



**Sensationalism in Media Ethics:**

**A discussion on the ethical considerations around sensationalism in media**

**Author: Osama Qadir**

**Co-Author: Momina Qadir**

### *Abstract*

Sensationalism is the use of exaggerated, shocking, or dramatic stories or headlines to attract and engage viewers or readers. This research study aimed to investigate the ethical considerations associated with sensationalism in media and its impact on public opinion. A survey was conducted to collect data using random sampling and descriptive analysis was used to analyze the data. The research hypothesis posited that sensationalized media in journalism and mass communication tends to have a negative effect on the general public. The findings of the study support this hypothesis. The survey data revealed that the majority of respondents perceived sensationalized media as having a very negative impact. Descriptive analysis of the data, represented through pie charts, indicated that sensationalism in media can lead to increased negative effects on the general public. These effects encompassed various aspects such as increased fear, panic, and misinformation. The research provides insights into the ethical considerations surrounding sensationalism in media and emphasizes the potential harm caused by distorted or exaggerated reporting. The negative impact on public opinion highlighted the importance of responsible journalism and the need for media outlets to uphold accuracy, fairness, and balance in their reporting. The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge on sensationalism in media and its ethical implications. They underscore the importance of considering the potential consequences of sensationalism and call for a more conscientious approach to reporting in the field of journalism and mass communication.

**Keywords:** *sensationalism, ethics, media, journalism.*

## 1. Introduction

In today's media landscape, sensationalism has become an increasingly common tactic used by journalists to grab attention and increase viewership or readership. Sensationalism refers to the use of provocative or shocking headlines, images, and content in news stories to evoke emotions and create a buzz. While sensationalism may drive traffic and generate revenue for media outlets, it raises ethical questions about the responsibility of journalists to report truthfully and the potential harm that sensationalized news can cause. According to (Emmanuel, 2013), the word sensationalism has been in the bad books of journalism since 20<sup>th</sup> century and it is neither a new concept nor a new word.

This research article will discuss the ethical considerations surrounding sensationalism in media, examining the impact of sensationalism on society and the potential consequences for individuals and communities. The article will also explore the factors that contribute to sensationalism in the media and the challenges faced by journalists in navigating ethical issues related to sensationalism. When journalists are tasked with covering high-profile and sensational trials, they encounter ethical challenges and dilemmas due to the potential harm or prejudice that their news reporting may inflict on the individuals involved (Wittchen, 2023).

The issue of sensationalism in media ethics is of particular importance in today's highly polarized and politically charged environment, where the media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing political outcomes. It goes without saying that media consumers gain insight as they attempt to contextualize the events and people as presented by the news media (Zweifel, 2013). The use of sensationalism can result in the spread of false information, the manipulation of public opinion, and the exploitation of vulnerable individuals and communities.

Therefore, this research article aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on the ethical considerations surrounding sensationalism in media, by providing a comprehensive overview of the issue and its implications for society.

Overall, the goal of this research article is to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex ethical considerations surrounding sensationalism in the media, and to offer insights into how journalists and media organizations can navigate these ethical challenges while upholding their responsibilities to the public.

### **1.1. Background**

Sensationalism in media is not a new phenomenon; it has been around for centuries. However, with the rise of digital media and the 24-hour news cycle, sensationalism has become more prevalent. The pressure to be the first to report on breaking news has led to a decline in accuracy and an increase in sensationalized headlines and stories. Sensational news, despite its often-attention-grabbing nature, may contain information or events that are significant to the moral values and ethical considerations of the community. These stories may highlight issues or events that have an impact on the community's sense of right and wrong, moral principles, or overall ethical standards (Slattery, 1994).

From the sensationalist newspapers of the 19th century to the clickbait headlines of the modern era, media organizations have long sought to grab the attention of readers and viewers by using shocking or exaggerated content. However, this practice raises important ethical considerations about the impact of sensationalism on individuals and society as a whole.

Media, as a technological medium, disseminates messages to a wide audience across various regions, countries, and even globally. This expansive reach enables the transmission

of information and content, including sensationalized elements, to masses in different parts of the world (Dan, 2008).

The media plays a crucial role as both an information provider and a communication conduit between individuals and the government. It serves to educate people by offering a diverse range of information covering socio-cultural and politico-economic aspects of society. In response to the increasing need for media ethics, many media organizations have established specific ethical codes to govern the conduct of their employees and safeguard against government regulations. These ethical guidelines aim to regulate employee performance and uphold the principles of responsible journalism in order to foster a well-informed society (Begum, 2014).

Sensationalism can take many forms, from exaggerating the severity of a story to manipulating images or video footage. The aim is always to capture the audience's attention and create an emotional response. The impact of sensationalism on public opinion can be profound, particularly in the age of social media, where stories can be shared and amplified to millions of people within seconds.

## **1.2. Ethical considerations**

The ethical considerations surrounding sensationalism in media are complex and multifaceted. On one hand, journalists have a duty to report the news and inform the public. However, they also have a responsibility to act in the public interest and to ensure that their reporting is accurate, fair, and balanced.

One of the main ethical concerns around sensationalism in media is the potential for harm. When journalists exaggerate or distort stories, they can create a false narrative that can cause panic, fear, and unrest. This is particularly true in cases where the media reports on

sensitive issues such as terrorism, crime, or health scares. Another ethical consideration is the impact of sensationalism on the reputation of the media. When the media is seen as sensationalist, it can damage public trust and credibility, making it harder for journalists to report on important issues in the future.

Finally, there is the issue of privacy and dignity. Sensationalism can often involve the exploitation of vulnerable individuals or the use of intrusive tactics to gather information. This can have a serious impact on the dignity and well-being of those involved.

### **1.3. Conclusion**

Sensationalism in media is a complex issue that requires careful consideration of the ethical implications. While the media has a duty to report the news, it must also act responsibly and ensure that its reporting is accurate, fair, and balanced. The impact of sensationalism on public opinion can be profound, and journalists and media outlets must be mindful of the potential for harm.

This research article will examine the various forms of sensationalism in media and the ethical considerations surrounding them. By highlighting the impact of sensationalism on public opinion and the ethical implications for journalists and media outlets, this study aims to encourage greater awareness and responsibility in the reporting of sensitive issues. Ultimately, it is essential that the media is seen as a trustworthy and reliable source of information, and that the public can trust that what they are reading or watching is accurate, fair, and unbiased.

## **2. Literature Review**

Sensationalism in media has been a topic of debate for many years, with scholars and journalists weighing in on the ethical considerations surrounding the use of provocative or shocking content to gain attention and increase readership or viewership. In this literature review, we will examine previous studies and research on the topic of sensationalism in media ethics, exploring its impact on society, the ethical dilemmas it poses for journalists, and the factors that contribute to its prevalence in modern media (Lada Trifonova Price, 2021)

### **2.1. Impact on Society**

One of the most significant concerns about sensationalism in media is its potential impact on society. Studies have shown that sensationalized news stories can increase anxiety and fear among the public, leading to negative effects on mental health and social behavior. For example, a study by the American Psychological Association found that exposure to sensationalized news stories can lead to feelings of helplessness and desensitization to violence, as well as increased aggression and decreased empathy (Combs et al., 2013).

Sensationalism in media can also have serious implications for marginalized communities, perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing biases. A study by the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy found that sensationalized coverage of crimes committed by immigrants and Muslims in the US contributes to a climate of fear and hostility towards these groups, fueling discrimination and hate crimes (Lewis et al., 2018).

Media organizations, with their incorporation of a variety of often contradictory norms, operational modes, and regulatory policies, navigate a landscape where sensationalism can pose additional complexities. Sensationalism, characterized by the exaggeration or distortion of news stories for attention-grabbing purposes, further complicates the already intricate dynamics within the industry (Vltmer, 2013).

With the emergence of new computer technologies, editors now have the ability to manipulate the content of photographs, altering colors, removing or adding objects or people to pictures. This manipulation raises concerns related to sensationalism, as modified images can be used to create a more sensationalized narrative or to deceive audiences. Moreover, the ability to produce negatives from altered images can be utilized to provide apparent proof of the authenticity of the photograph (Reaves, 1989).

## **2.2. Ethical Dilemmas for Journalists**

The use of sensationalism in media also raises ethical dilemmas for journalists, who are tasked with balancing the need to report the news accurately and fairly with the pressure to generate clicks and revenue. The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics emphasizes the importance of seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events, while also respecting the dignity and privacy of individuals (SPJ, 2014).

Media ethics often encompass a profound sense of outrage. Vital information that the public requires may be concealed or distorted, while reputations painstakingly built over a lifetime can be shattered with a few keystrokes. Many discussions surrounding media ethics are composed in the passionate fervor of the moment, addressing the pervasive influence of sensationalism and its potential impact on responsible journalism (Ferré, 2008).

However, in the current media landscape, where competition for attention is intense, journalists may be incentivized to prioritize sensationalism over accuracy and fairness. A study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that the use of clickbait headlines and sensationalized content is widespread in online news outlets, with many journalists admitting to feeling pressure to use such tactics (Newman et al., 2019).



(Ghosh, 2014) , in their study, highlighted instances where the traditional mass media, press, and television neglected established ethical principles and journalistic norms followed by the Indian news media.

Ethics serve as the internal guide that individuals rely on to assess and interpret a situation, enabling them to determine the appropriate course of action based on their moral values, ideals, and beliefs. Sensationalism, often intertwined with ethical considerations, can influence the way individuals perceive and respond to situations, potentially impacting their decision-making process (Tilak, 2020).

### **2.3. Factors Contributing to Sensationalism**

The prevalence of sensationalism in media can be attributed to a range of factors, including changes in technology, the rise of social media, and the increasing importance of ratings and revenue. The 24-hour news cycle and the need to compete with other media outlets for attention has also contributed to the use of sensationalism in news reporting (Donsbach, 2014).

Additionally, some scholars have argued that the commercialization of media has led to a focus on profits over journalistic integrity, resulting in a prioritization of sensational content (Jansen, 2014). Others have pointed to the influence of political and corporate interests on media coverage, which can lead to the manipulation of news stories and the use of sensationalism to advance certain agendas (Altheide, 2002).

According to (Raza M. Riaz, 2013), their findings reveal that these channels engage in the manipulation of "breaking news," presenting routine news events as breaking news in order to generate hype. The results suggest that a significant portion of news bulletins is

comprised of soft news, emphasizing sensationalism and entertainment value over substantive and critical reporting.

#### **2.4. Objective**

The objective of this research is to critically examine the ethical considerations surrounding sensationalism in media and its impact on society. This study aims to analyze the various forms of sensationalism, evaluate its ethical implications, and propose recommendations for promoting responsible media practices.

#### **2.5. Research Question**

“What are the ethical considerations associated with sensationalism in media, and how do they impact public opinion?”

#### **2.6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the literature on sensationalism in media ethics highlights the complex ethical considerations surrounding the use of provocative and shocking content to generate attention and increase readership or viewership. Sensationalism can have negative impacts on society, perpetuate biases and stereotypes, and pose ethical dilemmas for journalists tasked with balancing accuracy and fairness with the pressure to generate revenue.

The media has a significant impact on society and sensational media in particular can influence people’s attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Ethics are crucial in sensational media to ensure that the information presented is accurate, fair and does not cause any harm. One of the most important ethical consideration in sensational media is accuracy. It often involves controversial or shocking stories that can be distorted or exaggerated to make them more compelling. It is essential to verify the information presented avoiding any harm to the individuals or groups viewing the news (Chu, 2019).

The ethical implications have been widely debated in recent years. Proponents of sensationalism argue that it is a necessary part of news reporting whereas keeping in view the ethical considerations it is also irresponsible because it can lead to false or exaggerated reports by keeping the viewers interested in such news. The media has a responsibility to avoid causing harm to individuals or groups. Sensational media can have negative consequences such as stigmatizing or harming individuals or groups, inciting violence and hatred, or creating panic and anxiety. So, verifying the presented information that it is not going to spread false information that could harm the beliefs of viewers and cause violence among them is important (Walsh, 2020).

Some people might argue that ethics are not important in sensational media. According to (Perry, 2002), news sensationalism can be influenced by the geographical and/or cultural proximity of news events. Perry further argues that audiences or readers may perceive sensationalism based on the proximity of these events in terms of geographical location. However, many ethicists argue that ethics are important because the media can have a significant impact on people's beliefs. Additionally, certain actions that take place in sensational media may lead to interfere in ethical standards when reporting on sensational topics (Webster, 2012).

The factors contributing to the prevalence of sensationalism in media include changes in technology, the commercialization of media, and the influence of political and corporate interests. It is important for media organizations and journalists to be aware of these factors and to prioritize ethical considerations in their reporting practices, in order to maintain trust with their audiences and uphold their responsibilities to society.

Ethics in sensational media are crucial to ensure accuracy, fairness and to avoid causing harm. Media outlets must be responsible and mindful of their impact on society and prioritize ethical considerations in their reporting.

### 3. Research Design

The research design for this study is quantitative in nature. Quantitative research methods are suitable for exploring complex social phenomena, such as sensationalism in media, and understanding the perspectives of participants. According to Alan Bryman, such type of research design is referred to as a comparative research design (Bryman, 2012). The research will use an interpretive paradigm, which focuses on understanding the meanings and interpretations of participants regarding the research topic (Creswell, 2014). This approach relies on questioning in order to generate a deep understanding of the phenomena (Bonache, 2020).

#### 3.1. Data Collection Methods

The data collection method for this study will include a survey questionnaire that will be administered online. The survey will be designed to gather information from media consumers about their perceptions and attitudes towards sensationalism in media. The sample technique used will be convenience sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method that selects participants based on their accessibility (Babbie, 2016).

The survey questionnaire will consist of closed-ended questions. Closed-ended questions will allow respondents to select their answers from a list of options. The survey will be pre-tested to ensure that the questions are clear and relevant to the research topic.

#### 3.2. Data Analysis Methods

The data collected from the survey will be analyzed using descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize the responses to closed-ended questions. The software used for the data analysis will be SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Vr-22.

### **3.3. Ethical Considerations**

The research will adhere to ethical principles of research, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. All participants will be provided with a participant information sheet that explains the purpose of the study, the data collection methods, and their rights as participants. They will be asked to provide informed consent before participating in the study. All data will be kept confidential, and participants will not be asked to provide their names or other identifying information. They will have the freedom to withdraw the study if they want to.

#### 4. Results

The purpose of this research is to show the effect of sensationalism on public opinion and the ethical implications for journalists and media outlets, this study aims to encourage greater awareness and responsibility in the reporting of sensitive issues. Descriptive statistics show that how the sensationalism in media effects the public.

**Table 1**

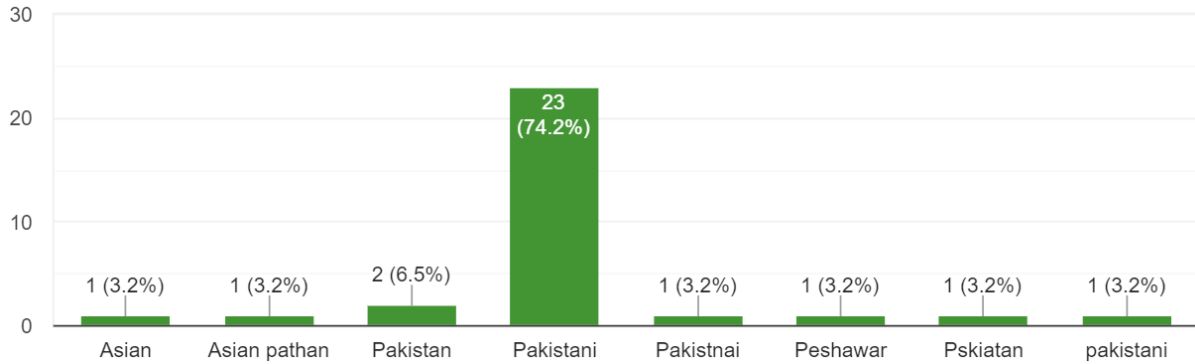
#### *Descriptive Statistics*

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Deviation	Variance	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
number of participants	30	29	1	30	16	2	9	78	0
age	30	30	19	49	28	1	6	35	2
gender	30	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	1
language	30	3	1	4	2	0	1	1	0
nationality	30	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	
education	30	2	1	3	2	0	1	0	0
profession	30	2	1	3	1	0	1	1	2
Q1	30	2	1	3	1	0	1	0	3
Q2	30	3	1	4	2	0	1	1	1
Q3	30	2	1	3	2	0	1	1	1
Q4	30	2	1	3	1	0	1	0	1
Q5	30	2	1	3	2	0	1	1	1
Q6	30	2	1	3	1	0	1	0	3
Q7	30	2	1	3	2	0	1	0	0
Q8	30	2	1	3	1	0	1	1	2
Q9	29	2	1	3	2	0	1	0	0
Q10	30	3	1	4	3	0	1	1	1
Q11	30	2	1	3	1	0	1	1	1
Q12	30	2	1	3	2	0	1	0	0

The table 1 shows that  $N = 30$ , the participants were from Pakistan and they all spoke English Urdu or they were bilingual. Their education level was intermediate, bachelors, masters and PhD. All of them were the users of social media. This table shows that most of the participants showed a greater impact towards media sensationalism, which means that sensationalism in media has a greater effect on people. Furthermore, the data was normally distributed. The detailed interpretation is show in table 2.



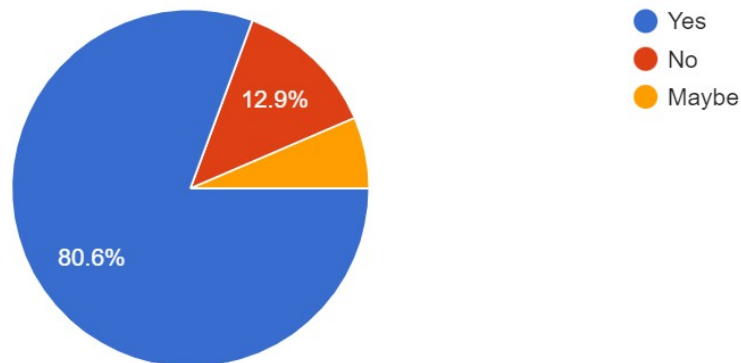
**Table 2**



N=30, This shows that all participants were Pakistani out of which 77% were male and 22% were female. 54% of the participants were in their BS level degree, 42% in their MS and 4% in intermediate level.

1. Are you aware of the term sensationalism in media?

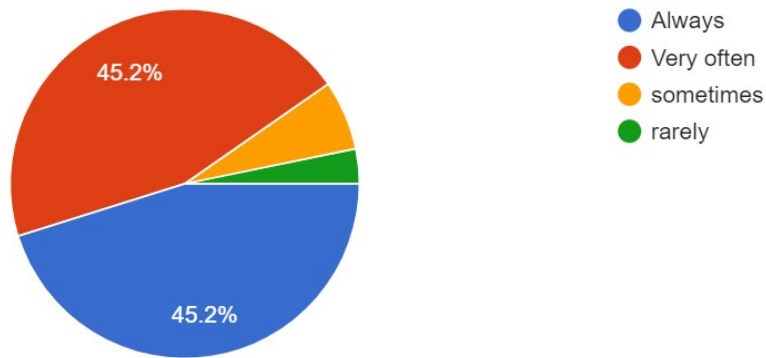
31 responses



80% of the people were aware of the term sensationalism. 12% did not know about the term therefore it was explained to them by the researchers.

2. How often do you see the news being sensationalized on media?

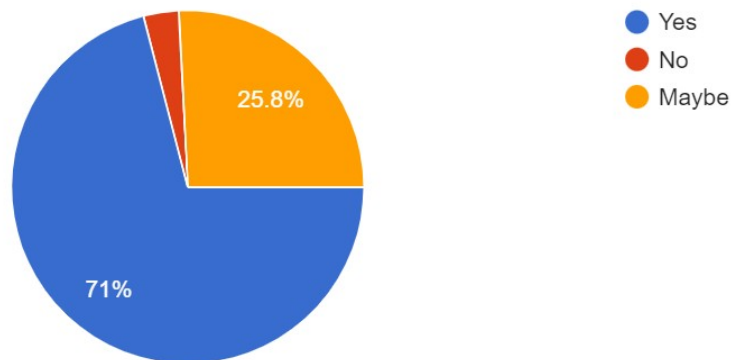
31 responses



Almost 45.2% people believe that the news being shown is sensationalized.

3. Do you think that sensationalism in media changes the perspective of the audiences related to media?

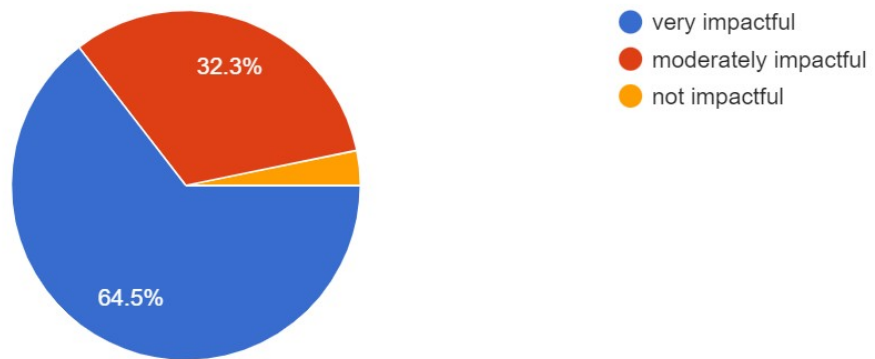
31 responses



About 71% people's perspectives change when the news is sensationalized.

4. how impactful are the sensationalized media news?

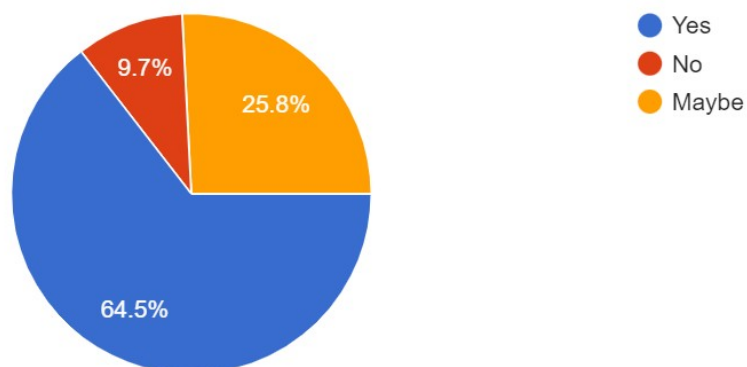
31 responses



The sensationalized media is very impactful to most of the public. However a very few people are not impacted

5. Do you think sensationalism is unethical practice in journalism?

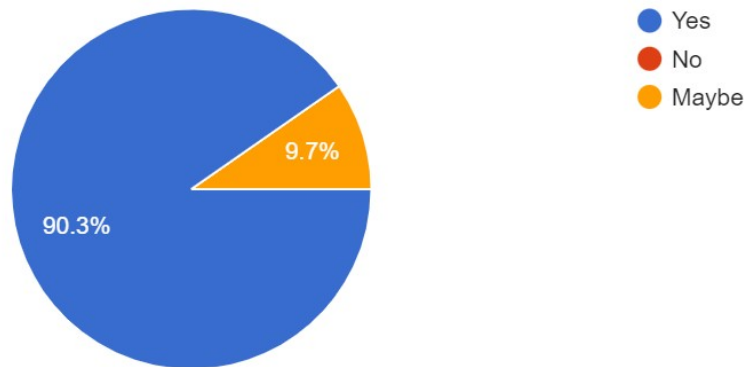
31 responses



Almost 64% of people think that sensationalism is an unethical practice.

6. do you think that the sensationalized news of media is for seeking attention?

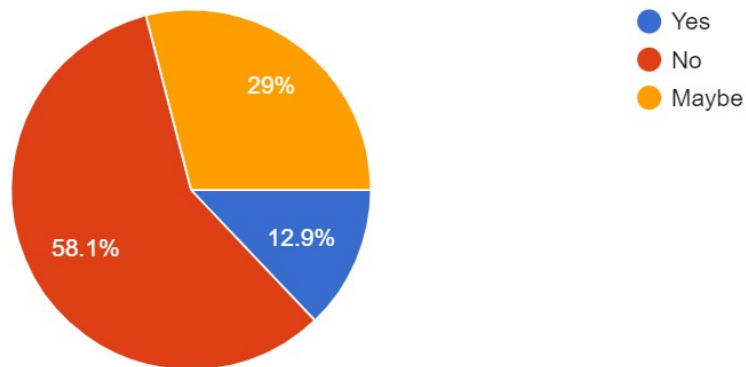
31 responses



About 90% of people think that sensationalized media shows such contents because they want attention.

7. Do you think sensationalism is important?

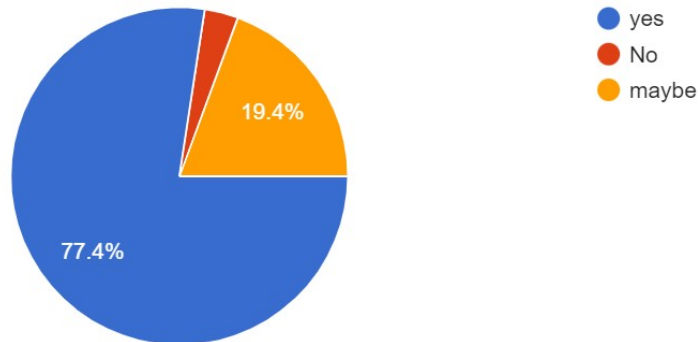
31 responses



58% people think that sensationalism is not important, however 12% people are of the perspective that media being sensationalized is important.

8. Are the news channels and other media sabotaging the essence of sensitive news by sensationalizing it?

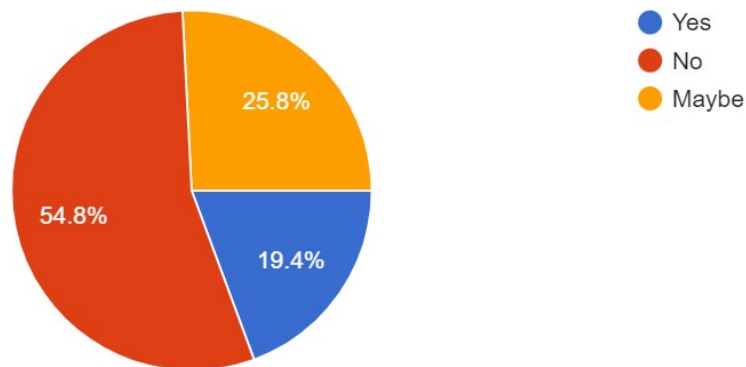
31 responses



Most of the people think that the news channels and other media are sabotaging the essence of sensitive news by sensationalizing it. 77.4% people agreed to it.

9. should the media news be sensitized?

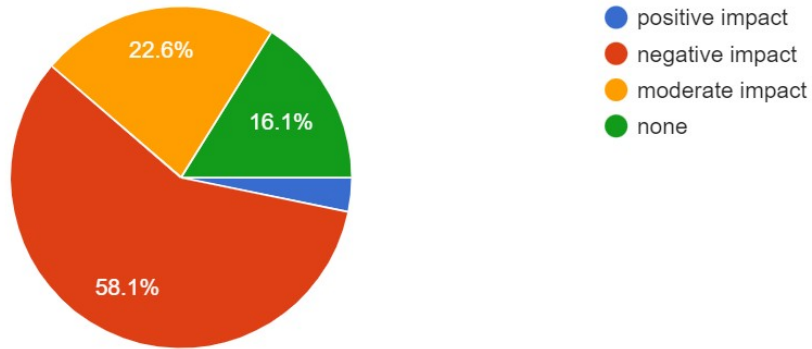
31 responses



55% people think that the news shouldn't be sensationalized.

10. what impact does the sensationalized media have on you?

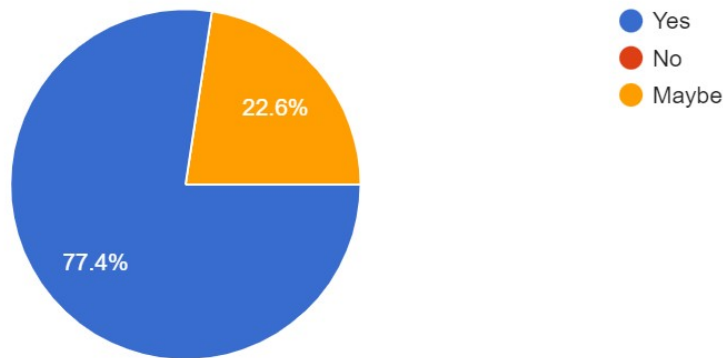
31 responses



This is an important question. About 58% people have a negative impact of sensationalized media, whereas 22% people are moderately affected by it. 16% people find its positive impact as well.

11. do you think sensationalized media provokes psychological triggers such as stress, anxiety and depression?

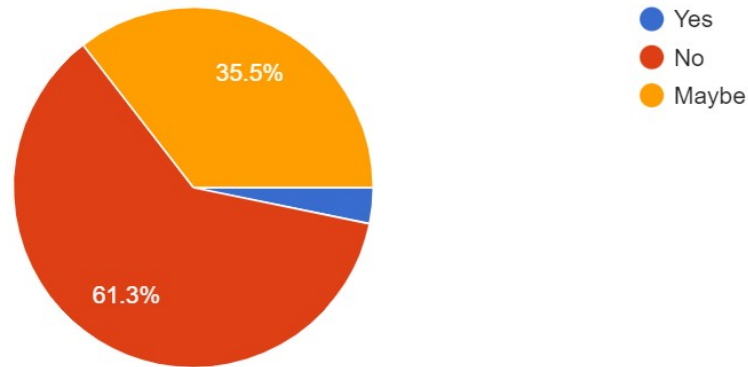
31 responses



This question shows that sensationalized media has psychological triggers as well, because 77% of people find their selves' anxious or triggered trough sensationalized media.

12. Do you trust the exaggerated and sensational claims given by the media?

31 responses



Majority of the people i.e. 61% do not trust the claims given by sensationalized media.

If we summarize these pie charts, we can conclude that sensationalized media has a very negative impact on general public. Hence this survey proves our hypothesis that sensationalized media in journalism and mass communication tends to increase its effect on people negatively.

## Discussions

The effect of sensationalism in the media on the public is a topic that has sparked many discussions and debates. Sensationalism refers to the use of exaggerated, shocking, or dramatic stories or headlines to attract and engage viewers or readers. While sensationalism can capture attention and increase media ratings or sales, it also has several potential effects on the public, which can be both positive and negative. As our study also shows that majority of the people were highly affected by the sensationalism of media through journalism or news, keeping in view that all of the participants were educated.

Sensationalized media tends to evoke strong emotional reactions from the audience. By emphasizing sensational aspects, such as violence, scandal, or controversy, the media can trigger fear, outrage, or anxiety among viewers. This emotional impact can sometimes distort people's perceptions of reality, as the media often focuses on extreme cases that may not be representative of the overall situation.

Over time, consistent use of sensationalism can erode public trust in the media. When news outlets prioritize sensational stories over accuracy and balanced reporting, it can lead to skepticism and skepticism regarding media content. Public trust is crucial for a well-informed society, and sensationalism can undermine the credibility of the media as an objective source of information.

Continuous exposure to sensationalized content can desensitize individuals to shocking or disturbing events. When extreme stories become commonplace, people may become less shocked or concerned, potentially normalizing violence, tragedy, or other negative occurrences. This can have long-term effects on societal values and the perception of what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior.



Sensationalism can contribute to polarization by presenting news in a biased or one-sided manner. Media outlets may emphasize sensational elements that align with their ideological or political biases, reinforcing existing beliefs and dividing the public along partisan lines. This can hinder constructive dialogue and contribute to the spread of misinformation or disinformation.

Sensationalized stories often overshadow more significant but less sensational news. As media outlets prioritize attention-grabbing headlines, important social, economic, or political issues may receive less coverage, resulting in a lack of public awareness or engagement with critical matters.

The constant exposure to sensationalized media content can have psychological effects on individuals. It can contribute to increased stress, anxiety, and feelings of insecurity, as people may develop a distorted view of the world based on sensationalized news. Furthermore, research has suggested a correlation between excessive media consumption, including sensationalized content, and mental health issues.

It is important to note that not all media outlets engage in sensationalism, and there are many reputable sources that strive to provide balanced and accurate reporting. However, the influence of sensationalism should be recognized and critically analyzed to promote media literacy and a more nuanced understanding of the information we consume.

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