To be or not to be bullshit? Obscuring the form vs. moving away from truthfulness

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Abstract

Do we make a stronger impression by using big words or by articulating ourselves clearly? The deceptive strategy of using complicated and obscure words to create an impression of competence results in so-called bullshit - i.e. something that may sound right and inspiring while in fact being nonsense. In this study our main aim was to examine whether impressiveness (measured by likeability) of a statement is better predicted by truthfulness or comprehensibility of a given statement. 234 students (80.1 % women) rated 4 different forms (created by manipulating their obscureness and truthfulness) of the set of statements and the results showed that likeability was predicted by both perceived truthfulness and comprehensibility. It suggests that impressiveness is attained not by use of obscure language, but rather by perceived truthfulness and comprehensibility by the recipient.

1 Introduction

We live in an era, which is often described as post-factual or post-truth and one of its main features is the prevalence of so-called bullshit. Although everybody has encountered some form of bullshit in daily life, its exact definition is quite elusive to. There have been attempts mainly by philosophers and linguists (Black, 1982; Frankfurt, 2005; Postman, 1969), but it were psychologists who empirically studied one of its forms – pseudo-profound bullshit (Pennycook, Cheyne, Barr, Koehler, & Fugelsang, 2015). Pennycook et al. (2015) used randomly-generated statements resembling New Age spirituality using buzz words from quantum mechanics, thus creating pseudo-profound bullshit. They focused on cognitive characteristics distinguishing people who find pseudo-profound bullshit more profound from those that do not. Their results show that people rating pseudo-profound bullshit as more profound have lower analytic thinking and intelligence, have more epistemically suspect beliefs and were more ontologically confused. However, one of the criticisms of that study was that they used pseudo-profound bullshit from spiritual domain, where interpretation of meaning might be subjective and determined by participant's beliefs. Similar to beauty that is in the eye of the beholder, what is viewed as bullshit by one person can be seen as transcendental by another (Dalton, 2016).

Following the criticism by Dalton (2016), we tried to establish more objective criteria in defining what can be considered bullshit and what factors influence the impressiveness of bullshit, i.e. focus more on the features of the bullshit rather than the individual differences between people receptive to bullshit.

As a starting point we took definition of bullshit by Frankfurt (2005) that stresses two main features of bullshit: (1) its lack of concern for the truth and (2) its goal to impress by suggesting that speaker is more knowledgeable than he or she is. Thus, we created new, more general measure of bullshit receptivity (Brezina, Čavojová, & Jurkovič, 2018; Jurkovič, Čavojová, & Brezina, 2018) and had participants to rate all the statements on three dimensions: how truthful do they perceive any given statement (truthfulness), how easy is it to understand it (comprehensibility) and how much do they like it (likeability). The goal of the current study was to examine what factors affect likeability the most (obscureness, truthfulness, comprehensibility)? In other words, we examined whether likeability is predicted by truthfulness or comprehensibility of the statement, or both.

2 Methods

2.1 Participants

Sample consisted of 234 students (188 women) of two major Slovak universities who were recruited in exchange for credits. Mean age of the sample was 22.11 ($SD = 2.7$).

2.2 Materials

Participants completed an online survey that consisted of 48 preliminary General Bullshit Receptivity Scale (GBRS) items in randomized order (the order of thematic blocks was randomized, as well as the order of items within a block). Items were collected out of four categories of human knowledge: (1) Health, (2) Politics & Economy, (3) Relationships & sex, and (4) Emotions. In each category we had one neutral (N) definition and three modifications: (F) the form modified by using obscure and complicated synonyms, while preserving the content; referring to quality of impressiveness; (C) only the content of neutral vocabulary definition was

modified while the form was kept the same; referring to lack of concern for the truth;

(FC) both form and content were modified; combining both aspects of bullshit.

To measure the two main defining features of bullshit – impressiveness and lack of concern for the truth – we asked participants to assess the truthfulness and likeability of each statement. This enabled us to see whether participants were able to discern loose relation to truth in C (and FC) statements and how obscurity affected the impressiveness (likeability). We controlled for comprehensibility of each statement. Participants evaluated truthfulness, comprehensibility and likeability of statements on 7-point Likert scale. The scores were reversed, so that higher score indicates higher truthfulness, comprehensibility and likeability. Descriptive statistics for mean ratings of truthfulness, comprehensibility and likeability are in Table 1.

	Truthfulness	Comprehensibility	Likeability
N	6.27 (0.60)	6.30 (0.70)	5.54 (0.99)
F	5.16 (0.75)	4.38 (0.89)	3.89 (0.86)
C	4.02 (1.04)	5.12 (0.96)	3.78 (1.07)
FC	3.98 (0.86)	3.43 (0.95)	2.99 (0.99)

Tab. 1: Descriptive statistics for GBRS (standard deviations are in the brackets)

3 Results

We examined whether likeability is predicted better by the truthfulness or comprehensibility of a given statement, so we performed four regression analyses for each category of statement (N, F, C, FC).

In the first set of analyses, the score of likeability represented a dependent variable while comprehensibility and truthfulness were positioned as predictors. In category of neutral statements (N) both perceived truthfulness and comprehensibility contributed significantly to likeability and predicted 30.3 % of the variance ($F(2,229) = 50.764$, $p < .001$). In category of modified statements with changed form (F), both perceived truthfulness and comprehensibility contributed significantly to likeability and predicted 45 % of the variance ($F(2,228) = 94.261$, $p < .001$). In category of modified statements with changed content (C), both perceived truthfulness and comprehensibility contributed significantly to likeability and predicted 46.5 % of the variance ($F(2,229) = 100.568$, $p < .001$). In category of modified statements with both changed form and content (FC), both perceived truthfulness and comprehensibility contributed significantly to likeability and predicted 55.6 % of the variance ($F(2,229) = 144.620$, $p < .001$).

In the second set of analyses, we performed stepwise linear regression to determine which predictor might have had a biggest impact on likeability of each set (N, F, C and FC) of statements. Because most of the results are same as in previous analyses (reported in previous paragraph and Table 2), we are reporting only percentage of variance explained by individual predictors as estimated by stepwise procedure. In category of neutral statements (N), the prediction model contained both predictors (likability and truthfulness). Likeability was primarily predicted by comprehensibility (29.1 % of variance in likeability explained) and to a lesser extent by truthfulness (1.8%).

Predictors	likeability - N	
	β	t
truthfulness	0,224	2,436*
comprehensibility	0,361	3,928***
	likeability - F	
Predictors	β	t
truthfulness	0,236	4,222***
comprehensibility	0,528	9,431***
	likeability - C	
Predictors	β	t
truthfulness	0,585	11,724365***
comprehensibility	0,24	4,818***
	likeability - FC	
Predictors	β	t
truthfulness	0,4	8,122***
comprehensibility	0,478	9,691***

Tab. 2: Truthfulness and comprehensibility as predictors of likeability (all 4 types)

In category of statements where only the form was modified (F), the prediction model contained both predictors (likability and truthfulness). Likeability was primarily predicted by comprehensibility (41.2 % of variance in likeability explained) and to a lesser extent by truthfulness (4.3%).

In category of statements where only the content was modified (C), the prediction model contained both predictors (likability and truthfulness). Likeability was primarily predicted by truthfulness (41.6 % of variance in likeability explained) and to a lesser extent by comprehensibility (5.4%).

In category of statements where both content and form were modified (FC), the prediction model contained both predictors (likability and truthfulness). Likeability was primarily predicted by comprehensibility (43.2 % of variance in likeability explained) and to a lesser extent by truthfulness (12.8%).

4 Discussion

The main aim of this paper was to examine whether likeability is predicted by truthfulness or comprehensibility of the statement, or both.

Our results show that both truthfulness and comprehensibility are predictors of likeability of statements, but their role was different in differently modified statements. Only in case of statements where content was modified was truthfulness the main predictor of likeability, in other sets of statements, comprehensibility was the main predictor.

From statements where content was modified, statements that used more obscure vocabulary (FC) were deemed to be less likeable, thus refuting assumption that use of complicated words might lead to an increased impressiveness (or likeability) of statements.

The reported reversal in importance of predictors in C statements might indicate that perceived truthfulness of statements might be more important in creation of impressive bullshit than perceived comprehensibility (or to be more precise, incomprehensibility, because in case of FC statements, we made them more incomprehensible by the used of more complicated and 'erudite' vocabulary).

Our preliminary results aim to form the basis for creating a scale for measurement of general bullshit. According to our results, it seems that the most prominent feature of bullshit is mimicking the truth by minor alterations in meaning to be more comprehensible, but less truthful at the same time. Familiarity heuristic might be one of the factors influencing impressiveness of bullshit statements. Usage of familiar buzzwords, jargon and metaphors, although in a wrong or nonsensical context, might be a more successful strategy than usage of largely incomprehensible synonyms. This assumption might be perhaps tested in some future research.

5 Acknowledgment

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