Do You Believe in Polls After All?

An Experimental Study on Credibility in Political Opinion Polls

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This study examines the factors influencing the perceived credibility of political opinion polls in Austria. Using a 3x2 between-subjects design, we conducted an online experiment with 1,600 participants, quota-sampled to match key demographic characteristics of the Austrian population (age, gender, and federal state). The design was validated through an a priori power analysis, indicating a robust 95 % statistical power. Mean comparisons revealed no significant differences in poll credibility across media source conditions; however, perceived competence and warmth significantly mediated this relationship. The public service broadcaster (ORF) was rated as more competent and warmer than both the tabloid medium (OE24) and the control group. Interestingly, providing detailed survey information reduced perceived poll credibility, highlighting the need for improved poll literacy. Voting intention (motivated reasoning) and perceived media competence emerged as strong predictors of poll credibility. This study offers novel insights into the credibility of political polls from a Central European perspective.

Key words: credibility, warmth, competence, polls, experimental design, stereotype content model

1. Introduction

Polls are omnipresent in the news media, and they matter. Public opinion represents the "currency" of representative democracies (Strömbäck, 2012, p. 2). Whether the media's publication of polls shapes or merely reflects public opinion depends, according to Strömbäck (2012, p. 16), on the quality of the survey. When media outlets report well-conducted, high-quality polls, they are more likely to reflect public opinion, whereas the publication of low-quality polls may instead shape it. The context in which polls are presented also plays an important role. Media should therefore provide sufficient information about survey design and methodology to enable audiences to form well-grounded opinions on the issues being covered. Election polls can further inform the public about others' political preferences and behaviors, potentially reducing the number of undecided voters (Mavridis & Ortuño-Ortín, 2018).

Moy and Rinke (2012) demonstrate that polls can exert a variety of effects on the public. Depending on the survey context, they may mobilize or demobilize voters, strengthen the leading party, or influence support for particular parties. In the context of voting intentions (see also Krause & Gahn, 2023), different effects are discussed, including increased support for the "underdog" or a strengthening of the leading party—the so-called "bandwagon effect." The first effect is related to "strategic voting", which describes a behavior in which voters rely on pre-election polls to make tactical decisions, choosing not necessarily their

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preferred option, but the one most likely to affect the election outcome in their favor (Moy & Rinke, 2012, p. 229f.).

Moy and Rinke (2012) also refer to non-electoral effects. Polls can influence political trust when they are used in "horse race journalism", which portrays politics as a strategic competition focused on winning and losing. Such coverage may foster political cynicism and mistrust among the public (Moy & Rinke, 2012, p. 231), which, in turn, can decrease people's willingness to engage in politics (Moy & Rinke, 2012, p. 232). Polls may further affect the expression of opinions. According to Moy and Rinke (2012, p. 233), citizens who believe their opinion is widely shared are more likely to express it, whereas those who perceive their view as unpopular tend to remain silent. This dynamic leads to a self-reinforcing process—often referred to as the *spiral of silence*—in which dominant opinions become increasingly visible, while dissenting ones gradually fade from public discourse.

Polls are an integral part of everyday political discourse and are regarded by political actors as essential tools that inform decision-making processes (Oleskog Tryggvason, 2020). Politicians and parties tend to draw on poll results, especially when they indicate a rise or decline in electoral support compared to previous elections. Oleskog Tryggvason (2020) shows that political polls influence several arenas of party activity—the media, internal, electoral, and parliamentary arenas. However, the parliamentary arena is perceived as the least affected by published polls, suggesting that core legislative processes remain relatively stable and insulated from polling dynamics. By contrast, polls are seen as particularly influential in shaping media coverage and internal party decision-making (Oleskog Tryggvason, 2020). In everyday political communication, poll results are prominently featured on news portals and serve as an important source of information for citizens.

Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) describe, among others, the "informational-instructive" function of journalism, which is essential for enabling citizens to access the information necessary for political participation. However, Oleskog Tryggvason and Strömbäck (2018) show that journalists often report poll changes inaccurately, attributing significance to shifts that fall within the margin of error—highlighting that sampling errors cannot be ignored. For citizens, it can be difficult to distinguish between high-quality and low-quality polls, a distinction that is crucial given its implications for how polls influence public opinion (Strömbäck, 2012).

While the credibility of political polls has been examined in several studies (Tsfati, 2001; Denner, Brocke, & Joeckel, 2016; Kuru, Pasek, & Traugott, 2017; Kuru, Pasek, & Traugott, 2019; Madson & Hillygus, 2020; Kuru, Pasek, & Traugott, 2020), two areas remain underexplored: First, most existing research focuses on the U.S. context, leaving a gap in Central European perspectives. Second, only a few studies (see e.g. Kuru, Pasek, & Traugott, 2017; Stadtmüller, Silber, & Beuthner, 2022) systematically investigate how methodological transparency and source perceptions interact to shape credibility judgments. Even fewer studies integrate psychological frameworks such as the Stereotype Content Model (SCM; Fiske, 2018; Peter & Ponzi, 2018) into this line of research.

This paper addresses these gaps by examining the factors that influence the perceived credibility of political opinion polls in Austria. Specifically, we focus on three dimensions: (1) the credibility of the publishing medium, (2) the presence or absence of methodological information, and (3) the mediating role of perceived warmth and competence, the two core dimensions of the SCM. We partially replicate previous research by Kuru et al. (2017) and Stadtmüller et al. (2022) and build on the mediation approach used by Peter & Ponzi (2018) to analyze how perceptions of media brands influence poll credibility.

To this end, we conducted a 3x2 between-subjects online experiment with a sample of 1,600 participants, quota-sampled to reflect key demographic characteristics (age, gender,

and federal state) of the Austrian population. The experimental design was validated a priori through a power analysis, which indicated robust 95% statistical power for an estimated effect size of 0.1. Data for the experiment were collected by Gallup International in November 2023.

The paper is structured as follows: first, we discuss the theoretical foundations and derive our hypotheses; the methods section then details the variables, sample, and methodological approach. This is followed by a presentation of the results and concludes with implications, including an outlook on further research, and consideration of the study's limitations.

2. Theoretical background

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundations of the study, with particular attention to the Austrian media system as the contextual framework. It also discusses key concepts from credibility research in communication science and introduces the Stereotype Content Model (SCM). Furthermore, it examines the potential effects of methodological information, such as sample size, survey institute, and data collection methods, on the perceived credibility of polls. Finally, it considers the influence of individual-level predictors, including political interest, media use, and general attitudes toward political opinion polls, on credibility evaluations.

2.1 Context of the study: The Austrian media system

In contrast to most studies in this field, our research adopts a Central European perspective by focusing on the Austrian media system as a special case within the broader media landscape. Seethaler (2024, p. 15) summarizes the defining characteristics of the Austrian media system as follows: "Late liberalization, significant foreign investments, reliance on state subsidies and state advertising, a high level of media concentration, and the sometimes endangered editorial autonomy." Despite these challenges, Austria maintains a relatively stable media market with strong, well-established media brands, a stability largely attributed to the "loyalty" of a significant share of Austrian citizens (Seethaler, 2024, p. 15). The media market is dominated by two major players: the public service broadcaster ORF and the media company *Mediaprint*, whose flagship outlet is the Kronen Zeitung (Seethaler, 2024, p. 9).

2.2 The influence of media brands on poll credibility

Historically, source credibility has been conceptualized along two dimensions: "expertise" and "trustworthiness" (Jackob & Hueß, 2016, p. 52). Expertise refers to the perceived ability of the source to make valid and accurate statements, while trustworthiness concerns the perceived intentions of the source—specifically, whether it aims to provide the most reliable information possible (Jackob & Hueß, 2016, p. 52). In media and communication studies, credibility is typically differentiated into three dimensions: source, media, and message credibility (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Hellmüller & Trilling, 2012; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003).

In this study, we adopt the concept of *poll credibility* proposed by Kuru et al. (2017) to assess perceived credibility in the context of opinion polls, which can be understood as a form of source credibility. The specific measurement scale builds on and integrates elements from various media credibility scales. Source and media credibility theory—which is strongly intertwined as media credibility originates from source credibility (Metzger et

al., 2003, p. 403)—suggest that the perceived credibility of information can be significantly influenced by the source or medium through which it is presented (see e.g. Self, 1996).

Within the context of the credibility dimensions discussed above, Denner et al. (2016, pp. 183–184) and Stadtmüller et al. (2022) suggest that the source of polls, specifically the opinion research institutes, whether known or fictitious, does not significantly influence overall poll credibility. According to Denner et al. (2016), the same applies to the publishing medium: perceived overall credibility does not differ substantially between polls published in tabloids and those appearing in quality newspapers. However, their findings indicate somewhat stronger effects when the medium, rather than the source, was varied. Similarly, Kuru et al. (2017, p. 439) report that "poll results and not source cues" primarily drive credibility judgements.

According to the *Austrian Digital News Report 2023*, trust in the media has declined steadily since 2021. In 2023, it reached an all-time low of only 38.3 % (Gadringer, Sparviero, Trappel, & Reichenberger, 2023, p. 111). Moreover, levels of trust vary considerably across different media brands (Gadringer et al., 2023, p. 114). Denner et al. (2016, p. 188) similarly found that polls published by quality newspapers were perceived as more credible "compared to the same result being published in a tabloid press."

2.3 Influence of warmth and competence on poll credibility

Building on previous studies suggesting that the publishing medium may not directly influence poll credibility, we extend this line of inquiry by employing a mediation model to examine the influence of perceived *warmth* and *competence* as proposed by the SCM.

Recent studies suggest that perceptions of warmth and competence, two fundamental dimensions of social cognition (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), may provide deeper insights into how individuals assess the credibility of polls. In this study, we draw on the concept of source credibility through the lens of *warmth* and *competence* as conceptualized in the SCM (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). The SCM assumes that individuals primarily seek to understand others' intentions toward them and their social group (Fiske, 2018, p. 67). The dimension of *warmth* (encompassing "trustworthiness" and "sociability") reflects the perceived intentions of an individual or group, addressing the question of "friend or foe." The dimension of *competence* (encompassing "capable" and "agentic") captures whether the individual or group "can enact that intent" (Fiske, 2018, p. 67).

As Peter & Ponzi (2018) describe, *warmth* and *competence* are the two main dimensions people use to evaluate and judge others (p. 1). These authors apply this framework in a marketing context to examine the so-called "innuendo effect" (Peter & Ponzi, 2018, p. 7). In short, they test whether describing a brand as *warm* leads to lower perceptions of competence, and vice versa. Similarly, Kervyn, Fiske, & Malone (2012, p. 175) demonstrate that consumers evaluate brands in much the same way they evaluate people and social groups. Accordingly, "intrinsic warmth and intention perceptions by consumers are playing a highly significant role in consumer behavior toward brands" (Kervyn et al., 2012b, p. 175). We argue that perceptions of *warmth* and *competence* associated with media brands may likewise mediate credibility perceptions of political opinion polls. In doing so, we aim to initiate a discussion about the (so far largely overlooked) influence of media brands on poll credibility.

Historically, credibility has been described as consisting of two key components: expertness—the extent to which a source is perceived as capable of making valid statements—and trustworthiness—the extent to which a source is perceived as intending to provide accurate information (Christofoletti, 2024; Jackob & Hueß, 2016, p. 52). The dimensions of *competence* (and related constructs) and *warmth* (and similar constructs) represent

the two primary ways in which people evaluate others (e.g., Abele & Wojciszke, 2013; Kervyn, Bergsieker, & Fiske, 2012; Wojciszke, 1994). Abele and Wojcisze (2007) refer to these broader dimensions as "agency" and "communion", which also encompass warmth and competence, and demonstrate that these dimensions parallel the core components of source credibility. Similar dimensions are also applied in journalism studies to assess media quality (Christofoletti, 2024, p. 4).

2.4 Influence of the provided information on poll credibility

Bhatti & Pedersen (2016) show that media reporting on political opinion polls often lacks essential methodological information, such as indications of statistical uncertainty. Even when such information is included, journalists frequently misinterpret the results, for instance, by emphasizing statistically insignificant differences. This suggests that transparency alone does not guarantee accurate interpretation. Instead, journalistic coverage often prioritizes engaging "horse race" narratives over methodological rigor. Bhatti & Pedersen (2016) see "bad poll reporting" as a "societal problem", given its significant functions and effects on citizens (see introduction). From a normative standpoint, Kuru et al. (2017) argue that transparency is desirable and can enhance credibility among individuals who are familiar with methodology, particularly among those who already agree with the reported results (Kuru et al., 2017).

Stadtmüller et al. (2022) demonstrate that certain survey information can positively influence trust perceptions of polls. However, they note that such information is not the most critical factor in evaluating poll trustworthiness; individual characteristics account for the largest portion of the variance. Nevertheless, details such as sample size and terms like "representative sample" were found to significantly affect perceived poll trustworthiness (Stadtmüller et al., 2022).

2.5 Influence of personal attributes on poll credibility

As noted above, Stadtmüller et al. (2022, p. 6) found that "information on survey quality plays a smaller role than respondent characteristics." Similar results have been reported by Kuru et al. (2017; 2020), who highlight that prior attitudes, particularly political ones, significantly shape perceptions of poll credibility. Likewise, Madson and Hillygus (2019) show that polls are perceived as more credible when they align with individuals' predetermined opinions. In line with these findings, and given our aim to evaluate predictors of poll credibility, we tested the direct effects of these variables using a linear regression model, providing a foundation for future research.

The linear regression model was structured in four blocks: sociodemographic variables, political attitudes, attitudes toward political polls in general, and media usage. In the first step, we included voting intention and general political interest, as Kuru et al. (2017) suggest that motivated reasoning may influence the perception of polls. We also considered the influence of news consumption (Newman, Fletcher, Eddy, Robertson, & Nielsen, 2023) given evidence that it may correlate with higher trust in media. (Kalogeropoulos, Suiter, Udris, & Eisenegger, 2019). Finally, following Stocké (2003), we incorporated participants' perceptions of the reliability and benefits of polls, as these factors have been shown to influence willingness to participate and may therefore affect perceived poll credibility.

Although the individual-level predictors discussed above are theoretically relevant and included in our empirical model, we deliberately refrained from formulating additional hypotheses. First, introducing numerous separate hypotheses would risk overloading the theoretical framework and diluting the paper's argumentative focus. Second, the linear

regression model is intended as an exploratory supplement, serving as a foundation for future, more targeted research on the individual determinants of poll credibility.

3. Hypotheses development and integrative model

This study examines the influence of the publishing medium on the perceived credibility of polls. In our experiment, we included Austria's two most prominent media types: a public service broadcaster and a tabloid newspaper, both of which are key publishers of opinion polls and therefore central to polling information. Rather than selecting the largest tabloid, Kronen Zeitung, we chose the tabloid *OE24* due to its lower trust ratings in the *Digital News Report 2023* compared to ORF, ensuring clearer contrast for the experimental manipulation (Gadringer et al., 2023, p. 115).

Based on this rationale, we formulated our first hypothesis:

H1: A poll published by ORF (public service medium) is perceived as more credible than one published by OE24 (tabloid press).

Following the discussion on source credibility, Hypotheses 2a to 2c examine the role of perceived *warmth* and *competence* on poll credibility. Specifically, we analyze which media brands are perceived as warmer and more competent, a) compared to the control group and b) relative to each other. We hypothesize that perceptions of *warmth* and *competence* associated with a media brand may mediate the perceived credibility of its polls. This assumption is supported by Peter and Ponzi (2018), who demonstrated in experimental studies that brand perceptions are mediated by these two dimensions.

It is well established that transparency enhances perceived credibility in journalism (see e.g. Curry & Stroud, 2021), and that *warmth* and *competence* can be understood as dimensions of source credibility or as criteria for evaluating media brands (Christofoletti, 2024, p. 4). Accordingly, we hypothesize that ORF and OE24 will be perceived as more competent and warmer than the control group, which does not disclose the publishing source of the survey to participants. This leads to the following hypotheses:

H2a: ORF is perceived to be more competent and warmer than the control group.

H2b: OE24 is perceived to be more competent and warmer than the control group.

Our third hypothesis relates to general trends in trust toward the tested media brands, ORF and OE24. In Austria, ORF is considered the most trustworthy media brand, while OE24 ranks at the lower end of the trust scale (Gadringer et al., 2023, p. 114).

H2c: ORF is perceived to be more competent and warmer than OE24.

Research question 1 addresses whether *warmth* or *competence* plays a more important role in mediating poll credibility. Following the framework of Peter and Ponzi (2018), we ask: is it more important that a media brand has the goodwill to publish a high-quality, well-conducted poll (warmth), or that it has the ability to do so (competence)? As discussed in the theoretical background, prior research does not provide conclusive evidence on which dimension is dominant in the effect of media brands on poll credibility. Political science perspectives offer some guidance: in most studies, competence appears to be more influential than character (McAllister, 2016). However, Laustsen and Bor (2017) suggest that *warmth* can be more important than *competence*, while Kim and Ball (2021) suggest that competence is linked to the perceived quality of a brand, and that higher warmth may even reduce the perceived brand competence.

We formulated the following research question regarding this dimension:

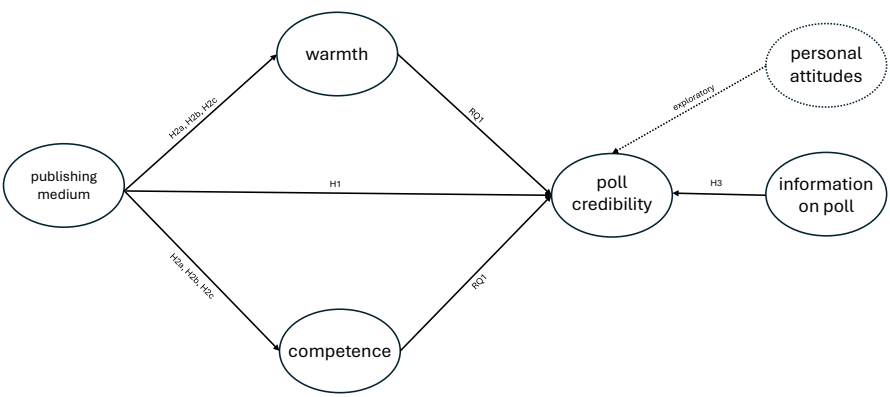
RQ1: Is warmth or competence the stronger mediator from media brand (IV) to poll credibility (DV)?

As discussed above, certain statistical details can enhance perceived poll credibility. Since our experimental design does not include accompanying journalistic commentary or explanatory framing—aside from the media brand—we are able to isolate the effect of methodological information itself. Accordingly, we propose that transparency, operationalized as the provision of institutional and methodological details (e.g., sample size, survey institute, and data collection method), can independently increase perceived poll credibility.

H3: If detailed information about the survey (institute, method, sample, range of variation, and survey period) is provided, it will be perceived as more credible than a survey presented without such information.

The integrative model (see Figure 1) illustrates the assumptions described above. It depicts how source-related factors (publication medium—public service broadcaster versus tabloid press—and perceived *warmth* and *competence*), message-related elements (in this case, methodological transparency), and individual attitudes jointly influence the perceived credibility of political opinion polls. The model integrates insights from source credibility theory, the Stereotype Content Model, and personal attitudes—operationalized here through variables such as motivated reasoning, media usage, and general attitudes toward polls—to capture the mechanisms shaping credibility assessments across different media contexts and personal perceptions.

Figure 1: Integrative model



4. Method

We conducted an online survey, with data collected by Gallup International through their proprietary online panel, *Gallupforum*, between 17 November 2023 and 29 November 2023. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. The data were collected by the globally recognized Gallup International Institute, which holds multiple certifications, including ESOMAR and MOA codex. The institute also adheres to ISO 20252 international quality standards for market research, ISO 9001 for quality management sys-

tems, and ISO 27001 for data security, and follows the guidelines of the Austrian Association of Market Research Institutes (VdMI).

Participants received an incentive of 60 cents for completing the survey. The sample was drawn from a non-probabilistic online access panel (*Gallup Forum*) and quota-sampled based on key demographic characteristics, including age, gender, and federal state. To better approximate the Austrian population aged 16 and older, the data were subsequently weighted according to official Microcensus 2021 statistics for age, gender, federal state, education, occupation, and municipality size. While these procedures enhance comparability with the target population, full statistical representativeness cannot be guaranteed.

A 3x2 between-subjects online experiment was conducted. Participants were randomly assigned to six test groups using a split-ballot design, in which each group received a different version of the poll stimuli to examine their effects. After group allocation, weighting was applied to ensure that each group reflected key demographic characteristics of the Austrian population (age, gender, federal state). This resulted in minor differences in group sizes, ranging from 261 to 280 participants per group. An a priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1.9.7 (F-Test, ANOVA: Fixed effects, special, main effects, and interactions), assuming a small effect size of 0.1 (df: 2, number of groups: 6), indicated that a total sample of 1,548 participants would provide 95 % power to detect significant effects. For practical reasons and to accommodate group allocation, we used a sample size of 1,600 participants.

For the mediation analysis, we employed model 4 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2018). This analysis is exploratory, as no previous studies have applied this model in the context of poll credibility. However, the design builds on the work of Peter and Ponzi (2018), who tested the "innuendo effect" in a marketing context. Our primary aim is to investigate whether *warmth* and *competence* serve as mediators of poll credibility, and to explore which dimension—warmth or competence—might be the stronger predictor. Specifically, we examine whether warmth and competence mediate the effect of media brand (IV) on perceived poll credibility (DV).

To assess the predictors of poll credibility, we conducted a multiple linear regression analysis comprising three blocks. The first block included voting intention and general political interest to account for potential motivational biases (Kuru et al., 2017). The second block focused on general attitudes toward polls, following Stocké (2003), while the third block captured news consumption, which has been linked to media trust (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019).

4.1 Pretest

A pretest was conducted with 50 participants from the Gallup International panel, balanced by gender, age, and education. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental groups. The pretest identified no issues with the survey and confirmed that the fictitious opinion research institute did not negatively affect the perceived poll credibility, consistent with findings by Kuru et al. (2020). Minor adjustments were made based on the pretest results: one scale was recoded, an open-ended question was added to filter out unreliable responses, and a recent Austrian election poll was used as the stimulus for the main survey.

4.2 Procedure & Manipulated Variables

Attention checks were implemented throughout the survey. Participants first provided their demographic information and were then randomly assigned to one of six stimulus groups. All groups received identical poll results from 9 November 2023, asking "Which party would you vote for if the National Council elections were held next Sunday?" The six groups

saw the same results, with variations in two experimental factors: media brand (three types: control group with no media indication, ORF, and OE24) and information amount (two levels: no methodological information versus full methodological information).

The stimuli were designed to resemble the appearance of the polls on the respective media websites. One group received additional information, including a fictitious opinion research institute, data collection method (telephone and online), sample size (n=800), a statement of representativeness for Austrian voters, and the maximum margin of error (+/- 3.5 %). An example of an ORF poll with accompanying information is shown in Figure 2. All stimuli are provided in the appendix. Following exposure to the stimuli, participants were asked to evaluate the perceived credibility of the poll, the perceived *warmth* and *competence* of the media brand, the trustworthiness of ORF (public service medium) and OE24

Figure 2: ORF with information

Translated question: “Which party would you vote for if the National Council elections were held next Sunday?” Translated Information: Institute for Opinion Research, Method: telephone and online survey; sample size: 800; representative for Austrian citizens that are eligible to vote from the age of 16; maximum fluctuation range of results: +/- 3.5 %; Data collection period: 7–10 November 2023.
The survey originates from Unique Research [09.11.2023]: “Which party would you vote for if the National Council elections were held next Sunday?”. https://politpro.eu/de/oesterreich/wahlumfragen/52236/unique-research/2023-11-09 [12.11.2025].

(tabloid), belief in conspiracy theories, voting intention, news usage, general attitudes towards polls, and political interest.

To avoid learning effects, the items related to the experimental stimulus were measured post-treatment (see, e.g., Koch, Peter, & Müller, 2019, p. 137). This design choice may introduce certain limitations which are discussed in the concluding section of the paper.

5. Measures

To measure the dependent variable *poll credibility* (a form of source credibility), we used the scale developed by Kuru et al. (2017). As no German translation was available, the scale was translated using the TRAPD method (Behr, Braun, & Dorer, 2015). Two independent translators from a professional translation office produced initial translations, which were then reviewed and adapted by three senior study leaders to ensure alignment with public opinion research standards. The translation was subsequently re-evaluated and approved by the translation office. The scale was also tested in the pretest phase. It included items assessing how "informative", "accurate", and "credible" the poll was. In our study, the scale showed robust internal consistency, with Cronbach's α values ranging from .78 to .84.

The perceived *warmth* and *competence* of the media brand publishing the poll were measured using two four-item scales based on Peter & Ponzi (2018) and Kervyn et al. (2012a). The translated version by Peter & Ponzi (2018) was used. *Warmth* was measured with the items "sympathetic", "friendly", "cordial", and "honest" (Cronbach's α between .90–.94), while *competence* was measured with "competent", "professional", "knowledgeable", and "experienced" (Cronbach's α between .97–.98).

The dimensions "reliability" and "benefits" of polls were measured using scales from Stocké (2003). Each dimension consisted of three items and demonstrated good internal consistency (both Cronbach's α: about .85). Example items included whether participants consider polls important for science, politics, and economics (*benefits*), and whether poll results are usually correct (*reliability*).

Political interest was measured using an established single-item scale from ALLBUS, asking participants how strongly they were interested in politics. News usage was measured with a scale from the Digital News Report (Gadringer et al., 2023, p. 68), asking participants how frequently they consumed news.

6. Results

6.1 Hypothesis 1: A poll published by ORF (public service medium) is perceived as more credible than one published by OE24 (tabloid press)

A one-way ANOVA was to compare perceived poll credibility across three publishing conditions: ORF (public service medium), OE24 (tabloid medium), and a control group with no indicated source. The analysis revealed no significant differences between the groups ($p=.79$). Hypothesis 1 is rejected.

Measure	ORF		OE24		Control group		$F(2, 1597)$	η^2
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Poll credibility	4.42	1.36	4.36	1.44	4.37	1.28	.237	.00

While no significant effect was found between the different media brands, the following research question examines whether warmth and competence mediate the perceived poll credibility. Even though no direct relationship was observed between media brand and

the poll credibility, a mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS for SPSS (Hayes, 2018). As Hayes (2018, p. 80) notes, contemporary mediation analysis does not require a significant direct effect between *X* and *Y* prior to analyzing their relationship. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported, as recommended by Hayes (2018, p. 53).

A multiple mediation analysis was conducted to examine the influence of the media brand (independent variable) on perceived poll credibility (dependent variable) through perceived warmth and competence (mediating variables) using model 4 in PROCESS (Hayes, 2018; 5000 bootstrap samples). Additionally, a moderation analysis (Model 7) testing the influence of the provided information on perceived warmth and competence revealed no significant interaction effects. Consequently, the analysis proceeded with model 4. The presence of accompanying information was included as a covariate to control for its potential influence.

However, the covariate did not significantly influence path *a* for warmth *(b=-0.07, t(1596)=-0.99, p>0.05*), competence *(b=-0.06, t(1596)=-0.80, p>0.05)*, or path *b* for poll credibility *(b=-0.08, t(1594)=-1.25, p>0.05)*.

6.2 Research Question 1: Is warmth or competence the stronger mediator from media brand (IV) toward poll credibility (DV)?

The *b*-paths (identical across all comparisons) shows significant associations between competence and warmth and poll credibility. However, competence exerts a stronger positive influence *(b=0.31, t(1594)=9.45, p<0.001)* than warmth *(b=0.14, t(1594)=3.66, p<0.001)* on perceived poll credibility. To answer our research question 1: Competence is identified as the stronger mediator between media brand and poll credibility.

6.3 Hypothesis 2a: ORF is perceived as more competent and warmer than the control group

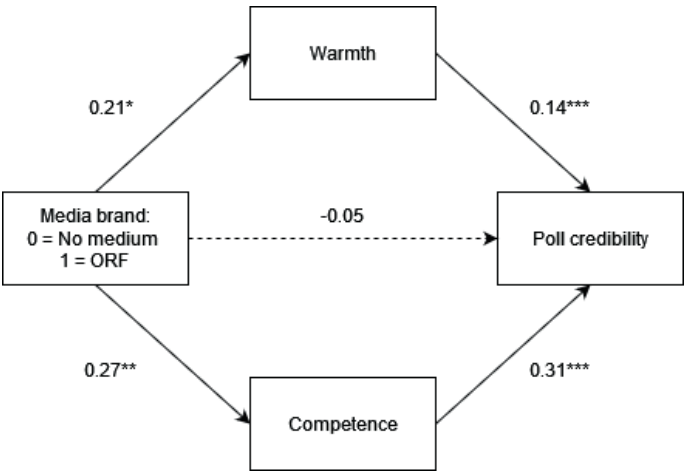
Between ORF and the control group (see Figure 3), the *a*-path for warmth shows a significant positive effect *(b=0.21, t(1596)=2.39, p<0.05)*, as does the *a*-path for competence *(b=0.27, t(1596)=2.70, p<0.01)*. This indicates that ORF is perceived as both warmer and more competent than the control group, with competence showing a slightly stronger effect. No significant direct effect (*c'*) of the ORF condition on perceived poll credibility was found (*b=–0.05, t(1594)=0.61, p>.05*). However, despite the small coefficients, the indirect effects via both warmth (*b=0.03, SE=0.01, 95 % CI [0.0051; 0.0579]*) and competence (*b=0.08, SE=0.02, 95 % CI [0.0226; 0.1437]*) are statistically significant. Therefore, hypothesis 2a is supported.

6.4 Hypothesis 2b: OE24 is perceived as more competent and warmer than the control group

Comparing OE24 to the control group, highly significant negative coefficients were found for warmth *(b=-0.32, t(1596)=-3.68, p<0.001)* and competence (*b=-0.54, t(1596)=-5.46, p<0.001)*. This indicates that the tabloid OE24 is perceived as significantly less warm and less competent than the control group, which did not see the medium source, with a stronger negative effect for competence than for warmth. Membership in the OE24 group showed significant indirect effects with negative coefficients for mediation via both warmth *(coeff=-0.04, SE=0.02, 95 % CI [-0.0817; -0.0145])* and competence *(coeff=-0.17, SE=0.04, 95 % CI [-0,2428; -0,1011])*. Although the effect size for warmth is relatively small, both mediators contribute to a decrease in perceived poll credibility. Therefore, hypothesis 2b is rejected.

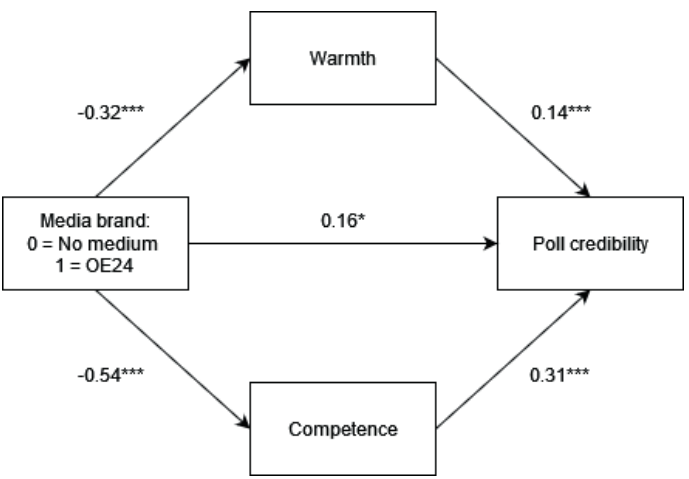
A significant direct effect (*c'*) was observed *(b=0.16, t(1596)=2.2, p<0.05)*, indicating that the relationship between media source and perceived poll credibility is not entirely mediated by warmth and competence.

Figure 3: Control group vs. ORF



*p<0.05; **p<0.01, ***p<0.001
F(5, 1594)=97.8724, p<.001, R2=.2349

Figure 4: Control group vs. OE24



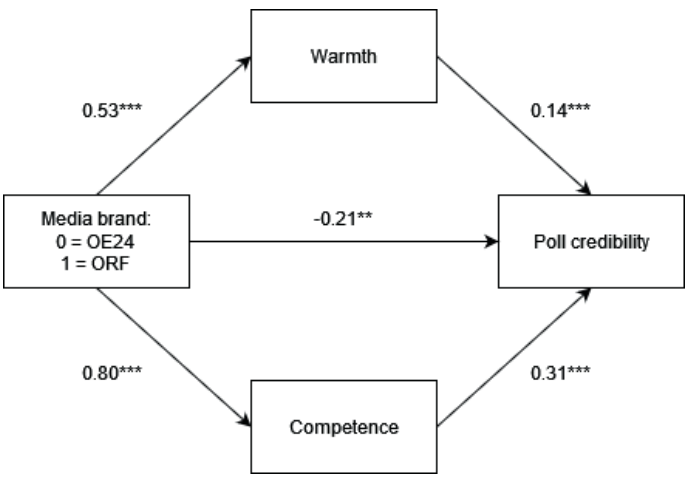
*p<0.05; **p<0.01, ***p<0.001
F(5, 1594)=97.8724, p<.001, R2=.2349

6.5 Hypothesis 2c: ORF is perceived to be more competent and warmer than OE24

In comparing OE24 (coded as the control group for this analysis) to ORF, significant effects were observed for the *a*-path. Warmth *(b=0.53, t(1596)=6.07, p<0.001)* and competence *(b=0.80, t(1596)=8.17, p<0.001)* show strong positive coefficients for the public service medium ORF relative to the tabloid OE24. These findings indicate that ORF is perceived as significantly warmer and more competent than OE24, with competence exhibiting a stronger effect than warmth on the *a*-path. Mediation is evident for the ORF group compared to the OE24 group. Mediation analysis confirms that perceived warmth and competence partly mediate this effect, with a smaller indirect effect via warmth *(coeff= 0.07, SE=0.02, 95 % CI [0,0305; 0,1220]),* and a stronger effect via competence *(coeff= 0.25, SE=0.05, 95 % CI [0.1733; 0.3322])*. Thus, hypothesis 2c is supported.

A significant direct effect (*c*') was observed from media brand to perceived poll credibility (b=-0.21, t(1594)=-2.78, p<0.01), indicating that warmth and competence do not fully mediate the relationship between media brand and poll credibility.

Figure 5: OE24 vs. ORF



*p<0.05; **p<0.01, ***p<0.001
F(5, 1594)=97.8724, p<.001, R2=.2349

6.6 Hypothesis 3: A survey that provides detailed methodological information (institute, method, sample, range of variation, and survey period) is perceived as more credible than a survey presented without such information.

In our 3x2 between-subjects experiment, three media brands were tested (control group/no medium, OE24, and ORF), and the poll was presented with two levels of information. One group received detailed information, including a fictive opinion research institute, method: telephone and online, sample size: n=800, a statement of representativeness for Austrian citizens eligible to vote, the maximum fluctuation range (+/- 3.5%), and the survey period. The other group received the same political poll without any additional information.

Poll credibility was compared between the groups with and without additional information. Surprisingly, the group with additional information *(M=4.31, SD=1.35)* showed

significantly lower credibility *(t(1598)=-2.23, p=.02, Cohen's d=-.12)* compared to the group without additional information *(M=4.46, SD=1.36).*

Measure	Information		No information		t(1598)	*p*	Cohen's *d*
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*			
Poll credibility	4.31	1.35	4.46	1.36	-2.23	.02	-.12

Although the effect is relatively weak, Hypothesis 3 is, surprisingly, rejected.

6.7 The influence of sociodemographic, political attitudes, and media usage on poll credibility

A multiple linear regression analysis (method: enter) was conducted to examine the influence on perceived poll credibility. The model explained 31.7% of the variance in poll credibility (R^2=.317; F(10, 1589)=75.303, p<.001), indicating a moderate level of explanatory power. Tests for multicollinearity showed a maximum variance inflation factor (VIF) of max. 2.099 for the independent variables, suggesting significant multicollinearity issues.

Table: Multiple linear regression analysis

DV: Poll credibility						
Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	β	95 % CI		*p*
				LL	*UL*	
(Constant)	1.739	.224		1.300	2.177	<.001
Age	-.024	.018	-.031	-.059	.011	.173
Gender	-.017	.060	-.006	-.134	.100	.773
Education	.039	.023	.038	-.005	.084	.085
Political interest	.055	.021	.067	.014	.095	.008
Voting Intention	.849	.067	.273	.717	.980	<.001
Perceived poll reliability (general)	.159	.028	.157	.104	.214	<.001
Perceived benefits of polls (general)	.046	.028	.048	-.010	.101	.108
Publication election polls in media	.263	.021	.309	.221	.305	<.001
News consumption	-.002	.019	-.003	-.039	.035	.918
R^2	.317					
N	1600					

Notes on variables: Age: 1=16-30, 2=31-40, 3=41-50, 5=61-70, 6=71+; Gender: 1=male, 2=female, 3=diverse; Education: 1=max. primary education, 5=university education; Political interested: 1=not at all, 7=very much; Voting intention: 1=ÖVP, SPÖ, NEOS, Die Grünen, Bierpartei, KPÖ, others, don't know; 2=FPÖ; Perceived poll reliability (gen.) by 3 items: 1=completely disagree, 7=completely agree; Perceived poll benefits (gen.) by 3 items: 1=completely disagree, 7=completely agree; Opinion on the publication of election surveys in the Austrian media: 1=completely disagree, 7=completely agree; News consumption: 1=more than 10 times a day, 10=never.

Voting intention (ß=.273, p<.001) and political interest (ß=.067, p=.008) were significant predictors; although the effect of political interest was relatively small. Voting intention, in particular, indicates that political attitudes are substantial predictors of perceived poll credibility. The strongest predictors were participants' attitudes toward the publication of election polls in the media (ß=.309, p<.001). The perceived reliability of polls also had a significant but smaller effect (ß=.157, p<.001). Demographic factors such as age (ß=-.031, p=.173), gender (ß=-.006, p=.773), and education (ß=.038, p=.085) were not significant, suggesting that credibility judgements are influenced more by cognitive and attitudinal factors than by basic demographic characteristics.

7. Discussion and outlook

In summary, our study yielded four key findings. First, perceived poll credibility does not differ significantly across media sources (ORF, OE24, or no media indication). Second, perceived warmth and competence of a media brand mediate the relationship between media source and poll credibility, with competence emerging as the stronger mediator. Nevertheless, these dimensions do not fully explain the observed effects, suggesting the presence of other additional, unmeasured factors. Third, providing methodological details about the poll (e.g., margin of error, sample size) does not increase perceived credibility. Fourth, both motivated reasoning and general attitudes toward the publication of polls significantly shape credibility perceptions.

As in previous studies (Kuru et al., 2017; Denner et al., 2016), our ANOVA did not reveal a significant effect of the media source on poll credibility. However, the mediation model provides a more nuanced picture: The SCM framework appears useful for examining how media brand perceptions shape credibility judgments in the context of journalistic content. Our results indicate that competence consistently emerges as the stronger mediator, suggesting that the perceived ability of a media brand to fulfil its informational role has a greater impact on credibility judgments than perceived warmth.

This finding is consistent with previous research (McAllister, 2016; Kim & Ball, 2021). Furthermore, ORF (public service medium) was perceived as warmer and more competent than both OE24 (tabloid press) and the control group, which aligns with the Digital News Report 2023, where ORF is rated as much more trusted than OE24. Notably, the disparity was more pronounced in the ORF versus OE24 comparison than in the ORF versus control group comparison, where the publishing medium was not indicated. Additionally, the comparison between OE24 and the control group revealed that the tabloid publication OE24 was perceived as significantly less warm and competent than the control group, which did not see any medium source.

It should be noted that, at the time of data collection, the media outlet Österreich/OE24 was subject to critical reporting in the Austrian media. The reported allegations included payments for favorable reporting and allegedly manipulated polling results in connection with the so-called "*Beinschab* tool" affair. These reports may have reinforced the generally low levels of perceived warmth and competence associated with OE24. However, we argue that the effects observed in our study primarily reflect a broader, well-established perception of OE24 as a low-trust tabloid medium. This perception was already evident in the Digital News Report 2019 (Gadringer, Holzinger, Nening, Sparviero, & Trappel, 2019, p. 103), predating both the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent allegations and critical coverage. However, it remains unclear to what extent the critical reporting on OE24 may have also shaped perceptions of other tabloid outlets. Future research could examine whether such scandals have spillover effects on the perceived credibility of other tabloid media.

We explicitly stress that our interpretation does not rely on any legally proven misconduct of the upon mentioned parties but refers solely to publicly discussed allegations and critical media coverage. The presumption of innocence applies to all parties mentioned.

Notably, despite the positive indirect effects of ORF on poll credibility via perceived warmth and competence, our mediation model revealed a significant negative direct effect of the ORF media source when compared to OE24. Conversely, OE24 exhibited a positive direct effect when compared to the control group, even though the paths from OE24 to warmth and competence were negative. This pattern suggests that factors beyond perceived warmth and competence influence poll credibility. Moreover, the inconsistent mediation patterns observed in the model may help explain the non-significant result in the ANOVA (H1).

One possible explanation for these findings is that media sources may simultaneously trigger political or institutional skepticism, which influences perceived credibility independently of SCM dimensions. For instance, Fawzi and Krämer (2021) show that "populist worldviews" can shape individuals' perception of media. Journalists themselves may also contribute to decreased credibility; to address this, they should "reflect on their selection of sources, the variety of presented opinions, and their relation to the political elite, and make them more transparent", thereby counteracting the perception that many citizens feel unrepresented (Fawzi & Krämer, 2021, p. 3308). Taken together, these findings highlight the need for future research to incorporate variables such as populist attitudes, perceived journalistic quality, and trust in media institutions. They also underscore the complexity of media credibility and the limitations of frameworks like the SCM when applied to politicized media environments.

It should be noted that the effect sizes for mediation via warmth and competence are, in some cases, relatively small (e.g., ORF vs. no medium). This suggests the likely presence of additional mediators beyond the Stereotype Content Model that warrant investigation in future research. Nonetheless, warmth and competence are widely used to assess both individuals and brands (Fiske, 2018; Peter & Ponzi, 2018), closely correspond to the classic source credibility dimensions of trustworthiness and expertise (Christofoletti, 2024), and appear to meaningfully contribute to the relationship between media source and perceived poll credibility.

Surprisingly, providing methodological information (e.g., sample size, margins of error) did not increase poll credibility. In fact, the group who received this information rated credibility significantly lower than those who did not, contradicting theoretical assumptions that transparency enhances credibility in media content (Curry & Stroud, 2021). Kuru et al. (2017) note, however, that transparency may increase credibility among respondents who already favor the poll results. This finding raises questions about the usefulness of the methodological information for general audiences: it may lead to information overload or be misinterpreted. For example, the sample size used in our stimulus (n=800) is statistically sufficient for national political polling, but non-expert participants might perceive it as relatively small compared to other polls with larger samples (e.g., 1000–2000 respondents). Additionally, critical media coverage and publicized allegations regarding political surveys may have contributed to lower trust, such that methodological transparency alone is insufficient to boost credibility. These dynamics warrant further investigation.

Political attitudes significantly shape perceptions of poll credibility. We compared voting intentions for other parties (Conservatives, Social Democrats, Greens, Liberals, Beerparty, Communists, Other Parties, Undecided) against the FPÖ, a right-wing party and the leading party in our stimulus. Participants intending to vote for the FPÖ are more likely to perceive the poll as credible than supporters of other parties, reflecting a clear pattern

of motivated reasoning. Notably, the strongest predictor of poll credibility was a positive attitude toward the publication of political polls in general. In contrast, socio-demographic factors had no significant influence, consistent with previous research (e.g., Kuru et al., 2017). These findings underscore that individuals tend to believe information that aligns with their preexisting preferences.

7.1 Implications

Our findings suggest that participants may not always know how to interpret survey details such as panel size or margin of error, pointing to a need for greater "poll literacy" among the public. Media outlets could address this by providing clearer explanations of polls, including sample sizes and methods, and public opinion associations might also play a role in improving understanding.

Media brands partially influence poll credibility through perceptions of warmth and competence, but additional dimensions likely contribute and should be explored in future research. Enhancing perceived competence through better presentation of poll information could increase credibility (Christofoletti, 2024). More broadly, the role of media brands in shaping perceptions of media content—via factors such as warmth and competence—deserves further investigation.

Finally, our linear regression model identified two strong predictors of poll credibility: motivated reasoning (as noted by Kuru et al., 2017) and a positive attitude toward the publication of polls in the media.

Our study underscores the key role of perceived competence in mediating poll credibility and reveals that transparency alone does not necessarily increase credibility. Media outlets and opinion research institutes should adopt measures to make polls and quality indicators more accessible and understandable to the public. Future research should further investigate the roles of warmth, competence, and transparency in shaping poll credibility, as well as strategies to enhance poll literacy and perceived media competence. Additionally, our findings confirm that motivated reasoning is one of a major predictor of how polls are perceived.

7.2 Limitations

Our study has several limitations. Due to experimental constraints, we tested only two media brands (a public service medium and tabloid newspaper). The use of a fictional opinion research institute may have influenced our results, despite theoretical justifications and measures such as the pretest. Additionally, the survey information provided—a sample size of N = 800—may have affected perceived poll credibility. While this sample size is sufficient for national political polling in terms of statistical inference, non-expert audiences might perceive it as relatively small compared to other polls with larger samples (e.g., 1,000 or 2,000 respondents). Another factor that may have contributed to the negative effect of providing methodological information could be the reported margin of error (3.5 %) as most poll recipients are likely unaware of the typical range of sampling error, revealing such information could have produced a sense of doubt about the survey's accuracy. All relevant measurements were collected post-treatment to avoid learning effects; however, this procedure may also introduce post-treatment bias. Finally, the mediation model has inherent limitations: warmth and competence were measured after exposure to the stimuli, and although a control group was included to mitigate this, other unmeasured factors may have influenced these ratings.

Ethical Statement

The data for this study was collected by the globally recognized Gallup International Institute, which holds multiple certifications, including ESOMAR and MOA codex. Additionally, Gallup International adheres to ISO 20252 international quality standards for market research, ISO 9001 for quality management systems, and ISO 27001 for data security, and follows guidelines set by the Austrian Association of Market Research Institutes (VdMI). Gallup conducted this survey via their panel called "Gallupforum". Each participant received an incentive of 0.6 €.

Declaration Of Conflicting Interest

None.

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Appendix

Figure 6: ORF (public service media) without survey information

Figure 7: ORF (public service medium) with survey information

Figure 8: OE24 (tabloid) without survey information

Figure 9: OE24 (tabloid) with survey information

Figure 10: Control group (no medium) without survey information

Figure 11: Control group (no medium) with survey information