

# The Images of News Media Perceived by People as Antecedent of News Use

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The monograph presents a rigorous, pioneering endeavor; it unveils initial findings that may prompt additional journalism research in a brand-new and fruitful direction. Soo Young Shin intends to direct attention to attributes of news media beyond trust or credibility that the existing scholarship cannot fully account for, including in the context of the situation currently facing the news industry. Shin’s valuable piece draws on an interesting conceptual foundation, and its verification has been arduously executed with three well-thought-out studies. The main discoveries of the study may contribute to several interconnected fields, including media business, journalism practice, and marketing strategies. Its primary contribution lies in the innovative thinking described at the outset that can inspire future scholars to study audience perceptions of individual news outlets and to gauge the impact of these images on marketability and popularity.

That said, on one hand, perhaps due to its massive global scope, the theoretical articulation and elaboration of all related components that led to the author’s inquiry (such as the conceptual parallelism of college reputation and national image to news firms) is not entirely cogent. Also, the synthesis of findings may not necessarily reflect and encapsulate the entire image structure of a given media corporation or industry. On the other hand, the monograph offers gems that deserve to be highlighted.

Research on how news media that create and disseminate images of others also get assessed by users of their images is crucial. What is particularly important here is the author’s emphasis on the context, messenger, and vehicle, instead of the content per se, which has traditionally mattered more to researchers when they investigate news users. The power of images—such as those of political candidates in electoral processes—and their ability to determine decision-making is well known in other fields. The novel insight here is how news consumers’ perceived image of the media in general or of a specific news outlet may overdetermine whether or how those consumers choose news content and process it.

Although Shin’s main thesis centers on the “image” of news media, many journalism-related concepts—including trust, credibility, value, practice, objectivity, loyalty, and consumer experience—are also mentioned sporadically in the literature section. Unfortunately, these relevant concepts appear to have eclipsed the image of news media. Each of these concepts about news business and predictors of news use could have been fully developed into separate studies. The grand framework and commendably all-inclusive perspective in the literature review, while highly informative, seem to digress somewhat. As a result, the proposed grand scope seems to zoom away from

and out of the image thesis. In other words, the construct of news media image could have been featured more centrally and then elaborated in greater detail. Not only would this make the research more conceptually compelling, it would also have guided the author to a different research design. Indeed, Shin herself argues that literature on corporate image, business reputation, and branding could lend notable insights that would help to develop a new research angle on news media.

Notably, the literature invoked on the “personality” and “socially responsible” dimensions of news media leads to studying consumers’ assessments of *distinct* news organizations, rather than surveying overall impression of all news media as executed in the present study. If, for example, we focus on news broadcasters, we are likely to find distinct images associated with CBS News, CNN, FOX News, MSNBC, or even PBS. Likewise, surveys can be conducted to capture perceived images of the parent companies or even publicized executives/owners of these broadcaster brands. Furthermore, the anchors, producers, and reporters working in each of the broadcasters can embody discernable images that impress, attract, and retain audiences. Inhouse research on news anchors conducted for executives indicates that broadcasters are keenly aware of the huge impact of anchors’ images on their ratings—and profits. Other types of image assessments for different genres, mediums, and platforms of news are regularly conducted in the media industry. The respondents’ feedback about distinct media brands can provide important insight on image attributes in the eyes of users and/or non-users. But here, the most explicit, significant part of images in news media was not addressed, presumably because the research project was designed to treat the overall news media as its unit of analysis.

Images of any entity are multifaceted and belong to different valence categories. Politicians, for example, can be perceived by voters as competent, experienced, and qualified, yet immoral. Thus, four distinct facets of their attributes are manifested: three are positive and one negative. The valence of images—which can be measured in a nuanced manner such as scale—can shine a brighter light on the object under investigation. Many of the descriptions under each dimension delineated in Shin’s study can be positive, negative, mixed, or hard-to-determine. But, these descriptions are not necessarily evaluations of what respondents have witnessed in or experienced about news media (in general). Rather, they can represent the respondents’ expectations (i.e., ideal type) for news media. For example, they may anticipate that news media will be compassionate and empathetic and not influenced by political or financial interests. The nature of the descriptions within the dimensions presents a challenge both for practical application of the findings and meaningful comparison should replications be conducted for specific media.

Future research should make clear what type and what level of corporate images the study will focus on and how this newly unveiled image construct can actually facilitate marketing effectiveness and/or elevating adoption and usage for specific news media. Given the highly diversified categories of content that media conglomerates produce to attract users, news may face difficult competition with other content categories that can be more appealing to users, more economical to produce and distribute, and thus easier to generate revenue. In other words, news media may not compete with one

another for users, but with other kinds of content providers. As such, the scope of perceived media images consumers hold may not necessarily need to be confined within news media. Perhaps different brands of legacy news media could be compared (e.g., the *Wall Street Journal*) with those of alternative and web-based channels (e.g., Reddit) when it comes to business information.

Another caveat of using *image* to encompass all attributes and characteristics pertaining to news media is that imagery should address (at least partially) *visually* oriented messages. Given that, one cannot help but think about the design, color, layout, and packaging of print news; appearance, demographics, and style of anchors and reporters in news shows; special sound and visual effects of news broadcasts. Even publicity about family sagas of media tycoons (e.g., the Redstones and the Murdochs) may matter. The “personality” dimension of the typology in the monograph may touch on this visual facet, but what media users see is de-emphasized. The ways that visual aspects mentioned above can be strongly associated with individual media firms provide yet another direction for inquiry.

Shin mentions in passing that the emotion could be inextricably intertwined with perceived images of news media. Emotions indeed can be a mediating factor that fortifies the proposed prediction model of media use. According to the “stair step model” of communication effects, conative effects may significantly hinge on the affective level, once the cognitive level of impact is observed. Emotions are a pivotal, enduring component of people’s heuristic base, too. To apply Shin’s examples of corporate reputation and country image to illustrate the point, job seekers will not want to join a company if they dislike its work culture or reputation; likewise, tourists will not want to visit a country if they do not find the country fascinating. Likewise, people will not choose a given news source if they do not like the media in any way—its content style, delivery method, or political perspective.

A critical component of this new model that deserves more attention is its anticipated outcome: news use. Instead of a direct measure, news use has proxies and pseudo-replacements—news interest, satisfaction, and loyalty. There are fundamental differences between the supposed variable and its proxies. Arguably, any behavioral dimension of news use (time spent, frequency, consumption habit, or amount of content accessed and recalled) certainly can shed brighter light on the impact of perceived images of news media. There could be discrepancies between *what participants say they feel* (satisfaction, interest, and loyalty) and *what they actually do*—the former belongs to cognitive or affective level, while the latter is at behavioral level, which should have higher internal and external validity. To truly assess the influence of perceived images of news media on users’ behavior, researchers would need to find an effective, valid way to measure behavior of news use, rather than using attitudinal or affective variables as proxies.

Among the dependent variables Shin used, *news interest* can be a cognitive construct involving social desirability and self-aggrandizing elements. As such, it depends greatly on situations (say, natural disasters, pandemics, or wars), personal needs (surveillance, socialization, learning, and entertainment), and habits (consumption of news vs. other media contents). Similarly, *loyalty* and *satisfaction* can be extremely

subjective and affective in nature; these do not necessarily translate well to frequency or volume of news consumption. Especially in the absence of specific news media being invoked, whether these variables accurately represent news consumption or choice is hard to determine. With real media brands or platforms incorporated in studies, however, direct observation and measurement of news use would be feasible.

To her credit, Shin provides abundant detail on her procedures. These involved multiple steps of construct exploration, verification, data collection, and statistical analysis. She should be commended for the triangulation of methods (combining qualitative and quantitative research tools). This information can be very helpful for others who wish to follow. Issues remain, however, regarding the ambiguous object of examination, the insubstantial justification and operationalization of key variables, and the lack of validity assessment of measurements. To effectively verify the direct influence of media images on individual media brands, researchers can conduct field experiments, lab-based experiments, or survey experiment—to infer causality derived from the images held by participants on different news media firms they select and consume. Moreover, participants could not provide their assessments for any specific news media they have used or avoided in both the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). It would be conceptually as well as empirically rewarding if the prediction structure were applicable to separate media brands.

Given the unveiled and confirmed seven-item typology (usefulness, social responsibility, personality, usability, transparency, perspective-taking, and selection bias) of news media images perceived by audiences, an important question for researchers to ask and verify is whether the seven elements are exhaustive and mutually exclusive. As many democratic media systems around the world (the U.S. included) become increasingly partisan, the political ideology that individual media outlets represent and embody could be fertile grounds on which consumers develop their impressions and make their choices. Additional work on this highly promising direction will, one hopes, fill in the picture.

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