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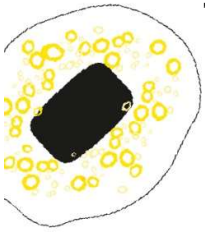

The Impact of Social Proof and Authority on Ad Credibility, Purchase Intention, and Brand Trust in B2B advertising

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Master thesis

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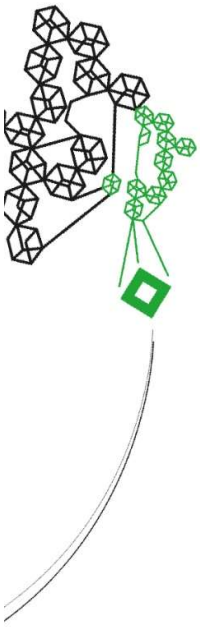

Abstract

Introduction: Persuasion principles have been widely studied in consumer markets and are effective ways to influence consumers. However, little to no research has been conducted on the effectiveness of these persuasion principles in a business-to-business market.

Objective: This study aims to explore this gap by studying the effectiveness of social proof and authority in a B2B context.

Method: A 2x2 experimental research design via an online survey was employed, testing four different advertisements: a control ad with no persuasion elements, an ad featuring social proof, an ad featuring authority, and an ad combining both principles. Participants were randomly assigned to one of these conditions and evaluated the ad credibility, the brand trust, and the purchase intention. Manipulation checks were done to ensure that participants perceived the correct persuasion principle. Data analysis was conducted using linear regression and mediation analyses.

Results: The results indicate that authority has a significant positive effect on both ad credibility and brand trust. Social proof however, showed no significant effect on any of the dependent variables. Additionally, ad credibility was found to be a mediator in the relationship between authority and brand trust.

Conclusion: The findings of the study suggest that B2B marketers should focus on authoritative messaging to improve the brand trust and ad credibility, which in turn affects the purchase intention as well. This study contributes to the growing body of research on persuasion in B2B marketing and underscores the need for further research in different B2B markets.

Keywords: B2B advertising, persuasion principles, Cialdini, agribusiness, social proof, authority

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In recent years, mastering persuasion techniques has become increasingly important for effective marketing. Persuasion is important since it can influence the decisions of others and convince them. As businesses compete for attention in crowded markets, understanding how to influence decision-making is essential. Persuasion principles, such as those identified by Cialdini (1993), have been widely studied in consumer markets and are key to driving behavior change through advertising.

The rise of social media has transformed how businesses interact with their target audiences, allowing for more direct engagement. In the Business-to-Business (B2B) context, social media plays a crucial role in generating leads and initiating customer journeys (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). As companies increasingly rely on these platforms, optimizing social media advertising strategies becomes essential to harness their full potential.

While extensive research exists on social media use in Business-to-Consumer (B2C) contexts, less attention has been given to its role in B2B strategies. Cartwright et al. (2021) suggest that further exploration is needed to understand how social selling works in B2B settings, particularly when it comes to the persuasive elements in advertising. Many B2B studies have focused on rational messaging, overlooking the potential impact of non-rational content such as the persuasion principles of Cialdini, which are well-established in B2C marketing; (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Swani et al., 2020). Non-rational content refers to appeals that are not based on logical arguments or factual information, but instead it targets emotions, social cues, or psychological triggers to influence the decision-making (Burciu & Hapenciuc, 2010).

Persuasion is often defined as social influence that changes a person's attitudes, ideas, or behaviors in response to external pressures, whether real or imagined (Cialdini, 2001).

Institutions, companies, and organizations use advertising as one of the most successful methods for spreading information, as it provides full control over volume and content (Cutlip et al, 1967). In their efforts to attract attention, influence consumer behavior, and guide decision-making, companies apply persuasion principles when crafting advertisements (Cialdini, 2001; Guadagno & Cialdini, 2005). Combining multiple persuasion principles is suggested to compound their impact (Cialdini, 2001), although there are no strict guidelines on how to do so optimally.

According to Cialdini (2001) the reason why persuasion is so effective is because it works by appealing to a limited set of deeply rooted human drives and needs in predictable ways. This means that people often react to persuasion techniques without consciously evaluating them, such as following social proof and trust authority instinctively. Cialdini (2001) gives the example that people are more likely to donate money when they saw that their neighbors had already done so, showing how we naturally follow the behavior of others. Cialdini does not explicitly frame persuasion as emotionally driven but it suggests that some persuasion techniques trigger strong emotional responses.

As organizations increasingly turn to digital platforms for communication, understanding how to apply these persuasion principles in B2B advertising becomes crucial. Prior studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of these principles in B2C settings (Abdul Talib et al, 2017; Fritchie and Johnson, 2003; Amblee and Bui, 2012; Jung and Kellaris, 2006), where advertising communication often seeks to evoke emotional responses (Spasova, 2022). However, B2B marketing traditionally emphasizes rational and functional messaging (Hutt & Speh, 2013). This contrast raises important questions about how these persuasion techniques might operate differently in a B2B environment, where purchase decisions typically involve multiple stakeholders, such as those comprising a buying center or decision-making unit (DMU). This DMU normally consists of the users, buyers, deciders, influencers and

gatekeepers (Webster & Wind, 1972). B2B purchases also have higher order values which increases the risk and are often more complex than B2C purchases (Rėklaitis & Pilelienė, 2019). According to Pandey and Mookerjee (2018), far less research has been conducted on affective factors, personal characteristics, and social and interpersonal dynamics in B2B decision-making compared to studies that focus on the traditional paradigm of B2B as a rational, cognitive process.

This research aims to address this gap by exploring how two key persuasion techniques, social proof and authority, can be applied to B2B advertising. These principles were chosen because, within the B2B context, other persuasion principles are less practical or relevant. For example, scarcity is typically more suited to B2C goods and less applicable when selling high-value products like machinery. For instance, it is not common practice to say, "Hurry, only two left!" when selling large machinery, as scarcity appeals are typically irrelevant in the B2B industry. This is because machines in B2B are often custom-made to meet specific client requirements, making such messaging inappropriate and out of context for the target audience. Similarly, principles like commitment may be effective in consumer contexts but are less common in B2B transactions. Testing all seven principles in this research would also be too extensive.

Moreover, the choice of social proof and authority is directly aligned with the context of the case company. The company aims to determine whether investing in reviews (social proof) and endorsements from authoritative figures (authority) would be beneficial for their marketing strategy. Therefore, this study focuses exclusively on these two principles to provide actionable insights tailored to the company’s needs.

While the effect of these techniques have been extensively studied a lot in B2C contexts (Abdul Talib et al, 2017; Amblee and Bui, 2012; Fritchie and Johnson, 2003; Jung and

Kellaris, 2006), their impact on B2B advertising, particularly in terms of ad credibility, purchase intention, and brand trust, remains underexplored.

Ad credibility, purchase intention, and brand trust were chosen as dependent variables in this study. Applying Cialdini's principles can also lead to negative effects if the claims are perceived as untrustworthy. Therefore, this research includes a measurement of ad credibility. An example of this is that in the study of Fenko et al. (2017) results suggested that using persuasion principles for certain consumers groups can backfire. They found a positive effect of scarcity on time pressure but a negative effect on the purchase intention. According to MacKenzie and Lutz (1989), ad credibility is essential as it reflects the extent to which an advertisement is perceived as believable and trustworthy. Purchase intention is another important measure because it directly assesses the likelihood that a buyer will consider or proceed with a purchase based on the advertisement which is also the main goal of advertising in general. Finally, brand trust is relevant to measure because maintaining long-term relationships is important for B2B companies. According to Mckinney and Benson (2013) brand trust is an important factor in sustainable customer relationships and according to Alexander et al. (2009) users in the DMU considered the brand to be most important to them in the choice of an industrial product. It is expected that social proof and authority have an effect on the purchase intention, brand trust and ad credibility since they have shown effectiveness in the B2C market and in the B2B market trust is very important and by using social proof and authority it is expected to increase the trust in the brand.

B2B advertising shares some similarities with B2C advertising but also presents unique challenges. For instance, B2B transactions often involve more technical products, longer decision-making processes, and greater perceived risks (Hutt & Speh, 2013). Unlike B2C, where advertising is integrated into the sales strategy, B2B advertising is typically seen as a

complement to personal selling efforts (Lichtenthal et al., 2006). Given these differences, the application of persuasive techniques in B2B marketing requires further investigation.

The objective of this research is to explore to what extent social influence, through the principles of social proof and authority, can be used as an online persuasion tool to affect ad credibility, purchase intention, and brand trust in B2B advertising.

1.2 Research objective and research questions

While there is extensive research on the application of persuasion principles in business-to-consumer (B2C) environments where people are relatively uninvolved and are more likely to pay attention to peripheral information (Massaro et al., 1988), there is a notable gap in the literature regarding their effectiveness in business-to-business (B2B) contexts, especially for high-investment products where the involvement is relatively high. B2B transactions typically involve higher stakes, longer sales cycles, and multiple decision-makers, which make the persuasion process more complex. Unlike B2C consumers, who may make impulsive or emotionally driven decisions, B2B buyers must justify their choices internally and align them with the wants and needs of the company such as budget constraints and technical requirements. Moreover, decision-making in B2B is more rational This research aims to address this gap by exploring whether Cialdini's principles of persuasion remain effective in B2B settings, specifically for high-investment products such as agricultural machinery. Understanding the nuances of how these principles work in a B2B context can provide valuable insights for companies looking to improve their digital marketing strategies.

Research questions:

To what extent does persuasive content affect ad credibility, brand trust and purchase intention on B2B advertising?

Sub-research questions:

1. To what extent does social proof affect ad credibility, purchase intention, and brand trust in B2B advertising for high-investment products?
2. To what extent does authority affect ad credibility, purchase intention, and brand trust in B2B advertising for high-investment products?
3. To what extent does ad credibility mediate the relationship between persuasive content and purchase intention in B2B advertising for high-investment products?

1.3 Practical relevance

The practical relevance of this research is that there is potential to provide actionable insights for the company, a leading player in the agricultural technology industry. As the company seeks to improve its market presence and drive sales of its innovative manure application systems, understanding the most effective digital marketing strategies becomes crucial.

One key area of consideration for the company is the potential investment in (online) influencers. By collaborating with industry influencers, the company can improve their established credibility and reach to increase the perceived authority of their products. Influencers can provide expert endorsements and testimonials that may persuade potential buyers, especially in high-investment B2B contexts where trust and reliability are very important.

Additionally, the company is thinking about offering discounts to larger, well-known companies. This strategy aims to make the company's products more attractive to these influential players in the market. If these large companies decide to purchase and use the company's machines, it will generate significant social proof.

This research will provide the company with empirical data on the effectiveness of social proof and authority in their digital marketing efforts. By understanding which strategies have the most significant impact on credibility, persuasiveness, and purchase intention, the company can make informed decisions about where to allocate their marketing budget.

Should the results indicate that influencer collaborations and discounts for large companies effectively improve social proof and authority, the company can confidently invest in these strategies to drive sales and strengthen their market position.

1.4 Academic relevance

This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on persuasion in advertising, particularly within the Business-to-Business (B2B) context. While the principles of social proof and authority have been extensively studied in Business-to-Consumer (B2C) environments, their application in B2B advertising remains underexplored. The majority of research in B2B marketing has traditionally focused on rational, functional messaging, reflecting the more complex, formal decision-making processes typical of these markets (Hutt & Speh, 2013). However, this approach overlooks the potential influence of non-rational content, such as the psychological mechanisms of persuasion, which have been shown to drive consumer behavior in B2C advertising (Cialdini, 2021; Swani et al., 2020).

By exploring how social proof and authority can impact ad credibility, purchase intention, and brand trust in B2B advertising, this study seeks to bridge the gap between the well-established B2C advertising literature and the less-developed B2B research. Specifically, this research investigates whether these persuasion principles, which have proven effective in B2C contexts, can have similar effects in the B2B environment, where decision-makers are typically more risk-averse and purchase processes involve multiple stakeholders.

Moreover, this study aims to contribute to the theoretical understanding of how persuasion functions in professional and organizational settings. It also offers empirical insights into the applicability of combining rational and non-rational content in B2B advertising, thus enriching existing B2B marketing theories and expanding the scope of persuasion research in advertising. Finally, this research provides a foundation for further investigation into the

effects of other persuasion principles in B2B contexts, opening avenues for future research in this area.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Social influence and relevance to b2b

Social influence includes a wide range of processes through which individuals change their behavior, attitudes, or beliefs due to the actions or presence of others. Social influence is defined by Raven (1965) as " The change in a person's cognition, attitude, or behavior, which has its origin in another person or group". This broad concept includes mechanisms such as conformity, compliance and socialization, as well as persuasion, which specifically involves efforts to change someone's attitude or behavior through communication and argumentation (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

2.2 Cialdini principles of persuasion

For this study, Cialdini principles are researched and used. These tools are powerful in advertising and can significantly increase results. The first principle is the principle of reciprocation, reciprocation according to Cialdini (2021d) is the principle that suggest people feel obliged to return a favor when something is given to them. The second principle is the principle of commitment and consistency which is about that people like to follow through with actions that align with their previous commitments and behaviors (Cialdini, 2021b). The third principle is the principle of social proof, which is about the tendency of individual to look to others to determine how the behave (Cialdini, 2021f). The fourth principle is the principle of authority which is based on the idea that people like to follow trusted experts and authoritative figures (Cialdini, 2021a). The fifth principle is principle of liking, this principle is about that people are more likely to be influenced by individuals or brand which they find attractive or likable (Cialdini, 2021c). The sixth principle is the principle of scarcity, this principle suggest that people value things more highly when they are less available (Cialdini,

2021e). The seventh and last principle, which was also added later by Robert Cialdini, is the principle of unity (Cialdini, 2021g). This principle focuses on the importance of shared identity and group membership in influencing people's attitudes and behaviors. For this study however, we only look at the principles social proof and authority.

2.2.1 Social proof

Social proof is based on the idea that individuals look at behavior from others to guide their own behavior, especially similar others (Cialdini, 2021f; Goethals & Darley, 1987). This is mostly happening in situations where there is uncertainty or unfamiliarity with the situation. To illustrate this you can think of a person who is buying a new product he/she never bought, this person is likely to be more vulnerable for social proof cues and is more likely to be persuaded to choose the product what the group norm is. In a study of Smith et al. (2007) it was shown that individuals with a high uncertainty condition displayed the greater conformity compared to individuals with a low uncertainty condition. This could be particularly relevant in the B2B context, where purchase decision making is a complicated practice with a lot of uncertainty, especially when purchasing for the first time (Ejaz, 2016). Social proof can act as a valuable heuristic in these cases, where testimonials or endorsements from other companies, and in this case farmers, that have successfully adopted the product can reduce perceived risk and guide the buyer toward making a decision. Trust in the B2B environment is very important, according to Kim et al. (2016) the customer-brand relationship in positively related to brand trust in the B2B context. According to Kamers (2015) trust is the basis on which B2B relationships can develop and without trust, there can be no relationship. In this study therefore, the brand trust will be measured. Two other dependent variables will be measured as well, the purchase intention and the ad credibility. In this study a case company is used and the main goal of this company is selling their machines, another goal is to gain knowledge about the effectiveness of advertising.

Social proof has a wide range of application possibilities, also outside marketing. The principle has been shown to guide actions such as reducing littering in public spaces, were Cialdini et al. (1990) showed that if there is already litter on the ground, there is a higher chance of littering by others because it became a norm. Another study from Reingen (1982) demonstrated that individuals were significantly more likely to donate to charity when shown a list of previous contributors. Bandura, Grusec, and Menlove (1967) found that children who were initially fearful of dogs and observed a peer model interacting fearlessly with a dog in a positive context were less avoidant for the dogs than children who did not observe a peer model. This shows how social proof can not only encourage actions but also can reduce fear and avoidance. A study from Buunk and Bakker (1995) showed that perceived extradyadic activity among peers has a strong influence on individual's willingness to engage in extradyadic sexual behavior,. All these studies highlight the power of the social proof principle. Cawsey and Rowley (2016) proposed a framework for social media strategies of B2B companies where stimulating electronic word of mouth, which is a form of social proof, is an important component which shows that social proof could be used in the B2B context as well.

2.2.2 Authority

According to the authority principle, we all have deep-seated sense of duty to authority, Humans are law-abiding (Cialdini, 2007). This deep-rooted inclination to obey authority starts from a young age, where we as humans learned to respect authority figures like parents and teachers. Being obedient to authority also benefits us, because authorities have a lot of knowledge and wisdom. To follow authority figure we do not have to think so much. Obedience to authority also causes social control which is good for the whole society.

According to Cialdini (2021a) when reacting to authority in an automatic fashion, people have a tendency to do so in response to mere symbols authority. The three kinds of symbol are

titles, clothing, and trappings. An example for a title is doctors title, he studied for it, so he must know. An example for clothing is wearing a serious uniform, like lab coat. Trappings could be the right car or a big watch. All these symbols could also be easily faked. A good example for this is that Dutch Youtubers went to a theme park with just a yellow safety jacket and everyone in the lines to the attractions allowed them to skip the lines[1]. Individuals who are deferred or obeyed by someone that has one of these symbols underestimated the effect of the authority pressures on their behaviors (Cialdini, 2021a).

The persuasive impact of being viewed as an authority is improved when coupled with credibility. A person perceived as both an expert on the relevant topic and trustworthy, presenting information honestly, is far more convincing (Cialdini, 2021a).

A experiment from Milgram in 1968 showed what authority can let people do (Wenglinsky & Milgram, 1975). Participants were instructed to administer increasingly severe electric shocks to a person (who was actually an actor) when they answered questions incorrectly. Despite hearing the actor's protests and apparent suffering, most participants continued delivering shocks when urged by an authority figure (the experimenter). This study demonstrated that ordinary people could follow orders to perform harmful actions when directed by an authority figure, highlighting the powerful influence of authority on behavior.

In marketing, authority can play an important role in shaping consumer attitudes and influencing purchasing decision. When in an advertisement a brand or product is endorsed by a recognized expert or industry leader, consumers are more likely to trust it (Wang, 2023). Authority in marketing could have different forms, it can be an expert endorsement, but it could also be a certification, award or any authoritative message.

[1] (491) Streetlab - Voordringen [Pretpark] (incl. eng sub) - YouTube

2.3.1 Hypothesis development

Persuasion and purchase intention

Purchase intention is defined as the willingness of people to buy a certain product (Rasheed et al., 2014). It represents the likelihood that someone will proceed with a purchase after being exposed to a marketing message, such as an advertisement. Various factors influence purchase intention, including product price, quality, and brand perception. While extensive research has examined the impact of persuasion techniques on purchase intention in B2C marketing, the application of these principles in B2B contexts remains underexplored (Swani, Brown, & Mudambi, 2020).

The role of social proof in B2B purchase decisions

One of the key persuasion techniques that could influence purchase intention in B2B advertising is social proof. Social proof suggests that people rely on the behavior and choices of others, especially similar others, to guide their own decision-making (Cialdini, 2021f). In consumer markets, social proof improves trust and reduces uncertainty by showing product popularity or widespread acceptance in the consumer market (Abdul Talib et al., 2017; Amblee & Bui, 2012).

However, B2B decision-making differs from B2C in several ways. B2B purchases often involve high financial stakes, a longer decision-making cycle, and multiple stakeholders in a DMU (Webster & Wind, 1972). Given this complexity, social proof in B2B contexts may function differently. Rather than relying on popularity and the adoption of others as in the B2C market, B2B buyers may find testimonials from respected industry peers, endorsements from market leaders, or references from established companies to be more persuasive (Cartwright et al., 2021). If potential buyers see that other companies in their industry use the

same product, it may reduce perceived risks and lower the threshold for making a purchase. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1a: The presence of social proof in advertisements will have a positive effect on purchase intention.

The role of authority in B2B purchase decisions

In addition to social proof, authority plays a crucial role in reducing uncertainty in high-stakes decision-making. According to Cialdini's authority principle, people are more likely to comply with recommendations from individuals or organizations perceived as experts (Cialdini, 2021a). In B2B marketing, endorsements from industry leaders, certifications, and expert testimonials can function as credibility signals that reduce perceived risk and increase confidence in the product (Jung & Kellaris, 2006).

Unlike B2C consumers who may rely on peer reviews or influencer marketing, B2B decision-makers tend to place greater value on risk reduction, return on investment and long-term supplier relationships (Swani et al., 2020). A possible way to create this is to use authority cues. Thus, we hypothesize:

H1b: The presence of authority in advertisements will have a positive effect on purchase intention.

The combination of social proof and authority

While social proof and authority may individually improve purchase intention, the combined effect of both principles remains uncertain in B2B settings. Some research suggests that combining multiple persuasion techniques can improve effectiveness (Cialdini, 2021). However, using persuasion principles can also carry the risk of backfiring which could mean

that with using more principles, the chances of backfiring are also getting bigger (Fenko et al., 2017). Thus, we hypothesize:

H1c: The combined presence of social proof and authority in advertisements will have a positive effect on purchase intention.

Persuasion and brand trust

Brand trust is a critical component in B2B relationships, where long-term partnerships and reliability are key purchasing considerations (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). It is defined as a consumer's confidence in a brand's ability to meet its promised value consistently (Kustini, 2011). Given the complexity of B2B transactions, creating trust through credible advertising could be highly effective. Brand trust is also becoming more important in recent years, research of Edelman (2023) shows that 79% of Gen Z say it's more important than ever to trust the brand they buy, this is more than any other generation surveyed. This shows that there is a trend in the importance of trust in a brand people need, which could mean that in the future when these people are working in businesses it will be more important in the B2B market.

Social proof and brand trust

Social proof can improve brand trust by demonstrating that a company's products are widely used and endorsed by others in the industry. When companies observe their industry peers successfully using a product, they may assume that the product is reliable and meets high standards (Swani et al., 2020). Thus, we hypothesize:

H2a: The presence of social proof in advertisements will have a positive effect on brand trust.

Authority and brand trust

Authority-based endorsements can create trust by showing expertise and reliability. Buyers in B2B settings value third-party validation, particularly from experts who have technical knowledge and industry experience. By associating a product with a trusted authority, a company could reduce uncertainty and improve its perceived credibility. Thus, we hypothesize:

H2b: The presence of authority in advertisements will have a positive effect on brand trust.

Similarly, if both principles reinforce each other, the combined effect may be even stronger:

H2c: The combined presence of social proof and authority in advertisements will have a positive effect on brand trust.

Persuasion and ad credibility

Ad credibility refers to the extent to which consumers perceive an advertisement as truthful and believable (Cotte et al., 2005). In B2B contexts, ad credibility is particularly important due to the higher financial stakes and long-term commitments involved in purchases. If an advertisement is perceived as credible, it increases confidence in the brand and product, making persuasion techniques more effective.

Social proof and ad credibility

Cialdini (2021f) suggests that people evaluate an advertisement's credibility based on external validation. In a B2B setting, if an advertisement references existing customers or industry-wide adoption, it may be perceived as more reliable. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3a: The presence of social proof in advertisements will positively influence ad credibility.

Authority and ad credibility

Similarly, authority figures can improve credibility by showing that product claims are correct. Buyers are more likely to trust an advertisement if it includes expert endorsements or references to recognized industry standards (Wang, 2023). Given the reliance on expertise in B2B markets, it is expected that advertisements featuring authoritative figures will lead to a higher ad credibility. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3b: The presence of authority in advertisements will have a positive effect on ad credibility.

If both principles reinforce credibility, their combined impact should be stronger:

H3c: The combined presence of social proof and authority in advertisements will have a positive effect on ad credibility.

The mediating role of ad credibility in purchase intention and brand trust

Prior research suggests that higher ad credibility leads to increased purchase intention (Lafferty & Goldsmith, 1999). Mosa (2021) concluded that there is a moderate positive effect relationship between ad credibility and purchase intention and also shows that positive comments, opinions, recommendations or reviews also have a significant positive effect, these are examples of social proof which is proof that social proof has a positive effect on ad credibility and the ad credibility has a positive effect on the purchase intention. This suggests that persuasion principles like social proof and authority may not directly affect the purchase intention, but may affect the purchase intention by influencing the ad credibility. However, this was done in a B2C environment while in this study we look at the B2B environment. Thus, we hypothesize:

H4a: Ad credibility has a positive effect on purchase intention.

H4b: Ad credibility mediates the relationship between social proof and purchase intention.

H4c: Ad credibility mediates the relationship between authority and purchase intention.

In a study from Kemec (2020) the relationship between influencer credibility and the effect on brand trust is mentioned. These influencers are used in advertisements and therefore it shows that there is a positive correlation between advertising credibility and brand trust. These studies emphasize that consumers who find advertisements credible are more likely to develop trust in the brand. Thus, we hypothesize:

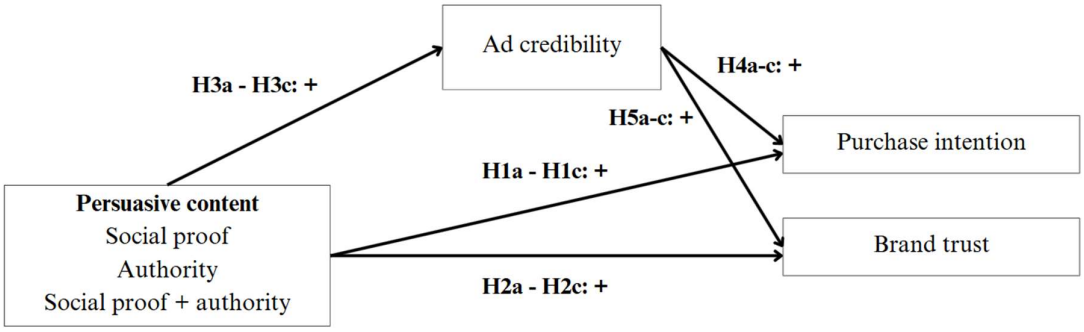
H5a: Ad credibility has a positive effect on brand trust.

H5b: Ad credibility mediates the relationship between social proof and brand trust.

H5c: Ad credibility mediates the relationship between authority and brand trust.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model



3. Method

3.1 Case company

The company at the center of this study is a prominent player in the agricultural technology industry, specializing in innovative solutions for manure application systems. Recognized for its high-quality products. The company is spending more time in improving their market presence and increasing sales through effective digital marketing strategies lately. Now, the company wants to determine if it will invest in creating social proof and authority in their communications by e.g. paying influencers or giving discounts to market leaders.

3.2 Research design

To answer the research questions and hypotheses, an experimental 2x2 design will be employed by conducting an online survey among the social media followers of the case company. The audience of the company's social media profiles are farmers and people who are interested in farming. A link to the Qualtrics survey will be posted on our Instagram story. Four advertisements will be made for the experiment. The design consists of four distinct conditions including a control condition, a condition for social proof, a condition for authority and a condition for a combination of both social proof and authority. The message in the control condition is a purely rational message with only information about the product. The dependent variables will be studied by measurement scales. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of the four conditions, to make sure there is a balanced representation across all conditions. Each participant will observe the advertisement corresponding to their assigned condition and subsequently complete a survey to measure the dependent variables. Manipulation checks will be done to ensure that participants correctly perceived the intended persuasion principle in the advertisement. Because current followers of the company already have a certain level of brand trust and buying intention associated with company, there will be another brand used for this research which is not known under the followers so for them it is a

new brand with no associations yet. However, prior to the main study, a pretest will be conducted to assess whether the content is persuasive and to validate the research by measuring perceived persuasiveness. This will be achieved by presenting the advertisements alongside a short survey assessing their persuasiveness.

Measurement items

In this study we have three dependent variables to measure, this will be done with the measurement items that can been seen in the operationalization table in figure 1. Brand trust will measured with four items from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001b). The adapted and modified statements are as follows: “This brand is trustworthy”, “This brand is reliable”, ‘This brand is honest’ and “This brand is safe”. These items have a 7-point Likert scale and ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Purchase intention will be measured with five items from Dodds et al. (1991). The adapted and modified items are as follows: “If I were to buy a product of this type, I would consider buying this one”, “I would recommend purchasing this product to others who are considering a product like this”, “The probability that I would consider buying this product is high”, “My willingness to buy this product is high” and “The probability that I will buy this product is high”. These items have a 7-point Likert scale and ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Ad credibility will be measured with four items from MacKenzie and Lutz (1989). The statements are “This advertisement is believable”, “This advertisement is credible”, “This advertisement is convincing” and “The advertisement is trustworthy”.

Tabel 1

Operationalization Table

Concept	Measurement items	Source	Scale
Brand trust	• This brand is trustworthy • This brand is reliable • This brand is honest • This brand is safe	Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001b)	Likert-scale 1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree
Purchase intention	• If I were to buy a product of this type, I would consider buying this one • I would recommend purchasing this product to others who are considering a product like this • The probability that I would consider buying this product is high • My willingness to buy this product is high	Dodds et al. (1991)	
Ad credibility	• This advertisement is believable • This advertisement is credible • This advertisement is convincing • This advertisement is trustworthy • This advertisement is realistic	MacKenzie and Lutz (1989)	
Control variables:			
Age	How old are you?		
DMU roll	Welche Rolle spielen Sie im Entscheidungsprozess für den Einkauf in Ihrer Organisation? • I am the main decision-maker • I am involved in the decision-making process, but I am not the main decision-maker • I make recommendations for the decision-making process • I am not involved in the decision-making process		
Future buy intention	Are you planning to buy a low-loader in the future? • Yes • No		
Familiarity	Were you familiar with the TwenteTrailer brand before participating in this study? • Yes • No		

3.2.1 Pretest

As mentioned before, a pretest study was conducted before the main questionnaire was finalized and distributed to participants. This was done to ensure the validity and effectiveness of the advertisements used in this study. The primary aim of the pre-test was to evaluate whether the designed advertisements successfully conveyed the intended principles of authority and social proof, while the control advertisement remained neutral. Additionally, the pre-test assessed which advertisement texts participants found most persuasive and gathered insights for potential improvements. The results of the pre-test informed adjustments to the final advertisements, to make sure these better reflect the intended principles and align with participant perceptions.

The pre-test included 43 valid responses: 35 completed questionnaires and 8 responses with a progression rate between 70% and 100%. Respondents were asked to evaluate four advertisements based on two questions: “To what extent do you agree this ad shows social proof?” and “To what extent do you agree this ad shows authority?” Additionally, participants were asked to create their own advertisement texts that they found convincing, providing valuable insights into what they personally associate with social proof and authority. The pre-test was conducted in Dutch. However, for clarity and accessibility, the texts have been translated into English. A detailed description of the procedure and results, along with the original Dutch texts, can be found in Appendices 1 and 2 .

The first social proof ad was rated the most persuasive overall, this included a statement about satisfied customers and good reviews. The second most persuasive ad was the first authority ad which included an expert endorsement of another company. The third most persuasive ad according to participants was the second social proof ad, which includes a statement about the number of sold product. Participant feedback showed that quantifiable metrics (e.g., user

numbers and satisfaction ratings) were effective for social proof, while authority texts often cited credible experts, brands, and awards.

To address unintended overlaps, the second authority ad was chosen for its clear focus on authority, with the text shortened to avoid social proof elements. Similarly, the second social proof ad was selected but combined with parts of the first ad to include quantifiable metrics. These adjustments ensure each ad effectively conveys its intended principle without overlap, making them ready for the main study. The adjusted advertisement texts are shown in figure 2.

Based on the pre-test results, the advertisements for the main study were finalized to reflect the intended persuasive principles. The control ad serves as a neutral baseline: "Company X[2] offers high-quality flatbed trailers for various industries.". The social proof ad emphasizes metrics and customer satisfaction: Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for a variety of industries. Company X has already sold more than 1,000 flatbed trailers nationwide and scores an average of 4.8 out of 5 stars.". The authority ad highlights a credible endorsement: Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for a variety of industries. According to Jan X, CEO at Company Y, Company X offers the most reliable solutions for heavy loads in the agricultural sector.". The combination ad integrates both principles: " Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for a variety of industries. Company X has already sold more than 1,000 flatbed loaders nationwide and scores an average of 4.8 out of 5 stars. According to Jan X, CEO at Company Y, Company X offers the most reliable solutions for heavy loads in the agricultural industry.". The final advertisements can be found in appendix 3. The full questionnaire can be found in appendix 4. It is important to acknowledge that the company's

[2] To protect the confidentiality of the case company, the name has been anonymized as 'company x' throughout this thesis. The real name was used during data collection.

target market is Germany, therefore also all the advertisements were translated to German as well as the Qualtrics Survey. The German advertisements are shown in appendix 3.

Table 2

Revised Advertisement Texts

Ad	Before	After
Control	Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for various industries.	Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for various industries.
Social proof	1. Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for a variety of industries. Company X scores an average of 4.8 out of 5 stars according to more than 300 satisfied customers. 2. Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for a variety of industries. Company X has already sold more than 1,000 flatbed loaders nationwide.	Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for a variety of industries. Company X has already sold more than 1,000 flatbed trailers nationwide and scores an average of 4.8 out of 5 stars.
Authority	1. Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for various industries. “At Company Y, we rely on Company X for the internal transport of our machines.” - Jan X, CEO Company Y. 2. Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for various industries. According to Erik X, recognized transportation expert at Company Z, Company X offers the most reliable solutions for heavy loads in the agricultural sector.	Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for a variety of industries. According to Jan X, CEO at Company Y, Company X offers the most reliable solutions for heavy loads in the agricultural sector.
After combined	Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for a variety of industries. Company X has already sold more than 1,000 flatbed loaders nationwide and scores an average of 4.8 out of 5 stars. According to Jan X, CEO at Company Y, Company X offers the most reliable solutions for heavy loads in the agricultural industry.	

3.3 Participant characteristics

To get a better understanding of the data of the main data collection, the demographics of the participants are analyzed. From the 213 participants, 209 (98.1%) of them were male. 3 (1.4%) participants were female and 1 (0.5%) choose to not specify their gender. The respondents are divided into different age categories. The largest group of respondents falls within the age category 16-24 years, with a total of 100 respondents (46.9%). The second

largest group is the 25-34 years category, consisting of 81 respondents (38.0%). In the 35-44 years category, there are 26 respondents (12.2%), while the 45-54 years category includes only 5 respondents (2.3%). The oldest group, 55-64 years, has just 1 respondent (0.5%).

25 respondents (12%) indicated that they were familiar with the brand before participating in the study. 188 respondents (88%) stated that they were not familiar with the brand prior to the study. The majority of the participants work in the agriculture sector, with 178 respondents (83.6%). This highlights a strong focus on participants involved in agriculture, which is likely reflective of the study's target audience or context. The second most represented sector is construction, with 14 respondents (6.6%). Other sectors include manufacturing/industry with 8 respondents (3.8%) and transport and logistics with 6 respondents (2.8%). The remaining sectors, including technology and public service, each have 2 respondents (0.9%), while the education sector is represented by 1 respondent (0.5%). Additionally, 2 respondents (0.9%) indicated "other" as their sector, which is not further specified in the dataset.

33% (70 respondents) are involved in the decision-making process but are not the main decision-makers. This represents the largest group. 29% (61 respondents) identify as the primary decision-makers. Another 29% (62 respondents) report that they provide recommendations for the decision-making process. Finally, 9% (20 respondents) state that they are not involved in the decision-making process at all. 76 respondents (36%) would start with online search engines (e.g., Google, Bing), making this the most popular source of initial information. 41 respondents (19%) would rely on recommendations from colleagues or industry. 39 respondents (18%) would seek advice from a trusted dealer or supplier. 26 respondents (12%) would visit manufacturer websites. 26 respondents (12%) would gather information through visits to trade fairs or exhibitions. 2 respondents (1%) would turn to social media (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook). 3 respondents (1%) selected other as their first source of information, without further specification.

3.4 Descriptive statistics and reliability

In table 3, the descriptive statistics and results of the reliability tests are given. Mean scores from ad credibility range from 4.497 to 5.366 which suggests that respondent generally rated the advertisements as somewhat credible. The standard deviations range between 1.223 and 1.345 indicating moderate variation in responses. For the purchase intention the mean scores range from 3.554 to 5.268 which shows that there is more variation in purchase intention. Standard deviations are also higher than ad credibility. For brand trust the mean scores range from 4.709 to 5.028, indicating that respondents generally rated brand trust relatively high. Standard deviations from brand trust, ranging from 1.120 to 1.259 are lower compared to purchase intention and ad credibility which indicates that responses were more consistent. The reliability is measured using Cronbach's Alpha, which assesses internal consistency. All 3 dependent variables have a reliability score of above 0.80, indicating that the measurement scales are internally consistent and reliable.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Factors	**Measurement items**	**Mean**	**SD**	**α**
Ad credibility	AdCred1	5.366	1.247	0.83
	AdCred2	5.362	1.223	
	AdCred3	5.033	1.319	
	AdCred4	4.497	1.345	
	AdCred5	4.986	1.337	
Purchase intention	PurchInt1	5.268	1.359	0.89
	PurchInt2	4.892	1.378	
	PurchInt3	4.216	1.569	
	PurchInt4	3.934	1.583	
	PurchInt5	3.554	1.655	
Brand trust	BrandTru1	5.028	1.259	0.91
	BranTru2	4.709	1.120	
	BranTru3	4.840	1.155	
	BranTru4	4.873	1.228	

Notes: SD = Standard Deviation, α = Cronbach's alpha coefficient

3.5 Data analysis plan

Before testing hypothesis, the dataset will be cleaned by removing participants based on the manipulations checks. Participants who did not correctly identified the intended persuasion principles are being removed from the final analysis. A reliability test is conducted using Cronbach's Alpha to make sure that there is internal consistency with a threshold of 0.7 indicating acceptable reliability. Descriptive statistics will be calculated to summarize the data. To test if the hypotheses are supported, multiple linear regression analyses are performed examining the effects of social proof and authority on ad credibility, purchase intention, and brand trust. Mediation will be checked by using the steps of Baron and Kenny (1986). Control variables, including age, brand familiarity, role in the DMU, and future purchase intentions, are being controlled for to make sure that the observed effects of social proof and authority on the dependent variables are not influenced by differences between respondents. To enable inclusion in the regression analyses, these categorical control variables were dummy-coded.

4 Results

In this chapter, the results of the study are presented. First the results of the manipulation checks will be given. After this, regression analyses and mediation analysis will be shown.

4.1 Manipulation check

Before proceeding to the regression analysis, manipulations of authority and social proof were checked by filtering out participants who did not perceive the manipulations as intended. The study consisted of four experimental conditions: An authority conditions, where participants viewed an advertisements featuring an authoritative message; a social proof condition, where the advertisement highlighted the opinions of others; a combination condition, which included both authority and social proof; and a control conditions, where no persuasion principles were present. For the authority conditions, participants were filtered out if they did not agree that

there was an opinion of an expert mentioned in the advertisement. For the social proof group, participants were filtered out if they did not agree that there was an opinion from someone else in the advertisement mentioned. For the combination group, participants were filtered out if they did not agree on both of these statements. The control group was filtered by participants who agreed on one of these statements so that only the participants who did not perceive authority or social proof in the advertisements were used for analysis. As a results of this, only 77 of the total 213 participants were included in the regression and mediation analyses.

4.2 Hypothesis testing

In order to test if hypothesis are supported or not, regression analysis was done to measure the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variables. In table 4.2 the results can be seen from the regression analysis. The regression analyses included the control variables age, familiarity with the brand, roll in the decision-making process and a future buying intention. Another important thing to note is that a significant portion of the original sample was not used for hypothesis testing. In the hypothesis testing, only participants who correctly perceived the intended principles in the advertisements were included in the final analysis. This means that, those who viewed a social proof advertisement and perceived social proof, or those who viewed an authority advertisement and perceived authority, were used for the final analysis. Similarly, participants in the combination group were included.

4.2.1 Effects of social proof and authority on purchase intention

Table 4 represents the results of the regression results predicting purchase intention. The findings indicate that authority has a positive effect on purchase intention but this effect is not statistically significant. Social proof has a negative effect on the purchase intention which is also not significant. The combination of authority and social proof showed a moderate

positive effect, but this too was not statistically significant. For the full regression results including the control variables estimates, see appendix 4.

Table 4

Results of Regression Analysis Predicting Purchase Intention

	Purchase intention		
Variable	B	SE	p
Authority	3.56	2.40	.143
Social proof	-.083	2.02	.682
Social proof x Authority	2.56	2.35	.280
Control variables:	Included		
Observations	77		
R2/R2 adjusted	0.221 / 0.089		

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; $p < .05$ is considered statistically significant. All control variables were included in the model (age, role in DMU, brand familiarity, future purchase intention).

4.2.2 Effects of social proof and authority on brand trust

Table 5 presents the regression results predicting brand trust. For brand trust, authority has a significant positive effect which indicates that authority plays a role in shaping brand trust. Social proof does not significantly affect brand trust. The combination of authority and social proof has a marginally significant effect on brand trust. The results of the regression analysis including results of control variables estimates, see appendix 5.

Table 5

Results of Regression Analysis Predicting Brand Trust

		Brand trust	
Variable	B	*SE*	*p*
Authority	4.72	1.39	.001***
Social proof	0.70	1.17	.553
Social proof x Authority	2.41	1.36	.080 .
Control variables:		Included	
Observations			
R^2/R^2 adjusted		0.221 / 0.089	

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; $p < .05$ is considered statistically significant. $p < .05$*, $p < .01$**, $p < .001$***. All control variables were included in the model (age, role in DMU, brand familiarity, future purchase intention).

4.2.3 Effects of social proof and authority on ad credibility

Table 6 shows the regression results predicting ad credibility. According to the results, authority has a statistically positive effect on ad credibility. Social proof on the other hand does not significantly influence ad credibility. The combination of authority and social proof shows a positive effect but is not statistically significant. See Appendix 6 for the full regression results with control variable estimates included.

Table 6

Results of Regression Analysis Predicting Ad Credibility

		Ad credibility	
Variable	B	*SE*	*p*
Authority	4.99	1.89	.010*
Social proof	0.93	1.59	.558
Social proof x Authority	2.73	1.85	.144
Control variables:		Included	
Observations		77	
R^2/R^2 adjusted		0.269 / 0.145	

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; $p < .05$ is considered statistically significant. $p < .05$*, $p < .01$**, $p < .001$***. All control variables were included in the model (age, role in DMU, brand familiarity, future purchase intention).

4.2.4 The direct effect of ad credibility on purchase intention and brand trust

The direct effect of ad credibility on the purchase intention and brand trust is measured by adding ad credibility to the regression models of purchase intention and brand trust. The results can be seen in table 7. The results show that ad credibility has a significant positive effect on both purchase intention and brand trust, confirming that ad credibility is an important variable for explaining these dependent variables.

Table 7

The Direct Effect of Ad Credibility on The Purchase Intention and Brand Trust

	Brand trust			*Purchase intention*		
Variable	B	*SE*	*p*	B	*SE*	*p*
Authority	2.73	1.24	.031*	0.73	2.28	.750
Social proof	0.32	0.99	.746	-1.36	1.82	.459
Social proof x Authority	1.32	1.17	.262	1.01	2.15	.641
Ad credibility	0.40	0.08	.001***	0.57	0.14	.001***
Control variables:	Included					
Observations	77			77		
R^2/R^2 adjusted	0.553 / 0.470			0.376 / 0.259		

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; $p < .05$ is considered statistically significant. $p < .05$*, $p < .01$**, $p < .001$***. All control variables were included in the model (age, role in DMU, brand familiarity, future purchase intention).

4.2.5 Mediation analysis: the role of ad credibility

According to Baron and Kenny (1986), there has to be a significant direct effect between the independent and dependent variable before mediation can be analyzed. Since both social proof and authority did not have significant effect on purchase intention, mediation of ad credibility could not be tested for these relationships. Similarly, there was no significant effect found between the relationship of social proof and brand trust, meaning that mediation

through ad credibility was also not possible in this relationship. Therefore the only possible mediation is the relationship between authority and brand trust, which is analyzed in R studio. In table 8, the results of this mediation analysis is shown. The results of this mediation analysis show that that ad credibility significantly mediates the relationship between authority and brand trust which means that a part of the influence of authority on brand trust can be explained by the ad credibility. The results indicate that that ad credibility partially mediates the relationship between authority and brand trust with 42.5% of the total effect is being explained by mediation.

Table 8

Mediation Analysis Results for The Effect of Authority on Brand Trust via Ad Credibility

		95% CI		
Effect	Estimate	*LL*	*UL*	*p*
Indirect effect (ACME)	1.574	0.57	2.96	.001***
Direct effect (ADE	2.142	0.22	3.70	.032*
Total effect	3.717	1.90	5.43	.000***
Proportion mediated	0.424	0.17	0.91	.001**

*Note***.** ACME = Average Causal Mediation Effect (indirect effect); ADE = Average Direct Effect; LL = lower limit of 95% confidence interval; UL = upper limit of 95% confidence interval. $p < .05$ is considered statistically significant. $p < .05$*, $p < .01$**, $p < .001$***.

4.2.6 Overview of hypotheses results

Table 9 provides an overview of the tested hypotheses and whether they are (partially) supported or not.

Table 9

Overview of hypotheses

	Hypotheses	**Result**
H1a	The presence of social proof in advertisements will have a positive effect on purchase intention.	Not supported
H1b	The presence of authority in advertisements will have a positive effect on purchase intention.	Not supported
H1c	The combined presence of social proof and authority in advertisements will have a positive effect on purchase intention.	Not supported
H2a	The presence of social proof in advertisements will have a positive effect on brand trust.	Not supported
H2b	The presence of authority in advertisements will have a positive effect on brand trust.	Supported
H2c	The combined presence of social proof and authority in advertisements will have a positive effect on brand trust.	Partially supported
H3a	The presence of social proof in advertisements will positively influence ad credibility	Not supported
H3b	The presence of authority in advertisements will have a positive effect on ad credibility.	Supported
H3c	The combined presence of social proof and authority in advertisements will have a positive effect on ad credibility.	Not supported
H4a	Ad credibility has a positive effect on the purchase intention	Supported
H4b	Ad credibility mediates the relationship between social proof and purchase intention.	Not supported
H4c	Ad credibility mediates the relationship between authority and purchase intention.	Not supported
H5a	Ad credibility has a positive effect on brand trust	Supported
H5b	Ad credibility mediates the relationship between social proof and brand trust.	Not supported
H5c	Ad credibility mediates the relationship between authority and brand trust.	Supported

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of social proof and authority on ad credibility, purchase intention and brand trust in a B2B advertising context. Specifically the study aimed to investigate a gap in the literature whether these persuasive principles also work in a B2B setting instead of a B2C setting. The research question guiding this study was: "To what extent do social proof and authority affect ad credibility, purchase intention, and brand trust in B2B advertising?" To answer this question, an experimental study was conducted using different advertisement conditions.

5.1 Main findings

As detailed in the results section, findings indicate that authority is strong persuasive factor in B2B advertising, significantly effecting both ad credibility and brand trust. Social proof, on the other hand, did not have a significant effect on any of the dependent variables suggesting that highlighting widespread adoption of a product may be not be what persuades B2B decision-makers. While the combination of authority and social proof showed a slight positive effect on brand trust, this effect was only marginally significant which indicates that the combined use of these principles does not necessarily strengthen the brand trust. An important finding is that the role of ad credibility as a critical factor for influencing the brand trust and purchase intention. Regression results demonstrated that authority improves ad credibility, which in turn leads to higher brand trust purchase intention. Mediation analysis confirmed that ad credibility partially explains the relationship between authority and brand trust, which also shows the importance of the ad credibility.

5.2 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the research on persuasion in B2B marketing by testing the applicability of social proof and authority in the B2B market. Prior research has extensively researched these principles in the context of B2C markets (Abdul Talib et al., 2017; Fritchie

and Johnson, 2003; Amblee and Bui, 2012; Jung and Kellaris, 2006) but the effectiveness of these persuasion principles in the B2B market is underexplored.

The findings of this study align partially with the findings of Cialdini (2021). In the B2C context both social proof and authority are effective instrument to persuade consumers. In the context of B2B the findings of this study show that authority does influence the brand trust and ad credibility but not the purchase intention. Social proof does not influence the purchase intention, brand trust nor the ad credibility. This is contrary to the findings of the study by Joyce (2024) which indicate that consumers are more likely to be influenced by recommendations from individuals they perceive as knowledgeable. This could suggest that B2B buyers may not be as influenced by showing other buyers as the consumers are. B2B buyers rather prioritize credibility and expertise when making purchasing decision. In previous research from Smith et al. (2007) it was shown that people who have a higher uncertainty are more likely to be effected by social proof. It might be that in a B2B environment were decision makers are more informed, social proof is less relevant.

Another important finding is the mediating role of ad credibility in the relationship between authority and brand trust. The results demonstrate that authority improves ad credibility, which in turn positively affects brand trust. This aligns with the findings of Mackenzie and Lutz (1989) that ad credibility is an important factor in creating trust for a brand. The study also aligns with findings from Mosa (2021) who found that ad credibility had a moderately positive effect on purchase intentions. This study extends their work by establishing ad credibility as an important factor for how authority influences brand trust in a B2B context. The mediation analysis shows how it is even more important to make sure that advertisements are perceived ad credible since it directly impacts the trust in the brand and the purchase intentions.

5.3 Practical implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications for marketers in the B2B space, specifically the case company as well.

First, the results show that using authoritative messaging, like endorsements from industry experts, can improve the ad credibility and brand trust where ad credibility indirectly effects the purchase intention as well. Companies should therefore consider investing time and money in getting testimonials from professionals in their industry, this could strengthen the effectiveness of the advertisements. Social proof, on the other hand, did not have a significant effect but it may still be useful although it is not significant it can still have an effect in other contexts or industries.

The significant mediating role of ad credibility suggests that marketers should prioritize transparency and factual accuracy in their messaging so that their advertisements are perceived as credible ads which can improve the overall effectiveness on the brand trust and purchase intention of the advertisement.

For this study a case company was used which wanted to know if the company should invest more in social proof and authority by for example paying influencers or giving discounts to market leaders. With the results from the study the advice for the company is that they should invest more in authoritative messaging from specific industry professionals instead of stating that ‘X machines have been sold’ which is a form of social proof, which does not have significant effect. For other marketers in the high investment and industrial industry this is also suggested, but it is important to know as a marketeer that the effect of the different persuasion principles are different across different industries. Therefore it is important to carefully consider different principles and check if they fit within the industries context. As mentioned before, in a industry with low investments like office supplies, social proof could be more effective as in this study where the study included a high investment product.

5.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research

This research had the goal of giving a first look insight the effectiveness of persuasion in a B2B environment. Because it is targeting a new segment in B2B research there were several limitations that should be acknowledged.

Firstly, the sample of the research consisted primarily of respondents with an interest in the agricultural sector. This was relevant for this study's context but it limits the generalizability of the findings to other B2B industries. Future research should target different B2B markets to investigate whether persuasion principles works in different B2B markets. B2B industries may differ in the complexity of decision-making because of factors as risk perception, whether it is a big investment or not, or stakeholder involvement. Different persuasion principles may work in different B2B industries. For example, in B2B markets where investments are not that big, such as office supplies, social proof may be more effective as in B2B industries with high investments like the low loader industry. In these high investment industries the expert endorsement may be more effective.

The experimental design relied on self-reported measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias or limitation in accurately capturing participants' true purchase intentions. Future studies could incorporate measures like click-through rates or conversion rates to strengthen the validity of the findings. The study was also done online which may not fully replicate the real-world context in which B2B decision are made. Further research could maybe implement an experiment in a real-world context like a trade fair. The study was also done in the context of online advertising, but it might be that the effect is different in a different online context like a website.

Third, the manipulation check revealed that the majority of the participants did not perceive the persuasive elements in the advertisement as intended. This could have several reasons. A reason could be that they did not understand the stimuli. The pre-test to determine what

stimuli was going to be used was done with another target group as the end survey and it might be that there is a difference in the understanding of the stimuli. Another reason might be that people were not paying attention anymore after so many questions and randomly filled something in. For future research it is important to ask this manipulation check at the beginning. The manipulation checks were ‘This advertisement quotes the opinion of an expert.’ and ‘This advertisement refers to the opinions of other customers.’ which do not need any expert knowledge to understand so chances are bigger that it was a lack of engagement with the content.

This study only focused on the two persuasion principles social proof and authority while other persuasion principles such as reciprocity or commitment and consistency, may also be effective in B2B advertising. Future research could explore the effect of other principles as well as combined effect of multiple persuasion principles to identify optimal strategies for B2B advertising.

5.5 Conclusion

This study explored the effects of social proof and authority on brand trust, purchase intention and ad credibility in a B2B context instead of a B2C context, which has already been explored a lot. The findings of the study indicate that authority significantly improves ad credibility and brand trust, while social proof does not have a significant influence. The other finding is this ad credibility was found to be a significant mediating factor in influencing both brand trust and purchase intention.

The study could be the start of further research of persuasion in the B2B context. While it is providing an interesting starting point for understanding persuasion in B2B advertising, future research should continue to explore how different persuasion principles are effective in the B2B market.

For practitioners, the results highlight the value of using authoritative endorsements and creating high levels of ad credibility. By focusing on this, B2B marketers can improve the effectiveness of their advertisement by making them more persuasive.

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Use of AI

During the preparation of this work, I used ChatGPT-4o to assist with coding in R for data analysis and improving textual content. After using this tool, I thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the final outcome.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Procedure of pretest and content used

First explaining about the two Cialdini principles I am researching and the goal of this pre-test.

Questions for pre-test:

Advertisement 1:

Show authority ad 1

“To what extent do you agree this ad displays authority?”.

“To what extent do you agree this ad displays social proof?”

Show authority ad 2

“To what extent do you agree this ad displays authority?”.

“To what extent do you agree this ad displays social proof?”

Show social proof ad 1

“To what extent do you agree this ad displays social proof?”

“To what extent do you agree this ad displays authority?”.

Show social proof ad 2

“To what extent do you agree this ad displays social proof?”

“To what extent do you agree this ad displays authority?”.

Show Control advertisement

“To what extent do you agree this ad displays authority?”.

“To what extent do you agree this ad displays social proof?”

Asking which of all the advertisements is most persuasive according to the participant

Ask participant to make text themselves for the 2 different principles

Advertisement texts used in the pre-test:

Authority 1 text:

Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for various industries. “At Company Y, we rely on Company X for the internal transport of our machines.” - Jan X, CEO Company Y

Authority 2 text:

Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for various industries. According to Erik X, recognized transportation expert at Company Z, Company X offers the most reliable solutions for heavy loads in the agricultural sector.

Social proof 1 text:

Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for various industries. Company X scores an average of 4.8 out of 5 stars according to more than 300 satisfied customers.

Social proof 2 text:

Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for various industries. Company X has already sold more than 1,000 flatbed loaders nationwide.

Control text:

Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for various industries.

The advertisement visual used in the pre-test:

Original pre-test advertisement texts in Dutch

Ad	Before	After
Control	Company X biedt hoogwaardige diepladers aan voor diverse industrieën	Company X biedt hoogwaardige diepladers aan voor diverse industrieën
Social proof	1. Company X biedt hoogwaardige diepladers aan voor diverse industrieën. Company X scoort gemiddeld 4.8 van 5 sterren volgens meer dan 300 tevreden klanten 2. Company X biedt hoogwaardige diepladers aan voor diverse industrieën. Company X heft al meer dan 1.000 diepladers verkocht in heel Nederland.	Company X biedt hoogwaardige diepladers aan voor diverse industrieën. Company X heeft al meer dan 1.000 diepladers verkocht in heel Nederland en scoort gemiddeld 4.8 van 5 sterren.

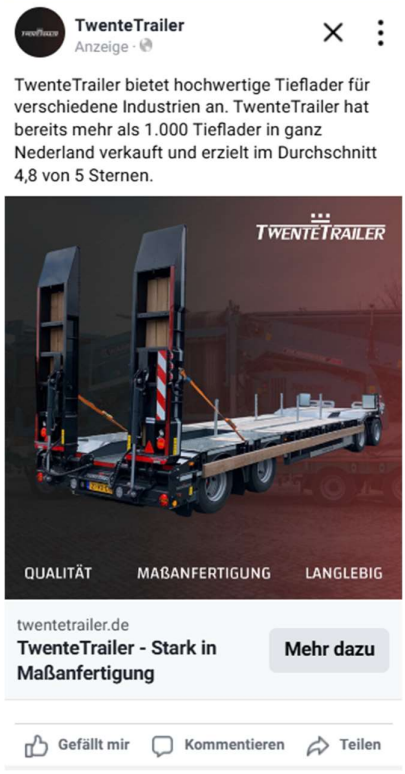
Authority	1. Company X biedt hoogwaardige diepladers aan voor diverse industrieën. “Bij Company Y vertrouwen op Company X voor het interne transport van onze machines.” – Jan X, CEO Company Y 2. Company X biedt hoogwaardige diepladers aan voor diversie industrieën. Volgens Erik X, erkend transportexpert bij Company Z, biedt Company X de meest betrouwbare oplossingen voor zware ladingen in de landbouwsector.	Company X biedt hoogwaardige diepladers aan voor diverse industrieën. Volgens Jan X, CEO bij Company Y, biedt Company X de meest betrouwbare oplossingen voor zware ladingen in de landbouwsector.

Appendix 2: Results of pre-test

Advertisement	Ad Text	Average perceived social proof (1 = high, 5 = low)	Averagge perceived Authority (1 = high, 5 = low)	Persuasiveness Ranking	Key Observations
Control Ad	Company X offers high-quality flatbed trailers for various industries.	Low SD = 0.92 M = 3.74	Low SD = 1.00 M = 3.51	5th (lowest)	Perceived as neutral, aligning with the absence of persuasive principles.
Social Proof Ad 1	Company X scores an average of 4.8 out of 5 stars according to more than 300 satisfied customers.	High SD = 0.94 M = 2.09	High SD = 0.97 M = 2.51	1st (highest)	Scored high on social proof as intended, but unexpectedly also scored high on authority.
Social Proof Ad 2	Company X has already sold more than 1,000 flatbed trailers nationwide.	High SD = 1.04 M = 2.44	Moderate/low SD = 0.95 M = 2.88	3rd	Effectively focused on social proof, with moderate authority scores, better meeting the intended design than social proof ad 1.
Authority Ad 1	At Company Y, we rely on Company X for the internal transport of our machines." - Jan X, CEO Company Y	High SD = 0.93 M = 2.63	High SD = 0.86 M = 2.27	2nd	Scored high on authority, as intended, but also unexpectedly high on social proof.
Authority Ad 2	According to Erik X, recognized transportation expert at	Moderate SD = 1.23 M = 2.9	High SD = 1.03 M = 2.37	4th	Successfully emphasized authority without overly

	Company Z, Company X offers the most reliable solutions.				activating social proof perceptions.

Appendix 3: Final advertisements

Control	
Social proof	

Authority	
Combination	

Appendix 4: Regression analysis purchase intention with control variable estimates

Results of Regression Analysis Predicting Purchase Intention

	Purchase intention		
Variable	B	SE	p
Authority	3.56	2.40	.143
Social proof	-.083	2.02	.682
Social proof x Authority	2.56	2.35	.280
Main decision maker	3.70	2.99	.220
Influencer	5.78	2.82	.045*
Advisor	1.79	2.88	.537
Age 16-24	0.55	3.45	.873
Age 25-34	-0.64	3.62	.860
Age 35-44	1.02	4.33	.815
Familarity	4.83	2.84	.094
Future purchase intention	-1.26	1.93	.517
Observations		77	
R2/R2 adjusted		0.221 / 0.089	

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error;
p < .05*, p < .01**, p < .001***.
Omitted categories for dummy variables: “Not involved” (DMU) and “Age 45–54”.

Appendix 5: Regression analysis brand trust with control variable estimates

Results of Regression Analysis Predicting Brand Trust

	Brand trust		
Variable	B	*SE*	*p*
Authority	4.72	1.39	.001***
Social proof	0.70	1.17	.553
Social proof x Authority	2.41	1.36	.080 .
Main decision maker	1.52	1.73	.383
Influencer	1.50	1.63	.361
Advisor	0.46	1.67	.784
Age 16-24	-0.46	2.00	.820
Age 25-34	0.33	2.09	.877
Age 35-44	1.51	2.50	.548
Familiarity	4.70	1.64	.006**
Future purchase intention	0.96	1.12	.393
Observations		77	
R^2/R^2 adjusted		0.221 / 0.089	

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error;
p < .05*, p < .01**, p < .001***, . = marginal significance (p < .10).
Omitted categories for dummy variables: “Not involved” (DMU) and “Age 45–54”.

Appendix 6: Regression analysis ad credibility with control variable estimates

Results of Regression Analysis Predicting Ad Credibility

	Ad credibility		
Variable	B	*SE*	*p*
Authority	4.99	1.89	.010*
Social proof	0.93	1.59	.558
Social proof x Authority	2.73	1.85	.144
Main decision maker	2.82	2.35	.235
Influencer	2.87	2.22	.200
Advisor	0.06	2.27	.978
Age 16-24	-1.45	2.72	.596
Age 25-34	-1.91	2.85	.505
Age 35-44	1.22	3.40	.721
Familiarity	3.49	2.23	.123
Future purchase intention	-0.43	1.52	.780
Observations		77	
R^2/R^2 adjusted		0.269 / 0.145	

Note. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error;
p < .05*, p < .01**, p < .001***.
Omitted categories for dummy variables: “Not involved” (DMU) and “Age 45–54”.

Appendix 7: Survey

Thesis Main Questionnaire - Final

Start of Block: Informed consent

Consent Text Sie sind eingeladen, an einer Forschungsstudie mit dem Titel "The Effectiveness of B2B Advertising" teilzunehmen. Diese Studie wird von Chris Rikmanspoel von der Faculty of Behavioural, Management, and Social Sciences an der Universität Twente durchgeführt. Ziel dieser Forschungsstudie ist es zu untersuchen, wie verschiedene Werbeprinzipien, wie soziale Bewährtheit und Autorität, die Wahrnehmung von Anzeigen, die Kaufabsicht und das Markenvertrauen in der Tiefladerbranche beeinflussen. Das Ausfüllen der Umfrage dauert etwa 5 Minuten. Die Daten werden verwendet, um meine Masterarbeit zu unterstützen. Ihre Teilnahme an dieser Studie ist vollständig freiwillig, und Sie können Ihre Teilnahme jederzeit abbrechen. Wir gehen davon aus, dass mit dieser Forschungsstudie keine bekannten Risiken verbunden sind. Wie bei jeder Online-Aktivität besteht jedoch ein minimales Risiko einer Datenverletzung. Nach bestem Wissen und Gewissen bleiben Ihre Antworten in dieser Studie vertraulich. Es werden keine persönlichen Daten erhoben. Alle Daten werden anonymisiert und sicher gespeichert, um Ihre Privatsphäre zu gewährleisten. Die in dieser Studie verwendeten Anzeigen sind fiktiv. Für weitere Informationen zu dieser Studie können Sie Chris Rikmanspoel unter c.b.g.rikmanspoel@student.utwente.nl kontaktieren.

Consent Question Bitte geben Sie unten an, ob Sie die oben genannten Informationen verstanden haben, an dieser Studie teilnehmen möchten und der Verarbeitung Ihrer (anonymisierten) Antworten zustimmen.

- ○ Ja, ich stimme zu, an der Studie teilzunehmen. (1)
- ○ Nein, ich stimme nicht zu. (2)

End of Block: Informed consent

Start of Block: Control Questions

Control Question Planen Sie in der Zukunft den Kauf eines Tiefladers?

- ○ Ja (1)
- ○ Nein (2)

Control Question 2 Welche Marke halten Sie für die führende Marke in der Tieflader-/Anhängerindustrie?

_____

End of Block: Control Questions

Start of Block: Control Group

Graphic Control Bitte lesen und betrachten Sie die Anzeige sorgfältig und teilen Sie anschließend Ihre Meinung zu den folgenden Aussagen mit.

AdCred1 Diese Anzeige is glaubwürdig

- Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- Stimme zu (2)
- Stimme eher zu (3)
- Weder noch (4)
- Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- Stimme nicht zu (6)
- Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

AdCred2 Diese Anzeige is realistisch

- ○ Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- ○ Stimme zu (2)
- ○ Stimme eher zu (3)
- ○ Weder noch (4)
- ○ Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- ○ Stimme nicht zu (6)
- ○ Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

AdCred3 Diese Anzeige is überzeugend

- ○ Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- ○ Stimme zu (2)
- ○ Stimme eher zu (3)
- ○ Weder noch (4)
- ○ Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- ○ Stimme nicht zu (6)
- ○ Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

AdCred4 Diese Anzeige is voreingenommen

- Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- Stimme zu (2)
- Stimme eher zu (3)
- Weder noch (4)
- Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- Stimme nicht zu (6)
- Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

AdCred5 Diese Anzeige is vertrauenswürdig

- Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- Stimme zu (2)
- Stimme eher zu (3)
- Weder noch (4)
- Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- Stimme nicht zu (6)
- Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

Page Break

Graphic Control 2 Hier ist die Anzeige erneut, bevor Sie mit den Fragen fortfahren.

PuchInt1 Wenn ich einen Tieflader kaufen würde, würde ich diesen beim Kauf in Betracht ziehen.

- Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- Stimme zu (2)
- Stimme eher zu (3)
- Weder noch (4)
- Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- Stimme nicht zu (6)
- Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

PurchInt2 Ich würde den Kauf dieses Produkts anderen empfehlen, die nach einem ähnlichens Produkt suchen.

- Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- Stimme zu (2)
- Stimme eher zu (3)
- Weder noch (4)
- Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- Stimme nicht zu (6)
- Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

PurchInt3 Die Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass ich in Erwägung ziehe, dieses Produkt zu kaufen, ist hoch.

- ○ Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- ○ Stimme zu (2)
- ○ Stimme eher zu (3)
- ○ Weder noch (4)
- ○ Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- ○ Stimme nicht zu (6)
- ○ Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

PurchInt4 Meine Bereitschaft, dieses Produkt zu kaufen, ist hoch.

- ○ Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- ○ Stimme zu (2)
- ○ Stimme eher zu (3)
- ○ Weder noch (4)
- ○ Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- ○ Stimme nicht zu (6)
- ○ Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

PurchInt5 Die Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass ich dieses Produkt kaufen werde, ist hoch.

- ○ Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- ○ Stimme zu (2)
- ○ Stimme eher zu (3)
- ○ Weder noch (4)
- ○ Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- ○ Stimme nicht zu (6)
- ○ Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

Page Break

Graphic Control 3 Hier ist die Anzeige erneut (das letzte Mal), bevor Sie mit den Fragen fortfahren..

BranTru1 Diese Marke ist vertrauenswürdig.

- ○ Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- ○ Stimme zu (2)
- ○ Stimme eher zu (3)
- ○ Weder noch (4)
- ○ Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- ○ Stimme nicht zu (6)
- ○ Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

BranTru2 Diese Marke ist zuverlässig.

- ○ Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- ○ Stimme zu (2)
- ○ Stimme eher zu (3)
- ○ Weder noch (4)
- ○ Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- ○ Stimme nicht zu (6)
- ○ Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

BranTru3 Diese Marke ist ehrlich.

- ○ Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- ○ Stimme zu (2)
- ○ Stimme eher zu (3)
- ○ Weder noch (4)
- ○ Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- ○ Stimme nicht zu (6)
- ○ Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

BranTru4 Diese Marke vermittelt Sicherheit.

- ○ Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- ○ Stimme zu (2)
- ○ Stimme eher zu (3)
- ○ Weder noch (4)
- ○ Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- ○ Stimme nicht zu (6)
- ○ Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

ManipulationAuthor In dieser Anzeige wird die Meinung eines Experten angeführt.

- ○ Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- ○ Stimme zu (2)
- ○ Stimme eher zu (3)
- ○ Weder noch (4)
- ○ Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- ○ Stimme nicht zu (6)
- ○ Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

ManipulationSocialPr In dieser Anzeige wird auf die Meinung anderer Kunden hingewiesen.

- ○ Stimme voll und ganz zu (1)
- ○ Stimme zu (2)
- ○ Stimme eher zu (3)
- ○ Weder noch (4)
- ○ Stimme eher nicht zu (5)
- ○ Stimme nicht zu (6)
- ○ Stimme überhaupt nicht zu (7)

End of Block: Control Group

Start of Block: Additional Questions

Familiarity with TT Waren Sie vor der Teilnahme an dieser Studie mit der Marke Company X vertraut?

- ○ Ja (1)
- ○ Nein (2)

FirstPlaceInfo Stellen Sie sich vor, Sie möchten einen Tieflader kaufen: Wo würden Sie zuerst nach Informationen suchen?

- ○ Online-Suchmaschinen (z.B. Google, Bing) (1)
- ○ Hersteller-Websites (2)
- ○ Empfehlungen von Kollegen oder Branchenexperten (3)
- ○ Besuch von Messen oder Ausstellungen (4)
- ○ Beratung durch einen vertrauenswürdigen Händler oder Lieferanten (5)
- ○ Soziale Medien (z.B. LinkedIn, Facebook) (6)
- ○ Andere: (7) _____

End of Block: Additional Questions

Start of Block: Demographics

Age Wie alt sind Sie?

- ○ 16-24 Jahre (1)
- ○ 25-34 Jahre (2)
- ○ 35-44 Jahre (3)
- ○ 45-54 Jahre (4)
- ○ 55-64 Jahre (5)
- ○ 65+ Jahre (6)

Gender Welchems Geschlecht gehören Sie an?

- ○ Männlich (1)
- ○ Weiblich (2)
- ○ Keine Angabe (3)

Industry In welchem Sektor/in welcher Branche sind Sie derzeit tätig?

- ○ Landwirtschaft (1)
- ○ Transport und Logistik (2)
- ○ Herstellung/Industrie (3)
- ○ Baugewerbe (4)
- ○ Technologie (5)
- ○ Finanzen (6)
- ○ Öffentlicher Dienst (7)
- ○ Einzelhandel (8)
- ○ Bildung (9)
- ○ Gastgewerbe (10)
- ○ Andere: (11) _____

RollDecisionProcess Welche Rolle spielen Sie im Entscheidungsprozess für den Einkauf in Ihrer Organisation?

- ○ Ich bin der hauptsächliche Entscheidungsträger (1)
- ○ Ich bin am Entscheidungsprozess beteiligt, aber nicht der hauptsächliche Entscheidungsträger (2)
- ○ Ich gebe Empfehlungen für den Entscheidungsprozess (3)
- ○ Ich bin nicht am Entscheidungsprozess beteiligt (4)

E-mail Wie lautet Ihre E-Mail-Adresse? Für die Teilnahme an der Verlosung wird Ihre E-Mail-Adresse abgefragt. **Nur ernsthaft ausgefüllte Fragebögen nehmen an der Verlosung teil (dies können wir überprüfen).**

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