
THE IMPACT OF SENSATIONAL NEWS TOWARDS PUBLIC PERCEPTION ON THE MALAYSIAN NEWS INDUSTRY

Oon Jin Xuan

Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology
oonjx-wk18@student.tarc.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The publication of sensational news is argued to bring harmful consequences in the long run. Going against journalistic standards, it has the tendency to form a negative public perception. However, the effectiveness of sensationalism has amplified with the aid of digital media. Therefore, this study is conducted to find out how online sensational news impacts public perception of the Malaysian news industry. Survey questionnaires were distributed to 150 Malaysian online news readers via purposive sampling. In the end, it is suggested that negative perception alone would not pose significant threats to the survival of media outlets. Still, there is a price to pay – that is the reputation and public perception of the industry itself.

Keywords: Impacts, media, online news, public perception, sensationalism

INTRODUCTION

Sensationalism is an editorial tactic whereby events and topics of news are intentionally selected and worded in ways that are distorted, exaggerated, misrepresented, and manipulate the truth to excite and attract readers (Jervis, 2015). As a highly effective means of increasing profits, the use of sensationalism has always been largely criticized. For example, Nordin (1979) argues that the publication of sensational news is abandoning serious news in favor of stories that evoke emotional responses – implying that serious news is worthy, while sensational news is not. Furthermore, sensationalism is criticized to be a sign of declining journalistic standards that are detrimental to a democratic society (Allan, 2010). Besides, sensational news is sometimes written misleadingly and turns into fake news, which goes against the professional and ethical standards of journalism (Semetko and Scammell, 2012).

Despite its many criticisms, sensational news has always been successful in gaining more profits – and its publication has only since grown with the emergence of the Internet. As online media are paid according to the frequency that advertisements on their websites are viewed, they may publish sensational stories to attract readers to click into the page (Evans, 2008). The effectiveness of this tactic can be further amplified if it was shared on social media. According to research by Kilgo et al. (2018), sensational stories are shared more on Facebook than those that are not, amplifying the reach of sensational stories through social sharing. This

high exposure contributes to more clicks, and in return, more advertising revenue. Hence, the high level of engagement motivates the publication of more sensational content online. In addition, there is also no limitation of time and space for online news websites unlike their traditional counterparts. This allows news outlets to publish news whenever they want and as much as they want to. Without the need to only prioritize hard news and current events, there is now more space and freedom to focus on generating sensational content on the Internet. Nevertheless, there may be serious consequences for publishing sensational news in the long run. According to Patterson (2000), the publication of soft and sensational news is detrimental because entertainment programs are far more entertaining than news for those who desire to be entertained. Meanwhile, hard news readers would be left uninterested in consuming news anymore because it is too soft and sensational for their taste.

Contradictorily, sensational news appears to be well-received in Malaysia. For example, Shariff et al. (2013) found out that 43% of Malaysians in higher learning institutions will only read news that is sensational. However, the research has a different area of interest—that is the news purchasing habits of Malaysians studying in tertiary education. Thus, merely provides statistical information on preferences and habits but not perception. Moreover, the research was conducted in 2013, and the public’s preferences may have changed due to changes in the market, economy, and behavior (SEG Measurement, n.d.). It is also believed that online news contains more sensational content than printed newspapers (Kovačič et al., 2010). With this in mind, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2020) revealed that 86% of Malaysians obtain news from news websites while 70% obtain it on social media. Therefore, it can be assumed that Malaysians are frequently exposed to sensational news.

However, just because people click to read online news, it does not mean that they will enjoy reading it (Lu et al., 2018). Hence, this raises a question about public perception of sensational news. Does the public genuinely like consuming sensational news, and have a good perception towards it? Does the public, who are constantly bombarded by sensational news, agree with its publication? If not, why is sensational news still well-received by the public and easily viral on the Internet? Therefore, these questions bring interest to find out how sensational news affects public perception of the Malaysian news industry. For a more comprehensive view, this paper sums up the research questions into the following three:

- *RQ1: What does the public think about sensational news?*
Although sensational news receives more readership, we do not know how the public perceives sensational news, and how it affects their perception of the industry. Will they think that the quality of news has declined over the years, or do they see no problem in sensationalism at all? Do they perceive sensational news as “news” or is it just a source of entertainment to them?

- *RQ2: What does the public think about the publication of sensational news?*
The publication of sensational news has always been debated upon by scholars due to its issues of credibility, ethics, morals, and professionalism. Thus, this question seeks to find out if the public holds such views too. Are the public aware of the issues stated above, and would they agree with it? Would they think that sensational news should still be published upon learning about such issues? Or would they still be intrigued to read sensational stories?

- *RQ3 Does putting too much focus on writing sensational news pose a bigger threat for news outlets in the future?*

This research question is rooted from the two research questions above. If the public does not have a good perception towards sensational news and its publication, will they eventually stop consuming news from organizations that publish it? Will sensational news come to an end as it stops attracting readers? How else would public perception affect the reputation and livelihood of the Malaysian news industry? Is the threat as severe as it is criticized to be?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sensational News and Quality

According to Patterson (2000), people who think that news has gone soft, sensational, and superficial are also more likely to say that news quality has deteriorated. Moreover, consumers of hard news generally had negative perceptions towards soft news, stating that it is often biased, sensational, uninformative, and boring. Thus, implying that sensational news is a negative quality in news writing. To him, news should not be used as an entertainment outlet because in the long run, entertainment programs are more entertaining than news for those who desire to be entertained. Hard news readers would also be left uninterested in reading news because it has become too soft and sensational for their taste.

Another research by Hofstetter and Dozier (1986) was conducted with the assumption that television news is highly sensational, and this sensationalism serves no quality. However, the findings revealed that sensational news on television contains a considerable amount of useful information. About 75% of sensational news coverage included information about the background and consequences of what was being reported. Besides, over 50% of sensational news discusses the process in which the events happened. About one-third of the coverage also mentions the political process or instructions on how to take action on political acts. This suggests that sensational news can also contain elements of quality news, which contradicts the general belief that sensational news lacks quality.

Since “quality news” can refer to news that is useful to its readers, Ge (2016) argues that sensationalism can help attract readers’ attention and interest to read legal news. He explains that the average reader may not have any interest in legal issues, but sensationalism may provoke readers to read it. In this context, sensationalism is an excellent strategy adopted by journalists to promote the ideas of the rule of law. This contradicts the common assumption that sensationalism serves no purpose and is only used for monetary gains. Nevertheless, the study also acknowledged that the excessive or inappropriate use of sensationalism could also cause harm to the primitive purpose of judicial reform.

Sensational News and Credibility

Molyneux and Coddington (2020) state that journalists view sensationalism as a practice that will diminish news credibility. Although sensational headlines on online news will produce a high number of clicks and traffic, it will only work for a short period because aggregating news underneath sensational headlines will diminish its credibility. Their research found that participants who have not seen the original version of the aggregated headline will think that the news article is high in credibility. However, once exposed to the original headline, they

perceive sensational news as lacking credibility and quality. Eventually, news outlets will lose readers because the content published is uninformative, low-quality, and not credible.

Kovačič (et al. 2010) also conducted research to understand journalists' perception of credibility between online media and traditional media. A survey was sent to 130 journalists in Slovenia, and results show that 41% felt that online websites of existing traditional media were not credible. Meanwhile, 68% believed that online established media were not credible. Most respondents explain that online news contains more sensational content, while traditional media contains more "serious" news or topics of public affairs. Thus, making it more credible.

Analyzing fake news, research by Mourão and Robertson (2019) found out that not all sensational news is fake news. The results reveal that 53.8% of the analyzed headlines and 56.5% of the analyzed body content did not contain any misinformation. Furthermore, 58% of the fake news was not sensational at all, and only about 6% of the stories had moderate or high levels of sensationalism. Nevertheless, sensationalism and misinformation were still strongly correlated. This suggests that stories which contained factual errors were also more prone to sensational presentation. Hence, making it look like sensational news lacks credibility.

Sensational News, Professionalism, and Ethics

The decline of professional journalism is often blamed on sensationalism by media critics. According to Ngange and Elempia (2019), newspapers tend to sensationalize crisis situations too, which is deemed unethical from their point of view. They elaborate that the newspapers intentionally sensationalize the crisis through their choice of words, framing, and headline. This arouses fear, temper, and concern among the public, which gives them a reason to hold on to the crisis. However, this situation could be fully avoided if the newspapers report the crisis in a fair, balanced, and truthful way. Regardless of the reason behind sensationalizing the news, sensationalism in journalism practice already undermines the profession's basic canons (accuracy, balance, fairness, and objectivity). It also prevents the public from being knowledgeable participants in policy discussions and provokes extremist tendencies.

However, Wang (2012) suggests that professionalism may not reduce sensationalism at all. In her research, she found out that reporters of medium professional levels (26.5%) reported the most sensational news in their daily news productions. This is followed by low professional level (25.6%) and high professional level reporters (25.3%). Although the difference is slight, it contradicts the general belief that sensational news is reported by "unprofessional" journalists as those with low professionalism reported less sensational news than those that are rated as medium. Wang (2012) further explained that this phenomenon may be caused by the competitive market. When the advertising pie has not experienced corresponding market growth, the media may adopt a sensational reporting formula to survive. Hence, professional reporters are also likely to report sensational news, showing a gap between their professional ideals and their actual practices.

In contrast, Slattery (1994) argues that sensational news has a moral dimension. She states that if news coverage labeled as sensational is vital to the moral health of the community, then its coverage is justified. She further identified two types of sensationalism which are: (1) *news of the moral life* which reflects broad and general themes of justice and injustice, right and wrong; (2) *pernicious sensationalism* whereby the moral context is removed and causes moral harm instead. Thus, journalists must identify and distinguish between the types of

sensationalism to ensure that what they publish will serve a purpose to its readers. If the journalist has claimed and proved to have acted responsibly, their actions are considered ethical despite what others may think of the news they have published.

Effectiveness of Online Sensational News

Tenenboim and Cohen (2015) conducted a longitudinal study for five years to find out what provokes internet users to engage with online news. They found out that despite being the most clicked news, sensational news does not receive the most comments. News receiving the most comments is news of social or political conflicts. This is because readers are motivated to voice their opinions and try to influence others as well. With this, the paper concluded that different types of content would generate different expressions of interest.

Similarly, Mourão and Robertson (2019) had also analyzed the engagement rate of fake news based on various factors such as clickbait, sensationalism, and misinformation. The research found out that sensationalism does not statistically predict significant engagement levels. This suggests that sensationalism does not resonate well with audiences. Instead, the spread of fake news is more closely related to identity politics and partisanship. Hence, their findings contradict the general belief that sensational news causes higher engagement rates.

However, the two articles mentioned above only measure the effectiveness of sensational news in terms of engagement. Hence, Lu et al. (2018) suggested a different approach in measuring the effectiveness of online news – by asking participants to rate their satisfaction before and after reading news. The findings show that nearly 65% of participants preferred the news before clicking into it, but only 51% still preferred it after reading it. Therefore, some readers may prefer the news before reading it but dislike it after it is being read. One of the elements in determining the preference after reading the news is quality. 85% of participants will have a decline in satisfaction towards the news when they find out the content is low in quality. For high-quality news, more participants showed higher preference before reading it, and this preference increases significantly after reading. However, this research did not mention how “high quality” and “low quality” news is determined, and what kind of news was used to conduct the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of public perception is often linked with opinion, beliefs, and attitudes. Therefore, the *ABC Model of Attitudes* is applied in this study to provide a better understanding towards the possible factors that may influence public perception. The ABC Model of Attitudes is one of the earliest models that explores the process of attitude formation. In general, this model proposes that attitude consists of three interrelated components that are seen in the abbreviation of “ABC”, which refers to (a) affective, (b) behavioral, and (c) cognitive (Ostrom, 1969). The definition of the three components is provided in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Components within the ABC Model of Attitudes

Components	Definition
Affective	Feelings or emotions associated with attitude objects
Behavioral	Past behaviors associated with attitude objects
Cognitive	Beliefs, thoughts, and attributes associated with attitude objects

According to the ABC Model of Attitudes, it is suggested that the public reads sensational news because of the affective component. However, their actual perception of sensationalism and the industry may be based on the behavioral and cognitive components. Therefore, how they think and act may not be on par.

To explain such a phenomenon, Niosi (2021) suggests that in different situations, the components may differ in sequence as one component “wins” over the other when determining the final attitude or action. Some attitudes are more likely to be based on feelings, while others may be based on behaviors or beliefs (Niosi, 2021). Hence, even if the public negatively perceives sensational news, they may still be emotionally driven to read it. However, their actual perception of sensational news is likely to be based on cognitive and behavioral. In return, *cognitive-behavioral-affective* will be the final sequence determining how sensational news affects public perception of the industry. Hence, this research uses this model as a guideline to find out why sensational news is still well-received despite its many criticisms.

METHODOLOGY

This research was first conducted in the year 2021. With political instability and the ongoing covid-19 pandemic, there had been an abundance of sensational news online that inspired this study. As no specific kind of sensational news was targeted for this study, the definition below was provided in the survey questionnaire. Thus, ensuring that respondents understand what the term “sensational news” refers to.

Sensationalism is an editorial tactic whereby events and topics of news are intentionally selected and worded in ways that are distorted, exaggerated, misrepresented, and manipulates the truth to excite and attract readers (Jervis, 2015).

To further improve the accuracy of the data collected, six different headlines were provided in the survey questionnaire for respondents to rate the level of sensationalism. The options provided are namely “not sensational”, “slightly sensational”, “sensational” and “highly sensational” represented by the numbers one to four on a four-point scale. After completing the data collection, the results are interpreted using mean as a sensational rating. As seen in Table 2 below, the average sensational rating for all six headlines are between two to three. Therefore, respondents of this study generally think that the headlines are in between the categories of “slightly sensational” and “sensational”. This shows that most respondents have spotted a certain degree of sensationalism in the headlines and have sufficient understanding of what the term “sensational news” means. Hence, they are able to answer the survey questionnaire more accurately.

Table 2: Respondent’s Understanding of Sensationalism

Headline of News	Mean
Muhyiddin falls on his sword	2.58
Surprise! Mahathir says he wanted Anwar as PM	2.86
Woman seeking internet signal caused Covid cluster, says Masidi	2.55
Pandelela-Mun Yee fail to deliver Malaysia’s first medal in Tokyo	2.57
Man jumps into sea again, this time wanting to swim to Makkah	2.53
Did my brother die because of his second vaccine dose?	2.88

Questionnaire survey was used in this study because it can be effectively sent to many people at once, thus getting more responses and portraying a closer representation towards public perception (Brooker & Schaefer, 2006). Using a non-probability purposive sampling, respondents consisted of 150 Malaysians who read online news of different gender and education to determine if such backgrounds affect the respondent’s answers in the survey.

For the research design, the questionnaire is split into five sections which are namely: (1) *Demographics* to determine if the respondent’s background affect how they perceive sensational news; (2) *News Consumption Habits* to further confirm that respondents are indeed online news readers; (3) *Idea of Sensationalism* to ensure that respondents understand what the term “sensational news” refers to; (4) *Perception of Sensational News* that collects general information regarding the respondent’s perceptions towards sensational news its publication; and (5) *Respondent’s Perception of Sensationalism the Industry* to determine how the public perception of sensational news affects the Malaysian news industry.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to Figure 2, respondents obtained their news from online sources such as social media or news websites at least once a week. Although the sample of this research are Malaysians who read online news, some of them still use traditional media to obtain their daily or weekly news. Thus, their perception of sensationalism may not be based on online news alone, but on a mix of the news obtained from multiple platforms.

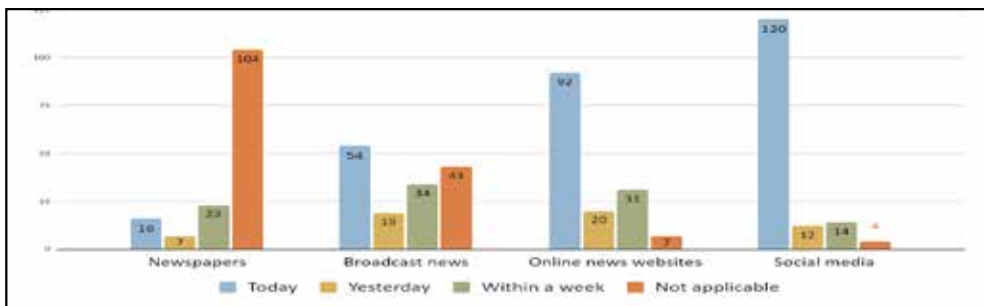


Figure 1: Method and Frequency of Obtaining News

With that in mind, the findings again prove the effectiveness of sensationalism as readers have shown a positive response towards it. Based on the research findings, 41.33% of respondents agree that they enjoy reading sensational news, while 25.33% strongly agreed with the statement. One of the possible reasons why respondents enjoy reading sensational news might be due to the fact that sensationalism makes news reading more interesting. As seen in Table 3 below, a simple majority of 58.67% respondents had agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoy reading sensational news and at the same time, opine that sensationalism makes news reading more interesting.

Table 3: Cross Tabulation between “I enjoy reading sensational news” and “Sensationalism makes news more interesting”

I Enjoy Reading Sensational News	Sensationalism Makes News More Interesting			
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Strongly disagree	3.33%	2.00%	1.33%	0.67%
Disagree	3.33%	8.67%	5.33%	0.67%
Agree	1.33%	10.67%	22.67%	8.00%
Strongly agree	2.00%	2.00%	12.00%	16.00%

Furthermore, Table 4 shows that a simple majority of respondents believe that sensational news serves educational value. To further understand this phenomenon, the results were cross tabulated with the respondent’s level of education. However, Figure 4 shows that the respondent’s level of education is not a determining factor in how they answer this question. This is because 53.85% of postgraduates and 47.06% of respondents with an education of secondary school and below agree that sensational news serves no educational value. In contrast, most pre-university students and undergraduate students disagree with the statement, having a percentage of 50% and 41.35% respectively.

Table 4: Cross Tabulation between “Educational Level” and “Sensational News Serves No Educational Value”

Education level	Sensational News Serves No Educational Value			
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Secondary school or below	0.67%	4.00%	5.33%	1.33%
Pre-U	0.67%	5.33%	3.33%	1.33%
Undergraduate	8.67%	28.67%	22.00%	10.00%
Postgraduate	2.00%	2.00%	4.67%	0.00%

Perhaps the term “educational value” is interpreted differently. For example, Patterson (2000) argues that soft and sensational news is uninformative and serves no educational value. However, Hofstetter and Dozier (1986) proved that sensationalism can also help to educate the public with helpful information such as the political process. An example of such news was provided in the survey questionnaire, with the headline “Muhyiddin falls

on his sword". Despite being sensational, the news still educates its readers on the political situation in Malaysia at the time, and what is expected to happen next. In addition to that, the news can also help to increase political awareness by attracting more people to read it. However, the educational value of such news can be limited as it may be unable to present in-depth insights or discussion. Hence, explaining why respondents could not come to an agreement on whether sensational news contains educational value or not.

Despite having a positive response towards sensational news, the respondent's perception on its publication is mostly negative. For instance, Figure 5 shows that respondents were unable to come to a consensus to whether sensational news is quality news or not, as the combined total for agree and strongly disagree adds up to 50%. However, a combined total of 69.33% respondents had either agreed or strongly agreed that the quality of news deteriorated because of sensational news. When compared to the above statement, this suggests that respondents may feel that sensational news still contains quality to a certain extent. Yet, this quality may have reduced over the years due to the increase of sensationalism in news. When applied to their personal experience, they may believe that news of the past contains higher quality.

In terms of credibility, a simple majority of 61.33% respondents had either agreed or strongly agreed that sensational news is not credible (Figure 3). This perception might be due to the fact that sensationalism is highly correlated with factual errors and misinformation (Mourão & Robertson, 2019). Moreover, a total of 58.67% respondents combined had disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "sensational news does not need to be credible". Even though the statement merely managed to gather a simple majority, it is the only statement that had a high response rate of 30.67% for the option "strongly disagree". Therefore, this finding indicates that respondents highly value credibility in news as they have shown a strong opinion towards it.

In addition to that, most respondents believe that the publication of sensational news is highly unethical if it ends up spreading fear, disharmony, hatred, and other negative attributes (Figure 4). For example, some media outlets may exaggerate news events and issues to catch attention by evoking negative emotions such as fear (Aslam et al., 2020). In return, this leads to constant stress, anxiety, depression, and more negative consequences for the reader's mental health. Moreover, the media outlets may even utilise strong emotions such as hate to gain more readership (Pew Research Center, 2017). Hence, most respondents can see the harmful effects of sensationalism and agree with the ethical issues of its publication.

With these issues in mind, a simple majority of respondents believe that the publication of sensational news can negatively affect the presumed overall credibility, quality, and professionalism of the news outlets that publish it (Figure 5). This finding thus reaffirms the criticisms and common assumptions of sensationalism that are mentioned in the literature review. However, the three attributes mentioned in Figure 5 appear to be distributed evenly, with no single attribute significantly dominating the other.

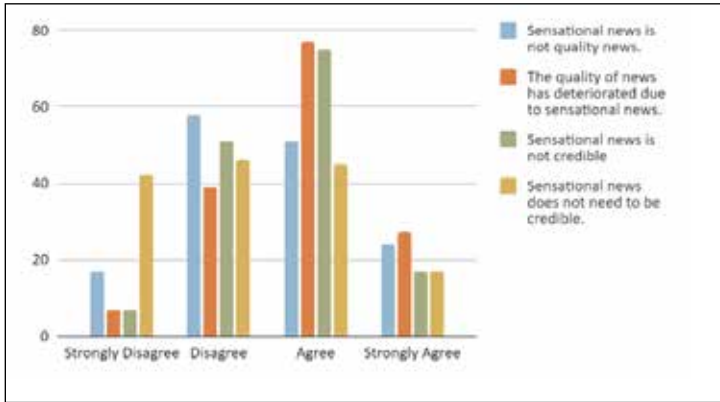


Figure 3: Sensationalism, Quality, and Credibility

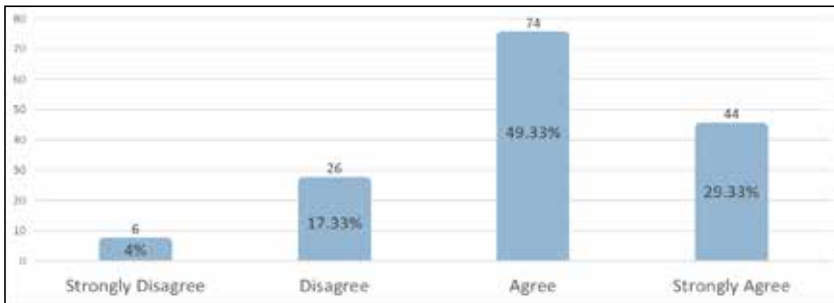


Figure 4: "...How much do you agree that it is unethical to publish sensational news?"

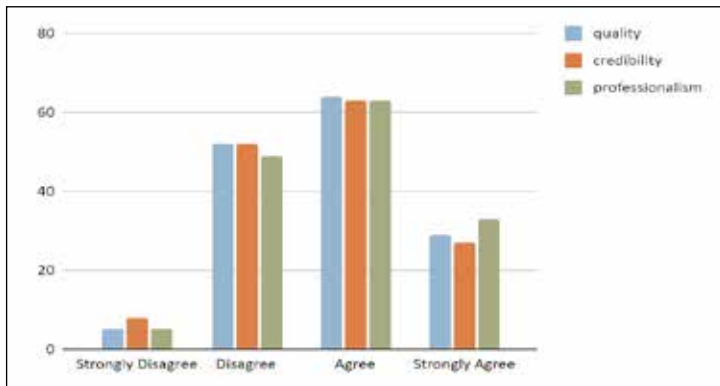


Figure 5: An organization has less quality/credibility/professionalism the more it publishes sensational news

As mentioned in the literature review, Patterson (2000) argues that those who desire to be entertained would eventually find other sources of entertainment. Meanwhile, those seeking "real news" would lose interest in news because it will become too sensational for their liking. Although this claim was made over 20 years ago in a western context, it appears to be applicable in Malaysia today. Figure 6 below shows that most respondents (116) actively read news to stay informed and updated, while only 47 of them read for leisurely purposes.

However, there are also 89 respondents who would read news because it is trending on social media. According to Lin and Atkin (2014), one of the main functions of social media is to provide leisure. Since sensational news is more likely to be the trending news on social media, it can be assumed that in general, most respondents read sensational news only for entertainment or leisurely purposes. This assumption is further justified when 67.34% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they read sensational news for entertainment (Figure 7). Thus, implying that sensational news is not actually consider as “real news” and has become an entertainment outlet instead.

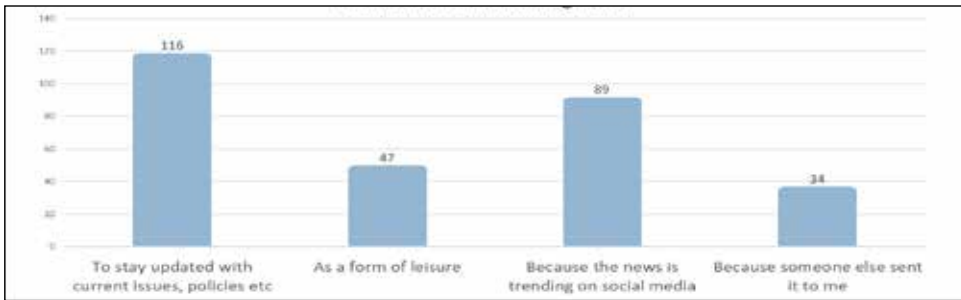


Figure 6: Reason for Consuming News

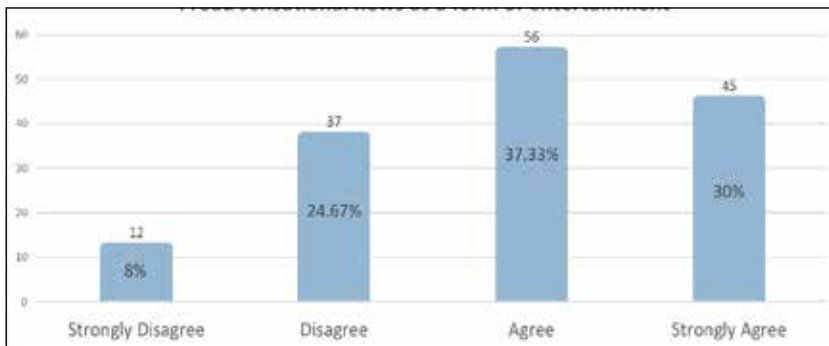


Figure 7: “I read sensational news as a form of entertainment”

Besides that, a high number of 82% of respondents believe that there are more important things for news outlets to report on other than sensational news (Figure 8). Although there is no clear definition of what “important news” means here, previous research conducted by Strömbäck et al. (2012) found out that when journalists decide what to publish, they think that news that increases the reader’s insight and knowledge are most important, yet it is perceived to be less important than they should be. On the other hand, news is perceived to be most important when it relates to the perceived reader’s interest – which includes stories or events that are sensational and unexpected. However, the importance of such sensational news is ranked higher than it should be. Their research indicates that even journalists who publish sensational news also feel that it serves less importance. Hence, supporting the respondent’s perception that the publication of sensational news serves less importance compared to other serious issues.

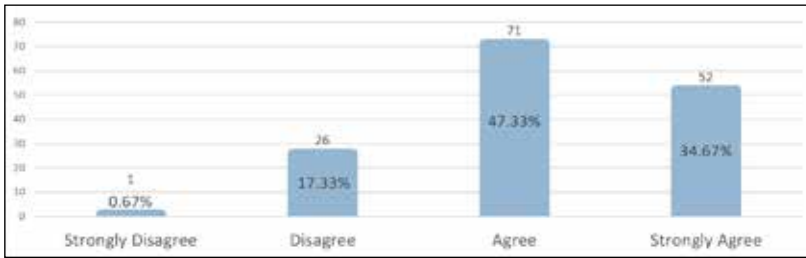


Figure 8: “There are more important things to report rather than sensational news”

Despite the negative perceptions of sensational news and its publication, the public is still of the opinion that it should be published. This complex response can be explained using the theoretical framework, the *ABC Model of Attitudes*. The model explains that attitudes are formed based on three components: *affective, cognitive, and behavioral*. Respondents tend to view the publication of sensational news negatively (cognitive). Although they might have some negative past experiences when reading sensational news, they still like consuming sensational news as their overall experience is more positive (behavior). For example, respondents might have come across unbelievable sensational news in the past. But since they read sensational news to seek entertainment, they may think that it is not a big issue.

Moreover, respondents are more likely to be emotionally driven when they are reading sensational news (affective). This is because the nature of sensationalism is to make news appear appealing by evoking emotional responses. Indeed, the findings of this study show that a higher percentage of females enjoy reading sensational news, and therefore, think that it should be published (Table 5). Although Table 6 shows that most male respondents also agree with the publication of sensational news for the same reason, the percentage of agreement is much lower. As argued by Chen et al. (2018), females tend to be more emotional by nature. Therefore, they may be more likely to be influenced by the affective component when asked if sensational news should continue its publication or not.

Table 5: Cross Tabulation between “I enjoy reading sensational news” and “Sensational news should not be published” among Female respondents

I Enjoy Reading Sensational News (Female)	Sensational News Should Not Be Published (Female)	
	Disagree & Strongly disagree	Agree & Strongly Agree
Disagree & Strongly disagree	14.29%	13.10%
Agree & Strongly Agree	51.19%	21.43%

Table 6: Cross Tabulation between “I enjoy reading sensational news” and “Sensational news should not be published” among Male respondents

I Enjoy Reading Sensational News (Male)	Sensational News Should Not Be Published (Male)	
	Disagree & Strongly disagree	Agree & Strongly Agree
Disagree & Strongly disagree	19.70%	21.21%
Agree & Strongly Agree	37.88%	21.21%

As mentioned in the literature review, Niosi (2021) suggests that some components may “win” over the other when determining the final attitude or action. Thus, some people may think one way but act another. Since respondents have positive affective and behavioral biases, they are more likely to be the dominant components in determining whether respondents will consume sensational news or not. Therefore, the sequence of components arranged from most to least influential would be *affective-behavioral-cognitive*. Even when respondents do not have a positive perception towards sensationalism, the editorial tactic is still effective in attracting them. This explains why sensational news continues to work well despite the negative connotations and perceptions surrounding it. Though the public may not like the idea of sensational news, they still could not help themselves to consume it. Thus, most of the respondents still end up agreeing with the publication of sensational news.

Since respondents still enjoy reading sensational news and opine that it should continue its publication, there may not be serious consequences for news outlets in the near future. However, the publication of overly sensational news can still bring negative effects to the organizations that publish it. In Table 7, 58.67% of respondents have stopped consuming news from organizations that publish overly sensational news. Most of these respondents avoid clicking onto sensational news too, implying that they may not deliberately seek to read sensational news in the first place. However, there is a considerable number of respondents (24.67%) who do not avoid clicking on sensational headlines but have stopped consumption from organizations that publish overly sensational news. This shows that sensationalism may be detrimental to the media outlets even though readers will still click into it. Ge (2016) explains that even when sensationalism is effective, the excessive and inappropriate use of it may bring harmful impacts instead. This goes on to show how reputation can affect media outlets—even if not all of the content published is sensational, readers may gradually stary to lose interest in the organizations if it has the frequent tendency of over-sensationalizing news.

Table 7: Cross Tabulation “I avoid clicking into sensational headlines” and “I have stopped consuming news from organizations that publish overly sensational news”

I Avoid Clicking Into News With Sensational Headlines	I Have Stopped Consuming News From Organizations That Publish Overly Sensational News			
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Strongly disagree	6.00%	7.33%	2.00%	2.00%
Disagree	4.00%	17.33%	15.33%	5.33%
Agree	0.00%	4.67%	16.00%	4.67%
Strongly agree	0.67%	1.33%	4.67%	8.67%

In addition, Gibson et al. (2006) highly emphasized the importance of public perception as it can affect corporate reputation. If a media firm ends up having a bad reputation, the public may stop consuming news from them in favor of other reputable companies. Therefore, it is vital to protect the reputation of the Malaysian news industry to ensure its survival. The arguments of Gibson et al. (2006) are further justified when 63.33% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Sensational news brings bad reputation to news organizations” (Table 8).

To further understand the impact of this circumstance, a comparison between this statement and “I dislike media organizations that publish sensational news” was made, and the result was tabulated. The combined percentage of respondents who agree and strongly agree is 42% for both statements. This shows that respondents think sensational news can bring a bad reputation to the news organization and leave a negative impression. Hence, they dislike such organizations. However, the data for those who do not have a dislike towards organizations that publish sensational news is more complex as 28% of the respondents “disagreed” and “strongly disagreed” on both questions. Meanwhile, 21.33% of them still acknowledged that sensational news has the potential to bring a bad reputation towards organizations despite not having a disliking towards these organizations.

Table 8: Cross Tabulation between “I dislike media organizations that publish sensational news” and “Sensational news brings bad reputation to news organizations”

I dislike media organizations that publish sensational news	Sensational News Brings Bad Reputation to News Organizations	
	Disagree & Strongly disagree	Agree & Strongly Agree
Disagree & Strongly disagree	28.00%	21.33%
Agree & Strongly Agree	8.67%	42.00%

Finally, the impacts of sensational news may not just affect the organizations that publish it alone. As shown in Figure 9, a total of 71.33% respondents combined had agreed or strongly agreed that they negatively perceive journalism and the industry because of sensational news. Even when there are still media outlets that favor quality and informational news over sensational stories, most of the public already has formed a negative perception towards the Malaysian news industry. Ultimately, the constant publication of sensational news can bring severe consequences to public perception of a profession that was once well respected.

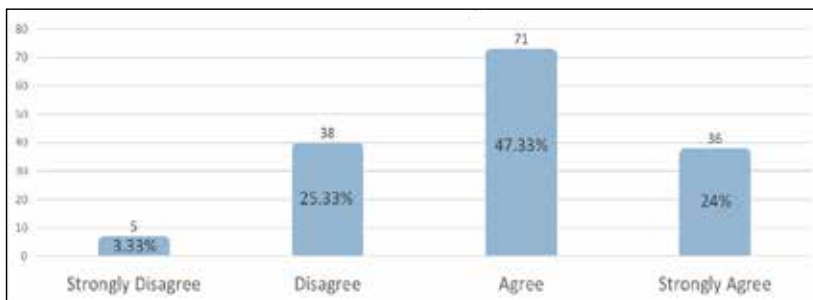


Figure 9: “Sensationalism negatively affects how I view journalism and the industry”

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the publication of sensational news negatively affects public perception on the Malaysian news industry. However, the data obtained from this research may not accurately

represent all segments of the public. For example, the survey questionnaire received most responses from females (56%) and undergraduates (69.33%). Furthermore, survey research provides little opportunity to explore issues in depth. The questions asked in the survey can only provide answers such as agree or disagree, but it does not explain the reason behind the respondent's answer. Even when crosstabulations were done to understand why respondents gave certain answers, their relationship is still formed based on the researcher's assumption. Thus, it may not be what respondents had in mind when providing the answer. Still, this research provides a general framework that could contribute to further research.

Based on the results of this study, Malaysians have already formed a negative perception towards sensational news and its publication. Yet, the threat to the industry may not be as significant as it is criticized to be. Throughout this research, many of the data obtained have a split percentage of 50%. Even when most of the data shows a simple majority having a negative perception towards sensational news, readers still find enjoyment in reading sensational news and thus agree with its publication. Therefore, a negative public perception alone may not be significant enough to affect the survival of media markets.

Regardless, the public perception and reputation of media organizations are still important. From the findings of this research, the public mainly consume news for the latest information and updates. Although they enjoy reading sensational news as well, it is merely viewed as an entertainment outlet and thus not considered as "real news". In addition to that, most respondents had also agreed with the criticisms of sensational news such as issues of quality, credibility, professionalism, and ethics. They also believe that sensational news brings a bad reputation to organizations that publish it. However, such negative perception is not just limited to the organizations that publish sensational news – it ultimately affects the industry as a whole. While there is nothing wrong with providing entertainment, media outlets should prioritize publishing and information that is able to form sophisticated citizens.

Unfortunately, such reform is easier said than done. As mentioned in the literature review, Wang (2012) mentioned that sensationalism is only adopted by media outlets because it allows them to survive. Due to the effectiveness of sensational news, journalists may give up their professional ideals in order to fulfill the market demands. As argued by Davis and McLeod (2003) from an evolutionary perspective, sensational news has always been a universal disdain, but people will always enjoy reading sensational news as it is part of human nature to be evoked by emotional responses. Hence, there will always be a high demand for sensational news in the market, especially on social media where people primarily seek for entertainment or leisure. If a reform is seriously needed, we as news readers would have to play a part too. If we continue to submerge ourselves in sensational stories, then the media outlets would have to keep fulfilling our demands. Alternatively, if we start to demand the type of news we desire, it would slowly but surely be actualized in the future.

For now, media outlets will still continue to gain significant profits by publishing sensational news. But this comes with a great cost: by sacrificing what the public perceives of journalism and the Malaysian news industry. All in all, it is up to the media outlets to decide for themselves if such a sacrifice is worth the cost, and what measures should be taken next. After all, even if it is possible for sensational news to threaten the industry, this threat may not be significant enough to affect their own livelihood.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper would not have been possible without the constant support and guidance of my lecturer, Dr. Chang Teck Peng.

REFERENCES

- Allan, S. (2010). *News Culture*. McGraw-Hill Education.
- Aslam, F., Awan, T. M., Syed, J. H., Kashif, A., & Parveen, M. (2020). Sentiments and emotions evoked by news headlines of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 7(23), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0523-3>
- Brooker, R. G., & Schaefer, T. M. (2006). *Public opinion in the 21st century: Let the people speak?* (pp. 1–33). Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Chen, X., Yuan, H., Zheng, T., Chang, Y., & Luo, Y. (2018). Females are more sensitive to opponent's emotional feedback: evidence from event-related potentials. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 12(275), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2018.00275>
- Davis, H., & McLeod, S. L. (2003). Why humans value sensational news: An evolutionary perspective. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 24(3), 208–216. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-5138\(03\)00012-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1090-5138(03)00012-6)
- Evans, D. S. (2008). The economics of the online advertising industry. *Review of Network Economics*, 7(3), 359–391. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1446-9022.1154>
- Ge, Y. (2016). Sensationalism in media discourse: A genre-based analysis of Chinese legal news reports. *Discourse & Communication*, 10(1), 22–39.
- Gibson, D., Gonzales, J. L. & Castanon, J. (2006). The importance of reputation and the role of public relations. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 51(3), 15–18.
- Hofstetter, C. R., & Dozier, D. M. (1986). Useful news, sensational news: Quality, sensationalism and local TV news. *Journalism Quarterly*, 63(4), 815–853.
- Jervis, J. (2015). *Sensational subjects: The dramatization of experience in the modern world*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Kilgo, D. K., Harlow, S., García-Perdomo, V. & Salaverría, R. (2018). A new sensation? An international exploration of sensationalism and social media recommendations in online news publications. *Journalism*, 19(11), 1497–1516. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916683549>
- Kovačič, M. P., Erjavec, K., & Štular, K. (2010). Credibility of traditional vs. online news media: a historical change in journalists' perceptions? *Medijska istraživanja: znanstveno-stručni časopis za novinarstvo i medije*, 16(1), 113–130. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/58486>
- Lin, C.A. & Atkin, D. (2014), Social media and leisure. In Michalos, A.C. (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_1623
- Lu, H., Zhang, M., & Ma, S. (2018, July 8-12). *Between clicks and satisfaction: Study on multi-phase user preferences and satisfaction for online news reading* [Paper presentation]. The 41st International ACM SIGIR Conference on Research & Development in Information Retrieval, Ann Arbor, MI, USA.
- Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2020). *Internet users survey 2020*. <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/skmmgovmy/media/General/pdf/IUS-2020-Report.pdf>

- Molyneux, L., & Coddington, M. (2020). Aggregation, clickbait and their effect on perceptions of journalistic credibility and quality. *Journalism Practice*, 14(4), 429–446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2019.1628658>
- Mourão, R. R., & Robertson, C. T. (2019). Fake news as discursive integration: An analysis of sites that publish false, misleading, hyperpartisan and sensational information. *Journalism studies*, 20(14), 2077–2095. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2019.1566871>
- Ngange, K. L. & Elempia, F. D. (2019). Sensationalism in journalism practice: Analysis of private and public print media coverage of crisis situations in Cameroon. *Journal of Mass Communication and Journalism*, 9(2), 1–7.
- Niosi, A. (2021). *Introduction to consumer behaviour*. BCampus.
- Nordin, K. D. (1979). The entertaining press: Sensationalism in eighteenth-century Boston newspapers. *Communication Research*, 6(3), 295–320.
- Ostrom, T. M. (1969). The relationship between the affective, behavioral, and cognitive components of attitude. *Journal of experimental social psychology*, 5(1), 12–30.
- Patterson, T. E. (2000, December). Doing well and doing good. SSRN. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=257395>
- Pew Research Center. (2017, March 29). *The future of free speech, trolls, anonymity and fake news online*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/03/29/the-future-of-free-speech-trolls-anonymity-and-fake-news-online/>
- SEG Measurement (n.d.). *When is a study considered to be outdated?* <https://segmeasurement.com/content/when-study-considered-be-outdated>
- Semetko, H. A., & Scammell, M. (2012). *The SAGE handbook of political communication*. SAGE Publications.
- Shariff, S. Z. M., Yaakop, S. H., & Mazlan, N. N. (2013). Trends in the purchasing pattern of newspapers among students of higher learning in the Klang Valley, Malaysia: A case study. *International Proceedings of Economics Development and Research*, 64(13), 59–64.
- Slattery, K. L. (1994). Sensationalism versus news of the moral life: Making the distinction. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 9(1), 5–15.
- Strömbäck, J., Karlsson, M., & Hopmann, D. N. (2012). Determinants of news content: Comparing journalists' perceptions of the normative and actual impact of different event properties when deciding what's news. *Journalism Studies*, 13(5-6), 718–728. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2012.664321>
- Tenenboim, O., & Cohen, A. A. (2015). What prompts users to click and comment: A longitudinal study of online news. *Journalism*, 16(2), 198–217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884913513996>
- Wang, T. L. (2012). Presentation and impact of market-driven journalism on sensationalism in global TV news. *International Communication Gazette*, 74(8), 711–727.