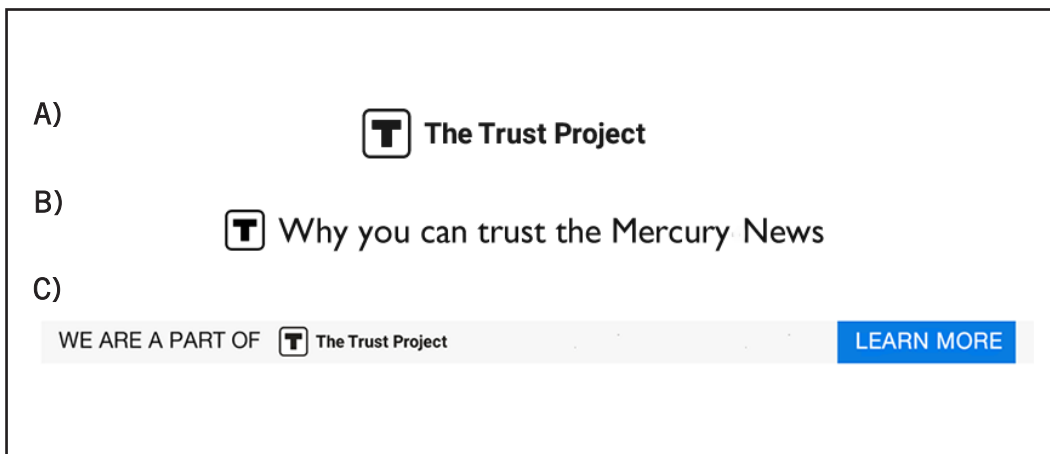
At left, a top-position high-prominence label on the Carlmont story. At right, a bottom position "Why You Can Trust" label on the Samaritan story.

selected that cited information from an anonymous source.

Each article was a local news story between 800 and 1200 words in length, attributed to a single staff writer at the paper. Display advertisements and other links on the article pages were chosen from non-breaking stories recently published on the news organization's website. Otherwise, all aspects of the article's original presentation as published were retained, with the exception of the manipulation of the journalistic transparency label.

LABEL DESIGN CONDITIONS

Label positioning was manipulated across two conditions. In the “top” condition, the area containing the transparency label was placed immediately before the start of the story text column. In the context of the news website's layout, this means the label was positioned below, in order, the headline, summary, byline, and the main image in the story. In the “bottom” condition, the area containing the T-rust Mark logo was placed immediately below the text column.



Label prominence was manipulated by presenting one of three existing treatments used by existing Trust Project member websites. Label prominence conditions differed with respect to the number of words presented around the transparency label, and the size of the area dedicated to the label. Design A read “The Trust Project” in black 16-pixel lettering (against a white background). Design B read “Why You Can Trust [publication name]” in similar black lettering. Finally, Design C read “We are a part of the Trust Project” aligned to the left of a colored rectangular text box, with the words “Learn More” on a button aligned to right of the text box.

Participants

A total of 843 participants took part in the study. Participants were recruited using Prolific.com in March and April 2021. All participants were U.S. residents aged 18 and older (mean age: 31.7 years; range 18-73). Participants were randomly assigned to an article and to one of six conditions within the article.

Participants did not have a high level of familiarity with the *San Jose Mercury News*. On a five-point familiarity scale, 71 percent of participant replied that they were “not familiar at all” with the site, and another 16 percent were “not very familiar” with the site. Only 12 participants (1.4 percent) were “very familiar with the site.

In addition to demographic information and familiarity with the *Mercury News*, we also measured several characteristics we thought might be important to examine in the content of our research questions. The first of these, procedural news knowledge, measured participants’ general familiarity with (U.S.) journalistic practices. We measured this using five multiple-choice items (example: “*In what section does a newspaper’s editorial staff endorse candidates and express their opinions about current issues?*”). The summed measure had a possible range of 0 to 5, and our participants averaged a 3.72. The second measure, general news trust, was measured using responses to a single question. Participants were asked, “Thinking about news in general, do you agree or disagree with the following statement?: ‘I think you can trust most news most of the time’”. Participants rated their agreement on a five-point scale, and their average response was a 2.97.

RESULTS

NOTICING THE LABEL

T-mark label positioning had a significant effect on participants' noticing the Trust Mark logo. Participants shown a label in the top position -- above the column text -- were significantly more likely to recall noticing the label (27.9%) than those shown a label below the column text (18.9%).

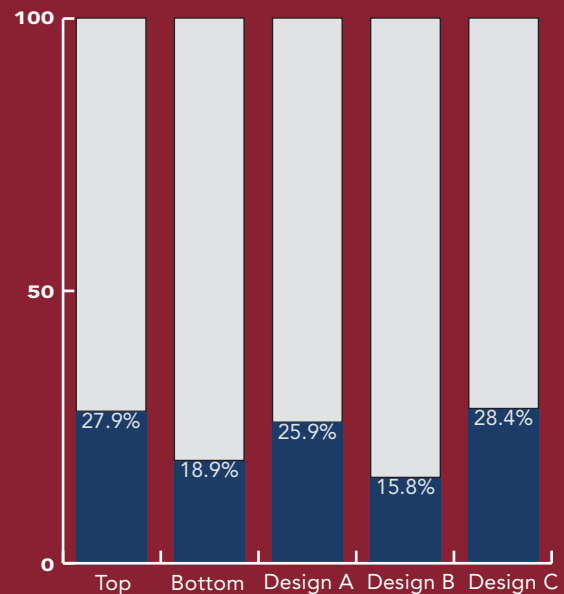
Label design treatment also had an impact on noticing the label. Participants who saw the "The Trust Project" version of the label (25.8%) and those who saw the "We Are a Part of The Trust Project (28.4%) were more likely to notice the label than those who saw the "Why you can trust the Mercury News" version of the label (15.8%).

In a separate analysis, we also examined the effect of several individual participant differences on the likelihood of noticing the Trust Mark logo. Age and procedural news knowledge did not predict noticing the label, while general news trust and familiarity with the *Mercury News* both significantly increased likelihood of noticing the label.

EFFECTS OF THE LABEL

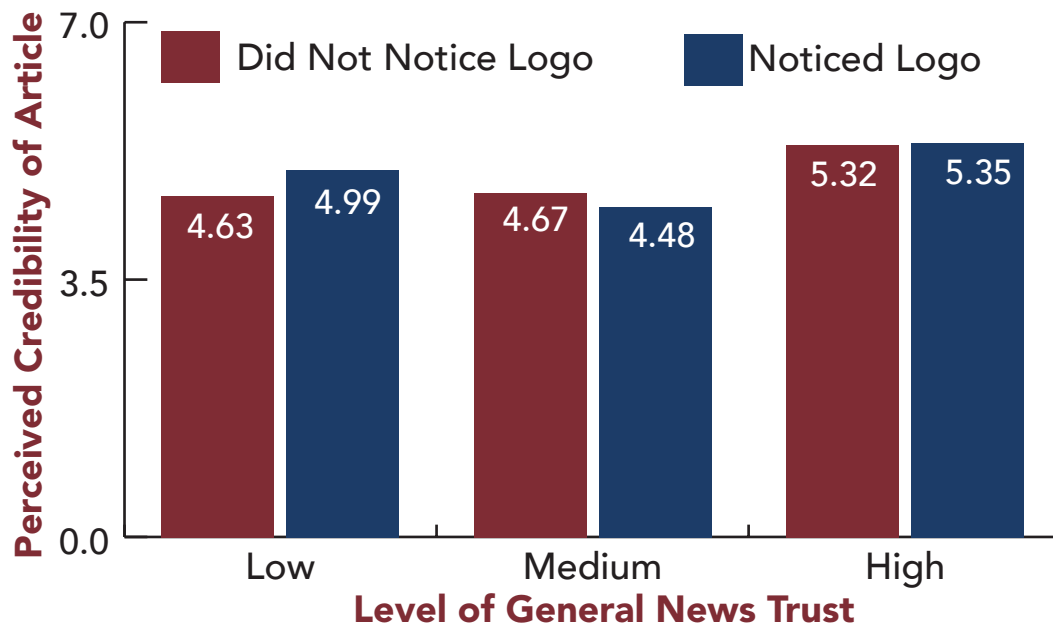
We also wanted to analyze how noticing the Trust Mark logo may have affected readers' perceptions of the news site. We tested for differences in several perceptions between those who noticed the mark ($n = 197$) and those who didn't ($n = 645$).

LABEL NOTICING BY POSITION AND DESIGN



- Noticing the Trust Mark logo led to a statistically significant increase in perceived credibility of the website. Readers who noticed the logo reported higher levels of perceived credibility (5.06) than those who did not notice the logo (4.87).
- Readers who noticed the Trust Mark logo also reported higher levels of news engagement intentions with the site than those who did not notice the label. Specifically, those who noticed the Trust Mark logo said they were more likely to seek out news from the *Mercury News* in the future (4.13 vs. 3.82), more likely to read another story from the *Mercury News* (3.80 vs. 3.49), and more likely to share the article on social media (5.22 vs. 4.76).
- Lastly, we also examined whether effects of labeling on credibility varied by level of general news trust. Results showed that effects of labeling on credibility only made a significant difference on those with lower levels of general news trust (39.5% of participants). The effects of seeing the label on those with medium or high levels of news trust were not significant.

LABELING EFFECTS ON CREDIBILITY BY GENERAL NEWS TRUST



IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

TRUST MARK LOGO VIEWING

Although participants in this study only viewed a single article, the presence of the Trust Mark log had positive effects on credibility perceptions and future news engagement intentions with the news site. However, overall, only just under a quarter of participants (23.7%) recalled noticing the Trust Mark logo. This suggests that news organizations may need to examine additional design variants to find a solution that is more universally noticed. The most noticed condition, Design Condition C, included the most wording around the Trust Mark logo itself, and also used a rectangular color field behind the wording to provide additional visual contrast. Both of these strategies may serve to draw users' eyes to the label, and can be employed in other specific ways to maximize label attention. Future research would do well to examine not only how design variants directly influence attention, but to examine how participants' attention to the Trust Mark logo and other transparency elements on a page dynamically shapes their reading behavior and site evaluations.

TRUST MARK LOGO IMPACT

This experiment clarifies both general and conditional effects of a Trust Mark logo on how largely novice users of a news website form impressions of its credibility. There was a moderate, statistically significant effect of seeing the Trust Mark logo on perceptions of credibility. Analyzing users based on their pre-existing, general level of trust in "most news organizations" showed that this effect was driven almost solely by those readers who tend to distrust general news. The positive effect of the Trust Mark was more noticeable on news engagement intentions, including desire to read more news from this website and desire to share the article participants read. Examining how these two effects of noticing the Trust Mark logo hold across repeated exposures -- in a single site visit, or across multiple visits -- would provide greater insight into real-world effectiveness.