

‘Wide-open Window or Concealing Curtain?’

Public Perceptions of Dutch News Media

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how Dutch citizens evaluate the various credibility aspects of their national news media and to what extent individual antecedents (news media consumption, personal beliefs, news media discussion, and socio-demographics) are of influence in this evaluation. Besides, it investigates if Dutch citizens have a tendency to belief in conspiracy theories and to what extent individual antecedents of personal beliefs and socio-demographics play a role in this. Finally, the study inquires to what extent people recognize general news frames in a homogeneous way.

Method: An online survey was carried out in March and April 2016. The items are generally based on existing, proven reliable scales. A total of 415 adults completed the questionnaire.

Results: Dutch citizens are inclined to perceive the national broadcasters as professional experts with reasonable believable and trustworthy news reports, but they question the completeness and unbiasedness (with a clear separation of fact and opinion) of this reporting. Television news consumption, social trust, and political trust are significant predictors of news media credibility perception. Dutch citizens seem to be quite susceptible to conspiracy thinking. Social trust and political trust are significant predictors of this construct. The participants are far from unanimous in the recognizing of general news frames in the national reporting of an event.

Conclusions: The public perceptions of Dutch news media are not extremely negative nor extremely positive. This applies to both credibility perception and conspiracy thinking. Enhancement of news media credibility perception is desired, just like a decrease of belief in conspiracy theories. In order to achieve this, journalists should pay more attention to illustrating news items from multiple perspectives and policymakers should pay attention the personal beliefs - trust in politics in particular - that are related to news media perceptions. Further research into the area of public framing recognition could be interesting; this initial exploration did not result into astonishing insights.

Keywords:

Perceived News Credibility; Perceived Objectivity; Perceived News Framing; Conspiracy Thinking; Trust in Journalism; Perceptions of Dutch News Media

INTRODUCTION

Those who wanted to watch the Dutch evening news on January 29, 2015 got a static image instead that read ‘One moment please’. Ultimately, the entire news program was cancelled. Behind the scenes, a young man in a suit demanded broadcast time while threatening the NOS-staff with a weapon. His name was Tarik Z. and he claimed that he wanted to warn the Dutch citizens for ‘the incomplete, unreliable and biased information that is disseminated by the news media’.

In a metaphorical way, broadcasters have been described as ‘windows on the world’. The view these windows provide, “helps to shape the public’s mental map or image of the world” (Larson, 1948). Therefore, it is important that the provided perspectives by news media are inclusive and objective enough. People like Tarik Z. are not convinced of these qualifications. They express the concern that media frames are – instead of wide-open windows – rather curtains which conceal true actuality. In other words: according to them, news media organisations provide subjective or false information.

Although there seems to be no convincing scientific evidence for an ideological media bias that is consistent over time and across contexts (Eveland & Shah, 2003), multiple studies found that a substantial – and possibly increasing – amount of people do perceive such a news bias (e.g. Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen, Driscoll & Casey, 2002; Kiouisis, 2001; Ladd, 2011; Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl & Pingree, 2015). Oftentimes it is believed that these perceived biases contain a message contrary to personal opinions (Eveland & Shah, 2003). In order to discover the current situation in the Netherlands with regard to the theme, this study examines how Dutch citizens experience the credibility of the national news media.

Scientific and Societal Relevance of Investigation

Investigation into public perception of news media is important, because of a variety of reasons. Gaining more insight into this attitude is beneficial both for the industry of journalism, for the society in a broader sense, and for the field of behavioral science. In this section those interests are pointed out introductory; more elaborate attention will be paid to them in the theoretical framework.

First of all, this study contributes to the field of behavioral science. Communication scholars point out how important it is to expand the relatively limited research knowledge about the correlates of trust in media (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Partly because of the severe consequences distrust can have, as described in the sections below. The scientific data that is available in the field, oftentimes is gathered in the United States (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). The Netherlands remained relatively underexposed with regard to news media perception research. In addition to possible differences in perception between citizens from different nations, the obtained data can also be time-barred. The rise of new media possibilities and online interaction, may have an impact on the credibility perception of news items (Thorson, Vraga & Ekdale, 2010), so it is important to remain up-to-date.

When it is known whether Dutch citizens doubt certain aspects of national news media, journalistic organizations might be able to implement improvements which fit the needs of the people better and reduce

trust issues. When a news media organization is not perceived credible, its profits will eventually inevitably decline (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Finally, for society as a whole, research into public perceptions of news media is relevant too. Gass and Seiter (2013) emphasize how important it is to study the persuasive power of media in order to help people prevent against undesirable interference. Besides, broadcasters serve as information providers; people sometimes make major decisions based on the knowledge they receive in media messages (Drok & Schwarz, 2010; Kohring & Matthes, 2007). An example of this is political voting behaviour (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). When citizens distrust the media, the indirect consequences can, for example, be that they no longer use their right to vote (Butler, Koopman & Zimbardo, 1995) or reject the opportunity to receive vaccines (e.g. Kata, 2010) – as emerged in the Netherlands after rumours of the HPV vaccinations (Kelly, Leader, Mittermaier, Hornik & Cappella, 2009). The invasion of Tarik at the NOS news is an example of a less passive expression of distrust. In order to make fellow citizens aware of the, in their view, suspicious media practices, individuals sometimes justify aggressive actions (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). By expanding the knowledge of the constructs and antecedents of news media perceptions, governmental institutions get a better chance of dealing with this kind of undesirable deeds in a more competent way. All in all, we could conclude it has great practical and theoretical relevance to study the perception Dutch citizens have of the credibility of news media in their country.

Constructs of News Media Perception

When it comes to public perceptions of the national news media, three important predicting constructs require attention, namely credibility perception (Kohring & Matthes, 2007), conspiracy thinking (Aupers, 2012), and framing recognition (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010). This division can be found reflected throughout the entire thesis and is chiefly explained in the theoretical framework. Besides these constructs, also individual antecedents are of importance. In the current thesis, attention will be paid to the following antecedents: news media consumption, personal beliefs, issue-involvement in the form of news media discussion, and socio-demographics. The main research question that the current study aims to answer is as follows:

How do Dutch citizens evaluate the national news media when it comes to the constructs of credibility perception, conspiracy thinking, and framing recognition and to what extent are these first two constructs predicted by personal antecedents?

With regard to credibility perception, fourteen antecedents have been identified and classified into the four categories mentioned above. The first sub question addresses the level of the public credibility perception and the mentioned associated antecedents:

1. [a] How do Dutch citizens evaluate the various credibility aspects of their national news media and [b] to what extent individual antecedents pertaining to news media consumption, personal beliefs, news media discussion, and socio-demographics are of influence in this evaluation?

With regard to conspiracy thinking, seven antecedents have been identified and classified into two categories: personal beliefs, and socio-demographics. The second sub question addresses the level of the public credibility perception and the mentioned associated antecedents:

2. [a] To what extent do Dutch citizens have a tendency to belief in conspiracy theories and [b] to what extent the individual antecedents of personal beliefs and socio-demographics are of influence in this?

Finally, attention is given to news frame recognition by citizens. The vast majority of the existing framing research aims to identify news frames used as objectively and scientifically as possible. In the current thesis, the recognizing of news frames is not reserved for scientists but for citizens. This results in the last and third sub question:

3. Which general news frames are identified by Dutch citizens after a period of consuming the reporting on a certain news event and to what extent this identification concerns a homogeneous interpretation with recognition of news frames to the same degree?

The theoretical framework is divided into three parts, pertaining to the constructs of public perception of news media that are discussed in the current thesis: credibility perception, conspiracy thinking, and framing recognition. Within the first two parts, attention is paid to the definition of the credibility and conspiracy construct, their associated consequences and the thereby arising relevance of investigation, the information available concerning the state of the construct in the Netherlands, and finally, the antecedents which are believed to be related to the construct. The third and final part of this chapter discusses news media framing, its definition and the relevance of investigating into the subject, the recognizing of news frames, and the relationship between issue-involvement and objectivity perception.

News Media Credibility Perception

Defining News Media Credibility Perception

The perception and evaluation of news media by individuals can be captured by the concept of *trust* in or *credibility* of journalism: a crucial variable in media effects (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Tsfat, 2003). In the current article, the choice has been made to employ the term ‘credibility’ rather than trust, as the latter concept can be seen as an aspect of credibility. In the following sections this becomes apparent in, for example, the conceptualisations of credibility by Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) and Flanagin and Metzger (2000).

Defining credibility. Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen, Driscoll and Casey (2005) describe credibility typically ‘as a facility for inspiring or instilling belief’, offering ‘reason or evidence to be believable or within the range of possibility’. Sundar (1999) defined credibility in the online news context as a ‘global evaluation of the objectivity of the story’. According to the scholar the evaluation of news items is constructed out of four basic factors: credibility, liking, quality, and representativeness. Meyer (1988) had previously indicated that the likeability and credibility of a newspaper might be the same dimensions. The scientist called this the ‘affiliation’ factor: the extent to which a reader likes the messenger changes the credibility perception of the message.

What news media credibility is composed of. The empirical measurement of news media credibility perception is quite often taken with single-item measurements (e.g. Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000; Roberts, 2010), which makes it hard to determine what meaning and implication the results do really have. Credibility perception can be seen as composed out of diverse aspects. The extensively quoted scholars Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) describe credibility as consisting of *expertness* (the extent to which a source is ‘well informed and intelligent’) and *trustworthiness* (impartial; absence of persuasive intentions). The caveat that communication scientists like Kohring and Matthes (2007) issue is ‘the lack of theoretical clarification of this credibility construct’: are the two identified components *dimensions* of credibility or *reasons* for credibility? They were not the first authors who mentioned this problem. Metzger,

Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus and McCann (2003) stated that the absence of the development of clear and consistent, conceptual and operational definitions of media credibility might be blamed to excessive focus on measurement. And indeed, when taking a glimpse into the scientific literature discussing this research theme, what stands out is the diversity of the conceptualizations being used to interpret the credibility construct. In an attempt to bring some clarity Flanagin and Metzger (2000) created an instrument that measures the perceived credibility of a message. They employed five dimensions (*believability, accuracy, trustworthiness, bias, and completeness*) which can also be found in earlier literature (e.g. Meyer, 1988). With an online experiment Roberts (2010) reaffirmed that the scale can be considered reliable. Considering the demonstrated expediency of the multidimensional conceptualization by Flanagin and Metzger (2000) the current study builds further upon the approach of these scholars. In addition, five other aspects that are prevalent in literature (e.g. Gaziano, 1987; Johnson & Kaye, 2000; Ognianova, 1998; Sundar, 1996; Rimmer & Weaver, 1987) about news media credibility perception (*expertness, fairness, respect for privacy, separation of fact and opinion, and concern for community's well-being*) are incorporated into the current research as well, with the aim to gain a broader understanding of credibility perception and to add value to the measurement.

Defining news media. In the course of time the definition of media credibility changed from an objective aspect of a certain media source to the subjective judgement of news institutions (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). In defining 'news media' we follow Kohring and Matthes (2007) who developed the first standardized scale for the measurement of trust in news media. They make clear that this trust in journalism does not refer to other forms of media communication, like entertainment or messages with a marketing purpose.

Relevance of Investigation into News Media Credibility Perception

It is understandable that communication scholars have been interested in the subject of news media credibility for a long time now (Kioussis, 2001; Meyer, 2004; Roberts, 2010). Trust in or credibility of journalism is considered a crucial variable in the influence media can have (e.g. Tsfati, 2003), so it is of value to pay attention to the dimensions that citizens apply when judging the reliability of news media (Kohring & Matthes, 2007) and to expand the relatively limited knowledge about the correlates of perceived media credibility (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). News media credibility is of ultimate importance for journalism (Singer, 2010), but also has great influence on society.

The consequences for journalism are quite obvious. When there is a lack of trust in certain media sources, people are less influenced by these mistrusted channels (Druckman, 2001; Tsfati, 2003) and they are likely to look for alternatives (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). In other words, there is a chance that distrustful news media consumers will go to competitors of their former news source. To be able to make citizens accept a certain frame as truth, perceived source credibility is indispensable (Druckman, 2001). Therefore it is not surprising that news media organizations place high value on being perceived as trustworthy. After

all, these consequences result in indirect manifestations like a decreasing degree of circulation, profitability and advertising value (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Less evident but certainly not inconsiderable are the consequences for society. The impact of the public perception of journalistic credibility reaches beyond the success and welfare of news media sources: it seems, to give an example, to relate to the extent of trust citizens have in the democratic system. According to Tsafati and Cohen (2005) the audience needs the assurance that they are well enough informed to make a considered political choice. Kohring and Matthes (2007) argued that the concept of trust is essential when it comes to organizing the current modern society that contains an unclear future and a variety of high-risk decision-making, because of the foundation trust lays for social order and cohesion. That is also one of the reasons that Barnett (2008) dismisses the thought that trust in the media would be overrated and that public distrust would be a sign of a healthy, sensible society. He contends that we should be concerned about increasing suspicion, because distrusting good journalism ultimately eliminates the profession. And that while, he reasons, proper journalism is essential in the individual formation of a truthful worldview and – consequently – in making well-informed decisions about important issues (such as voting behaviour, medical choices etcetera).

Furthermore, the relevance of scholarly interest into news media credibility perception has increased because of the rise of online news media during the last decades. Various scholars suggest that the perceived credibility decreases due to the reliability risks that co-occur with the ample author possibilities of the world wide web (Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen, Driscoll & Casey, 2002; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus & McCann, 2003; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). After all, everybody with internet access and basic computer skills is able to post online messages. Besides, online interaction possibilities and online context of news items also seem to play a role in the judgment of credibility (Thorson, Vraga & Ekdale, 2010). It is therefore of interest to keep up with the developments of news media perceptions.

News Media Credibility Perception in the Netherlands

There is not much known about the extent to which Dutch citizens perceive their national news media credible. Tsfati and Ariely (2014) noticed that most of the studies exploring relationships between trust in news media and associated issues were conducted in the United States. They examined cross-national data from 44 different countries in order to expand the knowledge of trust in media, and encourage other researchers to follow their example and study this subject outside the U.S. context. Tsfati and Ariely (2014) included the Netherlands into their analysis, but although interesting individual-level correlations were investigated, no explicit information about the Dutch credibility perception was displayed. In other words: their study does not show to what extent Dutch citizens trust their national news media.

The 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer is another example of an international research into public perceptions of news media credibility. Their online survey was conducted in 28 countries and incorporated more than 33,000 respondents. It measured trust in government, business, nongovernmental organizations and media. Their main finding is there is a growing gap between the ‘informed public’ (ages 25-64, high

education and income, active consumer of media sources, corporate news and public policy information) and the mass population. Among the Dutch participants, the mean score on the trust index (measuring the four mentioned institutions including news media) was 62% for the informed public and 52% for the mass population. However, the study does not elaborate extensively the experienced media credibility in the Netherlands specifically.

A research that does have a particular focus on Dutch news media consumption and the related appreciation was conducted by Drok and Schwarz (2010). Yet this study also does not supply the desired data concerning the credibility perception of the Dutch citizen, because the research was limited to youth and newspaper consumption. From the conducted focus groups the conclusion was drawn that most Dutch adolescents think journalists are subjective but do work conscientiously and provide correct facts.

The semi-scientific research agency Newcom performs an inquiry into trust and media among 700 Dutch citizens every two year. In 2015 they concluded almost a third of the research population indicated to perceive both traditional and digital news media as credible. Overall, traditional news sources would still be considered most reliable. At the same time, there is a noticeable decline in the perceived credibility of both newspapers, television, radio and social media since the first Newcom Vertrouwensindex (Trust Index) measurements in 2010. The question remains which constructs contribute to this media credibility concept and where the distrust is constituted of.

Antecedents of News Media Credibility Perception

With regard to credibility perception, fourteen antecedents have been identified and classified into four categories which will be discussed in the following sections: news media consumption, personal beliefs, news media discussion, and socio-demographics.

News Media Consumption

When the credibility perception of news media messages is measured, the messenger should be taken into account. Source variables have been called of ‘paramount importance’ when it comes to media credibility (Eveland & Shah, 2003). One of the first scholars who examined the public opinion regarding credibility of various media sources was Roper (1985) who asked the U.S. audience every two years to answer the following question:

‘If you got conflicting or different reports of the same story from radio, television, the magazines and the newspapers, which of the four versions would you be most inclined to believe—the one on radio or television or magazines or newspapers?’

The results showed that the newspaper had to give up its initial position of credibility advantage after 1959; from that moment on people were inclined to perceive television as the most credible source. Also scholars like Newhagen and Nass (1989) and Ibelema and Powell (2001) found out that people think cable television news is the most trustworthy. It might be because of geographical and/or cultural differences that

the respondents from Texas that were surveyed by Kiouisis (2001) stated something totally different: they indicated newspapers the most credible, followed by online news. Television news ended last place. An explanation could be that the differences found were not that aberrant at all, because all three sources were rated 'moderately credible': people seem to be a bit apprehensive about all of the mentioned media channels (Kiouisis, 2001). This 'general scepticism' was previously mentioned by some scholars (e.g. Flanagan & Metzger, 2000; Johnson & Kaye, 1998).

However, it is undeniable that differences in source credibility perception can be found. Perhaps, Kohring (2004) thought, the most common consumed media sources by an individual also appear to be most credible to him or her. And indeed, when he decided to control for the actual media use of respondents, it was shown that the television has to take a step back for quality papers when it comes to perceived credibility. Also Kiouisis (2001) noticed an association between media use and credibility perception, although marginal. The lesson that is to be learned: it is advisable to treat media source credibility as a multidimensional concept. And still, when Drok and Schwarz (2010) surveyed 1029 Dutch citizens aged between 15 and 29, the findings of Roper (1985) seem to be confirmed: although actual media use does have consequences for the credibility assessment of the sources, the television was indicated as most credible/trustworthy source of news consumption, both by newspaper readers and non-newspaper readers. In judging credibility the television source was followed by newspapers (in original, paper and free form); online news websites were perceived the least credible by this young Dutch audience (Drok & Schwarz, 2010). Tsfaty and Ariely (2014) also failed to find a positive relation between exposure to online news and trust in media. On the contrary: a negative correlation was found. Thus, when examining the credibility perception of news media it is important to pay attention to the amount *and* the kind of news media consumption by the participants. Exposure to both television, radio and newspaper news seems to be positively and significantly related to media credibility perception (Tsfaty & Ariely, 2014; see also Drok & Schwarz, 2010; Kohring, 2004). The frequenter the exposure, the more people are inclined to trust the media. Since the majority of the investigations mentioned seems to confirm such a link it is assumed that the higher the news media consumption, the more people are inclined to trust the media.

Hypothesis 1a [H1a]: news website consumption positively correlates with news media credibility perception.

Hypothesis 1b [H1b]: newspaper consumption positively correlates with news media credibility perception.

Hypothesis 1c [H1c]: television news consumption positively correlates with news media credibility perception.

Hypothesis 1d [H1d]: radio news consumption positively correlates with news media credibility perception.

Hypothesis 1e [H1e]: social media news consumption positively correlates with news media credibility perception.

Personal Beliefs

Following the Social Judgement Theory (e.g. Sherif & Hovland, 1961) people judge messages by comparing it to their current opinions. News media reports that happen to differ greatly from these personal beliefs usually end up in the 'latitude of rejection' and are more easily perceived as biased (D'Alessio, 2003). Philosophy of life and convictions thus play a major role in the establishment of perceptions of news

media. In other words, personal beliefs linked to world view and cynicism are associated with news media perceptions (e.g. Lee, 2010; Pinkleton & Austin, 1998; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Social trust. Sturgis et al. (2010) define social trust as the ‘propensity to believe that fellow citizens will not act against our interests in social and economic transactions’. Authors (e.g. Sturgis et al., 2010; Taylor, Funk & Clark, 2007) sometimes alternate between the definitions ‘social trust’ and ‘interpersonal trust’, which makes it apparent that these two concepts have been accepted as interchangeable. In the present study following Sturgis et al. ‘social trust’ has been chosen as leading term. This is also convenient in avoiding any confusion with ‘interpersonal communication’ concerning news media. The trust one has in other people is a predictor of the trust one has in news media credibility (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), so it is hypothesised social trust positively correlates with news media credibility perception.

Trust in economy. As can be expected, a cynical world view also reflects into evaluation of and trust in economy. According to Lee (2010), this personal belief directly influences trust in politics which in turn affects news media credibility perception. The current study thus hypothesis that trust in economy positively correlates with news media credibility perception, moderated by trust in politics.

Trust in politics. Political engagement and media perceptions seem to mutually influence each other. Eveland and Shah (2003) argue that criticism raised towards certain political bias infect the entire media industry image. According to the scholars perceiving news bias is largely defined by the political view that the people surrounding you exercise. The level of one’s own political knowledge is of importance in news framing attempts too: the lower the level of political knowledge the longer one is under influence of framing effects (Lecheler & Vreese, 2011). All in all, trust in politics is believed to positively correlate with news media credibility perception.

Hypothesis 2a [H2a]: social trust positively correlates with news media credibility perception.

Hypothesis 2b [H2b]: trust in economy positively correlates with news media credibility perception, moderated by trust in politics.

Hypothesis 2c [H2c]: trust in politics positively correlates with news media credibility perception.

News Media Discussion

Not only the media consumption patterns and the personal beliefs of a person determine the perception one has of news media; engagement and issue-involvement play an important role too (e.g. Gunther, 1992). The Social Judgement Theory for example does not only proclaim that one judges news media by comparing it to current opinions, it also shows the undeniable influence of the level of involvement with other people or issues (e.g. Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall 1965). The 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer claimed people trust friends and relatives with 30 percent points more than journalists when it comes to content creation. An individual does not only operate and ponder in relation to news sources, issues involved, and political climate. Contact with other people can determine a lot too. Therefore the issue-involvement antecedents this paper discusses are human interaction related.

Interpersonal communication. Gunther (1992) disapproves the idea of credibility conception as individual process of considerations. He emphasizes the relational aspect of it and showed how important group identification is in the assessment of news media credibility. Mutz and Martin (2001) also stress the importance of interpersonal communication in evaluating news media objectivity. In the mental formation of what is objective or standard, one pays attention to its fellow humans to develop a yardstick against which news reports can be compared on unbiasedness. This is also called biased sampling (Eveland & Shah, 2003). This is, inter alia, accomplished by mundane interpersonal conversations about the news. According to Kiousis (2001) this kind of communication negatively impacts the credibility image of news media sources, because of the confrontation with a variegation of opinions which can make the news media consumer more critical. This will be investigated by assuming that interpersonal communication about news media negatively correlates with perceived news media credibility.

Online interaction. In the same paper of Kiousis (2001) it appears that the relationship between *online* interaction and perceived news media credibility is different: the more online interpersonal interaction, the more the online source is perceived credible. According to Choi, Watt, and Lynch (2006) this has to do with considering the Internet as an alternative, and thus in itself already critical, source for the so called mainstream media. Interpersonal communication online would therefore not have a significant additional impact. The scholars wonder how online behavior with regard to sharing news items and accompanying opinions is related to the perception of news media credibility and they call for future researchers who investigate this. Kim (2015) found out online comments of others on news items do not directly influence the personal news credibility perception of respondents, but it does influence the image they have of the conventional credibility assessment by their fellow citizens – which has some indirect influence on their own perception in turn. Because Turcotte et al. (2015) agree with Kiousis (2001) findings of a positive relationship between online communication and media assessment, it is assumed that online interaction about news media positively correlates with perceived news media credibility.

Hypothesis 3a [H3a]: interpersonal communication about news media negatively correlates with news media credibility perception.

Hypothesis 3b [H3b]: online interaction about news media positively correlates with news media credibility perception.

Socio-demographics

Besides the national differences that were mentioned in the introduction section, also individual receiver characteristics seem to play a role in the formation of news media perceptions.

Age. According to Bucy (2003) over and over again it was found that the younger public is more willingly to perceive news media as credible. Generally speaking, older news consumers would be more critical due to their life lessons learned and developed worldly wisdom (Robinson & Kohut, 1988). Although the observed correlations are just slightly aberrant from the average, it is hypothesised that age does negatively correlate with media credibility perception.

Sex. Robinson and Kohut (1988) found that gender of all demographic characteristics is most strongly associated with news media credibility perception. (In the current thesis ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are deployed interchangeable.) According to these scholars, women are, with a five percent-point difference, more inclined to report news media as believable. At the same time, many communication scientists claim they did not find a relationship between sex and news media credibility perception (e.g. Flanagin & Metzger, 2007) at all. Therefore, it is hypothesised sex does not significantly correlate with media credibility perception.

Level of education. Schooling is another personal variable which has been tested for associations with news media perceptions. The 2016 Edelman TRUST BAROMETER proclaims that the ‘informed public’ (high educated, media consuming, top 25 percent income) increasingly trusts in politics, business, NGOs and news media, while the ‘mass population’ stays more or less at the same level of trust. Scholars generally do not agree with this statement. According to Bucy (2003) higher educated citizens in comparison with less educated people are inclined to be more critical towards media and thus will not label broadcasters reliable just like that. Since Tsfaty and Ariely (2014) and Soh, Reid, and King (2007) agree in finding a negative correlation for schooling and trust in news media, it is hypothesized that level of education negatively correlates with news media credibility perception.

Religion. The last socio-demographic antecedent discussed in the current paper is religion. As to news media credibility perception, a significant negative correlation was found for both Christian and Islamic religion (Ariyanto, Hornsey & Gallois, 2007; Golan & Day, 2007). Based on these findings, Golan and Kioussis (2010) expected a similar outcome when analysing a dataset containing opinions of Arab youth in Egypt and Saudi Arabia but they had to reject their hypothesis. On the contrary, belief in Allah turned out to be significantly positive related with media credibility perception. The declaration that the scholars bring up refers to their research sample. Within the countries involved, media is controlled by the state; it could be that the religious participants tend to trust the public institutions more. Another argument is the possible influence of the young age of the respondents – they would be more inclined to depend on internet-based media as an essential source of information in these areas. Because of this argumentation and the more common found alternative results, we will stick to the hypothesis that religion negatively correlates with media credibility perception.

Hypothesis 4a [H4a]: age positively correlates with news media credibility perception.

Hypothesis 4b [H4b]: sex does not significantly correlate with news media credibility perception.

Hypothesis 4c [H4c]: level of education negatively correlates with news media credibility perception.

Hypothesis 4d [H4d]: religion negatively correlates with news media credibility perception.

Conceptual Framework News Media Credibility Perception

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework that is formulated based on the preceding literature about news media credibility perception. The model assumes news media consumption and personal beliefs are positively associated with news media credibility perception, just like online interaction, while the antecedent of interpersonal communication and the socio-demographics are supposed to negatively relate to credibility perception – except gender, which is expected to not be related to this construct at all. This is indicated by the dashed line with the notification n.s. (non-significant).

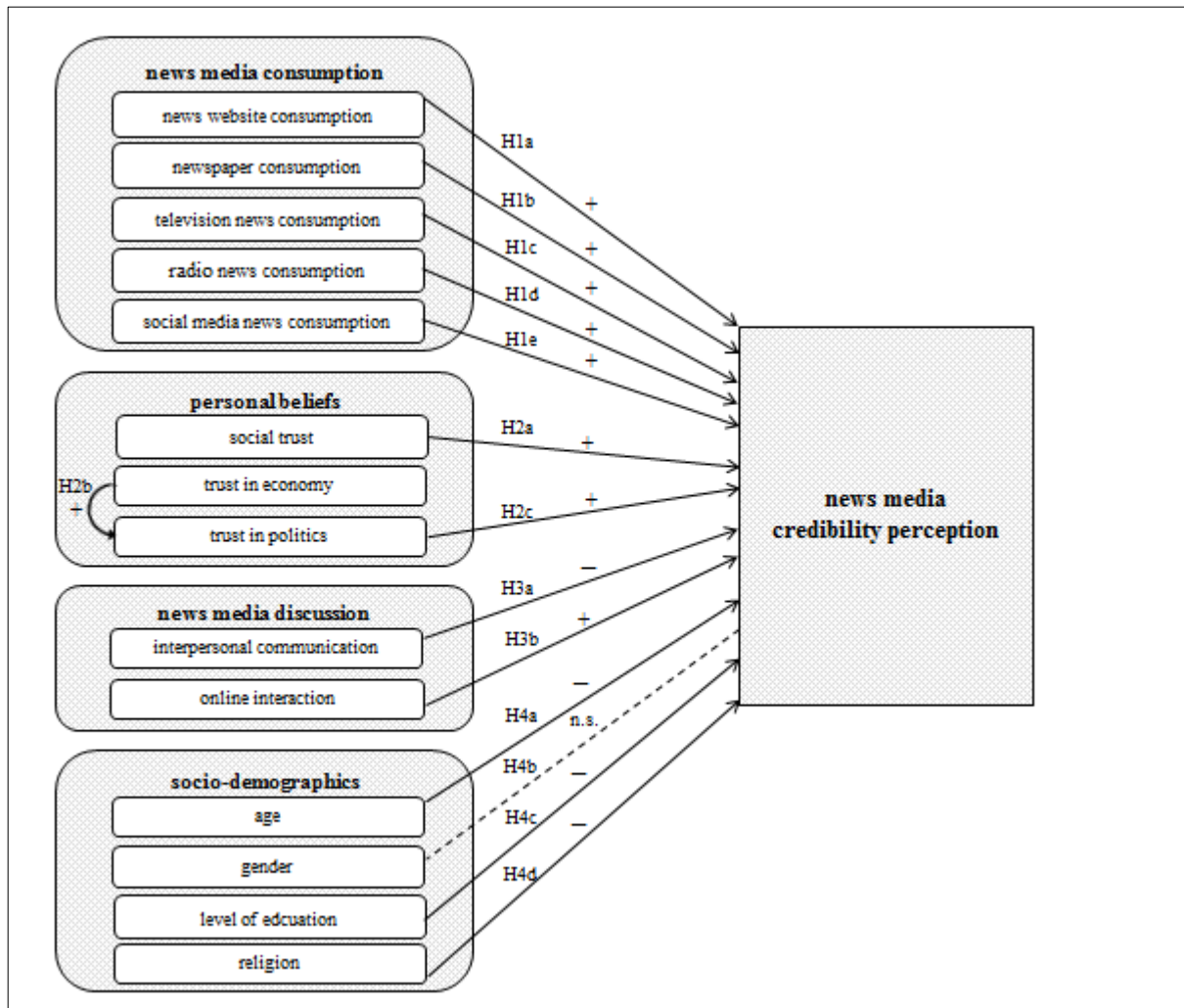


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework News Media Credibility Perception

Conspiracy Thinking

Defining Conspiracy Thinking

Aupers (2012) claims it is not wondrous that people question the credibility of news media these days. One of the reasons for this is that modern society has become less transparent because of its complexity and at the same time it encourages to have a critical attitude towards authorities, including media sources and government (Bartlett & Miller, 2010; Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Aupers (2012) designates the belief in conspiracy theories as a radical and generalized manifestation of this distrust. With the increase and seemingly normalization of these conspiracy theories within society (Aupers, 2012), there has also been a growing scholarly interest in this subject during the last quarter century (Brotherton, 2013; Stempel, Hargrove & Stempel, 2007). In the current thesis the terms of ‘conspiracy thinking’ and ‘conspiracy mentality’ will be deployed interchangeable. A conspiracy theory can be defined as ‘a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons the conspirators acting in secret’ (Keeley, 1999).

Relevance of Investigation into Conspiracy Thinking

The scholars that address the subject of conspiracy thinking are oftentimes psychologically grounded (e.g. Brotherton, 2013; Bartlett & Miller, 2010), while the role of framing, agenda setting and the involvement and power of the media remains underexposed by communication scientists. Also most of the scholarly attention is focused at answering the question why people would believe conspiracy theories (mainly because of its explanatory function with regard to experienced uncertainty about distressing societal events (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Park, 2010; Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013)), while it is leastways as interesting where susceptibility to believe in conspiracy theories leads to and what consequences this has for the formation of attitude regarding news items. This is important because conspiracy thinking can have profound consequences as an extreme form of distrust in news media (Brotherton, 2013). Bartlett and Miller (2010) explain how it plays a major role in radicalisation:

“The acceptance of conspiracy theories in contexts of extremism often serves as a ‘radicalizing multiplier’, which feeds back into the ideologies, internal dynamics and psychological processes of the group. They hold extremist groups together and push them in a more extreme and sometimes violent direction.”

Also in less extreme cases conspiracy thinking can have harmful consequences. The theories stimulate distrust between particular communities and governments, which can impede community-level attempts to, for example, combat violent extremism (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). In fact, suspicion and irrational mistrust are disruptive in all kind of collaborations and joint ventures. In other words, for a well-functioning society it is of great importance there is a sense of trust in governmental institutions (Bartlett & Miller, 2010).

Although conspiracy thinking does not necessarily have to result in damaging consequences (Clarke, 2002), it is tangential to many areas of life. Belief in certain theories can for example affect participating in preventive vaccination of children (e.g. Kata, 2010) and complying with medical HIV/AIDS combat (Bogart, Wagner, Galvan & Banks, 2010), but the associated sense of powerless may also lead to detachment of political involvement (Butler, Koopman & Zimbardo, 1995) and justification of violence and extremism in order to ‘wake up’ the ignorant public to the deception of government, media and education (Bartlett & Miller, 2010).

Conspiracy Thinking in the Netherlands

Within conspiracy thinking terminology a frequently used definition is ‘false flag’ operation. This term refers to a harmful act organized by a government (or organisation) against its own residents while pretending an external enemy is the culprit, in order to incite hatred which must, for example, justify starting a war (Brotherton, 2015). The attacks on 9/11 are frequently associated with this form of ‘an inside job’: one third of the Americans does not trust the official news reporting about the atrocity and reckon the US government guilty in allowing or executing the attacks. Among Muslim citizens this percentage is even substantially higher: around 80% blame the government of the United States and/or Israel for destroying the Twin Towers (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). In the Netherlands, 19.5% of the population ‘agrees’ or ‘totally agrees’ with the statement that “The American government was behind the attacks of September 11, or at least had specific foreknowledge”. This emerged from an online survey among 3800 Dutch individuals that was conducted by the social psychologist Van Prooijen (2015) in cooperation with Quest Test Nederland. The scholar revealed that he was surprised by the high percentage of Dutch people who indicated they believed in one or more of the 20 conspiracy theories presented to them in the survey. Another outcome of the study is an 38.0% ‘agreement’ or ‘total agreement’ with the statement that “The government and the media are making agreements about the news items that are published and in which manner this is done.” Although this reveals something about the trust Dutch citizens have in the credibility of news media, there is a lot that is still unknown. Research into conspiracy thinking within the Netherlands is scarce.

Antecedents of Conspiracy Thinking

Personal Beliefs

As explained in the section about credibility perception and personal beliefs, these antecedents are associated with news media perceptions (e.g. Lee, 2010; Pinkleton & Austin, 1998; Tsfaty & Ariely, 2014). In the following paragraphs, the association between personal beliefs and conspiracy thinking are explicated.

Social trust. Distrust in other people is associated with conspiracy thinking (e.g. Goertzel, 1994), so it is assumed that social trust negatively correlates with conspiracy thinking. This corresponds to the line of reasoning in the section on credibility perception and social trust.

Trust in economy. Goertzel (1994) did not find a correlation between economic uncertainty and conspiracy thinking. According to Furnham (2013) on the other hand, people who did not define themselves as rich were more willing to belief in conspiracy theories. This study therefor assumes that trust in economy negatively correlates with conspiracy thinking.

Trust in politics. It seems to be clear that trust in politics and conspiracy thinking are intertwined. Butler, Koopman and Zimbardo (1995) for example, found that watching a movie with a plot based on a conspiracy theory about the death of John F. Kennedy leaded to ‘significantly aroused anger’ and less willingness to vote and contribute in other political actions. Bartlett and Miller (2010) describe how conspiracy thinking can foster political extremism because of the feeling of being powerlessness and not able to make a difference in a corrupt system. At the same time, they call for further investigation unto the relationship between political engagement and conspiracy belief because of the many corresponding unidentified issues like the link between belief and practice. Ward and Voas (2011) describe conspiracy thinking as having a ‘negative focus on global politics’. All in all, it is expected to find that trust in politics negatively correlates with conspiracy mentality.

Hypothesis 5a [H5a]: social trust negatively correlates with conspiracy mentality.

Hypothesis 5b [H5b]: trust in economy negatively correlates with conspiracy mentality.

Hypothesis 5c [H5c]: trust in politics negatively correlates with conspiracy mentality.

Socio-demographics

Like mentioned in the section about credibility perception and socio-demographic antecedents, individual receiver characteristics seem to play a role in the formation of news media perceptions. This also applies to the relationship with conspiracy thinking; it is further expanded in the following paragraphs.

Age. When investigating the relationship between conspiracy thinking and age, Goertzel (1994) did find a minor deviation: younger citizens would be more amenable to conspiracy thinking. However, multiple other scientists like Bird and Bogart (2003) claimed they did not find such a relationship. Therefore, it is assumed that age does not significantly correlate with conspiracy mentality.

Sex. Various scholars (e.g. Bird & Bogart, 2003; Goertzel, 1994) ascertained gender does not significant correlate with conspiracy thinking. Because of these findings, it is assumed sex does not significantly correlate with conspiracy mentality.

Educational level. According to Goertzel (1994) education does barely correlate with conspiracy mentality. However, Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel (2007) claim that it does: lower-educated citizens would be more inclined to give credence to conspiracy theories. Bird and Bogart (2003) agree when it comes to the belief in specific conspiracy theories about HIV/AIDS and birth control. Either way, it is clear that with the increase of high educated people conspiracy mentality does not decline (Darwin, Neave & Holmes, 2011). All taken together, it is hypothesised that level of education negatively correlates with conspiracy mentality.

Religion. Earlier in this paper it was mentioned that 80% of American Muslims would adhere a conspiracy theory about the attacks on 9/11 and not trust the official news reporting about this event, set

against a third of the total American population (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). Religiousness in general seems to have a positive correlation with conspiracy mentality (Furnham, 2013; Vincent & Furnham, 1997). Therefore, it is assumed that religion positively correlates with conspiracy mentality.

Hypothesis 6a [H6a]: age does not significantly correlate with conspiracy mentality.

Hypothesis 6b [H6b]: sex does not significantly correlate with conspiracy mentality.

Hypothesis 6c [H6c]: level of education negatively correlates with conspiracy mentality.

Hypothesis 6d [H6d]: religion positively correlates with conspiracy mentality.

Conceptual Framework Conspiracy Mentality

Figure 2 shows the conceptual framework that is formulated based on the preceding literature about conspiracy mentality. The model assumes personal beliefs are negatively associated with conspiracy mentality, just like level of education. Religion would positively correlate with conspiracy mentality, while age and gender are expected to not be related to conspiracy mentality at all. This is indicated by the dashed line with the notification n.s. (non-significant).

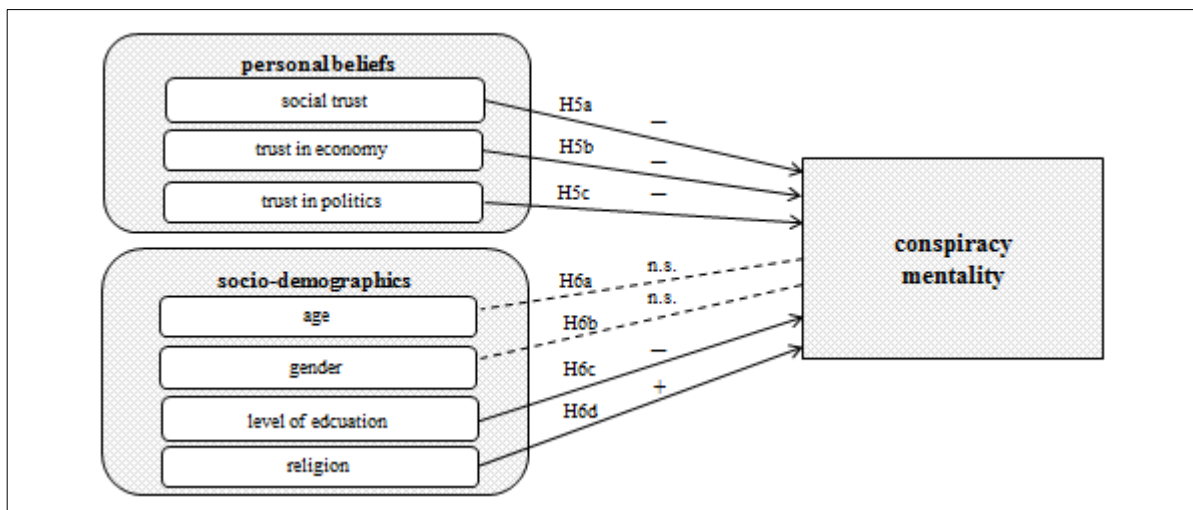


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework Conspiracy Mentality

News Media Framing Recognition

Defining News Media Framing

Although the importance of perceived objectivity of journalism by the public is clearly emphasized (e.g. Gaziano, 1987; Sundar, 1999), the unruly practice is that reporting truly objective and completely integral is nearly impossible. In order to report events, a news medium has to make a lot of choices in setting the tone of the news item (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010): which viewpoint to handle, how to make a complex situation understandable, how to remain faithful to the narrative of concerned sources, which aspects are relevant, how to act accountable for news values like balanced coverage, how to make the

content interesting enough for the target audience? By responding to these issues, neutral facts “take on their meaning by being embedded in a frame or story line that organizes them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasize while ignoring others” (Kuypers, 2006, p7). This inevitable process is called framing and can have profound consequences for the image forming of the audience (e.g. Curçseu & Schruijer, 2008; Kuypers, 2006; Snow, Vliegenthart & Corrigan-Brown, 2007). Just a subtle change in phrasing – that does not concern the substantive information – can already have enormous effect on the percentage of people that agrees with a certain statement (Sniderman & Theriault, 2004). The words that are chosen, the information that is disclosed, and the accentuation of details all define a frame (Entman, 1991; Iyengar & Reeves, 1997; Van Ginneken, 2002). Not only the tone of presentation and the way the news is packaged contributes to the framing of news items, but also the amount of exposure, the positing in place and time, and if present, the headlines and photographs or accompanying visual and auditory effects (Parenti, 1997). Basically, it is impossible to report objectively (D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010).

Journalists inevitably not only add (or even superimpose) their frames to news items, they also draw from sources who frame their messages in a certain way in order to communicate their preferred meanings of events and issues. Besides, the public inevitably frames the consumed media messages too (McQuail, 2005; Van Gorp, 2007). Framing is, in other words, a comprehensive concept.

In the course of time, communication scholars have defined five general news frames that are employed frequently: the conflict frame, economic consequences frame, attribution of responsibility frame, human interest frame, and morality frame (e.g. Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The current article holds on to this format when investigating frame recognition.

Relevance of Investigation into News Media Framing

Framing theory has become the most commonly applied research approach in the field of communication science (Bryant & Miron, 2004; Van Gorp, 2007); media framing or news framing in particular is interesting for the growing number of attention paying scholars who endeavour to understand the working of the concept (D’Angelo & Kuypers, 2010).

Chong and Druckman (2007) point out the lack of scientific knowledge about the long-term influence of news framing on the public opinion towards a certain item. They stress that it is important for citizens to be aware of the consequences of the presentation of an issue, because ultimately this has influence on their opinion formation. Gaining knowledge about news media framing and the recognizing of it, is a valuable contribution to the prevention against unethical persuasive power of media.

Recognition of News Media Framing

There is a rich variety of frame detecting methods (from a word-counting content approach to face-to-face interviews, see for example Boräng et al., 2014) but there is a similarity in all of them: in practice, when it comes to identifying frames present in certain content, scientists get the analysis job done. There

are only few studies in which the average citizen is put to work with the aim to detect frames. It is worth knowing if people even do recognise news frames, and, if that is the case, whether they do that in a comparable way. In the current study the issue is addressed by asking which general news frames are identified by Dutch citizens after a period of consuming the reporting on a certain news event and to what extent this identification concerns a homogeneous interpretation with recognition of news frames to the same degree.

Issue-Involvement and Objectivity Perception

Framing and objectivity are intertwined. With the perceiving of framing elements, the perception of objectivity fades out (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010). One of the scientific theories within the framing concept is the Hostile Media Phenomenon. This phenomenon is described as the effect of experiencing news media coverage as biased and conflicting with one's own point of view, even if the content is neutral (Vallone, Ross & Lepper, 1985). It is thus clear that issue involvement is an influential factor with regard to news media framing. This was well exemplified when Vallone, Ross and Lepper (1985) confronted their participants with news reports of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut. Pro-Arab respondents judged the videos as pro-Israel, but pro-Israeli believed it was anti-Israel. On the one hand, perceived bias and framing are more common among the people who feel strongly attached to a certain issue (Dalton, Beck & Huckfeldt, 1998), on the other hand, framing effects often have more extensive influence in the case of issues that are less familiar to the news media consumer, because of the scarcity of information resources consulted (Evans, 2010). All in all, it is hypothesized that issue-involvement negatively correlates with perceived news media objectivity.

***Hypothesis 7 [H7]:** issue-involvement negatively correlates with perceived news media objectivity.*

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Method

In order to gain insight in the perceptions of Dutch citizens with regard to the credibility of national news media, conspiracy theories, and framing, an online questionnaire was launched. Opting for this methodology made it possible to broach a relatively large amount of sub-topics among a large group of respondents in a reasonable short time frame. Also for respondents, this type of research is not very intensively as they can execute it fairly quick on a self-chosen location and under conditions of anonymity (Downs & Adrian, 2004). This reduces the risk of interviewer bias and socially desired answering. An advantage of the deployment of online surveys above the paper and pencil version is that digital given

responses are of significant higher quality (MacElroy, Mikucki, & McDowell, 2002); one of the reasons for this is the decrease of wrongly skipping and answering of questions in a way that differs from the purpose of the researcher.

Procedure

On the 2nd March of 2016 the official questionnaire was rolled out using the online survey tool Qualtrics. As of April 5, the questionnaire was closed and the analysis of the collected data started. Participation in the study took the respondents one session of about 10 to 15 minutes. Since the questionnaire should be completed by citizens of the Netherlands, the language of the questions posed was Dutch. The opening text included a short introduction of the subject matter and some instructions like the call for answering as honest as possible and for completing the whole survey. The respondents were given reassurance that there were no wrong answers. Furthermore, it was mentioned that the data would exclusively be used for the current study and not be analysed at individual level. The name and email address of the investigator could be found below the introduction text in case participants wanted to contact her.

After answering the questions the participants were given the opportunity to note down their email address if they would like to receive the research results and/or wanted to compete for a voucher. The respondents were thanked for their participation and also encouraged to ask others to participate.

Pre-test

A pre-test was developed in order to tackle potential usability and validity issues. Ten respondents participated. The questionnaire used in the pre-test proved to operate properly and was therefore largely taken over into the final form. Since one of the comments made during the pre-test concerned the wide variety within the Dutch news media landscape, in a short introduction text participants were explained the propositions measuring credibility regard the Dutch news media in general: if they evaluated the diverse media sources differently they were urged to choose the answer they thought would be most applicable in general.

Measures

Equal to the order that is used throughout the entire article, also in this measurement section, first credibility perception will be discussed, subsequently conspiracy thinking, and finally framing perception. The measurement of the antecedents that are associated with the first two constructs will be addressed after the section of conspiracy thinking. For the complete questionnaire, please refer to Appendix A.

Perceived News Media Credibility

The empirical measurement of perceived news media credibility is quite often taken with single-item measurements (e.g. Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000; Roberts, 2010), which makes it hard to determine what meaning and implication the results do really have. Considering the demonstrated expediency (Roberts, 2010) of the multidimensional conceptualization by Flanagin and Metzger (2000), the current study builds further upon the approach of these scholars. These scholars chose to investigate the dimensions ‘believability’, ‘accuracy’, ‘trustworthiness’, ‘bias’, and ‘completeness’. To find out whether more dimensions play a role in the formation of the credibility concept five extra dimensions, derived from scientific literature in the field (please refer to ‘Defining News Media Credibility Perception’ in the theoretical framework), were added to the scale of the current study: ‘expertness’, ‘fairness’, ‘respect for privacy’, ‘separation of fact and opinion’, and ‘concern for community’s well-being’. The formulation of the propositions was, tailored to the dimension, *The reports of Dutch new media are...* or *The Dutch news media are...*, completed with a description of one of the dimensions, occasionally in reversed mode. Respondents were asked to respond to this by marking their opinion using a 5-point agreement scale, which was chosen so that the analysis would be consistent with the other Likert scales used in the current investigation.

The combination of the ten credibility dimensions together yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha = .85$. This means the achieved internal consistency is enhanced further adding the five extra dimensions in comparison with the original Flanagin & Metzger-measurement instrument. To investigate the underlying structure of the new composed 10-item news media credibility question set, a principal axis factoring with varimax rotation was conducted. See Appendix B for the execution of this test.

Conspiracy Thinking Susceptibility

Susceptibility for conspiracy thinking was measured by deployment of the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire of Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, and Imhoff (2013). Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with five propositions by means of a 5-point Likert scale. Examples of this items are *Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about* and *There are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions*. The deployment of this scale led to a disputable Cronbach’s Alpha of .67 ($M = 3.38$, $SD = .63$). Cronbach’s alpha increases to .69 if the item *Government agencies closely monitor all citizens* is deleted. In further calculates, this item elimination will therefore be applied.

Antecedents

News Media Consumption

In order to get an idea of the news media consumption and usage of the respondents, they were asked to checkbox the media channels (news websites, papers, television, radio, social media) by which they usually get in touch with news reporting. Also they were asked to indicate the average time in minutes daily spent on those channels.

After that, the usage of news media sources was tested by letting the participants write down the names of their usual news providing sources per channel (again divided into news websites, papers, television, radio, social media). It was allowed to name several sources per channel. If a certain channel was not consulted by the participant, he or she could indicate this by inserting an alternative sign of choice (for example a cross: x) in the respective textbox.

Lastly, the respondents were asked if they owned a personal social media profile with which they were able to share news items (like Facebook). If so, they had to answer 8 questions about their personal active/passive behavior with regard to sharing news items on the social medium. The 5-point scale (ranging from 'very rare' to 'very often') used to measure this was inspired by the 19 items that Steggink (2015) employed in his master thesis to investigate active and passive preferences of Facebook use. Half of these items were appropriate to paraphrase into specific *news related* online media actions suitable for the current study. This final scale can be found in Appendix A ($M = 2.05$, $SD = .71$, $\alpha = .88$). Respondents who did not own a social media profile that enables them to share news items were forwarded to the next set of questions.

Personal Belief Measures

Social trust. In the short text introducing the four propositions regarding social trust, respondents were instructed to interpret the questions being related to strangers rather than to acquaintances from their personal environment, because of the possible bias Sturgis and Smith (2010) describe concerning uncertainty about the subject being measured. The items were derived from Sturgis et al. (2010). Two examples are: *I believe that most people are basically well-intentioned* and *My first reaction is to trust people*. Again, a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'totally disagree' to 'totally agree' was used. Unfortunately, the employment of this items resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of .58. This was not the expectation, since Sturgis et al. found a Cronbach's alpha of .76 and .79 in their samples. After deleting the item '*I believe that most people will take advantage of you if you let them.*' Cronbach's alpha is .61 ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .53$).

Trust in economics. The 5 items used to measure evaluation of the economy were based on the Michigan Index of Consumer Sentiment (ICS) which is mentioned by several studies including Lemmon and Portniaguina (2006). A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the perception of the respondents concerning, for example, the following items: *Do you think that a year from now, you (and your family living there) will be better off financially, or worse off, or about the same as now?* and *I think now is a good time to buy major (/expensive) household items*. Appendix A can be consulted for the remaining items. Cronbach's alpha was narrowly sufficient with .71 ($M = 3.25$, $SD = .58$).

Trust in politics. As political cynicism can play a role in the perceiving of news media and its credibility, participants were confronted with 5 items measuring this trait. The set of questions was derived from Pinkleton and Weintraub Austin (2004). Also in earlier studies the utility of the scale had been demonstrated. The slightly modified items included, for example, the following propositions: *Dutch politicians do care about the people (not only about themselves or special interests)* and *Candidates for*

office are interested only in people's votes not in their opinions. Refer to Appendix A for the complete question set. Again a 5-point agreement scale was employed for indication. The use of the five items resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of .80 ($M = 2.83$, $SD = .68$).

News Media Discussion

To investigate to what extent the respondents use the comment section below online news items, they were asked how frequently they leave a comment on websites, social media like Facebook and Twitter, online fora and other webpages. The 5-point Likert scale pertaining to this questions ranged from 'never/very rarely' to 'very often'. The same 5-point Likert scale was used in order to measure interpersonal discussion of news by asking how frequently people in everyday life talk with their immediate environment about the news. Also the social media activity items inspired by Steggink (2015), as described in the foregoing section about news media consumption, provide information about news media discussion.

Socio-Demographics

With regard to socio-demographical data, respondents had to indicate their gender, age, religion, highest level of education, and political party preference.

Perceived News Media Framing

To find out how Dutch citizens perceive news media framing, the participants were randomly assigned to one of three different news events. The news cases were formulated as objective and as similar to each other as possible. News case 1: *On August 3, 2015 in Alphen aan de Rijn two construction cranes and a deck collapsed on buildings next to the Julianabrug.* News case 2: *On September 23, 2015 it was announced that the automotive industry used software to affect vehicle emissions during emissions tests.* News case 3: *On December 31, 2015 in Cologne and some other places in Germany aggravated assaults, robberies and mistreatments took place.* These events were selected because of the combination of the relatively mutual comparability with regard to their extensive presence in the Dutch news reporting and their relative co-occurrence in time (within the span of a half year) and on the other hand the completely different subject-matters. Multiple news cases were selected in order to rule out the possibility that conclusions are drawn based on potential results that exclusively occur in a certain kind of news case.

After answering the question *Are you familiar with this event?*, respondents were forwarded to the next set of questions (in case their answer was negative) or they continued with the question set related to the assigned news case (in case their answer was affirmative). The first questions addressed issue involvement (*How involved do you feel with this news item?*, *How much attention did you pay to news coverage about this item?*) with a 5-point Likert scale. After that the participants were asked to indicate to

what extent they thought Dutch news media had given an accurate picture of the event using a 5-point agreement scale.

Lastly, the degree of perceived framing in the reporting of the news events was verified by presenting the respondents 5 propositions starting with *In the Dutch news coverage on this issue, there was a lot of attention to....* Each proposition was completed with a description of one of the general identified news frames: conflict, economic, responsibility, human interest, and morality (e.g. Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Again, a 5-point Likert scale was used ranging from ‘totally disagree’ to ‘totally agree’.

Sample

Sampling Methods

In order to recruit a large and diverse sample a variety of groups within the network of the investigator was addressed via email and online recruitment on Facebook (for example, in groups aimed at residents in Flevoland, Gelderland, Noord-Brabant, Noord-Holland, Overijssel, Utrecht, Zeeland and Zuid-Holland), Instagram and Twitter. Promotion candy and cereal bars with a little card containing a participation appeal and the survey hyperlink were handed out at Utrecht Central station, two locations of the freelance workspace Seats2Meet, a construction and infrastructure company, door-to-door in several streets and in a library.

Respondents were asked to spread the word and share the survey hyperlink with acquaintances. As a form of encouragement for participation an incentive was made available: participants could compete for one of two Bol.com-vouchers with a value of respectively €15 and €20. This was not obliged. The inclusion criterion used was being a Dutch citizen older than 18 years. The exclusion criterion automatically following from the online form of the survey was digital incompetence.

424 individuals completed the questionnaire. Nine of these completed questionnaires had to be removed because the corresponding respondents were underage, which resulted in a dataset of 415 appropriate surveys. Parts of the questionnaire could be skipped if the respective participant a) did not have a personal social media profile with which he/she was able to share news items (this applies to 17.6% ($n = 73$) of the respondents) or b) was not familiar with the random assigned news event he/she was confronted with (this applies to 8.9% ($n = 37$) of the respondents).

Sex and Age

Table 1 shows the number and the corresponding percentage of respondents in diverse sociodemographic categories. The total analysed sample consisted of 180 men (43.4%) and 235 women (56.6%). Although the intended male/female division was 50/50 and that aim was pursued during the recruitment process, it is common in surveys to obtain slightly higher response rates among women (Sax, Gilmartin & Bryant, 2003).

The age of the participants whose data was analysed ranged from 18 to 79 ($M = 33.57$, $SD = 13.62$). The men ($M = 35.3$) were on average a bit older than the women ($M = 32.2$).

Educational Level

One of the socio-demographical aspects is educational level. According to preliminary statistics from Eurostat (2016) 46% of the Dutch citizens (data analysed from 30- to 35-year olds) is highly educated, which corresponds to hbo or wo education level. Since these educational groups in the current research population together form 77.1% ($n = 320$), they are clearly over represented. One of the reasons could be that non-response is generally higher among less high educated citizens (e.g. Armstrong & Overton, 1977). In addition, in the direct network of the investigator highly educated people were abundantly present.

Religion

Just like the overrepresentation of highly educated people, also Christians are abundantly present in the sample population, as Table 1 shows. This overrepresentation is probably at the expense of the representation of agnostics and atheists. All other religions (Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and the category 'other') do not deviate all too much in presence from the formal population. An exception on this is no Hindus were represented; in the research population they constitute 0.6% of the total. Please refer to Table 1 for the comparison between the research sample and the formal research population (the Dutch population).

Political Preference

Respondents were asked to notify their current political party preference. All Dutch political parties that are currently in parliament were mentioned by the sample population. As could be expected due to the overrepresentation of Christians, the Christian parties ChristenUnie and Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij were more frequently chosen in the sample than in the total research population. Also the Partij voor de Vrijheid deviates from the total research population, but in the opposite sense: it is fairly underrepresented. In respect of the other parties it applies that there are no percentage differences greater than 5.1% with regard to the official statistics.

Overall Representativeness

Although the research sample does not overall closely reflect certain characteristics (educational level, religion, political preference) of the total Dutch population (please refer to Table 1), the design did achieve a broad socio-demographic coverage. Also the number of participants ($N = 415$) is large enough to make rather firm statements about the Dutch population, because the design reached the minimum

recommended size ($n = 385$) for a representative sample (with 5% error bound and a 95% confidence interval) of the research population consisting of approximately 17 million individuals.

Table 1

Demographical Data Display

	N*	%	% formal sample: Dutch population**
Gender			
Male	180	43.4	approx. 50.0
Female	235	56.6	approx. 50.0
Educational level			
lbo/vbo/vmbo	8	1.9	approx. 22.0
mbo	60	14.5	combined approx. 43.0
havo/vwo	27	6.5	
hbo	141	34.0	combined approx. 35.0
wo	179	43.1	
Religion			
Agnosticism	50	12.0	combined 49.2
Atheism	87	21.0	
Buddhism	2	.5	.5
Christianity	231	55.7	40.2
Islam	18	4.3	4.9
Judaism	2	.5	.1
Other	25	6.0	4.5
Political Preference			
50PLUS	2	.5	2.8
ChristenDemocratisch Appèl	23	5.5	12.6
ChristenUnie	105	25.3	3.5
Democraten 66	41	9.9	13.5
GroenLinks	36	8.7	6.3
Partij van de Arbeid	19	4.6	8.9
Partij voor de dieren	8	1.9	3.3
Partij voor de Vrijheid	9	2.2	18.5
Socialistische Partij	14	3.4	9.2
Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij	38	9.2	2.6
Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie	49	11.8	18.5
Geen of andere voorkeur	70	16.9	-

Note. * $N = 415$. ** Derived from Statline.CBS, Schmeets and Van Mensvoort (2015), and Ipsos.

Data Analysis

When the data collection process was finished, first of all, the data set was tested on outliers which were removed if necessary. Subsequently, Cronbach's alpha's were measured to test internal consistency and constructs were created. Reversed items – which should avoid response set – were recoded as necessary.

In order to measure the degree of association between the variables and ultimately answer the hypotheses, first of all correlation coefficients were calculated using Spearman's rho.

To estimate the proportion of variance in perception of news media credibility and conspiracy thinking that can be accounted for by the associated antecedents, a standard multiple regression analysis (MRA) was performed. Prior to interpreting the results of the MRA, several assumptions were evaluated. After checking on missing values and outliers, histograms indicated the data was more or less normally distributed. Also, the finding that the mutual correlations were not too high indicated that the multicollinearity would not interfere with the ability to interpret the outcome of the MRA.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to analyse the statistical difference between means of religious groups with regard to news media credibility perception and conspiracy mentality.

RESULTS

Structured by three research questions and seven hypotheses the present research strived to gain insight into the correlations of the constructs of news media credibility perception, conspiracy thinking and news framing perception. In this chapter, first of all the results of the level of news media credibility perception will be displayed, followed by the associated antecedents that are surveyed. Subsequently, the results of the level of conspiracy thinking will be brought up, after which the investigated corresponding antecedents are shown. Eventually, the level of public recognizing of news frames will be discussed.

Level of News Media Credibility Perception

Research question 1 is aimed at answering the question how Dutch citizens evaluate various credibility aspects of their national news media. When the participants were requested to rate ten different credibility dimensions of their national news media on a 5-point Likert scale, *expertness* was rewarded with the highest mean score: $M = 3.67$ ($SD = .80$). *Completeness* was rated lowest with $M = 2.58$ ($SD = .83$). These evaluations, along with the other credibility dimension assessments, can be found in descending order in Table 2. Overall, the credibility dimensions were rated with $M = 3.14$ ($SD = .54$): slightly above the middle answer option 'do not disagree/ do not agree'.

Table 2

Evaluation of national news media on various credibility dimensions by Dutch citizens

Credibility Dimensions	Mean*	Std. Deviation
1. Expertness	3.67	.796
2. Believability	3.59	.814
3. Trustworthiness	3.36	.801
4. Respect for privacy	3.26	.861
5. Accuracy	3.18	.860
6. Fairness	3.10	.814
7. Concern for community's well-being	3.03	.838
8. Separation of fact and opinion	2.92	.873
9. Unbiasedness	2.67	.887
10. Completeness	2.58	.833
Mean	3.14	.542

Note. $N = 415$. * On a 5-point Likert scale.

Antecedents of News Media Credibility Perception

News Media Consumption and News Media Credibility Perception

Table 3 reveals, in descending order, the average time spent on news media consumption per channel as reported by the respondents. Almost all respondents ($n = 414$, 99.8%) stated to make use of at least one of the presented news media channels in order to follow the news. As one can see, online media (news websites and social media) are the most frequently accessed channels. Newspapers are, with an average duration of about fifteen minutes a day and the smallest number of respondents, the least consulted news channel.

Table 3

Average time spent on news media consumption reported by Dutch citizens

News Channel	N	Mean*	Std. Deviation
Social media	332	24.00	33.26
News websites	363	20.67	28.79
Television news	332	19.82	22.30
Radio news	296	18.28	32.64
Newspapers	274	14.91	18.36

Note. * In minutes a day.

Hypothesis 1 stated that the higher the news media consumption, the more people are inclined to trust the media. As Table 4 shows, this correlation can only be found for the consumption of newspapers (even after controlling for age) and television news. The correlation between news media consumption as a whole and perceived news media credibility is not significant.

The results of the execution of a regression analysis in which the significantly correlated antecedents of news media credibility perception are included, can be found in Table 5. The overall model fit was $R^2 = .273$, meaning that 27.3% of the variance in the general credibility judgement can be explained by this model. Following the regression outcomes with regard to news media consumption, only television news consumption is a significant predictor of news media credibility perception.

Personal Beliefs and News Media Credibility Perception

Hypothesis 2 stated that personal beliefs positively correlate with news media credibility perception. As Table 4 shows, this correlation can be found for both social trust (*H2a*), trust in economy, and trust in politics (*H2c*). Political trust is most strongly correlated to the construct of news media credibility perception. As hypothesized, trust in economy is moderated by trust in politics (*H2b*).

When performing the regression analysis, it was found that social trust and trust in politics were significant predictors. Of all antecedents, trust in politics has the strongest effect on credibility perception. These results can be found in Table 5.

News Media Discussion and News Media Credibility Perception

Interpersonal communication. *Hypothesis 3* stated that news media discussion correlates with news media credibility perception. Interpersonal communication about news media would negatively correlate with perceived news media credibility (*H3a*). As Table 4 shows the contrary of this expectation is true: Spearman's rho indicated the presence of a weak *positive* correlation between news media conversation frequency and news media credibility perception. *H3a* is therefore rejected. The data have demonstrated that the opposite of the hypothesis is true.

Online interaction. *Hypothesis 3b* stated online interaction about news media positively correlates with perceived news media credibility. Table 4 again presents that the opposite of the expectation is true. This time Spearman's rho indicated the presence of a weak *negative* correlation between personal online comment frequency on news media websites and news media credibility perception. *H3b* is therefore rejected too, while the opposite of the hypothesis is approved.

Social Media Activity. The same calculation was made for the use of personal social media profiles. A correlation with news media credibility perception was not found: Spearman's $\rho = .008$, $p = .876$, two-tailed, $N = 342$. Therefore, also on ground of this measurement *H3* is not confirmed.

Regression Analysis. For the proportion of variance in perception of news media credibility that can be accounted for conversation frequency (or interpersonal communication) and comment frequency (or

online interaction), please refer to Table 5. When news media credibility perception was predicted it was found that both were not significant predictors.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics and News Media Credibility Perception

Age. *Hypothesis 4a* stated that age negatively correlates with news media credibility perception. Spearman's rho however, indicated the presence of a weak positive correlation between age and news media credibility perception: Spearman's $\rho = .12$, $p = .015$, two-tailed, $N = 415$. On ground of this calculation *H4a* will be rejected. The regression analysis indicates that age is not a predictor for news media credibility perception.

Sex. *Hypothesis 4b* assumes that sex does not significantly correlate with news media credibility perception. Spearman's $\rho = .06$, $p = .227$, two-tailed, $N = 415$. *H4b* can be confirmed: sex does not significantly correlate with media credibility perception.

Level of education. *Hypothesis 4c* stated that level of education negatively correlates with news media credibility perception. Spearman's rho indicated that the correlation between level of education and perceived news media credibility was not significant: Spearman's $\rho = -.01$, $p = .847$, two-tailed, $N = 415$. *H4c* is therefore rejected.

Religion. *Hypothesis 4d* assumed religion negatively correlates with news media credibility perception. Spearman's $\rho = -.02$, $p = .761$, two-tailed, $N = 415$. *H4d* is rejected.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) showed that the means of the religious groups do statistically differ ($p < 0.01$) with regard to news media credibility perception. The proportion of variance in news media credibility perception explained by religion is 7.3%.

Table 4

Correlations of News Media Credibility Construct and Antecedents

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Construct																
1. News media credibility perception	-															
News Media Consumption																
2. News websites	.05	-														
3. Newspapers	.19**	.19**	-													
4. Television news	.21**	.15*	.40**	-												
5. Radio news	.11	.21**	.10	.31**	-											
6. Social media	-.09	.22**	-.02	.17**	.11	-										
7. Total news media consumption	.06	.49**	.42**	.56**	.50**	.55**	-									
Personal Beliefs																
8. Social trust	.14**	-.11*	.19**	-.00	.08	-.02	-.04	-								
9. Trust in economy	.17**	.07	-.06	-.14*	.06	-.13*	-.10	.13*	-							
10. Trust in politics	.35**	-.01	.12*	-.09	-.06	-.11*	-.15**	.18**	.26**	-						
News Media Discussion																
11. Interpersonal communication	.11*	.21**	.24**	.14*	-.12*	.11*	.30**	.04	.10*	.10	-					
12. Online interaction	-.10*	.07	.04	.03	.02	.31**	.24**	-.03	-.13**	-.04	.16**	-				
Socio-demographics																
13. Age	.12*	.02	.45**	.33**	-.18**	-.20**	.16**	.06	-.10*	-.12*	.10*	.04	-			
14. Gender	.06	-.21**	-.18**	-.05	-.19**	.07	-.12*	.05	-.10*	.07	-.04	-.01	.15**	-		
15. Level of education	-.01	.15**	-.01	-.22**	-.04	.03	-.11*	.20**	.20**	.24**	.01	-.07	-.36**	-.00	-	
16. Religion	.02	.16**	-.00	.10	.04	.19**	.16**	.05	.01	-.10*	.12*	.07	.07	.01	.02	-

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 5

Unstandardized (B) and Standardised (ß) Regression Coefficients, and p-value for the Antecedents in the Regression Model Predicting News Media Credibility Perception

	B	ß	p
News Media Consumption			
Newspapers	-.002	-.060	.357
Television news	.007	.241**	.000
Personal Beliefs			
Social trust	.133	.132*	.026
Trust in economy	.057	.063	.324
Trust in politics	.299	.359**	.000
News Media Discussion			
Interpersonal communication	.067	.084	.150
Online interaction	-.061	-.096	.096
Socio-demographics			
Age	.005	.123	.052

*Note. N = 415. *p < .05 **p < .01*

Correlation Model News Media Credibility Perception

Figure 3 shows the correlation model that is constructed out of the findings as described in this chapter. The model manifests that newspaper consumption and television news consumption are positively correlated to news media credibility perception, just like social trust, trust in politics, interpersonal communication with regard to news media discussion, and age. Trust in economy is positively correlated to news media credibility perception, moderated by trust in politics. Online interaction with regard to news media discussion is negatively correlated with news media credibility perception. The dashed line with the notification *n.s.* (non-significant) indicates that the rest of the antecedents are not correlated to news media credibility perception.

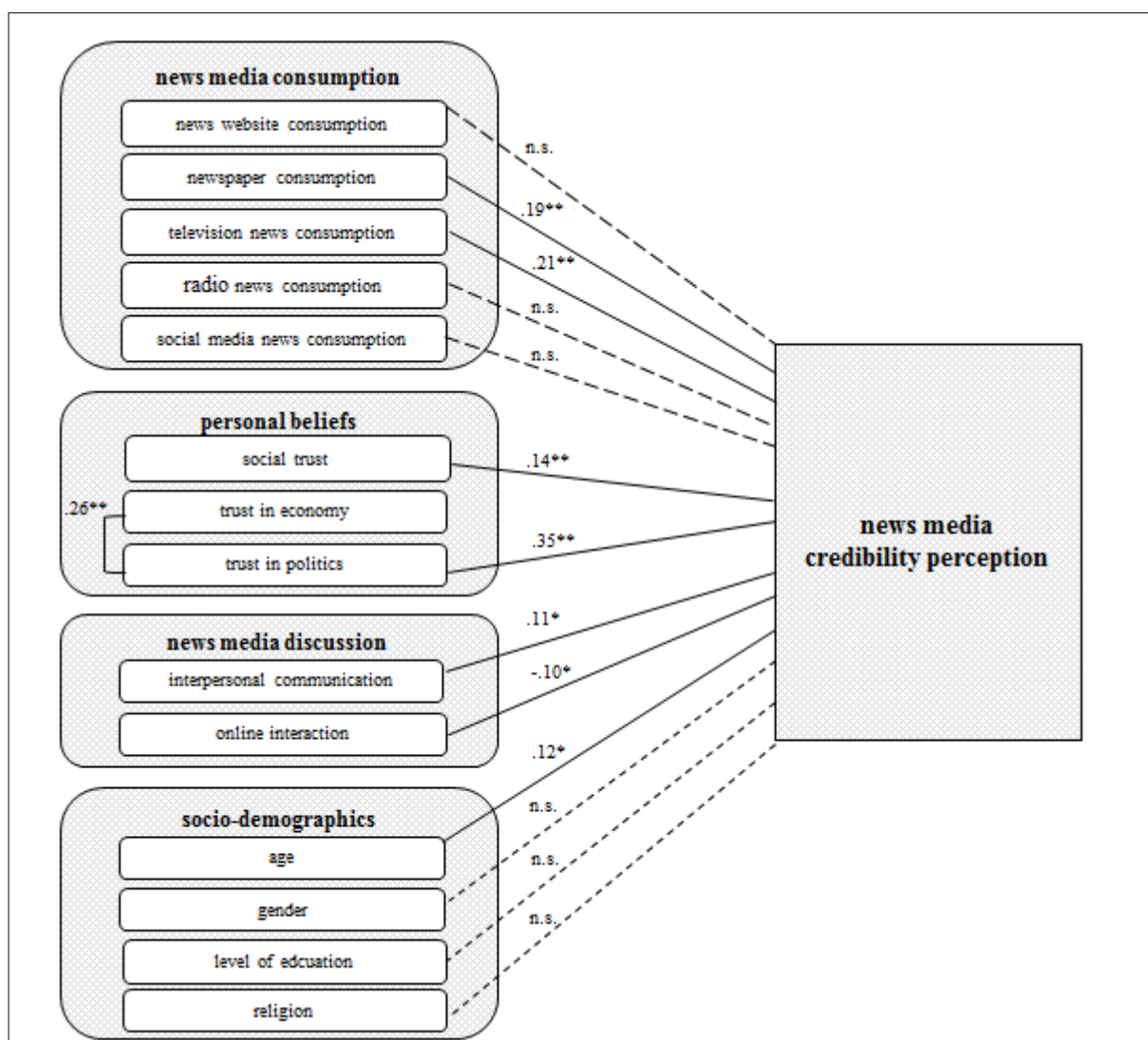


Figure 3. Correlation Model News Media Credibility Perception

Regression Model News Media Credibility Perception

The outcomes of the regression analysis of the associated antecedents with news media credibility perception that were presented in this chapter, are displayed in figure 4. The model shows that television news consumption, social trust, and trust in politics are significant predictors of news media credibility perception. The dashed line with the notification n.s. (non-significant) indicates that the rest of the antecedents are not.

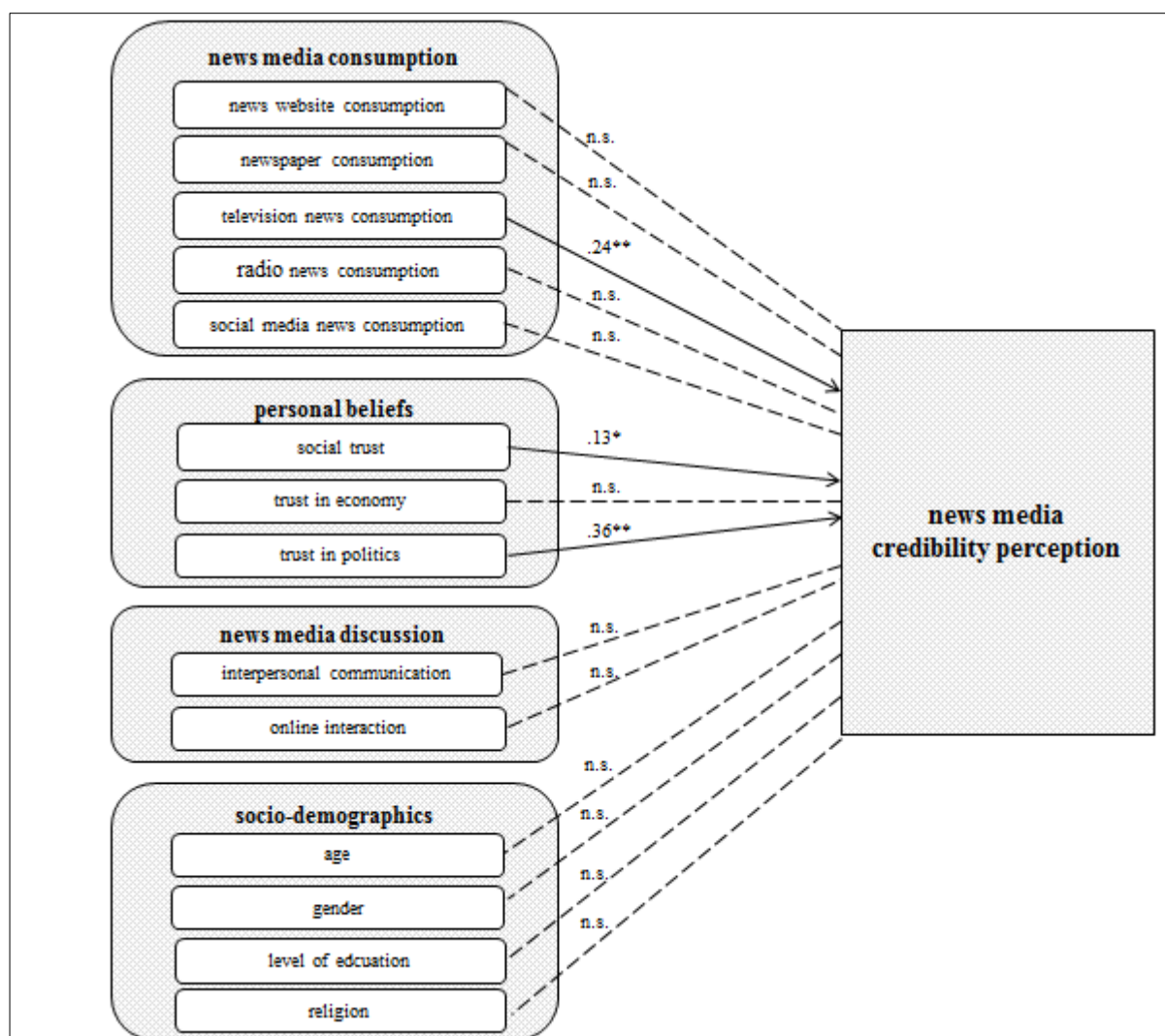


Figure 4. Regression Model News Media Credibility Perception

Level of Conspiracy Mentality

The respondents were requested to fill out the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire. Using this test *research question 2*, asking what the score of Dutch citizens on conspiracy thinking examination is, could be answered. Out of all five items the statement *Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about* had the highest mean score ('likely') on a 5-point scale ranging from 'very unlikely' to 'very likely'. *Events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret*

activities received the lowest mean score with an assessment that ended up between the answer options ‘unlikely’ and ‘do not know’. The overall mean score was $M = 3.38$ ($SD = .63$). The mean scores on all five items in descending order can be found in Table 7.

Table 6

Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ) mean scores of Dutch Citizens (N = 415)

CMQ-items	Mean	Std. D.
Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about.	4.00	.912
Politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions.	3.80	.807
There are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions.	3.20	1.086
Government agencies closely monitor all citizens.*	3.15	1.034
Events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities.	2.75	.943

Note. * = In further calculations with the CMQ-scale this item is deleted because of its Cronbach’s alpha reducing effect.

Antecedents of Conspiracy Mentality

Personal Beliefs and Conspiracy Mentality

Hypothesis 5 stated that personal beliefs negatively correlate with conspiracy mentality. As Table 7 shows, this correlation can be found for both social trust (*H5a*), trust in economy (*H5b*), and trust in politics (*H5c*). Political trust is most strongly correlated to the construct of conspiracy mentality.

When conspiracy mentality was predicted it was found that political trust and social trust were significant predictors. Economical trust was not a significant predictor. These results can be found in Table 8. The overall model fit was $R^2 = .217$, meaning that 21.7% of the variance in the general credibility mentality questionnaire score can be explained by this model.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics and Conspiracy Mentality

Age. *Hypothesis 6a* stated that age does not significantly correlate with news conspiracy mentality. Spearman’s rho confirmed this hypothesis: $\rho = .074$, $p = .133$, two-tailed, $N = 415$.

Sex. *Hypothesis 6b* assumes that sex does not significantly correlate with conspiracy mentality. Spearman’s $\rho = .069$, $p = .160$, two-tailed, $N = 414$. *H6b* can be confirmed: sex does not significantly correlate with conspiracy mentality.

Level of Education. *Hypothesis 6c* stated level of education does not correlate with conspiracy mentality. Spearman’s rho however indicated the presence of a weak negative correlation between level of education and conspiracy mentality: Spearman’s $\rho = -.114$, $p < .05$, two-tailed, $N = 414$. *H6c* is therefore rejected.

Religion. *Hypothesis 6d* stated religion negatively correlates with conspiracy mentality. Spearman’s $\rho = -.03$, $p = .526$, two-tailed, $N = 415$. *H6d* is therefore rejected.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) showed that the means of the religious groups do statistically differ ($p < 0.01$) with regard to conspiracy mentality. The proportion of variance in conspiracy mentality explained by religion is 6.7%.

Table 7

Correlations of Conspiracy Construct and Associated Antecedents

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Construct								
1. Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire Score	-							
Personal Beliefs								
2. Social trust	-.27**	-						
3. Economical trust	-.20**	.13*	-					
4. Political trust	-.40**	.18**	.26**	-				
Socio-demographics								
5. Age	-.07	.06	-.11*	-.12*	-			
6. Gender	.07	.05	-.10*	.07	-.15	-		
7. Level of education	-.16**	.20**	.20**	.24**	-.36**	-.00	-	
8. Religion	.03	.05	.01	-.10*	.07	.01	.02	-

Note. $N = 415$. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 8

Unstandardized (B) and Standardised (β) Regression Coefficients, and p-value for the Antecedents in the Regression Model Predicting Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire Scores

	B	β	p
Personal Beliefs			
Social trust	-.263	-.207*	.000
Economical trust	-.096	-.082	.084
Political trust	-.350	-.349*	.000
Socio-demographics			
Level of Education	-.003	-.005	.921

Note. $N = 415$. * $p < .01$

Correlation Model Conspiracy Mentality

Figure 5 shows the correlation model that is constructed out of the findings as described in this chapter. The model manifests that social trust, trust in economy, and trust in politics are negatively correlated to conspiracy mentality, just like level of education. The dashed line with the notification *n.s.* (non-significant) indicates that the rest of the antecedents are not correlated to conspiracy mentality.

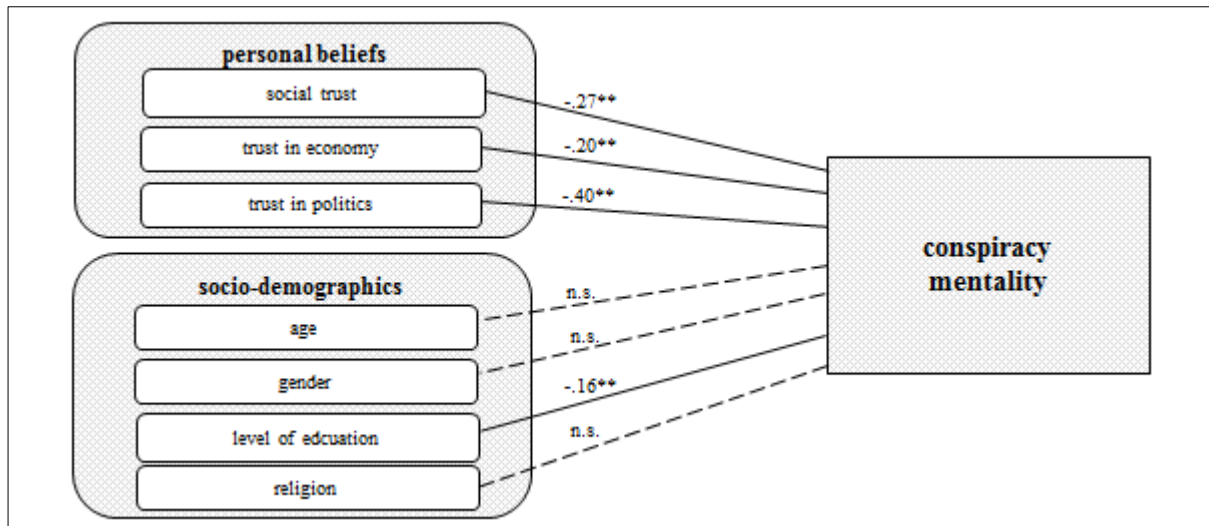


Figure 5. Correlation Model Conspiracy Mentality

Regression Model Conspiracy Mentality

Figure 6 shows the outcomes of the regression analysis of the associated antecedents with conspiracy mentality that were presented in this chapter. Social trust and trust in politics are significant predictors of conspiracy mentality. The dashed line with the notification *n.s.* (non-significant) indicates that the rest of the antecedents are not.

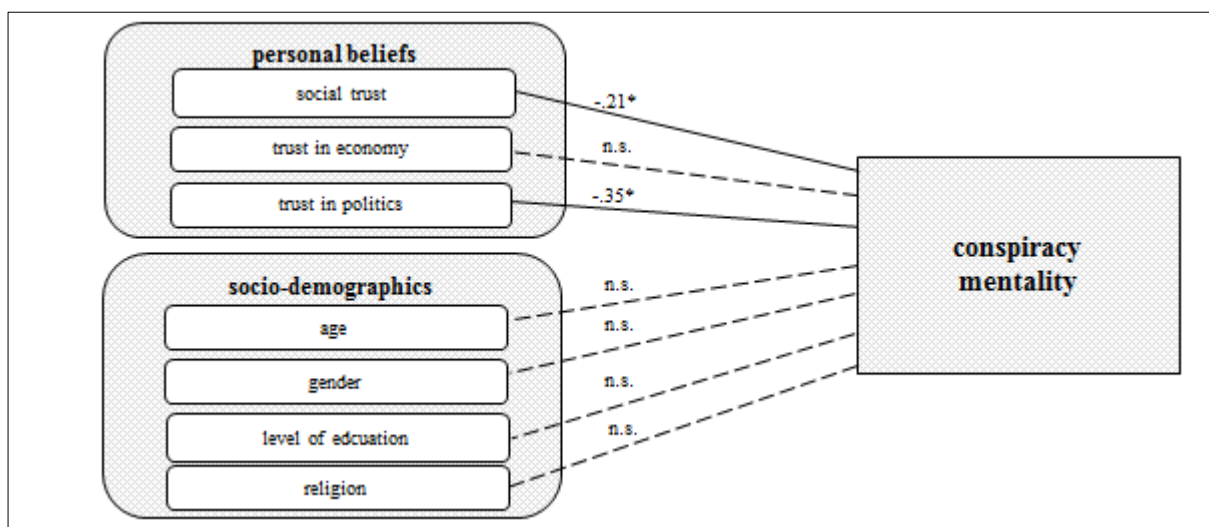


Figure 6. Regression Model Conspiracy Mentality

Public Recognizing of News Framing

Research question 3 addresses the issue which general news frames are identified by Dutch citizens after a period of consuming the reporting on a certain news event and to what extent Dutch citizens have a homogeneous interpretation of these news frames. The news cases selected for this investigation are, as revealed before, 1. the construction collapse in Alphen aan de Rijn, 2. the emission test software affaire, and 3. the misconduct on New Year's Eve 2016 in Keulen. Table 10 displays the information pertaining to the introductory questions which were asked prior to the items that addressed framing perception. As can be seen, the respondents that were assigned to news case 3 (the misconduct on New Year's Eve) felt most involved, paid the most attention to the news coverage of the case, and were least convinced that national news media had given an accurate portrayal of the event.

Perceived Framing in the Case of the Construction Collapse in Alphen aan de Rijn

The news frame concerned with the news case of the construction collapse that was identified most fitting according to the respondents seemed to be the responsibility frame. The mean score on this 5-point Likert item was $M = 3.92$. 77.4% ($n = 89$) indicated to agree (58.3%, $n = 67$) or totally agree (19.1%, $n = 22$) with the statement that Dutch news media paid a lot of attention to attribution of responsibility of the event. The variance was relatively small in comparison with the other news frames. That is also the case for the human interest frame ($M = 3.63$), which seems to be a good second best fit.

Most respondents agreed, with regard to the concerned case, the morality frame did not describe the Dutch news coverage angle of incidence very well ($M = 2.17$). In response to the statement that Dutch news media paid a lot of attention to the context of moral or religious principles of the event, only 4.3% ($n = 5$) agreed, 31.3% ($n = 36$) was neutral, 40.9% ($n = 47$) disagreed, and 23.5% ($n = 27$) totally disagreed. Table 9 provides an overview of the extent to which the participants identify the five general news frames in the case of the construction work collapse in Alphen aan de Rijn.

Perceived Framing in the Case of the Emission Test Software Affaire

The general news frame that obtained the highest mean score in the case of the emission software affaire was that of responsibility ($M = 3.87$), closely followed by the economic consequences frame ($M = 3.78$). For the responsibility frame statement applies that a large majority (75.0%, $n = 84$) agrees or totally agrees, a quarter (24.1%, $n = 27$) is neutral, and only one respondent (0.9%, $n = 1$) disagrees. The corresponding variance is relatively low, while it is relatively high for the economic consequences frame. To this frame it applies that a comparable part of the group (74.1%, $n = 83$) agrees or totally agrees, 16.1% ($n = 18$) is neutral, and 9.8% ($n = 1$) disagrees. For both frames nobody opted for the answer 'totally disagree'. Table 9 provides an overview of the extent to which the participants identify the five general news frames in the case of emission test software affaire.

Perceived Framing in the Case of the Misconduct on New Year's Eve 2016

The general news frame that obtained the highest mean score in the case of the misconduct on New Year's eve is that of responsibility ($M = 3.83$, 74.2% agreed or totally agreed), followed by the morality frame ($M = 3.59$, 62.3% agreed or totally agreed) and the conflict frame ($M = 3.46$, 57.0% agreed or totally agreed). The human interest approach ($M = 3.32$, 50.0% agreed or totally agreed) also scored relatively high. Table 9 provides an overview of the extent to which the participants identify the five general news frames in the case of misconduct on New Year's Eve. As can be seen, variance levels for all frames are relatively high in this case. The lowest variance belongs to the responsibility frame.

Table 9

Extent of Recognised News Media Frames in Dutch News Coverage of Three Cases (N = 415)

	Construction Collapse		Emission Test Software Affaire		Misconduct in Cologne	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Conflict	2.75	.836	3.13	.664	3.46	.870
Human Interest	3.63	.743	2.64	.879	3.32	.897
Economical	2.96	.931	3.78	.802	2.34	.824
Morality	2.17	.837	2.64	.957	3.59	.926
Responsibility	3.92	.751	3.87	.622	3.83	.743

Extent of Homogeneous Interpretation of News Frames

Altogether, the relatively high variance and standard deviation levels of the general news frames recognised across the three different three different news cases, point out that the Dutch population is far from unanimous in their news frame perception. The only exception found in this investigation is the identification of the responsibility frame within the news coverage of the emission test software affaire.

Issue-Involvement and Objectivity Perception

Hypothesis 7 stated issue-involvement negatively correlates with perceived news media objectivity. The respondents were requested to indicate to which extent they felt involved with the random assigned news case by means of a 5-point-Likert scale. The same was asked for the extent to which they perceived the news coverage concerning the case as objective. Spearman's rho however indicated that the correlation between issue-involvement and news media objectivity perception was not significant: Spearman's $\rho = .022$, $p = .668$, two-tailed, $N = 378$. *H7* therefore is not confirmed. The extent to which respondents perceived themselves as involved in the news event, the amount of attention they paid to the news coverage of the event, and the extent to which they agreed with the statement that the event was accurate represented, can be found in Table 10.

Table 10

Perceived News Framing Introductory Questions Display

	Construction Collapse	Emission Test Software Affaire	Misconduct in Cologne
Number of respondents assigned	129	131	155
Number of respondents aware of the news event	115	112	151
Perceived involvement*			
Very uninvolved	9.6	8.9	2.0
Uninvolved	29.6	33.0	19.9
Not uninvolved/not involved	32.2	22.3	33.1
Involved	27.0	32.1	41.7
Very involved	1.7	3.6	3.3
Attention paid to the news coverage of the news case*			
Very little	6.1	8.0	2.0
Little	32.2	38.4	27.8
Not little/not much	40.0	40.2	47.7
Much	20.0	13.4	21.2
Very much	1.7	-	1.3
Agreement with accurate representation of event*			
Totally disagree	-	0.9	3.3
Disagree	5.2	9.8	29.8
Do not disagree/ do not agree	27.8	35.7	33.1
Agree	64.3	53.6	33.1
Totally agree	2.6	-	0.7

*Note. N = 415. * Data display as a percentage of the total group of respondents pertaining to the respective news event.*

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Conclusion

Concluding from the research findings, Dutch citizens seem to experience national news media as a window that gives reasonable view to the world and its events while some corners of the window frame remain veiled by the curtains of bias, political ulterior motives, and the blur of fact and opinion. This conception is mainly shaped by their personal beliefs with regard to social, economic, and political trust rather than socio-demographic data like sex, age, level of education, and religion.

News Media Credibility Perception

Level of News Media Credibility Perception. Although the findings of the current study demonstrate that Dutch citizens are inclined to perceive the national broadcasters as professional experts with reasonable believable and trustworthy news reports, they question the completeness and unbiasedness (with a clear separation of fact and opinion) of this reporting. This is consistent with the research findings of Drok and Schwarz (2010) who investigated media credibility with specific focus on Dutch youth and newspaper consumption. They described a similar result: national news coverage is perceived as professional and trustworthy although not always objective and various enough.

The overall rating of the news media credibility dimensions is not exorbitant high or low. This indicates that the Dutch citizens do not completely distrust the national news media, but on the other hand there is no overwhelming trust either. As explained in the theoretical framework, this lack of a positive news media credibility perception can have profound implications for the journalistic profession and society as a whole. Therefore, it is important that journalists try to enhance the perceived credibility by addressing the credibility dimensions that gained the lowest rating: separation of fact and opinion, unbiasedness, and completeness. News media organizations should try harder to illustrate a news item from multiple perspectives.

Antecedents of News Media Credibility Perception. The present study showed that, although this is often assumed (Drok & Schwarz, 2010; Kioussis, 2001; Kohring, 2004b; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), the time spent on news media consumption as a whole has no significant correlation with perceived news media credibility. Exceptions found on this positive relationship with credibility perception were the average number of minutes daily spent on newspaper reading – even after controlling for age – and watching television news programs. Only television news consumption proved to be a significant predictor for news media credibility perception. In the field watching television has been mentioned as positively and significantly related to news media credibility perception before (Drok & Schwarz, 2010; Roper, 1985); the current study confirms this assumption. One explanation for the difference between this finding and the absence of a similar relationship with news media consumption as a whole, could be that television in general is perceived as more credible than other news media channels (Ibelema & Powell, 2001; Newhagen & Nass, 1989). It is likely that news media consumption via less trusted channels has repercussions on news media credibility perception.

Consistent with previous research in the field (e.g. Lee, 2010; Pinkleton & Austin, 1998; Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), it was found that personal beliefs (social trust, trust in economy, and trust in politics) have an impact on news media credibility perception. The influence of political trust is the strongest, which must raise awareness among politicians. Apparently trust in media and politics are intertwined.

Against the predictions (; Kioussis, 2001; Turcotte et al., 2015), interpersonal conversations about the news proved to positively correlate with perceived news media credibility, while online interaction about the news negatively correlates with news media credibility perception. The argumentation that supported a negative correlation of interpersonal communication with perceived credibility, seems in practice to apply to the relationship between online interaction and perceived credibility: the confrontation

with a variegation of opinions can make the news media consumer more critical towards news media. The current study proved that both interpersonal communication and online interaction about news events are no significant predictors of news media credibility perception. Apparently, the correlations are based on a third variable.

With regard to socio-demographics, none of the antecedents proved to be significant predictors of news media credibility perception. Age of the respondents does positively correlate with credibility perception, while it was hypothesized that older news consumers would be more critical due to their life lessons learned and developed worldly wisdom (Bucy, 2003; Robinson & Kohut, 1988). Evidently, that conclusion should be reconsidered.

Conspiracy Mentality

Level of Conspiracy Mentality. It is remarkable that Dutch citizens seem to be convinced that it is likely that many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about. Moreover, also other conspiracy ideas are not rejected by the participants. This is in line with the findings of Van Prooijen (2015), who found that a surprisingly high percentage of Dutch citizens beliefs in conspiracy theories. Since conspiracy thinking can have harmful consequences (Butler, Koopman & Zimbardo, 1995; Bartlett & Miller, 2010), it is important to reduce belief in conspiracy theories as much as possible. The results of the current study emphasize that this topic deserves attention within the Netherlands.

Antecedents of Conspiracy Mentality. As predicted based on foregoing research findings (Furnham, 2013; Goertzel, 1994; Ward & Voas, 2011), personal beliefs (social trust, trust in economy, trust in politics) negatively correlate with conspiracy mentality. Similar to the relationship with news media credibility perception, social trust and political trust turn out to be significant predictors for conspiracy mentality. Again, the influence of political trust is the strongest. Politicians should really be aware of the importance to build trust; it has far-reaching consequences.

With regard to the relationship between socio-demographics, exclusively level of education proved to correlate with conspiracy mentality – in a negative way, like found before by Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel (2007). Researchers have previously recommended to include teaching materials about conspiracy theories and how to deal with them thoughtfully; this study stresses the recommendation. Nevertheless, none of the socio-demographics have proven to be significant predictors of conspiracy mentality, thus in addressing the reduce of conspiracy thinking, it is more accurate to take personal beliefs as a starting point.

News Media Framing Recognition

In an initial exploration of public framing perception, it became apparent that citizens are far from unanimous in the recognizing of general news frames in the national reporting of an event.

The hypothesis that issue-involvement would negatively correlate with perceived news media objectivity could not be confirmed. Seemingly, the part of the hostile media effect wherein perceived bias and framing are more common among the people who feel strongly attached to a certain issue (Dalton, Beck & Huckfeldt, 1998) is not always apparent.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the composition of the respondents group with regard to representativeness of the population in educational level, religion, and political preference was not a precise reflection of society, the total of participants provided valuable data from which important conclusions can be drawn. Nevertheless, it is advisable to conduct the exact same study with a representative sample. Besides, it would be interesting to gather the data in several countries and cultures, creating the possibility to make a precise international comparison in the image of journalists formed by their fellow citizens. It deserves a recommendation to future researchers to deploy the credibility dimensions that are used in the current study in order to measure public perception of the construct; by adding the extra dimensions derived from literature to the five credibility dimensions as revealed by Flanagin and Metzger (2000) the internal consistency of their scale enhances.

It is a shame that the items measuring social trust lacked some internal consistency. For further research it is recommended to use another scale than that of Sturgis et al. (2010). Another minor methodological setback was that the deployment of the promising CMQ in this study, even after deleting an item, did just not make it to a reliable Cronbach's Alpha of .70. The deployment of another conspiracy research instrument is therefore recommended in further research attempts.

The mean ratings on the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al., 2013) were fairly high, leading to the conclusion that Dutch citizens seem to be quite susceptible to conspiracy thinking. That future research attempts in this area would be valuable is indisputable. Conspiracy thinking can -as disclosed in the theoretical framework- have harmful consequences and given the reasonable high national mean CMQ-score, the topic deserves attention. Not in the last place in a practical sense by the not fully trusted politicians. In studies with regard to suspicion and conspiracy it is especially vital to keep the non-response bias in mind; people with trust issues might have difficulties with exposing their opinions. This is also important to bear in mind for the current study.

The initial exploration of public framing perception did not result into astonishing insights. Further research into this area would be interesting. Researchers willingly to do so are advised to consider alternative research methods. Focus groups or in-depth interviews could provide more insight in the reasoning behind certain attitudes and facilitate the opportunity to appoint issue-specific frames.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Socio-Demographic Data

Wat is uw geslacht?

- ☐ man
- ☐ vrouw

Wat is uw leeftijd? ☐

Welke religie of levensovertuiging hangt u aan?

- ☐ Boeddhisme
- ☐ Christendom
- ☐ Hindoeïsme
- ☐ Islam
- ☐ Jodendom
- ☐ Agnosticisme/ietsisme (*aanname dat er 'iets' is tussen hemel en aarde zonder een religie aan te hangen*)
- ☐ Atheïsme (*afwezigheid van geloof in een of meerdere goden*)
- ☐ Overig

Wat is uw hoogst genoten (afgeronde of huidige) opleiding?

- ☐ Basisonderwijs/ lagere school
- ☐ Lbo/ vbo/ vmbo
- ☐ Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs (mbo)
- ☐ Hoger voortgezet onderwijs (havo of vwo)
- ☐ Hoger beroepsonderwijs (hbo)
- ☐ Wetenschappelijk onderwijs (universiteit)

Wat is uw huidige politieke partijvoorkeur?

- ☐ 50PLUS (50+)
- ☐ ChristenDemocratisch Appèl (CDA)
- ☐ ChristenUnie (CU)
- ☐ Democraten 66 (D66)
- ☐ GroenLinks (GL)
- ☐ Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA)
- ☐ Partij voor de Dieren (PvdD)
- ☐ Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)
- ☐ Socialistische Partij (SP)
- ☐ Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP)
- ☐ Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD)
- ☐ Geen of andere voorkeur

News Media Consumption

1. Vink hieronder de media aan waar u doorgaans nieuwsberichten te horen/zien krijgt en noteer hoeveel minuten per dag dat gemiddeld ongeveer is:

- ☐ Nieuwswebsite, gemiddeld ☐ minuten per dag
- ☐ Krant, gemiddeld ☐ minuten per dag
- ☐ Televisienieuws, gemiddeld ☐ minuten per dag
- ☐ Radionieuws, gemiddeld ☐ minuten per dag
- ☐ Op sociale media gedeelde nieuwsberichten, gemiddeld ☐ minuten per dag

2. Via welke nieuwsbronnen komt u doorgaans in aanraking met nieuwsberichten? Noteer de namen van deze nieuwsbronnen per medium. Er mogen meerdere nieuwsbronnen per medium ingevuld worden, geschieden door een komma. Als u geen gebruik maakt van een bepaald medium, noteer dan een streepje (-) of kruisje (x) in het bijbehorende tekstvak.

Vul hieronder uw nieuwsbronnen in (bijvoorbeeld de namen van nieuwswebsites, televisieprogramma's, kranten, radiozenders of sociale media)

Nieuwswebsites	
Kranten	
Televisie	
Radio	
Sociale media	

3. Laat u weleens een reactie achter onder nieuwsberichten op nieuwswebsites, sociale media zoals Facebook of Twitter, online forums of andere internetpagina's? (5-point scale ranging from 'very rare' to 'very often')

4. Hoe vaak praat u in het dagelijks leven met uw naaste omgeving over het nieuws? (5-point scale ranging from 'very rare' to 'very often')

5. Heeft u een eigen account/profiel op een sociaal medium zoals Facebook? (ja/nee)

Use of Personal Social Media Profile

Based on Facebook usage types (Steggink (2015), derived from van Deursen.
5-point scale ranging from 'very rare' to 'very often'.

Geef aan hoe vaak u onderstaande handelingen verricht op Facebook of een ander sociaal medium.

1. Hoe vaak leest u nieuwsberichten die door anderen worden gedeeld?
2. Hoe vaak plaatst u een update over een nieuwsbericht (in woorden)?
3. Hoe vaak reageert u woordelijk op nieuwsberichten of statusupdates die aan nieuwsberichten gerelateerd zijn?
4. Hoe vaak deelt u nieuwsberichten of statusupdates die gaan over nieuwsberichten?
5. Hoe vaak 'likt' u een nieuwsbericht of nieuws-gerelateerde statusupdate?
6. Hoe vaak zoekt en bekijkt u nieuws-gerelateerde pagina's?
7. Hoe vaak plaatst u nieuwsfoto's of nieuwsfilmpjes?
8. Hoe vaak wordt u lid van een nieuws-gerelateerde pagina of creëer u er zelf één?

Perceived Credibility of National News Media

Based on the measuring of media credibility as a multidimensional concept by Flanagin & Metzger (2000).
5-point Likert scale ranging from 'totally disagree' to 'totally agree'.

Dit is het tweede deel van de vragenlijst. De volgende tien stellingen gaan over de Nederlandse nieuwsmedia in zijn algemeenheid. Denk hierbij bijvoorbeeld aan NOS en RTL Nieuws, de grote kranten, radionieuws op de reguliere zenders en bekende nieuwswebsites. Natuurlijk kan het zo zijn dat u deze nieuwsmedia verschillend beoordeelt; kies dan voor het antwoord dat u in het algemeen/gemiddeld het meest van toepassing vindt.

1. De berichten van Nederlandse nieuwsmedia zijn ongeloofwaardig.
2. De berichten van Nederlandse nieuwsmedia zijn accuraat (nauwkeurig).
3. De berichten van Nederlandse nieuwsmedia zijn betrouwbaar.
4. De berichten van Nederlandse nieuwsmedia zijn bevooroordeeld.
5. De berichten van Nederlandse nieuwsmedia zijn volledig.
6. De berichten van Nederlandse nieuwsmedia zijn onprofessioneel.
7. De berichten van Nederlandse nieuwsmedia zijn eerlijk.
8. De Nederlandse nieuwsmedia hebben geen respect voor privacy.

9. De Nederlandse nieuwsmedia scheiden feit en mening goed.
10. De Nederlandse nieuwsmedia geven om het welzijn van het land.

Perceived News Framing

De volgende negen vragen gaan over een nieuwsbericht dat als volgt in de media kwam:

Nieuwscase 1

Op 3 augustus 2015 vielen in Alphen aan de Rijn twee bouwkransen en een brugdek op panden naast de Julianabrug.

Nieuwscase 2

Op 23 september 2015 werd bekend dat er in de auto-industrie software is gebruikt die de uitlaatgassen van auto's kan beïnvloeden tijdens emissietesten.

Nieuwscase 3

Op 31 december 2015 was er in Keulen en op andere plekken in Duitsland sprake van aanrandingen, berovingen en mishandelingen.

1. Bent u bekend met deze gebeurtenis? (*ja/nee*)

2. Hoe betrokken voelt u zich bij dit nieuwsitem? (*ranging from 'very uninvolved' to 'very involved'*)

3. Hoeveel aandacht heeft u besteed aan de berichtgeving over dit nieuwsitem? (*'very little' to 'very much'*)

Based on the media attention scale of Lee, 2005.

4. Ik denk dat de Nederlandse nieuwsmedia een betrouwbaar beeld van deze gebeurtenis hebben gegeven. (*'totally disagree' to 'totally agree'*)

Beoordeling presentatiewijze op algemene nieuwsframes

5-point Likert scale ranging from 'totally disagree' to 'totally agree'.

5. In de Nederlandse nieuwsberichtgeving over dit onderwerp was er veel aandacht voor het benadrukken van *conflict* tussen individuen, groepen of instellingen.

6. In de Nederlandse nieuwsberichtgeving over dit onderwerp was er veel aandacht voor de *menselijke/emotionele* kant van het verhaal.

7. In de Nederlandse nieuwsberichtgeving over dit onderwerp was er veel aandacht voor de *economische gevolgen* die de gebeurtenis zal hebben.

8. In de Nederlandse nieuwsberichtgeving over dit onderwerp was er veel aandacht voor het plaatsen van de gebeurtenis in de context van *morele of religieuze* principes.

9. In de Nederlandse nieuwsberichtgeving over dit onderwerp was er veel aandacht voor het toeschrijven van de *verantwoordelijkheid* voor de gebeurtenis aan de regering, een persoon of groep.

Trust in Politics

Derived from Pinkleton & Weintraub Austin (2004). Based on the items used in previous studies (e.g., Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990; Pinkleton & Austin, 2001).

5-point Likert scale ranging from 'totally disagree' to 'totally agree'.

1. Nederlandse politici geven om het belang van het volk (niet alleen om zichzelf of speciale belangen).
2. Potentiële Kamerleden zijn alleen geïnteresseerd in de verkiezingsstemmen van de mensen, niet in hun mening.
3. Politici weten goed wat er in speelt in 'de echte wereld'/ onder de bevolking.
4. Het lijkt erop dat onze regering draait om een paar grote belangen die alleen zichzelf dienen.
5. Nederlandse politici blijven goed in contact met het volk nadat ze verkozen zijn.

Trust in Economics

Based on the Michigan Index of Consumer Sentiment (ICS) –also the one of Lee-, a set of survey items that tap public perceptions of economic prosperity. 5-point Likert scale.

1. In mijn ogen is de nationale economie het afgelopen jaar... (*flink verbeterd* - *flink verslechterd*)
(Based on Lee, 2010)

2. Denkt u dat u (en uw gezin) er over een jaar financieel gezien beter voor staat, slechter of ongeveer hetzelfde vergeleken met nu? (*veel slechter* – *veel beter*)

3. Ik denk dat het nu een goed moment is om grote (/dure) huishoudelijke artikelen aan te schaffen. (Denk bijvoorbeeld aan een wasmachine.) (*helemaal mee oneens* – *helemaal mee eens*)

Social Trust

Derived from Sturgis et al., 2010. 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'totally disagree' to 'totally agree'.

Denk bij de volgende vier vragen niet zozeer aan bekenden uit uw persoonlijke omgeving, maar vooral aan onbekenden (vanwege Sturgis & Smith, 2010).

1. Ik denk dat de meeste mensen in principe goede bedoelingen hebben.
2. Ik denk dat de meeste mensen zullen proberen gebruik van me te maken als ik ze de kans geef.
3. Ik denk dat de meeste mensen met wie ik omga eerlijk en betrouwbaar zijn.
4. Als ik mensen ontmoet, is mijn eerste reactie ze te vertrouwen.

Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire

Based on the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire of Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah & Imhoff (2013). 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'very unlikely' to 'very likely'.

1. Er gebeuren veel zeer belangrijke dingen in de wereld waarover de gewone burger nooit wordt geïnformeerd.
2. Politici vertellen ons meestal niet de ware motieven voor hun beslissingen.
3. Overheidsinstellingen houden nauwlettend toezicht op alle burgers.
4. Gebeurtenissen die op het eerste gezicht geen verband met elkaar hebben, zijn vaak het resultaat van geheime activiteiten.
5. Er zijn geheime organisaties die grote invloed hebben op politieke beslissingen.

Appendix B: Factor Analysis of News Media Credibility Question Set

To investigate the underlying structure of the new composed 10-item news media credibility question set, a principal axis factoring with varimax rotation was conducted. Prior to this test, examination of the data ($N = 415$) indicated that the variables were not perfectly normally distributed. Given the robust nature of factor analysis, these deviations were not considered problematic. Furthermore, a linear relationship was identified among the variables. Two factors (with Eigenvalues exceeding 1) were identified as underlying the ten questionnaire items (see Table 2). In total, these factors accounted for around 55.1% of the variance in the questionnaire data. As Table 1 shows, aside from the item corresponding to respect for privacy, all variables load into Factor 1 and Factor 2.

Table 1

Varimax Rotated Factor Structure of the Ten Item Attitudes Towards News Media Credibility^a

Item	Loadings	
	Factor 1	Factor 2
Accuracy	.799	.104
Trustworthiness	.776	.126
Completeness	.644	.172
Fairness	.745	.257
Separation of fact and opinion	.662	.199
Concern for community's well-being	.119	.764
Believability	.719	.208
Unbiasedness	.711	-.117
Expertness	.547	.401
Respect for privacy	-	.743
Percentage of Variance:	39.93%	15.16%

Note. ^a. = Rotation converged in 3 iterations.