

## *Advertorials as a Public Relations Tool and its Impact on Newspapers and Readers*

Annette Stephen, Symbiosis Institute of Media & Communication, India  
Raj Kishore Patra, Symbiosis Institute of Media & Communication, India

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### **Abstract**

The declaration of an advertorial (by printing the word ‘advertisement’ on the article) although counter-intuitive, produces positive impressions on the reader about the publisher. This study began by investigating the effect that inserting the word ‘advertorial’ has on the readers’ impressions of the publishing house, by exhibiting a collection of advertorials. The first part of the study explored what factors readers felt contributed in building the credibility of newspapers, and the ethical practices surrounding advertorials.

The subsequent experiment measured the change in perceived credibility within two similar groups of readers who were shown the same advertorial; one was simply given the advertorial piece while the other was informed so.

The research followed both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative analysis, comprising of a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Depth Interviews was conducted to list out the possible factors that affect creditworthiness of any newspaper. Further that output used in the quantitative analysis to understand which factor was rated most important.

This academic research is empirical in that it draws out the factors that affect creditworthiness. It is deductive insofar as it quantifies the degree to which perceived credibility is affected by the term ‘advertorial’. This study uses two-way ANOVA approach to analyse the data.

The study established that readers perceived different levels of credibility for different newspapers. Upon revealing that the article exhibited was an advertorial, the perceived credibility rating improved. This result can be explained by the current shifting views of modern society that seek honesty (or disclosure) in even unconventional scenarios.

**Keywords:** Public Relations, Advertorial, Source Credibility, Self-disclosure

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## **An Introduction**

Advertorials are a potent communication tool with a reputation for deception. This portmanteau of the words advertising and editorial<sup>1</sup> (Oxford Dictionaries) refers to any piece of communication in any media that is sponsored by a brand and endorsed by a publisher. Advertorial differ from editorial content by the exchange of money or favours moving from the brand to the publisher for the endorsement.

This expanding practice unsettles the media industry by undermining the credibility of editorials, a tested Public Relations (PR) tool with legitimacy. Advertorials are accepted in degrees ranging from approbation to rejection and are acknowledged by professionals as popular, if not infamous.

Most studies have inspected the audience's perception of advertorials, with emphasis on their consumer behaviour. This paper, however, explores public perception of ethicality in advertorials, and the effect such knowledge has on the reader's impression on credibility of the advertorial piece.

## **Aim and Objectives of the Research**

To study advertorials used as a PR Tool, from the readers' perspective and thereby understand the changing credit rating of the publication and the overall impact on the publishing industry. Specifically:

- i. To study readers' (changing) impression of advertorials and understand their expectation of newspaper credibility and ethics;
- ii. To link whether information about article/newspaper, when self-disclosed alters readers' impression about the publishing house regarding credibility and ethical practices; and
- iii. To learn if declaring advertorials is regarded by readers as self-disclosing information about newspapers.

## **Literature Review**

### **Type of Advertorials and the Scope of this Essay**

Advertorials were defined by Goodlad, Eadie, Kinnin, and Raymond (1997) and rephrased by Robinson, Ozanne and Cohen (2002) as 'print advertisements executed in the editorial style of the host publication'. As its use widened (Elliott, 1984), the definition extended to native advertising and infomercials (Prounis, 2004). Notably, the quality of execution and resemblance to the host publication varied (Goodlad et al, 1997; Fry, 1989). This paper will exclusively examine the editorial content in newspapers.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/advertorial>

## **The History of Advertorials**

The nature of the subject<sup>2</sup> has been explored extensively and as early as 1984, Elliott's paper investigated the idea of credibility. When revisited by Cameron (1994), Balasubramanian (1994), Cameron and Curtin (1995), followed by Cameron & Ju-Pak (2000) and Kim, Pasadeos & Barban (2001) the leading question of legitimacy yielded to an inspection of the format of the advertorial. Sandler and Secunda's study 1993<sup>3</sup> of the indistinct boundaries between editorials and advertising was followed by Dix and Phau (2009), Wang (2006), Ellerbach (2004), Eckman and Lindlof (2003), Angus (2000), Cameron and Ju-Pak (2000), to name a few; inspection had given way to comparison against advertisements up to the 2010s. The dominant emphasis, however, has been that editorials are more effective than advertisements<sup>4</sup>.

## **Effectiveness of Advertorials**

In 1991, Kotler prophesied the growing importance of editorial credibility stating that consumers were five times more likely to be influenced by 'editorial copy than by advertising'. Advertorials top the Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) order<sup>5</sup> (Loda & Coleman, 2005) and are regarded an improved marketing tool over advertising (Dahlen and Edenius, 2007; Agee & Martin, 2001; Cameron and Ju-Pak, 2000).

The foremost advantage of the editorial format is its enhanced believability (Beenstock, 1998). Schudson (1984) notes "if an item appears as news, it has a legitimacy that advertising does not have". Cameron and Ju-Pak (2000) and Cameron (1994) further observe that traditional advertising is considered less credible considering personal gain of the source, intent to persuade and bias of the source. The phenomenon called third-party endorsement which is the implicit approval of the medium in which the text is published (Beltramini and Stafford, 1993) could mitigate ill-feeling. Advertorials incorporate this and thereby achieve brand messaging with complete efficacy.

## **Ethical Considerations**

An early study by Cameron and Haley (1992) observed that advertising professionals were unconcerned about deception<sup>6</sup>. Opinions changed in time based on its effectiveness as a tool balanced against the ethics of the practice (Sharma, 2013). The implications of PR ethics on advertorials is little addressed and understood even less.

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of which include: Kim et al., (2001) ; Cameron & Curtin (1995) ; Cameron Ju-Pak (2000)

<sup>3</sup> Although that paper was a benchmark study that assessed the attitudes towards the gap between advertising and editorials

<sup>4</sup>Voice of dissent: Elliott and Speck (1998), Franzen (1994)

<sup>5</sup> The IMC is a term frequently used in marketing. It refers to the use of various tools by marketing professionals, such as advertising, public relations, direct marketing, to achieve holistic communication.

<sup>6</sup> This is the overtone that authors cast in their research. Examples of which include: Kim, B-H., Ju-Pak, K-H. & Cameron , G.T. (1995) Trends in the use and abuse of advertorials in magazines and Cameron, G. T. & Ju-Park, K.-H. (2000). Information pollution? Labeling and format of advertorials in national newspapers. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 27(1), 65-76.

## **Advertorials - Legitimate Tools in Public Relations**

Press Management has been a principal area of operation<sup>7</sup> and Press Releases<sup>8</sup> an important tool<sup>9</sup> whereby third party endorsements on the client improve their image with the reading masses. Advertorials<sup>10</sup>, as dated by Merriam-Webster, goes as early as 1946, and appear to be a recent cousin to the Press Releases. Their reception has been mixed.

Some publishers claim infrequent and cautious use whereas others use it more indiscreetly, even openly. A third group has claimed to find a middle ground (Filloux, 2013). In a specialised survey conducted in 1999 in the UK, only 30% of the trade publishers, who responded, admitted to using advertorials (Gray, 1999); The surveyors however opined that the number was significantly higher than reported (Gray, 1999). If the base premise is third party endorsement – i.e., if credibility is the core of the PR industry – then advertorials are erosive tools; calling for legitimate concern when practitioners use it.

Gray (1999) alludes to a tacit understanding within the publishing industry concerning advertorials. It has caused some incidents of deception and lapses in high-brow journalistic practices (Sharma, 2013); the ripples are felt in PR. Governing bodies urge for integrity and the Press Council of India established a code of conduct when issuing advertorials.

## **Source Credibility: The Basis of Trust in PR**

‘Source credibility’ was defined by Hovland and associates in 1953; the term subsequently became popular. Accordingly, there are two key factors that contain source credibility: expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland et al. 1953; Hovland and Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1991).

Source credibility for the reader is changeable and situation-dependent (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969; Hayes, 1971; Chaffee, 1982) and individual considerations such as age, education, gender, and knowledge about the media and the topic (Stockwell, 2006; Westley & Severin, 1964; Lewis, 1981) mould it.

Source information is crucial to credibility because it is the foremost consideration for judgments (Sundar, 2008); not knowing the source of information or its intent makes it difficult to know whether to trust it (Metzger et al, 2003). Thereafter, readers (routinely) use heuristics to ascertain the credibility of a medium (Metzger & Flanagin, 2010, 2013). Bradlee said in 1981 that “the credibility of a newspaper is its most precious asset, and it depends almost entirely on the integrity of its reporters.” Newspapers are perceived as more credible than magazines and other printed media (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000) primarily because newspapers direct to an authority, be it the reporting journalists, or even the name of the newspaper. Authority is an important heuristic that readers use to assess source credibility (Sundar, 2008). Deploying advertorials affects the newspaper’s credibility in interesting ways because it distorts the authority equilibrium.

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<sup>7</sup> although the status quo shows signs of change (Prindle, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Press Management tools are many including not only the Press Release, but corrigendums, Press Meets etc

<sup>9</sup> Some commonly touted ones include press releases, press conferences, familiarisation trips, events etc.

<sup>10</sup> Some dissenting academics, however, distinguish advertorials from other rightful hybrid tools (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005).

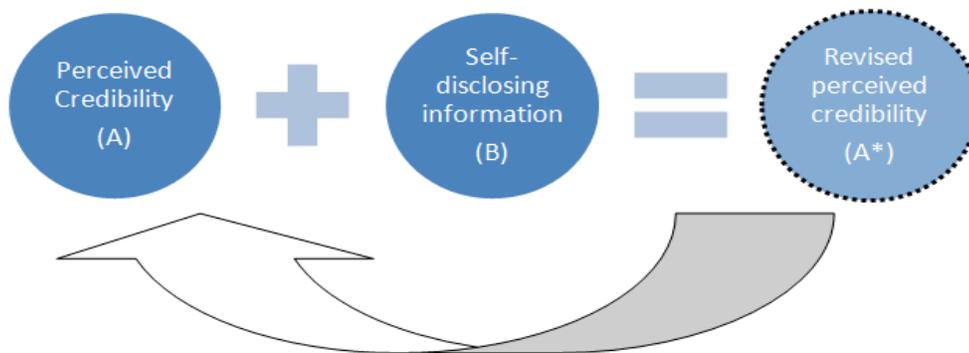
## Research Gap

Informed readers today discern that under-hand dealings are more prevalent than ever (Jacob, n.d.), which in turn affects their decisions and opinions (Jacob, n.d.). Transparent communication implies revelation of the content provider and the intent behind the content, lest the public be wrongly persuaded (Balasubramanian, 1994; Cole & Greer, 2013; Hallahan, 1999; Jo, 2004; van Reijmersdal et al., 2010). To paraphrase Taiminen et al. (2015), the onus of proper representation rests with the newspaper, especially to clear its name. However, very few studies have been conducted on this point (Taiminen, et al., 2015; Connor, 2010) and the literature on advertorial ethics is yet to achieve saturation<sup>11</sup>.

## Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Readers are constantly assessing, classifying and reassessing sources on levels of credibility. The relationship between changing impression and the credibility of the news source is complex (Stockwell, 2006; Vallone, Lepper, & Ross, 1985).

Like a self feeding system, Perceived Source Credibility<sup>12</sup> is affected by information that the newspaper provides, *even of itself*. Refer Figure 1. If non-disclosure of information defeats the journalistic ideal, in theory, disclosure should uphold it. The newspaper's best PR agent is itself.



**Figure 1. The self-feeding system where self-disclosure feeds back on Perceived Credibility**

In doing so, the newspaper opens itself to two prospects: a reaffirmation of the journalistic standards, and an act of credibility. If readers accept and welcome self-disclosure it ultimately raises the ethical standards and sustains the notion of unbiased, third party endorsement.

Researchers have identified variables in source credibility's constitution: accuracy, completion, balance, fairness, believability, trustworthiness and honesty of information source (Epstein, 1994). Additional factors were enlisted by Andrews & Shimp (1990), Artz & Tyout (1999) and Yalch & Elmore-Yalch (1984). The author proposes a new factor: 'self-disclosure'.

<sup>11</sup> One lacuna concerns the influence advertorials effect on the image of the publishing house.

<sup>12</sup> This research observes the construct of Source Credibility from the readers' perspective, and the words Perceived Source Credibility and Source Credibility mean the same. Therefore this research uses the word Perceived Source Credibility interchangeably with Source Credibility.

Self-disclosure is a new and distinguished construct. It is neither *information style*, nor *honesty of information source* and also not *transparency*. Information style (Choi, 2013) refers to the editorial style of reporting whereas Self-disclosure is an act independent of style. While the source of information is clarified by printing the word ‘advertoiral’, self-disclosure is beyond mere clarification – it is an admission. Furthermore, transparency according to Karlsson (2010) ‘relates to the disclosure of statements about how information is selected and produced and how the news content is verified’ which is procedural, unlike self-disclosure, which is an immediate admission.

### **Hypotheses and Assumptions**

H1: the knowledge that the (newspaper) article is an advertorial does not affect how a reader perceives the credibility of the newspaper.

The key dependent variable is Perceived Source Credibility (PSC). To test h1, the ensuing experiment tested other null hypotheses (h2, h3, h4).

The key assumption is that readers discern advertorial messaging regardless of the quality of execution. While low quality advertorials are easily recognisable (Goodlad et al, 1997) and whilst the success – and therefore recognisability – of an advertorial is dependent on the execution (Robinson, Ozanne & Cohen, 2002.), this research will not account for the quality of execution.

### **Methodology**

This research is empirical since it extracts the factors that affect creditworthiness. It is deductive as it quantifies the degree to which perceived credibility is affected by the term ‘advertoiral’.

The research<sup>13</sup> followed first qualitative then quantitative techniques. The first part of the study comprised of a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Depth Interviews to list out the factors that readers felt affected the creditworthiness of any newspaper. Thereafter, a survey was framed based on the factors and readers rated them in importance.

In the first part of the survey readers were presented an article. They rated the newspaper with (and without) knowledge that the article was an advertorial. This double combination was applied across three different newspapers, *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express* and *The Times of India*<sup>14</sup>, resulting in 3x2 i.e., 6 surveys. The objective of this question was to determine how readers coloured their view of the newspaper based on the article, and the extra information provided. Refer Table 3.

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<sup>13</sup> This academic research is empirical in that it draws out the factors that affect Perceived Credibility. It is deductive in that it presents a hypothesis – Perceived Credibility is affected by the term ‘advertoiral’ – and tests the validity of the same. The research followed both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

<sup>14</sup> These newspapers were chosen on account of their wide circulation and popularity in India

Table 3

**The division into 3x2 groups basis the information provided in question 1 of the surveys**

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Group A <i>The Hindu</i> -Normal Article	Group B <i>The Indian Express</i> -Normal Article	Group C <i>The Times of India</i> -Normal Article
Group D The <i>Hindu</i> -Article is an Advertorial	Group E The <i>Indian Express</i> -Article is an Advertorial	Group F The <i>Times of India</i> -Article is an Advertorial

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Table notes: All six surveys presented the same article, under question 1 and the background information provided were different, as shown above.

**Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis**

Seven Depth Interviews, using the Visual Prompts method followed the Focus Group Discussion. 25- 55 year-old persons were targeted for both for their reading habits, consumer choices and peer-influence. Eleven exhibits (a collection of newspaper articles and advertorials that were difficult to discern) were shown to them.

**The Summary of the Focus Group Discussion:**

Newspapers seemed weak preservers of justice and poor custodians of integrity because ‘corporations owned media houses’, linking politics to newspapers and implicit bias which sharpened for polarizing subjects. Advertorials were reportedly difficult to recognize. The reasons for trusting newspapers were: a particular, confidence inspiring writing style; the familiarity of family newspapers; the input of peer groups; the preferences for particular editors. Authenticity emerged as a keyword and the corresponding difficulty in determining the same was considered. Ethics remained crucial and newspapers needed to offer balanced views upholding the journalistic spirit.

**The Summary of Depth Interviews:**

Labels are hard to notice and need pointing out which retroactively alters opinions. Aesthetics change the readers’ views in two main ways: first by hinting at the name of the paper and thereafter, changing the existing perception. The last exhibit was cloaked and the task to identify the newspaper demonstrated readers’ perception.

**Codes Developed:** The themes crystallised into the following coded words. They underscore other ideas (as it emerged from the data gathered):

- i. Gravity: the overall mood of the newspaper
- ii. Familiarity with the newspaper: how reference groups increase familiarity affecting opinions
- iii. Writing style: how one writing style appeals over another
- iv. Perceived eligibility of stories : the newsworthiness of stories and adherence to those standards
- iv. Perceived 'good' reputation of the newspaper: the opinion accepted, from even outside one's reference group

### **The Experiment**

The experiment attempted to note variance in credibility when it is known or not to be an advertorial and to note variance in credibility between the different newspapers.

Three hundred respondents of ages 25-55 completed the survey. Respondents, divided into six groups of 50, received a survey in which respondent rated on an 11-point scale from 0-10. Apart from question 1, the other questions remained the same for each of the six groups.

### **Analysis of the data using Two Way Anova**

The two -way Anova was used since there was one measurement variable and two nominal variables, and each value of one nominal variable was found in combination with each value of the other. It tested three null hypotheses: that the means of the measurement variable are equal for different values of the first nominal variable, that the means are equal for different values of the second nominal variable, and that there is no interaction (the effects of one nominal variable don't depend on the value of the other nominal variable). Refer Tables 4A and 4B.

In this case the first factor X1 was the information the groups received regarding the type of the article which was whether it was an advertorial or not. The second factor X2 was the media houses that published the article which were *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express* and the *Times of India*. The analysis was performed using Microsoft Excel.

Table 4A:  
**The Anova: Two-Factor with Replication Measuring Perceived Source Credibility on a 11 point scale (1-11)**

SUMMARY	Normal	Advertorials	Total
The Hindu			
Sum	329	354	683
Average	6.58	7.08	6.83
Variance	2.412	2.320	2.405
The Indian Express			
Sum	277	353	630
Average	5.54	7.06	6.3
Variance	4.253	2.873	4.111
The Times of India			
Sum	212	276	488
Average	4.24	5.52	4.88
Variance	3.411	4.051	4.107
<b>Total</b>			
Count	150	150	
Sum	818	983	
Average	5.453	6.553	
Variance	4.236	3.578	

Table notes: 300 responses were taken where the sample size was 50. The scale range is from 1 to 11. Higher scores indicate greater Perceived Source Credibility.

Table 4B:  
Summary of Data

Source of Variation	SS	Df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Sample	203.327	2	101.663	31.572	3.79E-13	3.026
Columns	90.750	1	90.750	28.183	2.18E-07	3.873
Interaction	14.220	2	7.110	2.208	0.112	3.026
Within	946.700	294	3.220			
Total	1254.997	299				

The following hypotheses were tested and the resulting observations were analysed.

**h2: Publishing house:** The null hypothesis was that there was no difference in the means between the groups that were informed about the source of each article.

H0 (Factor X1):  $\mu_1 = \mu_2 = \mu_3$

Alternate hypothesis was that there was a difference in the means between at least one pair of groups.

Ha (Factor X2):  $(\mu_i \neq \mu_j)$ ;

The analysis shows that there is significant difference in the means between the groups  $F > F \text{ crit}$  ( $28.183 > 3.873$ ). The p-value ( $2.18E-07$ ) is significantly lower than the alpha 0.05 which corresponds to a confidence level of 95%. Hence the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternate is deemed true. This result means that the information about the source of the article (publisher) significantly influences the perception of creditworthiness in the article. In this survey *The Times of India* came out as the publishing house with the highest creditworthiness. Refer Table 4B.

**h3: Advertorial or not:** The null hypothesis was that there was no difference in the means between the group that knew that the article was an advertorial and the group that did not.

H0 (Factor X1):  $\mu_1 = \mu_2$

Alternate hypothesis was that there was a difference in the means between the two groups.

H1 (Factor X1):  $(\mu_1 \neq \mu_2)$ ;

The analysis shows that there is a significant difference in the means between the two groups  $F > F \text{ crit}$  ( $31.572 > 3.026$ ). The p-value ( $3.79E-13$ ) is lower than the alpha 0.05 which corresponds to a confidence level of 95%. Hence the alternate hypothesis holds and the null is rejected. This means that the information that the article is an advertorial does indeed influence the perception of creditworthiness in the article. Refer Table 4B.

**h4: Interaction between the two factors:** This tests the null hypothesis that the two factors do not interact with each other. In plain words this means that the knowledge about the source of the article does not influence the perception of its creditworthiness with or without the information that it was an advertorial or not.

The analysis shows that there is no significant difference in the means between the groups  $F < F_{crit}$  ( $2.208 < 3.026$ ). The p-value (0.11) is higher than the alpha 0.05 which corresponds to a confidence level of 95%. Hence the alternate hypothesis is rejected and the null is deemed true. This result means that the information about the source of the article (publisher) has no influence on the perception of creditworthiness in the article when seen as a normal editorial and when seen as an advertorial. Refer Table 4B.

The latter part of the survey required respondents to rate the importance they gave to the following five parameters that impact credibility: Gravity, Familiarity, Writing style, Eligibility of printed storied and Perceived Reputation. Table 5 details the same.

Table 5:  
**The Frequency of each factor against the newspaper**

Advertorial- ed Survey (Groups D to F)	Newspaper	Gravity	Famili -arity	Writin g style	Eligibility of printed storied	Perceived reputation
	<i>The Hindu</i>	6.9	6.9	8	8	8.3
	<i>The Indian Express</i>	7.3	7	6.2	7.2	6.8
	<i>The Times of India</i>	6.9	4.9	5.9	5.7	4.8
Normal Survey (Groups A to C)	Newspaper	Gravity	Famili arity	Writin g style	Eligibility of printed storied	Perceived reputation
	<i>The Hindu</i>	5.3	5.7	5.3	7	5
	<i>The Indian Express</i>	5.9	6.6	6.2	6.1	6.9
	<i>The Times of India</i>	3.1	3	3.3	3	3.2
Averaged		5.9	5.68	5.81	6.16	5.83

**Table notes: Responses were on an 11 point scale from 1-11. The averages are given.**

When informed that the article was an advertorial (in the first part of the survey), respondents applied that knowledge to the following questions, even when asked for a general opinion. Surveys in Groups D to F consequently suffered and the overall rating thereby dropped. ‘Eligibility of Printed Stories’ topped the charts as the parameter readers felt were most important, at 6.16 by a margin of 0.26. Refer Chart 1.



Chart 1. The frequency of the various parameters that influence credibility, as suggested by readers

### Findings and Discussion

That people form and retain pre-conceived notions about newspapers' credibility has been confirmed within this cohort, by the first Anova result (for h2). The different Perceived Credibility ratings observed are bolstered by the idea that personal experience and peer review form impressions which act as a filter when processing new information.

The second Anova result (for h3) determines that disclosure positively influences the perception of creditworthiness indicating that, as a rule, labeling advertorials elevates the Perceived Credibility of the newspaper. All three newspapers showed an increase that was statistically significant and, *The Times of India* benefitted the most when it ranked the lowest under normal conditions.

The key finding is that self-disclosing information positively reforms preconceived notions especially information such as ethics, standards, compromises, leadership etc.

Lastly, the third Anova (for h4) resulted in the combination of newspaper title and its being an advertorial or not, was not statistically significant. Perceived Credibility is, thus, NOT heavily dependent on the title of the newspaper, or in other words, the information about the source of the article (publisher) has no significant influence on the perception of creditworthiness in the article when seen as a normal editorial and when seen as an advertorial.

Self-disclosure in summary benefits the newspaper by improving its credit rating, and this improvement is independent of the name of the newspaper, upholding the alternate hypothesis (h1).

Ultimately the labels 'Advertorial' and 'Advertisement' are construed as self-disclosing information which tacitly express a third party influence, informing the reader that the editor has distanced himself from the article. It even suggests that the article was produced by an interested third party. Remarkably, these words taken out of context are liabilities.

## Conclusions and Limitations

There were constitutional (inherent in the research question) and technical limitations. Each individual reader's perception is formed by many factors<sup>15</sup> which are arbitrary as the reader assigns them himself and measures the newspaper against it. This operation poses a conundrum: all readers insist on adherence to an undefined personal set of standards, which when transgressed by any newspaper lowers its self-image. The importance of a set of predefined universal standard is apparent as is the ludicrous impossibility of achieving this.

These material limitations are threefold. First, the sample size could have been wider for improved results. Here adequate resources<sup>16</sup> were used to cross the minimum threshold. Secondly, the data collection required for this paper needed to reach saturation point, which was beyond the scope of the resources available. And lastly, there were no controls on the demographics. Readers aged 18 upwards formed the sample and factors such as the reading habits and styles, frequency, the quality of execution of the advertorial<sup>17</sup> etc were unaccounted for. Furthermore, advertorials appear in many forms and so may not be distinguishable from the outset, to most readers. And older audience may not be as accommodating of the idea of 'self-disclosure' and the results could vary accordingly.

Despite the many hurdles, this study confirmed the following. The wide prevalence of advertorials generated varied opinions about itself: some readers view it as an inevitable object of the times, and others (in minority) reject it as an obtrusive development. To officially declare an advertorial *ipso facto* indicates non-adherence to the journalistic ideal – a defeatist proceeding. This point, ironically, was never recognised by participants, raising many red flags. People have either acquiesced to advertorials being the status quo, or journalistic integrity is a non-issue.

This implies that, subconsciously, people believe the age of journalistic courage is in its twilight and newspapers are soon becoming businesses. The same era, remarkably, views self-disclosure to be an act of 'honesty'. An act of honesty, nonetheless, is sharply different to an admittance of slipping. And herein lies the enigma: to declare or not to declare; to uphold journalistic standards or to admit the slack.

This study submits that disclosure appears more strongly as an act of honesty and less as an official bail-out. It is paradoxical how the terms 'Advertorial' – or 'Advertisement' – which taken alone are negative words suddenly seem compelling honest; a point mentioned earlier.

In effect the alternate hypothesis (h1) was upheld which affirmed that disclosure of advertorials positively affects the source credibility of any newspaper.

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<sup>15</sup> even if they have not actively engaged with the publication themselves.

<sup>16</sup> The population size is 353409 based on Q4 IRS Report in 2014. At 95% confidence level and at confidence interval 8, the sample size needed is 150

<sup>17</sup> A poorly drafted advertorial body is more likely to stand out as one. Readers may identify it more easily (without the need for labels) impacting the image of the newspaper, presumably negatively

For PR, however, the effects are still unsettled. The principle purpose of PR and newspaper tactics is brand image improvement and the ramifications of advertorial labeling on the brand is another topic altogether. It is possible that any positive effect evoked might channel to the brand, in turn raising its image. But this is yet to be established. PR, ultimately, advances with the raised ethical standards and practices. Simultaneously, the non-advertorialed content will savour the fruits of its forthrightness, implying that PR outside of advertorials is in the winning. At present advertorials continue to assist the newspaper.

The conclusions above hold true under the given conditions. It is possible that at another time, with a more diverse cohort, and under different conditions, dissimilar results may be observed. The changing landscape of media ethics caused a flux of opinions and is yet to settle one way. Advertorials for now are increasingly viewed with ambivalence and received with shifting prejudices.

Two things are certain for the present: self-disclosure prevails and readers are receptive to the changing purpose, structure and nature of the publishing industry. One thing is certain for all time: this glad acceptance of self-disclosure is bound to the present, given circumstances. The future is open to speculation.

### **Recommendations and Further Study**

Future study could explore whether people consider the drop in ethical standards to affect perceived credibility beyond the repair that disclosing advertorials bring in. The Press Council of India advised printing the word advertorial on the article to improve ethical practices and arguably, the act conforms to best ethical practice. PR should support the editorial responsibility and the right to claim journalistic quality for the content shown in the context of the media, according to Taiminen, et al., (2015) and this is one way forward.

This report may assist the Press Council of India<sup>18</sup> in urging publishing houses to print the word ‘Advertorial’ on every paid-for piece of article. Advertorials are vehicles of credibility. To rhetorically spin McLuhan’s maxim<sup>19</sup>: it is now possible for the medium to surpass the message.

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<sup>18</sup> The Press council of India is statutory body established to ensure the freedom of Press and the highest standard of conducted, are maintained. It is a self-regulatory body with powers that (albeit are legally unenforceable) are able to propel changes in journalistic practices and trends. It is has been argued that the PCI should be afforded punitive powers. The PCI has been pressing legislation in favour of disclosure of advertorials. E.g., Economic Times, September 20, 2011 & The Hoot, December 5, 2011

<sup>19</sup> Marshall McLuhan’s famously said that ‘The medium was the message’. This statement bears new meaning in light of the present argument. Retrieved from <http://marshallmcluhanspeaks.com/>

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Contact Email Id- [annetemstephen@gmail.com](mailto:annetemstephen@gmail.com) and [raj.patra@simc.edu](mailto:raj.patra@simc.edu)