



# Epistemic vigilance and persuasion: The construction of trust in online marketing



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## ABSTRACT

This article explores trust in the discourse of online advertising. Drawing on the relevance-theoretic concept of epistemic vigilance, it asks whether the mechanisms that underlie such a notion can explain which elements in an advert are likely to contribute to the perception of the message as more reliable or credible, thus overcoming readers' inherent skepticism towards advertising. To this end, the online market for tea was taken as a case in point, and an ad hoc corpus of 216 texts from British websites was compiled and analyzed. Findings show that the writers of these texts seek to present their readership with a variety of fine-tuned cultural representations, which may or may not be supported by factual information. This serves to allow the message to pass through the audience's filters of epistemic vigilance, fostering a sense of reliability in the sources of the communication and, by turn, in the product itself.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores strategies in advertising that are used to achieve trust. More specifically, it considers how adverts can pass through addressees' mechanisms of epistemic vigilance, leading to the information conveyed being perceived as trustworthy. To this end, the study examines an ad hoc corpus of texts from eight British websites that market tea online (see References section for details) collected between March and May 2019.

Advertising depends to a great extent on consumers' perception of trust. However, a range of asymmetrical interests between sellers (*persuaders*) and consumers (*persuadees*) has been seen as being at the root of a "universal skepticism" towards advertising (Duff et al., 2019:20), this notion related to the broad, evolved mechanism of "sales-resistance", characteristic of the animal species, whereby "the reactor would benefit from not performing the behavior which is being urged upon it by the actor" (Krebs and Dawkins, 1984:390). Such skepticism renders the act of persuasion more difficult to achieve. In what follows, I will examine the type of information that *persuaders* (advertisers, copywriters, sellers, vendors, etc.) chose to include in their messages to *persuadees* in order to counteract their inherent skepticism. The analysis will allow for greater insights into a) how a positive impression of a product is created, b) how audience skepticism can be overcome, and c) how the content of advertising texts can be perceived as reliable and trustworthy.

The act of trusting is not something we do passively. Within the framework of Relevance Theory (RT) it has been suggested that, in order to guard against the possibility of deception or misinformation, humans have developed a highly-tuned ability to assess the credibility of the source of communication (i.e. who to believe), as well as the content of what is communicated

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(i.e. what to believe). This ability has been termed ‘epistemic vigilance’ (EV) (Mascaro and Sperber, 2009; Sperber et al., 2010). Empirical work on RT has tended to pair EV with issues of mistrust and misunderstanding in a variety of contexts, such as the use of puns (Padilla Cruz, 2015), social slogans (Dybko, 2012), irony (Matsui, 2019), humor (Padilla Cruz, 2012; Li, 2019), traditional narratives (Unger, 2016), and in second language learning (Padilla Cruz, 2013; Ifantidou, 2016).

Advertising communication has not commonly been discussed in relation to EV. This is perhaps surprising, not only because RT is a fruitful framework for studies of advertising (Tanaka, 1999; Díaz Pérez, 2000; Conradie, 2012; Díez-Arroyo, 2018; del Saz-Rubio, 2018; Forceville, 2020, amongst others), but also because, as noted for RT, current interest in the mechanisms that seek to challenge the risks involved in human communication “should be of particular interest to researchers in communication science who focus on issues of advertising” (Maillat, 2016:1746). One exception is a study by Lombardi Vallauri (2021) in which EV is addressed, although taking advertising (together with political persuasion) as a means of exploring the relationship between EV and presupposition.

The current study, then, seeks to fill the gap in the literature on advertising and EV. It also differs from previous work in one fundamental respect: the notion of EV is not used as a means of assessing the question of being accidentally or intentionally misinformed, deceived or misled. On the contrary, I argue that adopting the perspective of EV may help us to understand why certain information, or specific linguistic choices that advertisers make, might contribute to the perception that the content of an advertising message merits our trust.

The paper asks the following research questions: what information do advertisers use with the aim of passing through the EV mechanisms of their readership? What signs of credibility are typically used here? That is, what evidence do these texts offer, and how is this evidence structured and transmitted?

The specific focus of the current study requires some explanation. The tea websites under study are British, yet we have taken into account the fact that tea is consumed in many parts of the world, and has a firm and long-standing presence in Western culture, despite its origins and cultivation lying in geographically distant lands. This cultural duality can be exploited in advertising discourse to build and enhance a credible perception of the message, and as such tea occupies a somewhat unusual place in our cultural perceptions of the world.

As for the medium, web-based advertising is often associated with “a fact-oriented information-age readership” (Cook et al., 2009:170), which in turn seems to be determined by a relatively high informative load, with the format of this channel allowing for a greater variety of content than other forms of advertising, as well as an open-ended timeframe of interface with the readership (Janoschka, 2004:47–52). This favors a type of argumentative discourse which differs substantially from more traditional forms of advertising. We might assume, then, that decisions made by copywriters here, regarding the information presented as a means of passing through the audience's EV filters, would reflect the specific characteristics of the product as well as the medium itself.

Finally, images carry great significance as conveyers of meaning, and online advertising in particular is multimodal, combining written text and images. However, the current study will focus solely on the linguistic elements of advertising texts. Such an approach not only reflects the powerful role of language in the process of persuasion (McQuarrie et al., 1996), but also embraces the notion that what is especially interesting from the perspective of EV is how language can foster and encourage trust.

The paper is organized thus. The broad notion of trust in the marketing literature is discussed in section 2. The theoretical framework is established in section 3, looking specifically at, a) RT and the notion of EV, b) the relationship between EV and cultural representations, and c) Origgì's (2012) specification of the sources of trust. The corpus and methodology are described in section 4, followed by a presentation of the findings in section 5. Finally, in section 6 some conclusions are offered.

## 2. Marketing and trust

In the literature on marketing, trust is frequently seen as a driver of the decision-making process. Hence, there is considerable interest in identifying where and how levels of consumer trust are sensitive to a range of issues, including the distribution channel (McKnight et al., 2002; Stewart and Cunningham, 2017; Leong et al., 2020), brand equity (Li and Miniard, 2006; Ahmad and Guzmán, 2021), advertising disclaimers (Petrescu et al., 2019), marketing relationships (Cuevas et al., 2015), and positive reviews of products (Anaya-Sánchez et al., 2020). Yet there is no agreement as to the definition of trust itself; rather, the concept is often described as “a multidimensional construct” (McKnight et al., 2002:300; Soh et al., 2009:97), which offers substantial room for maneuver. In the current study, I have taken into consideration not only notions of offline advertising trust, but also research that understands trust in specific terms of the online mode, that is, where it is necessarily influenced by the specific characteristics of the technological platform that connects advertising with consumers.

One of the most comprehensive models of offline advertising trust, based on a multi-disciplinary literature review, is the ADTRUST Scale (Soh et al., 2009). It establishes three stages, or dimensions, in terms of the mechanisms through which advertising-based trust emerges: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive dimension involves the factors of *reliability*, embracing notions such as keeping promises and not lying, and *usefulness*, defined as “information utility of advertising for purchase decision making”, and as such is equated with the competence of the source (Soh et al., 2009:97). In turn, the affective dimension involves the general appeal or likeability of an advertisement. Finally, the behavioral dimension entails the *willingness to rely on*, that is, whether a consumer is successfully prompted towards acting “based on ad-conveyed information” (Soh et al., 2009:97). Interestingly, this inclination to trust something is distinguished from “actual behavior (i.e.

relying on advertising)” (Soh et al., 2009:86). Importantly for our present purposes, the study also concluded that benevolence does not emerge as an element that determines trust in advertising; indeed, an absence of the perception of benevolence is attributed to the fact that “consumers do not perceive advertising as altruistic. (...) it is not advertising’s primary aim to provide them with purely benevolent, objective information” (Soh et al., 2009:97).

The idea that online advertising trust can be determined by variables specific to the digital medium arises mainly from the perception that it is more difficult to assess the trustworthiness of e-vendors (i.e. retailers selling products via the Internet) than in the case of physical stores; the web environment does not allow direct inspection of a product, and consumers cannot use their human instincts to draw conclusions about products based on their interaction with sellers (McKnight et al., 2002:298; Stewart and Cunningham 2017). So, trust can be seen as requiring a conceptualization which is a “context-specific, non-static” process (Leong et al., 2020); that is, advertising is an activity in constant evolution, and so too must be the description of trust within it.

In line with McKnight et al.’s (2002) Trust Building Model (TBM), trust in the online environment depends on two interrelated components: trust in beliefs (i.e. perceptions that the competence, benevolence and integrity of the seller can be trusted) and trust in intentions, also known as *willingness to depend on* (i.e. the decision to make oneself open, and hence vulnerable, to the seller).

Leong et al. (2020) consider both the ADTRUST Scale (Soh et al., 2009) and McKnight et al.’s (2002) TBM, concluding that trust in online advertising can be predicted in terms of five hierarchically ordered factors: reliability, website quality, willingness to rely on, reputation, and amount of time spent on the website. *Reliability* entails adverts being “trustable and reliable with honesty in disclosed information” (Leong et al., 2020:9). *Website quality* concerns the digital medium serving as the “online storefront”; if consumers feel that a website is “responsive, reassuring, empathic, secure, and safe, (...) they will have a strong trusting belief about the benevolence, integrity and competence of vendors” (Leong et al., 2020:5). *Willingness to rely on* reflects volitional vulnerability, and can be understood as a deliberate choice that consumers make to cast aside doubts about a seller and to proceed with their consumer interest, rather than rejecting a site and clicking away. The fourth factor, *reputation*, relates to consumers’ (electronic, word-of-mouth) opinions about marketers. Finally, *time spent online* influences trust, in that spending extended periods of time on a website is likely to lead to richer and more varied experiences for consumers, which in turn will boost their confidence and increase their trust of the site (Stewart and Cunningham, 2017:258; Leong et al., 2020:6).

From the communicative perspective of RT, and analogous to the multifaceted notion of offline and online trust, is the attribution of trust to interlocutors as “a complex of judgments, heuristics, biased social perceptions and previous commitments” (Origi, 2012:223). In what follows, then, some of the trust-related factors identified in the marketing literature will be revisited in the characterization of trust from an EV perspective. For example, we will explore concepts of competence and benevolence (section 3.1), the conceptualization of reputation (sections 5.1 and 5.3), and the notion of *willingness to rely on* (section 3.1). However, a further issue requires clarification: what leads to content being perceived as reliable? Many factors involved in offline and online trust seem to depend either directly or indirectly on consumers’ perception that the content of an advert is trustworthy. While in principle this fits well within a study of trust, the discussion of content trustworthiness in the marketing literature raises questions that have not always been resolved adequately. Thus, explanations of ‘trustworthy’ are sometimes elusive or nebulous, claiming only that content should be presented as “free of any doubts” (Leong’s et al., 2020:13); other attempts to characterize trustworthiness in advertising include the notions of plausibility (Petrescu, 2019:742), validity (Stewart and Cunningham, 2017:252) and the perceived reliability of the source (Li and Miniard, 2006:102). The crucial question, however, is which features themselves contribute to the perception of the plausibility, reliability or validity of the content. Moreover, as Janoschka (2004:88) has noted, in the field of advertising “mere information about a product is not sufficient to trigger a consumer reaction”. Hence, it is necessary to determine not only what type of information conveys an impression of trustworthiness, but also exactly how copywriters seek to transmit this information to potential consumers in order to generate maximal levels of trust.

### 3. The theoretical framework

#### 3.1. Relevance and EV

Within the framework of RT, the concept of EV involves an individual’s ability to determine when and where trust should be allocated in communication. As an innate ability, it draws on a variety of cognitive mechanisms (i.e. moral, epistemic and mindreading components) that operate at a subconscious level and appear to develop in children between the ages of three and six (Mascaro and Sperber, 2009; Sperber et al., 2010). EV, then, operates as a spontaneously occurring measure of the level of trust required for communication to remain advantageous in a given context (Mazzarella, 2015:185). From a RT perspective, the maintenance of effective EV has been seen to work in two ways: through vigilance of the source, and vigilance of the content (Mascaro and Sperber, 2009:367; Sperber et al., 2010:371; Wilson, 2011:18). Source vigilance consists of decisions as to whether an addresser is believable as the source of the communication, and entails judging their competence (i.e. ability to offer relevant information) and benevolence (i.e. the honesty or motivation felt to be involved in what they are communicating). In turn, content vigilance consists of determining the believability of the information being communicated, and involves judgments regarding two types of consistency: the information’s internal consistency, and whether that information is consistent with our previous knowledge.

An individual's EV triggers a critical attitude of caution or distrust towards any communicated content, effectively preventing them from blindly believing it (Sperber et al., 2010:363). Such a “permanent dimension of [our] communicative exchange” (Sperber, 2013:64) does not come into play at a discrete point in the comprehension process. Rather, it might be understood as a suite of cognitive mechanisms that are constantly at work, responding to “interpretive hypotheses about the explicit content of utterances, about the implicated premises retrieved and about the implicated conclusion(s) reached” (Padilla Cruz, 2013:120). As Sperber et al. (2010:364) note, “in communication, it is not that we can generally be trustful and therefore need to be vigilant only in rare and special circumstances. We could not be mutually trustful unless we were mutually vigilant”. It is also argued that when addressees harbor doubts about their addresser's benevolence, they shift to a costly processing strategy known as “sophisticated understanding” whereby they assume that their communicator “intends to seem benevolent and competent” (Sperber, 1994:196).

These ideas can be related to some of the more practical issues that were reviewed in section 2, towards providing a more accurate account of how trust works in advertising. Thus, marketing notions of competence and benevolence can be fully appreciated in their role of trust allocation as it relates to vigilance of the source. Furthermore, specific features already discussed, such as the pervasive “skepticism of advertising” (Duff et al., 2019:20), along with the characterization of advertising benevolence as “not purely (...), objective information” (Soh et al., 2009:97), are useful ways to explain why information might not pass through addressees' EV mechanisms when they are reading promotional texts.

Also of interest here is a reconsideration of the marketing notion of *willingness to rely on* (McKnight et al., 2002:302; Soh et al., 2009:97; Leong et al., 2020:5) from the perspective of EV. This concept can be understood as a distinguishing feature of the discourse of advertising and how trust operates therein. By devoting time and attention to an advertising text, rather than rejecting or ignoring it outright, addressees become “willing victims” (Krebs and Dawkins, 1984:388), who, during the course of interpretation, adopt a “tentative and labile stance of trust” (Sperber et al., 2010:368). Although this attitude of comprehension differs from skepticism (i.e. it implies a potential willingness to accept what the communicator says), it will only result in acceptance if EV mechanisms do not lead to doubts. In communicative terms, this entails adopting a strategy in which trust allocation depends on examining the coherence of incoming information by comparing or contrasting it to previously held beliefs (Mercier and Sperber, 2011:60). It is precisely a receiver's reliance on coherence as a principle for accepting or rejecting an addresser's claims that affords the latter “an opportunity to get past” the defenses of the former, and thus to effect successful persuasion (Sperber et al., 2010:376). Throughout this work, ‘getting past’ these defenses is understood in the sense of an utterance or evidence ‘standing up to’ or ‘passing through’ someone's epistemic vigilance tests (EV filters).

More broadly, advertisers will seek to pass through consumers' EV mechanisms by using “premises that the addressee already believes” (Mercier and Sperber, 2011:60). In the present study, I will argue that such premises involve the notion of ‘cultural information’ (Sperber 1996).

### 3.2. Relevance, EV and cultural information

To understand how copywriters might better take advantage of a willing attitude in addressees, this section outlines Sperber's (1996) concept of ‘cultural information’. We will approach this notion from the framework of RT and its relation to EV.

Using an epidemiological metaphor, Sperber (1996) sees cultural facts as necessarily nested in a type of epidemiology of representation: only those representations that are widely and durably distributed within a social group can truly be called culture.

The spread and consolidation of cultural representations is achieved through a causal chain of cognitive and ecological factors. These depend on the existence of inter- and intra-individual mechanisms: the former are responsible for the formation and transformation of mental (i.e. private) representations; the latter arise as the result of changes in the environment (i.e. spoken or written texts, specific behaviors, institutions that disseminate information, etc.) and foster the transmission of representations. It is in this way that individuals make their mental representations public and share them. Yet through this very act of communication, such public representations are once again transformed into mental representations in the receiver's mind.

Cultural information, then, becomes assimilated within the notion of metarepresentation, which in RT is defined as “a representation of a representation: a higher-order representation with a lower-order representation embedded within it” (Wilson, 2000:411). That is, a thought or utterance can be used to contain (i.e. to metarepresent) another thought or utterance. Basic to the notion of metarepresentation is the idea of resemblance or the sharing of implications between the representation and the original. The duplication of representations, where they are essentially identical (i.e. they share all implications in every situation), is rare; instead, a looser relation of resemblance is the typical situation (Sperber, 1996:58; Wilson, 2000:427).

Cultural information conforms to this pattern. During the process of mental-public-mental transmission, representations undergo transformations. Only those representations that are “repeatedly communicated *and* minimally transformed in the process” (Sperber, 1996:83, italics in the original) become part of the culture.

Within such a framework, a key question for us is how EV is exercised with culturally transmitted content. One notable characteristic of cultural information is that it tends to enjoy high levels of credibility. Any type of opposition or disagreement regarding assumptions would therefore “compromise one's cultural competence and social acceptability” (Sperber et al.,

2010:380). That is, opposition to the high degree of credibility of cultural information would run contrary to the natural human inclination to adopt the behavior and attitudes of the majority in a community, a process known as “inclusive fitness” (Wilson, 2011:17) or “conformist bias” (Sperber et al., 2010:381). Arguably, cultural representations can often be understood as already-held beliefs, and as such come with a guarantee of congruity.

Moreover, due to our general willingness to accept the validity of culturally transmitted content, the kind of EV exercised on such information is sometimes rather “short-sighted” (Sperber et al., 2010:381). This is the case with legends and myths, for example. What really matters here is not so much the content of what you share, but with whom you share it, because this sharing defines group identity. On the same lines, Talmont-Kaminski (2020:91) notes that this kind of vigilance is not really aimed at judging the content of the claims made, and that the real vigilance falls on the source of those claims.

For copywriters, cultural information, and its associated power of inclusive fitness constitute a useful resource, both to neutralize potential consumer skepticism and to underline the impression of credibility of the message.

### 3.3. Sources of trust

This section discusses Origgi’s (2012) sources of trust, which have served as a means of organizing the claims of cultural information in our tea text samples. Origgi’s system identifies seven main sources of trust (Origgi, 2012: 227–233): inferences on the subject’s reliability, inferences on the content’s reliability, internalized social norms of complying to authority, socially distributed reputational cues, robust signals, emotional reactions, and moral commitments. The first type, inferences on the subject’s reliability, subdivides into contextual signs (i.e. they indicate that somebody has a better ‘epistemic position’ than ours), previous beliefs (e.g. prejudices), and acknowledged expertise (i.e. past behavior or earned expertise), which may be based on other people’s judgments or reputational clues. The second source, inferences on the content’s reliability, comprises the pragmatics of trust and the soundness of arguments as a cue for trustworthiness. The next source, internalized social norms of complying to authority, has four elements: deference to authority (i.e. the speaker may have some authority over us), natural pedagogy (i.e. learning environments where speakers can be attributed authority due to their position), conformism (i.e. a cognitive strategy according to which people accept the dominant view), and social norms (i.e. in line with the rules of the society in which we live, we are expected to give credit to certain individuals, institutions or practices). The fourth category, socially distributed reputational cues, involves reputations, understood as beliefs about people, objects or events, and is “influenced by the formal dynamics of social networks” (Origgi, 2012:232). The fifth position, robust signals, involves elements that possess a quality that is difficult to simulate. The source of trust referred to as ‘emotional reactions’ does not function in terms of reason, but rather is the result of subjects’ intuitions. Finally, ‘moral commitments’ denote the type of trust towards people with whom we have an ethical responsibility.

This organization has posed some challenges in our analysis, which will be addressed in the following section.

## 4. Corpus and methodology

The present study uses an ad hoc corpus of online promotional descriptions of tea. Collected between March and May 2019, some 216 texts were downloaded manually from eight British websites, totaling 45,123 words. Table 1 includes the sources, plus the size and distribution of the corpus.

**Table 1**  
Distribution of online tea marketers used as sources.

Tea sources									Total
	Adagio	Cup of Tea	High Teas	Kensington	Ringtons	Rosie Lea Tea	Tea Makers	Tea Repertoire	8
Number of texts	29	18	23	39	9	26	36	36	216
Word tokens	8066	1769	3372	4709	490	3474	11,044	12,199	45,123

Regarding the selection criteria, all the websites were freely available and addressed to the general public. In order to ensure homogeneity between sources, only those sites that provided full descriptions of the product in the body text were considered. Since the study is based on qualitative rather than quantitative analysis, text length and the number and type of products described on a given site were not taken as criteria for exclusion.

All the websites are British,<sup>1</sup> which is relevant in two respects: it may condition the type of information that advertisers choose to provide about a product, and such information might take advantage of the East–West relationship between tea producing countries and Britain, which has a well-established reputation for the consumption of tea. For this reason, copywriters, when considering the existing influence of tea in a target country, might identify in their potential audience an awareness and appreciation of very practical details about the product. Thus, we might expect our results to contrast with

<sup>1</sup> <https://worldteadirectory.com>. [Accessed 30 May 2019].

those of [Izquierdo and Pérez Blanco \(2020\)](#), who concluded that the promotion of tea in the British context engages customers through strategies that stress an enjoyable experience, and the fostering of fun and lightheartedness; they also suggest that functional information (e.g. ingredients, brewing instructions) is more appropriate for audiences less familiar with the tea-drinking experience.

As for the East–West relationship, tea exports constitute a means by which the culture of tea-producing countries can be disseminated. In the present context, this is possible largely because in many of these countries tea culture and traditional culture “have merged into an inseparable whole” ([Guo and Yang, 2019:185](#)). As such, cultural information of this sort is potentially of use to copywriters as a way of gaining consumer confidence.

An additional issue is the suitability of the product in question for the advertising channel. These websites promote tea that can only be bought in specialized online stores. Such purchases tend to involve comparison, careful examination of a product's features, and hence the investment of a certain amount of time and effort. Online advertising, then, offers certain advantages, as noted in the Introduction and section 2, above.

The freeware *AntConc* (4.2.0) was used for the extraction of information on number of words, their type, and frequency of use. However, cultural representations also require interpretation, and thus a close manual reading of the material was also necessary. The methodology was inductive in nature, and the research was not conducted in a linear way. Texts were first considered individually, and studied from a linguistic perspective (e.g. the use of lexis, seeking to uncover the assumptions and implications of the claims made). My attention was thus drawn to legends, awards, reputations, explanations of brand names, and details of political geography; none of these things involves the typical characteristic attributes of tea promotion (e.g. taste, appearance and ingredients ([Izquierdo and Pérez Blanco 2020:44](#))). It was this element of ‘innovation’ that appeared to transmit a sense of authenticity to the texts under survey, which was difficult to assess using a statistical approach.

As noted in section 3.3, [Origgi's \(2012\)](#) classification was used to organize the material. One main issue, as recognized by [Origgi \(2012:229, 233\)](#), is the existence of a degree of overlap between categories and subcategories. For example, ‘acknowledged expertise’ may cover some of the same terrain as ‘socially distributed reputational cues’, and the subcategory ‘social norms’ shares some space with ‘moral commitments’. To minimize the impact of fuzzy boundaries, it was decided a) to include ‘moral commitments’ within the category ‘internalized social norms of complying to authority’, and b) to avoid subcategories as distinct groups. So, [Origgi's](#) subcategories were only used as a means of providing clarity for the main categories. An example of this is in the grouping of ‘awards’ in [subsection 5.2](#) rather than in 5.3: while awards, as seals of approval, symbolize enhanced reputations, the fact that they arise from the evaluation of external judges working in accordance with social norms (i.e. laws and standards of institutionalized organizations) seems a more compelling interpretation.

Another problem arose with [Origgi's](#) categories ‘emotional reactions’ and ‘inferences on the content's reliability’. The former appears to depend on personal feelings, a variable that the present study was not designed to address. Whereas the latter presents its own problems in light of our current aims (that is, to develop an account of how cultural information can be used to pass through EV filters); constraining ‘inferences on the content's reliability’ to a single, independent source of trust would not in itself be useful here, given the approach we have adopted.

Thus, [Origgi's \(2012\)](#) initial seven categories have been reformulated into four: inferences as to the reliability of the subject, internalized social norms of complying with authority, socially distributed reputational cues, and robust signals.

## 5. Results and discussion

This section, based on [Origgi's \(2012\)](#) organizational principles, classifies and analyzes instances of cultural information from our dataset. [Table 2](#) sets out the four major sources of trust identified, with the number of texts in which each source appears, and the corresponding frequency (in percentages).

**Table 2**  
Sources of trust in online tea advertising and their distribution across the dataset.

Sources of trust	Number of texts	Percentages
Inferences as to the reliability of the subject	79	36.57%
Internalized social norms of complying with authority	44	20.37%
Socially distributed reputational clues	132	61.11%
Robust signals	135	62.5%

### 5.1. Inferences as to the reliability of the subject

One option for copywriters is to offer information about the alleged virtues of their product through a third party. In our data, these outside parties take the form of “tea lovers”, “tea drinkers”, “tea enthusiasts”, and “customers”, as illustrated in excerpts (1, 2) below. The reliability of these informants can be inferred from their advantageous “epistemic position” ([Origgi, 2012:228](#)); that is, they have been in contact with the product as a result of their own needs and tastes.

The advantageous epistemic position of such third parties seems to present them as competent sources of information, lending the advertisement the credibility of testimonies based on first-hand experience. A text is thus able to show coherence with its addressees' already-held beliefs (i.e. not everyone enjoys the same level of evidence; those who have experienced something deserve credit for it). Also, through reporting the thoughts and utterances of these supposed informants, a text becomes metarepresentational; that is, copywriters are able to position themselves (as persuaders) at a distance from the message, and thus attain a degree of objectivity. This in turn will allow receivers to perceive such statements as coming from a benevolent and competent source.

In (1), below, believability is supported by the verb “stun” and the temporal expression “for centuries”, a clear reputational cue, and in (2) by the use of the progressive aspect and the adverb “always”, highlighting the frequency of the comment, plus “wonderful”, an adjective of positive stance.

1. Oriental Beauty has stunned oolong lovers for centuries. <Theteamakers\_Oolong\_5>
2. Our customers are always commenting on what a wonderful tasting cup of tea it makes <Rosieleatea\_Black\_11>

Elsewhere, readers are invited to interpret the passage metarepresentationally through the presence in the text of “connoisseurs” (“the kind of tea much favored by Taiwan tea connoisseurs”, Highteas\_Oolong\_8) and “highly sought-after by tea connoisseurs” (Tearepertoire\_Black\_4). Trust of this third party will by default be high, based on the assumed level of expertise of such “connoisseurs”, who bring a high degree of competence and discernible judgment. Simultaneously, addressees can attach credibility to these opinions by drawing on already-held assumptions about the socially accepted meaning of being a connoisseur: someone with a past record of a consistent level of appreciation, enjoying the respect of other specialists, etc. Even though such claims regarding the opinions of others may be false, they hardly seem so, in that their vague nature makes them almost unfalsifiable (see Lombardi Vallauri (2016, 2019) for a discussion of vagueness in advertising).

While all this is intended to pass through the filters of consumers' EV mechanisms, and thus foster a feeling of greater confidence in the discourse, we should bear in mind that no direct quotations or statistics are used to back up these statements. Accepting them as true, then, depends to a great extent on simply believing the copywriter, which might explain the relatively limited distribution of this source of trust, occupying as it does the third position in our ranking.

## 5.2. Internalized social norms of complying with authority

Two subsystems of trust-as-authority can be identified: deference to authority and authority as a social norm. The former covers those cases of knowledge acquired through what people around us say or write: it is not questioned because what really matters is the associated sense of social-fitness that it provides. Information of this type tends to be accepted “in a deferential way” (Origi, 2012:230).

The analysis of this subsystem of trust in our corpus has highlighted the occasional use of legends (5.6%). ‘Legend’<sup>2</sup> is here understood as a “traditional story or group of stories told about a particular person or place. (...) Legends resemble folktales in content; they may include supernatural beings, elements of mythology, or explanations of natural phenomena”. For our present purposes, legend and folklore will be regarded as analogous terms. Since folklore embodies the cultural heritage of a country or society, it nicely illustrates the defining features of the concept of cultural information as defined by Sperber (1996) and Sperber et al. (2010:379–380): it consists of assumptions transmitted from generation to generation, widely accepted by a community, and that lack a specified or identifiable source.

The legends included in our data relate to traditional stories about the origin of a particular tea variety, or the place where it is produced. See examples (3, 4) below.

3. The origins of our Mango Green tea reside in a Hindu legend, where a mango tree grew from the ashes of the sun princess, who had been incinerated by an evil sorceress. When the ripened mango fell to the ground, the beautiful princess emerged again. Our bestselling Mango Green combines the vegetal goodness of green tea with the flavour of perfectly ripened mangoes. <Adagio\_Green\_11>
4. Big Red Robe (aka. Da Hong Pao), originating in the north of Wuyi mountain, Fujian Province, is a legendary Chinese oolong tea. According to the myth, this tea cured the illness of the mother of an emperor during the Ming Dynasty and the emperor in gratitude sent red robes to protect the tea bushes. <Teareptorie\_Oolong\_10>

The popular origins of such legends are evident in the use of the sequences “the origins of our Mango Green tea reside in a Hindu legend” (3) and “according to the myth” (4); other lexical realizations on the same lines are: “have found a place in ancient myth and legend”, “derived from the story of the goddess”, “rumor also has it that”, “according to a folklore”, and “it is believed that”. Arguably, the inherent vagueness of such statements protects them from being perceived as false. All of these expressions involve the metarepresentational use of folklore: in each reference to a traditional story, the text produces a

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/art/legend-literature>. [Accessed 7 June 2023].

representation by “resemblance to a representation that is attributed to the cultural heritage” (Unger, 2016:251). By incorporating legends, advertisers also assume the role of distributors of these cultural representations through repetition.

From an EV perspective, copywriters can draw on the use of legends: even though potential British readers may not be familiar with these stories, they will perceive them as examples of cultural inheritance, and hence will regard the product as deeply rooted in its culture of origin. Despite belonging to a mythical or even magical realm, legends have the power to underline shared, universal values (i.e. the importance of kindness (4), or the triumph of love over evil (3)). As such, their use brings the text closer to addressees’ already-held cultural assumptions. The audience’s skepticism is likely to be reduced, given the nature and reception of legends, and hence their inclusion in an advertising text can have the effect of stressing social fitness, boosting the level of competence and benevolence perceived in their (unstated) source, and encouraging a sense of confidence in the text.

The second subsystem is trust as a social norm. Credibility, as Origgi (2012:231) has claimed, can also be determined by the social rules that we abide by and rely on within our epistemic community. In the present corpus, such rules include the respect we grant to the winning of awards or certificates, their inclusion carrying the underlying assumption that such merits involve the work of arbitrators acting in accordance with the rules and standards of institutionalized organizations. Thus, a product so advertised gains credibility metarepresentationally: not because the copywriter preaches its alleged virtues, but because its quality is seen to derive from the evaluation of external appraisal. It is the decision of these arbitrators (i.e. the merit itself) that the advert echoes. Also, the relatively limited use of this device (14.81%) may intensify its effect when used, lending further weight to claims about the quality of the product.

See example (5):

5. The Kiruwanaganga Estate stretches over 450 Hectares and is one of the highest quality low-elevation plantations in Ceylon. The Estate was given the prestigious ‘Speciality Tea of the Year Award 2002–2003’ and was the first factory in Southern Sri Lanka to receive the ISO Quality Management Systems certification. <Kensington\_Black\_1>

Moreover, the social norms alluded to here are either familiar in themselves, or follow a familiar format, with factual specifics to underline the perception of their veracity. Marketers can take advantage of this: if consumers admit the premise (i.e. excellence indicates that something is of high quality; products of high quality win awards), then, it is unlikely that the audience will reject the conclusions that arise, that is, the assertion that the product is indeed of high quality. Thus, the advertising message will contribute to the strengthening of these already-held beliefs.

### 5.3. Socially distributed reputational cues

Reputations can be defined as “the set of social evaluative beliefs that have been cumulated around a person, an item or an event” (Origgi, 2012:231). As discussed in section 2, the online marketing literature assesses these evaluative beliefs in terms of consumers’ opinions about the product through a process of electronic word-of-mouth. This section explores how copywriters use reputation to foster addressees’ perceptions of trust in the message, the product, and ultimately in the sellers themselves.

Reputations can be understood as exemplifying cases of cultural representation. As such, they may lack a clearly identifiable source, be disseminated on a population-wide scale, and referred to without their claims being questioned (Sperber, 1996; Sperber et al., 2010). This cultural dimension of reputations might in itself be enough to justify their frequency of use in our data as the second most common device. Nevertheless, it is probable that advertisers will try to offer the readership the possibility of gaining a better understanding of these transmitted reputational cues through factual information, resulting in greater degrees of believability and trustworthiness in the appreciation of the message.

In our dataset, reputation as a source of trust is expressed in relation to people (14.35%) and to the promoted product (46.75%). Reputation regarding people was partially dealt with in section 5.1. In what follows I will focus on specialists (i.e. tea masters, tea artisans, tea farmers), whose expert actions (e.g. planting, harvesting, blending, etc.) are all part of the process inherent in ensuring the final quality of the product.

Consider these examples.

6. Our Qing Xin Jade Oolong, painstakingly rolled 40–50 times and meticulously roasted by our Tea Master, Mr. Wang, offers a highly aromatic and fragrant infusion. <Tearepertoire\_Oolong\_1>
7. The supreme quality of this exquisite loose leaf tea is delicately cultivated by our exceptionally talented Japanese tea farmers, whose tea expertise has been passed from generation to generation for over 800 years. <Theteamakers\_Green\_2>

Both passages contain adverbs, “painstakingly” and “meticulously” (6), and “delicately” (7), that underline the labor-intensive role of the tea master, plus “the exceptionally talented Japanese tea farmers” (7). In addition, the precision introduced by quantifying expressions, “40–50 times” (6) and “for over 800 years” (7), generates in the reader an array of positively-charged assumptions about the commitment and dedication of these experts, as well as underpinning such assumptions with details from, and perhaps their own knowledge of, these well-established traditions. Hence, such details function as a means of supporting and clarifying the validity of the reputations involved. Moreover, in (6) we observe how the



text avoids generalizations, instead referring to the tea master by name ('Mr. Wang'), which is epistemically significant: it serves to help addressees strengthen their beliefs about the existence of these experts in the real world, rather than as part of a contrived persuasive narrative, thus providing concrete evidence that claims as to the high quality of the product are based on a known and identifiable source.

The second element in the category of reputational cues is tea as a product. Reputation of this sort appears to be realized through adjective choice, in particular the items "traditional", "classic", "famous", "legendary", "rare", "renowned", "revered" and "well-known". These terms help the addressee to activate and make more manifest an array of assumptions related to reputation in a metarepresentational sense: they all imply that a reputation is shared by a great number of people, and hence has been consolidated within a given community. However, it seems that copywriters here seek to go beyond these generalizations through the inclusion of factual information, as illustrated in (8):

8. The delicate buds and leaves for this rare Chinese tea can only be picked ten days a year. <Cupoftea\_Green\_2>

This text justifies the uniqueness of the product ("rare") through the inclusion of an item of unbiased, factual information: the extremely short period of harvest time. Cultural knowledge of scarcity value may lead the audience to understand, and possibly accept, the alleged reputation of this tea in terms of coherence with already-held beliefs about rarity and exclusivity. In addition, since factual details tend to arouse approval due to their objectivity (they do not reflect the marketers' opinions), the text can be read as deriving from a competent and benevolent source. Ultimately, this information is likely to pass through readers' EV mechanisms and be accepted.

#### 5.4. Robust signals

Origgi (2012:232) defines robust signals as "signals that are difficult to fake", arguing that they are among the strongest indications of credibility. For products, this means that the quality which a robust signal indicates cannot easily be imitated. In the case of online tea advertising, brand names, complex symbols that convey a variety of "ideas and attributes associated with the product" (Zinkhan and Martin 1987:157), are used as indicators of authenticity, and hence can be seen as robust signals.

In our dataset we find brand names whose foreignness (e.g. *Bi Lo Chun*, *Ti Guan Yin*, *Anji Bai Cha*; *Gyokuro*, *Dongfang Meiren*, etc.) can be taken as evidence of the Asian origin of the product. Simultaneously, the very strangeness of these words may demand clarification to a western readership, and, as we will see, this is provided in the body text. Languages spoken in traditional tea producing countries are often considered difficult for westerners. Their undecipherable meanings, together with the distant places they represent, carry an exotic and mystifying air (i.e. their denotation is poor, but their connotative value is high).

In the marketing of tea, one of the key roles of advertisers is to reassure their potential clients of the undisputed origins of their product. One of the devices used involves providing factual information relating to the brand names in the body text. Two main groups of explanations can be distinguished: identifying Asian names with geographical places (a tea garden, town, estate, or region) (18.98%), and explaining the very meanings of these foreign terms (35.18%). See the following examples (9–11):

9. Ooooh Darjeeling is a rare oolong tea from Darjeeling, India, (...) a town situated in the slopes of the beautiful, towering Himalayas. The town, and the tea plantations that stretch around it, are often enveloped in mist. This unique climate, along with the region's loamy soil, help produce one of the most unique and distinctive teas in the world. <Adagio\_Oolong\_3>
10. Orthodox Ceylon Bogawantalawa. Bogawantalawa is a valley area in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. (...) Due to its situation at 1400–1850 m above sea level and the low temperatures, the tea bushes thrive. <Theteamakers\_Black\_16>
11. Yunnan Golden Buds is a sublime black tea from Yunnan, the southwestern province of China (...). With its red, fertile soil and misty humid climate, Yunnan Province provides an ideal terroir for tea cultivation. <Tearepertoire\_Black\_1>

Here, readers can see how the brand names enjoy an indisputable relationship with factual information, through reference to regions located in well-known Asian tea producing countries: Darjeeling, India (9); Bogawantalawa, Sri Lanka (10), and Yunnan, China (11). The inclusion of further information adds weight to the texts' details, creating an impression of factual authenticity: geographical landmarks (the Himalayas (9)); specific altitudes (1400–1850 m above sea level (10)); characteristic weather conditions such as mist (9), temperature (10), and humidity (11); and features of a region's soil type, such as loamy (9), and red fertile soil (11). Such details do not reflect any strongly held opinions on the part of the advertisers, yet neither are they nebulous or vague; on the contrary, they can be attributed to independent, verifiable sources. As such, readers are subtly edged away from their initial caution in the reading process, towards a position in which already-held assumptions about the high standards of Asian tea are underlined and strengthened through reinforcement.

The second type of explanation of brand names involves quasi-philological descriptions in the body text, as in examples (12–15) below. Such specifications of meaning can be read as metarepresentational. Arguably, the choice of guiding words—the verbs "mean" (12), "come from" (13), the expressions "be named after" (14) and "also known by its literal

translation” (15)—, together with the clarifying function they serve, situate readers in a context not unlike that of reading a dictionary entry: the presentation of a word’s meaning, its origin, pronunciation, translation, etc. Dictionaries are standardly taken as authoritative sources of information, and hence these dictionary-like texts operate at the level of cultural meta-representational: advertisers evoke the impression of trustworthiness in such sources of knowledge, turning the cultural weight and instructive role of such reference works to their advantage. Moreover, the implied association between dictionaries and these texts further encourages the reader to regard such passages as being well informed, originating in credible and identifiable sources, and thus the potential to pass through their EV mechanisms increases.

12. Sencha means boiled tea: Sen = boil, Cha = tea. <Highteas\_Green\_7>
13. China Keemun. The name comes from an old Western spelling of the name of the nearby town Qimen (pronounced “Chee-men”). <Rosieleatea\_Black\_6>
14. Ti Guan Yin tea is named after the Chinese Goddess of Mercy, Guan Yin. <Rosieleatea\_Oolong\_1>
15. Longjing tea, also known by its literal translation ‘Dragon Well’. <Kensigtontea\_Green\_3>

Finally, in several remaining examples (8.34%), part of the body text includes material which is analogous to an encyclopedia entry. Encyclopedias seek to summarize knowledge about the world (Rey, 1982:19), and we see something akin to this in (16), where the text expands on the meaning of the brand name, giving details of the origin and use of certain ingredients, and about the product’s history.

16. Supreme Japanese Genmaicha. In ancient Japan, tea was a luxury commodity. Therefore, the Japanese mixed roasted rice with Sencha green tea and created the blend that is now known as Genmaicha. (...) Adding rice was not a culinary innovation but, simply, an attempt to make the green tea last longer. This is why, in Japan, Genmaicha is known as ‘The People’s Tea’. <Theeamakers\_Green\_4>

The tone of an encyclopedia entry in (16) is created through providing general information about the product: “Japan” (mentioned twice) and “ancient” (alluding to the tea’s background), “mixed” (referring to the method employed in its production), the clause “to make the green tea last longer” (expressing the purpose of this mixture), and finally, the reason clause “this is why”, which explains the use of an alternative to the original brand name. By taking the reader on this informational journey, the text relies on the metarepresentational use of a trusted discourse, that of encyclopedia entries. It successfully draws on already-held assumptions about the authoritative and didactic nature of encyclopedias, and in doing so achieves an air of objectivity. In this sense, it is not the marketer’s ideas that the advert is perceived as expressing, and hence it is more likely that this information passes through the filters of readers’ EV mechanisms.

Finally, the high frequency in the use of this source of trust throughout our dataset is in line with other research (Guo and Yang, 2019) which highlights the importance of the terminological value of tea names.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has addressed the question of how advertising texts seek to persuade by passing the tests of potential customers’ EV mechanisms. Contrary to previous work, which has focused mainly on issues of misunderstanding and mistrust, here we have explored how copywriters encourage the perception of credibility and trustworthiness in promotional texts. To this end, texts from eight British websites marketing tea online were analyzed, principally from a qualitative perspective. It was found that advertisers present their messages by relying on cultural representations, that is, information that is already widely disseminated, and which thus tends to be accepted throughout a community.

The results showed that in this corpus the significance of cultural information is twofold. It allows copywriters: a) to create a tone of objectivity, and b) to rely on the kind of content that is not open to question. Objectivity can be seen to be in operation here, in the sense that, within the framework of RT, culturally transmitted information may be understood as a case of metarepresentation. So, if a text does not express the copywriters’ opinion, it can be perceived as deriving from a non-biased source, and this source will be judged to be more competent and benevolent by the reader; hence, the text successfully achieves ‘vigilance of source’ (Mascaro and Sperber, 2009:367; Sperber et al., 2010:371; Wilson, 2011:18). In addition, the inclusion of culturally transmitted information affords copywriters the chance “not so much to endorse the content as to vouch for its status as a commonly accepted cultural assumption” (Sperber et al., 2010:380). This parallels the role of presuppositions in persuasive discourse (Lombardi Vallauri, 2016, 2019, 2021). The use of cultural representations in advertising texts, then, leads addressees to be able to achieve coherence in what they read with previously-held beliefs; in this way, the reading process will successfully achieve ‘vigilance of content’ (Mascaro and Sperber, 2009:367; Sperber et al., 2010:371; Wilson, 2011:18). On the same lines, it can be claimed that culturally-transmitted content can pass the test of a reader’s EV mechanisms, thus counteracting the natural skepticism towards advertising that we all tend to have.

The current analysis of our data has illustrated how the type of cultural information used by copywriters falls into four categories, these adapted from Origgi’s (2012) sources of trust. First, copywriters rely on third parties, that is, people who have had contact with the product advertised in some way. The second category, internalized social norms of complying with authority, involves the use of legends, awards and certifications. Third, socially distributed reputational clues draw on the

reputations either of specialists in the area of the product, or of the promoted product itself, these reputations expressed through a careful choice of appropriate terms. Finally, brand names can be seen to function as ‘robust signals’.

Our findings have also indicated that copywriters strive to underline the impression of credibility and value of cultural information, either by resorting to vagueness or through the use of factual content. The latter may take the form of expressions of quantity, proper nouns, geographical places, and may be expressed through encyclopedic or quasi-philological, dictionary-like explanations. Readers are thus led to make assumptions as to the quality of the product, relying not only on cultural representations, the origins of which are sometimes not specified, but more importantly on information that appears to have an attested and identifiable source.

Through the present analysis, then, we have tried to show how the use of cultural representations in advertising can contribute to enhancing the perception of the reliability and trustworthiness of a promotional text. In addition, the use of such content in advertising discourse itself extends and consolidates these cultural representations.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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