

strict sense. Hence most of what is known about the mediating impact of social reality perceptions, for instance, is based on plausible theoretical argumentations rather than on a solid empirical basis. Whereas a mediating variable is influenced by the independent variable and then, in turn, influences the dependent variable, a moderating variable specifies the conditions under which a given effect occurs, as well as conditions under which the strength or direction of an effect varies (cf. Baron & Kenny, 1986; Holmbeck, 1997). The following section provides an overview of variables that may moderate the relationship between media information and political attitudes.

### *2.3. Conditionality of the Media's Impact on Political Attitudes*

This section provides a brief overview of variables that specify the conditions under which media effects on political attitudes are particularly likely. The purpose of this section is to inform the selection of moderator variables that might be relevant with respect to the present study's research interest. In order to provide a rather broad overview of possible moderators, the present section expands its focus on studies that explore the media's impact on political support and also includes studies on the relationship between media and attitudes towards policy issues. Several studies indicate that media effects are particularly strong, if the audience's trust in media is high (Section 2.3.1). Other studies indicate that media's impact on political attitudes varies as a function of individuals' political sophistication (Section 2.3.2). Further studies investigate whether media effects are contingent upon the general intensity of media use (Section 2.3.3). More recently, the modus of information processing has been the focus of scholars' attention. Section 2.3.4 provides an overview of research exploring the moderating role of online vs. memory-based processing of media information. Section 2.3.5 presents studies that explore the moderating effects of individual predispositions. Finally, Section 2.3.6 summarizes the findings and discusses suggestions for the present study.

#### *2.3.1. The Role of Media Trust and Media Credibility*

The perceived trustworthiness or credibility of mass media<sup>22</sup> is considered a relevant precondition for the media to have an impact on political attitudes. More precisely, media effects are supposed to be stronger if trust in media information is high (Matthes, 2007b, p. 187). This argument traces back to the classical persuasion studies by Hovland & Weiss (1951). Empirical support for the assumption that media credibility enhances the likelihood of media effects is given in an experimental study

22 The terms are used interchangeably in media effects research (Kohring & Matthes, 2007, p. 231f.).

by Druckman (2001b), for instance. The framing of news from a credible source (New York Times) was found to have a greater impact on attitudes than news frames from a source considered non-credible (The National Enquirer). Consistently, J.M. Miller & Krosnick (2000) found that priming effects are more likely to occur among people with high levels of general trust in the media compared to individuals with low trust levels.<sup>23</sup> The assumptions of moderation were tested by including interaction terms as well as the original predictor and moderator variables in the regression models. Similar findings were provided by Garramone (1984). Wolling (1999) also reported results which indicate that credible media sources exert stronger influence on political attitudes than less credible media sources.<sup>24</sup> Media credibility was found to moderate the media's effects on the evaluation of government performance and the assessment of implementations of political decisions. The media's impact on other political attitudes was found to be independent of media credibility, however. The author therefore concluded that media credibility moderates the media's impact only in part (Wolling, 1999, p. 216f.). In contrast to the majority of findings, Matthes (2007b) reported results that do not support the assumption that trust in media moderates the strength of media effects. The findings are based on empirical tests using group comparisons (low vs. high trust respondents) in structural equation modeling. The author explained that the low variance in the trust variable might account for this finding.

### 2.3.2. The Role of Political Sophistication

A variety of studies suggests that the mass media's impact on political attitudes is contingent upon the level of political sophistication of the audience or other related concepts such as political expertise, political awareness, political knowledge and political involvement. The term political sophistication refers to the "cognitive complexity about politics" and is related to a person's political belief system (PBS)

- 23 Trust in the media was measured as self-reported measures, captured with three questions referring to the media in general.
- 24 The assumption of moderating effects was tested based on the inclusion of interaction variables into regression models. In order to compute the interaction variables, for each media outlet the author recoded high credibility levels with '1' and low credibility levels with a value of '0'. These values were then multiplied with the value that was assigned to the media outlets based on findings from the content analysis (Wolling, 1999, p. 279). Those product indicators were included in the regression analysis, the original media content indicators were excluded from the regression analysis. This procedure seems problematic for two reasons. First, the values of the product term for the non-credible media content will all be zero, as the product of any other number and zero is zero. Hence, no variance on the interaction variable for the non-credible media content existed. Moreover, not including the original predictor variable and moderator variable in regression analyses with product interaction terms is considered problematical, because the results are not controlled for the effects of both predictor and moderator variable on the dependent variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p. 1175f., Friedrich, 1982).