

Article

The Breaking News Effect and Its Impact on the Credibility and Trust in Information Posted on Social Media

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Abstract: The development of social media has triggered important changes in our society and in the way consumers read and trust online information. The presence of consumers in the online environment exposes them to a greater extent to various instances of fake news, which are spread more or less intentionally. Sensational and breaking-news-style information are one of the ways in which consumers' attention is attracted, by posting exaggerated or distorted information. The objective of our research is to determine the impact of sensational and breaking news headlines on content credibility. In a mediation model, we show that the perception of sensationalism mediates the relation between the presence of breaking news headlines and trust in the content of the information. Based on our proposed model, the existence of breaking news headlines increases the consumers' perception of sensationalism and reduces trust in news content. These results have important implications for patterns of news consumption. If a piece of information is presented in a sensational way, it might attract more consumers' attention in the short term, but in the long run it will reduce the credibility of its content. Based on our research, we recommend using sensational headlines with caution to maintain credibility.

Keywords: breaking news; fake news; sensational news; social media; source credibility; trust



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1. Introduction

In recent years, social media has evolved from a platform for meeting and connecting with friends to an environment where people create and exchange different types of information [1]. Compared to traditional newspapers, content shared on social media usually does not pass an editorial check [2], making it more susceptible to fake content and information [3]. Spreading rumors and false stories is a typical human activity that has existed since the beginning of mankind [4,5], but social media has amplified this phenomenon by spreading fake information faster and more widely [6,7]. Most of the time, every piece of information posted on social media reaches millions of users in real time, which, in the case of misinformation, can be a problem for companies, organizations, and even individuals. Fake news shared on social media can damage the reputation of companies or individuals [8], it can represent a financial threat for companies or political campaigns [9,10], or, in some cases, it can even lead to boycotts [11]. The rapidity of spreading information, through sharing and posting, often gives no time for reaction from the person or organization included in the news [12]. Sensational news is another way of spreading easily fake, exaggerated, or distorted information [13]. By wanting to create a sensation, some isolated facts about companies can be made a headline, threatening the image and trust of customers. For instance, for a retail companies, a negative headline about one of their stores can impact negatively the entire store chain. Online users can easily spread negative news and information about an unfortunate event, which can be

generalized for the entire retail company. It takes a lot of effort and money to develop strategies to combat such news. McDonald's is one of the companies to invest in advertising campaigns in order to destroy all the negative myths created in the media about them [14]. Other retail companies also struggle with similar battles, where some negative information is generalized and might destroy their public image. In comparison to the initial spread of rumors, which was mainly unintentional, fake news is distributed both intentionally and unintentionally [9,15,16], and has a much wider impact. Fake news often takes the form of satire, parodies, alternated fabrication, or sensational headlines [1], and it is easily spread because of the low analytical capabilities or dogmatism of readers [17].

In this paper, we focus on the impact of a breaking-news-style information on the perception of sensationalism and content credibility. The paper begins by examining the existing literature on fake news, with a focus on sensational headlines and their impact on consumers and companies. In the empirical part, we present the results of research in which we manipulate the form of a news story and measure the perception of sensationalism and its credibility. Based on the results, we present the discussion, implications and conclusions of the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Fake News Concept

With the development of the internet and social media networks, fake news has become a common phenomenon of our society, having major implications in various areas of the everyday life of consumers. Fake news is defined as fabricated news articles that aim to deceive the public opinion and mislead readers' opinions for ideological, political, or financial gain [5,9,18]. In spite of the simple definition given to fake news, there are several facets that are associated with this concept that need to be analyzed in order to fully understand this phenomenon. On one hand, fake news is not necessarily a new concept, as it was previously known in the media as misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, satire, hoaxes, or conspiracy theories [5]. On the other hand, there are the various forms in which fake news is disseminated nowadays. The most important categories are the intentionally crafted false information for financial gain or for discrediting others [9,15], and the distorted news based on real and factual information that should fit a particular context [19].

An important aspect for the classification of fake news is the intention of the disseminator. In this sense, there is the intentional spread of fake news, previously known as disinformation, and the unintentional spread of existing information, also known as misinformation [5,20]. These two categories correspond, according to [5], to two types of fake news sharing behavior: malicious and benign. The malicious sharing behavior of fake news refers to the people who share fake information even if they know that the information is untrue. Usually, these are people paid to disseminate fake information for ideological, political, or financial purposes [21]. The category of the benign users refers to the unintentional spread of false information. This group is more difficult to analyze because of the different motivations and reasons for creating and sharing fake news. Several authors have concluded that social norms play an important role for this type of behavior [17,22,23]. The need for gratification, acceptance, and conformity of social groups lead users to share information accepted and debated in the social group, without analyzing the veracity of the information [11,23–26]. A special case is that of non-human agents, or social bots, that spread fake news based on predefined computer algorithms that mimic human behavior [27]. Based on human behavior, such as giving likes, sharing, or commenting, these social bots accelerate the spread of fake news [15].

2.2. Breaking News or the Sensational Effect

One frequent form of creating fake news on social media or in the online environment is through the creation of sensational headlines in the style of a breaking news story. In a society characterized by information overload [28], where online users do not have the

time and patience to read news in an extensive way, social media and even internet news outlets function in a “headline” style. Therefore, the sensational headline or title of a news article is more important than its content [29] or the credibility of its source [30]. Sensational “breaking news” titles are designed to grab the attention of consumers or online users, and receive a large number of likes, comments, and shares [18]. This increases their likelihood of appearing in the news feeds of a high number of online users, and thereby assures a rapid spread on social media [31]. Therefore, little attention is paid to the veracity of the information, and frequently the idea in the headline is the one to create a first impression and remain in the mind of the consumer [32]. Moreover, sensational headlines create traffic and, consequently, more revenue from advertisements posted along with the news [18,33].

Publishing sensational news is not a new phenomenon, as it has already existed in a certain category of magazines and in the society [34]. Sensational news triggers the curiosity of the readers. Several authors suggest that curiosity is a normal psychological trait [35,36], as individuals aim to find out potentially dangerous information about their environment in order to know how to cope with it. Moreover, according to the theories of evolutionary adeptness, individuals read sensational news in order to be integrated in their social circle and increase reproductive fitness [37,38].

Several news channels use sensational messages in order to increase the size of their audience [39]. Studies confirm that sensational news encourages consumers to watch the news for a longer time, but it is not the only success factor, as the type of sensational news depends on the characteristics of the watcher [40]. Sometimes sensational headlines are also read because of the curiosity of readers that use heuristics in order to determine the truthfulness of the information. Therefore, the judgements regarding the credibility of the news is more important than its content [41].

2.3. Trust in Online News

One big difficulty in the identification of fake news is their realistic form [18]. Several studies have shown that there is a certain polarization of social media, as users have a confirmation bias by reading and sharing only the information which corresponds to their own beliefs and values [5,24,42,43]. Based on several personalization algorithms, users receive in their news feeds only information and posts that correspond to their past behavior [43], creating hereby so-called “echo chambers” [24]. This type of posting, and the lack of opposing information, strengthens the belief of the users in a certain group by reducing their reflective thinking [44] and their ability to accept opposing information. These so-called echo-chambers makes users trust the information they read, without checking its veracity, and promote hereby a superficial thinking [44] and a higher adherence to fake information in the social media [17,42]. This idea is supported by [45], according to which altruism, ignorance, and entertainment are significant predictors of fake news sharing. Users tend to disseminate online information if they believe it is for a good cause (altruism) or if the information is funny (entertainment) without checking if the information is true or not. They also confirm that ignorance can be a predictor for the dissemination of fake news [45]. In opposition to this, personality traits such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, and open-mindedness, as well as behavioral characteristics such as lower level of extroversion as well as fewer hours spent online, increase the discernment towards the truthfulness of online information [43]. Another interesting fact is that during pandemics, consumers share online information as a passing-time activity [46].

Another aspect about the credibility of online news and the categorization of sensational and fake news is the binary perspective, where sensational and fake news is analyzed as true or false. Few authors take into consideration different levels of facticity [13,19,34,47], in which different types of fallacies are used in order to blur the content [34]. According to some authors, the way something is said is more important than its content [34,48], allowing different rhetorical devices to change the meaning of the content. Frequently used fallacies are the false dilemma, formal logical errors, bandwagon effect, false attribution, ad hominem fallacy, clickbait or stylistic flaws, rhetorical questions, and alter-

native facts [34,49–51]. However, it depends on the education level [51], the cognitive abilities [44,52], or the emotional state [53] in how far a reader believes in the presented rhetorical devices. According to [54], the information adoption is based on quality of the content, the quality of the expression of the information, and its utility. If information is well written and the content is plausible, it is more likely to be trusted by the readers.

The credibility of certain information depends on the credibility of its source [55]. According to the elaboration likelihood model, a consumer has two paths of evaluating information. The central route refers to the message itself, to its content and form, while the peripheral route refers to the other features of the information, such as source credibility, reputation, and general impression [56,57]. Usually, the evaluation of the information in the central route requires more cognitive effort, while decisions based on the peripheral route are easier and based on heuristic cues [58,59]. Especially in ambiguous situations [60], when the reader does not have the time or does not want to make the effort to evaluate the information, they rely on the peripheral route, relying on the credibility of the sources or the general impression. Consequently, in the social media context, where the reader is overwhelmed by information, they frequently rely on the credibility of the source [57,61].

2.4. Implications of Sensational Headlines

The spreading of fake and sensational news has different implications for companies, media, consumers, and society in general [5]. Fake news about companies can affect their reputation, and can even influence their revenues by changing the consumers' buying options [8,62]. Combating fake news about the quality of products or other reputational issues costs a lot of time and effort for companies [63], and sometimes it is difficult to entirely erase fake information as soon as it has been made public. The ability to react quickly to negative information has raised the need to have specialized departments in companies to monitor fake news. The existence of such departments involves high cost in order to respond rapidly to such potential fake news [64].

From a consumer's perspective, the existence of fake news can lead to confusion and doubt [65], as it is difficult to sort out the real information from the media. This decreases the trust in media and encourages consumers to avoid such types of news [66]. This avoidance behavior is also known as social media fatigue, and leads to a discontinuance of using or being active on social media, or even in closing the social media account [67].

A sensational title or headline triggers a similar behavior. A sensational headline may raise expectations for the content of an article, which, in the case of fake news, is not met, leading to the deception of the reader. This also leads to an avoidance behavior, which diminishes the interest of readers in such types of articles, unless it is used for heuristics [41]. In any case, the desire of media companies to attract the consumer's attention with sensational news can lead to information overload, which, again, causes social media fatigue and a discontinuous behavior [67–69].

There is an intense preoccupation in finding algorithms for the detection of the truthfulness of sensational news [70], but the phenomenon is complex and dynamic, so it will need further insights into understanding it.

3. Methodology and Data Collection

3.1. Objective, Hypotheses and Research Design

The objective of our research is to determine the impact that a sensational "breaking news" post has on the credibility and trust of the presented information to the consumer. We aim to test empirically if the perception of the sensational breaking news information impacts the credibility of the content. In order to test this objective, a mediation model was developed, having the condition of the post (objective vs breaking news) as independent variable, the credibility of the information as a dependent variable, and the perception of sensationalism as the mediator. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Information written in a breaking news style increases the consumer's perception regarding the sensationalism of the post (a-path).*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *A higher perception of sensationalism decreases the trust and the credibility of the posted information (b-path).*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Information posted in a breaking news style decreases the credibility of the news (c-path).*

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *The perception of sensationalism mediates the relation between the breaking news style in which the information was written and its credibility (c'-path).*

In the first hypothesis, we aim to measure if breaking news information is perceived by the consumer as sensational or not. In the second hypothesis, we assume that information that is perceived as sensational has a lower credibility, while in the third and fourth hypotheses, we aim to measure the direct and total effect of the relation between breaking-news-style information and its credibility.

In order to determine the impact of sensational information on the consumer's trust, a study with a within-subject design has been carried out, in which the participants ($N = 370$ participants) had to evaluate two posts on social media regarding the increase in gas prices. In the first condition, the posts have been written in a breaking news manner, presenting the "disaster" caused by the increased gas prices (quantified in the research with 2), while in condition 2, the post presents, in a fairly objective way, the impact of the increased gas prices on the consumers' bills (quantified in the research with 1). After seeing the posts, the participants had to evaluate the truthfulness and the credibility of the information, as well as their perception regarding the sensational effect of the headline on the presented information. All items have been measured based on self-reported Likert scales, with 1 as total disagreement and 7 as full agreement.

Data collection took place with the help of interview operators, and was carried out in December 2019. It must be mentioned that the panicking news was tested before the beginning of the pandemic and before the start of the increasing energy prices. The sample was equally distributed among genders: 50.5% women and 49.4% men. Most of the respondents were between 21 and 30 years old (61.6%), but also other age groups have been included, such as 31–40 years (14.3%), 41–50 years (7.5%), 51–60 years (11.6%), and older than 60 years (1.8%), as well as younger than 20 years (2.9%).

3.2. Factor Analysis and Reliability of Variables

In order to test the reliability of the items used in the research, a factor analysis has been applied. The results have revealed the existence of three factors resulting from the items used in the self-reported questionnaire (see Table 1). The significance of the factor analysis is given by the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin criterion, which has a value of 0.927, and the Bartlett test, with a Chi-square value of 6760.5 ($p = 0.000$). According to the item loadings, factor 1 contains 10 items referring to different forms of trust in and credibility of the information. Initially, we have aimed to test different forms of trust regarding information posted on the internet, as, for instance, general trust and belief in the truthfulness of the information (3 items), trust in the publication or the internet site where the information was posted (3 items), match with the own beliefs of the reader (2 items), and comparison to other information sources (2 items). The results of the confirmatory analysis show a correlation between these items and, for this reason, they will be considered as one variable, "trust," in the further analysis. The average of the variable trust is $M = 3.293$, and the Cronbach alpha for these items has a value of $\alpha = 0.942$.

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis.

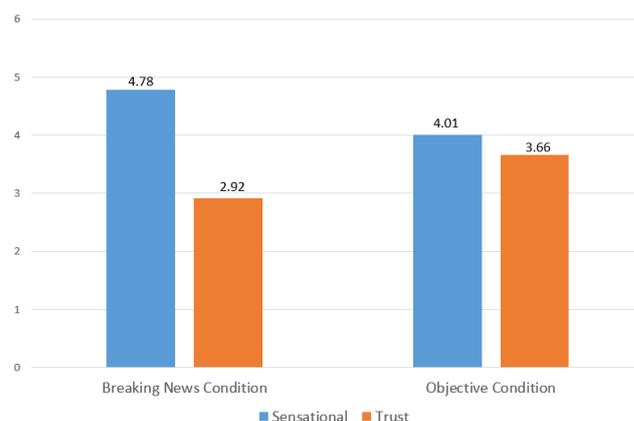
Item	Factor Loading
Trust in news ($\alpha = 0.942$)	
I believe this news is true	0.754
I believe this information is reliable and may contribute to the formation of a personal opinion	0.818
I believe that this information is reliable and can help to change my personal attitude towards the presented subject	0.815
I believe the source has significant credibility	0.884
I trust the information because the publication is known	0.815
I trust the information because the publication has a high degree of credibility	0.864
I trust the information because the publication corresponds to my personal values and ideas	0.828
I trust the information because the publication is validated by my social circle	0.801
The content is well presented, based on arguments and concrete data	0.814
I believe that the information does not contradict other published articles	0.653
Perception of sensational ($\alpha = 0.712$)	
I believe that the title contains elements specific to the “sensational”	0.759
I feel that the title diminishes my confidence in the subject	0.726
I feel there is a discrepancy between the “sensational” of the title and the presented subject	0.683

According to the loadings of the factor analysis (see Table 1), the second factor contains three items referring to the perception of the sensationalism of the presented information, and is named “sensational” in the further analysis. The variable sensational has an average value of $M = 4.398$, and a Cronbach alpha of $\alpha = 0.712$.

The third variable referred to the need of the readers to check the posted information. Taking into consideration the fact that this factor contains only one item, it has been eliminated from the further analysis. The items and the result of the factor analysis can be observed in Table 1.

4. Results

The descriptive statistics of the empirical results have shown that there is a difference in the perception of trust and truthfulness and the perception of sensationalism for the breaking news and the objective condition (see Figure 1). Respondents perceive, in a significant way, a higher degree of trust in the posted information for the objective condition in comparison to the breaking news condition ($M_{\text{objective}} = 3.66 > M_{\text{breaking_news}} = 2.92$, $F = 51.639$, $p = 0.000$). As expected, the consumers perceive a higher degree of sensationalism for the breaking news condition in comparison to the objective condition ($M_{\text{objective}} = 4.01 < M_{\text{breaking_news}} = 4.78$, $F = 54.108$, $p = 0.000$).

**Figure 1.** Descriptive results for breaking news vs. objective condition.

For the proposed objective, a mediation model was developed, having the condition (breaking news vs. objective) as the independent variable, the credibility and the trust towards the information as the dependent variable, and the perception of sensationalism as mediator. The mediation was performed with the help of the Process-Macro written by [71], in SPSS 20.0, by applying a bootstrapping method with 5000 samples at a confidence interval of 95%.

There is a significant positive relation for the a-path between the breaking news condition (quantified as “breaking news condition = 2” and “objective condition = 1”) and the self-reported evaluation of the perception of sensationalism. For this path, the β -coefficient has the value 0.768, having $t = 7.355$, $p = 0.000$, and $CI = [0.564; 0.975]$. This confirms hypothesis 1, showing that the respondents have a lower perception of sensationalism for the objective condition, in comparison to the breaking news condition. The perception of sensationalism is negatively correlated with the dependent variable trust (b-path), having $\beta = -0.235$ ($t = -6.723$, $p = 0.000$, and $CI = [-0.304; -0.166]$). This result confirms hypothesis 2, by which a higher perception of sensationalism decreases the trust and belief in the truthfulness of the presented information.

The direct effect (c' -path) of the relation, describing the impact of the existence of a breaking news condition on the trust in the presented information, has the coefficient $\beta = -0.554$ ($t = -5.383$, $p = 0.000$, and $CI = [-0.757; -0.352]$). The total effect for the same relation (c-path) has also the following significant values: $\beta = -0.735$ ($t = -7.186$, $p = 0.000$, and $CI = [-0.937; -0.534]$). The indirect effect of the mediation model has the value: $ab = c - c' = -0.181$ and a bootstrapping 95% confidence interval $CI = [0.106; 0.272]$. Taking into consideration the fact that 0 is not included into $CI = [-0.272; -0.106]$, the mediation is confirmed. The Sobel test has a value of 4.957 ($p = 0.000$), confirming the mediation (calculated based on [72,73]). These results confirm hypothesis 3 and the fact that the existence of a breaking news condition impacts the credibility of the presented information. Moreover, the perception of a sensational headline decreases the credibility of the presented information even more, confirming, hereby, hypothesis 4. These results can be observed in the mediation model in Figure 2.

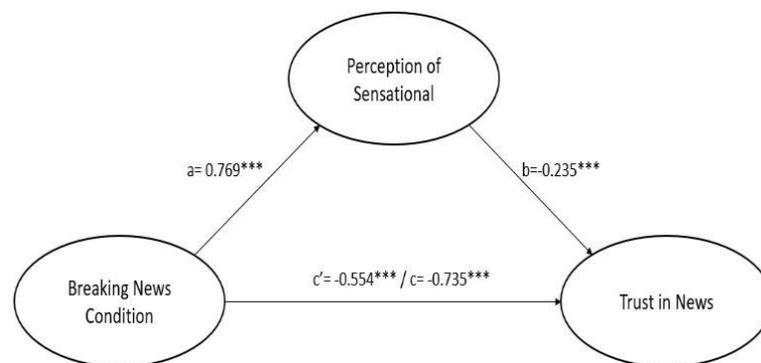


Figure 2. The mediation model (where *** represents $p < 0.01$).

5. Discussion

In the era of social media networks, the spreading of fake or sensational news remains a stringent problem of our current society. Sensational information has the ability to attract the attention of online users, but, according to our study, it reduces the credibility of its content. Sensational news posted in the online environment is frequently read because of curiosity and heuristics, but it does not have the highest degree of credibility. As reported by other authors, sensational news is frequently used for fun or heuristics [39,41], and not necessarily for its content. This result has important implications for online content creators in order to dose the right amount of sensationalism into the posted information. First of all, it is important to determine if sensational news is meant to create buzz by increasing audiences, or online exposure by likes and shares, or if it is important to create a credible message that should be transmitted to its readers.

This result is especially important for news channels, which use the breaking news headline for each new instance of information. This overload in the use of sensational headlines might produce the opposite effect in catching the attention of consumers. Instead of attracting the attention of the online user to important information, they reduce the credibility of the posted content. Especially for serious news channels and news sites, it is important to use sensational headlines with responsibility, by prioritizing the information posted under a sensational headline. By choosing correctly the information and events posted under a sensational title, the readers might pay the appropriate attention.

At the opposite end, there are gossip magazines and sites which rely, for their success, on sensational headlines with different society news, to attract the attention of the readers. In their case, the content about divorces, fights, and other rumors are not necessarily important, but they are an interesting attention catcher for certain groups of the society. As other authors have stated previously, rumors and society news have always been a hot topic for the majority of individuals [37], and gossip magazines have been able to quantify this need by publishing and posting these types of information.

Especially during times of crises, such as the pandemic, it is important to maintain the credibility of online information and news. In such times, individuals are more attentive to breaking news information, as their survival instinct encourages them to be up-to-date with all published information. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that the need and desire of individuals to be up-to-date with information led to more social subjective insecurity [74], emotional contagion [75], and confusion about the implications of health security measures and vaccination [76]. From the perspective of gossip magazines, they have also used topics related to the COVID-19 virus in order to attract the attention. Because of the sensationalism of such information in times of crisis, they have led to a higher confusion, leading to the reluctance to vaccinate or even in a slow adoption of health measures.

6. Conclusions

Even though it is obvious that serious news channels and sites compete for the attention and time of readers and online users with gossip magazines, sites, and influencers, we recommend to use sensational headlines with responsibility, and for really important news. Even though sensational headlines might create short-time attention and traffic in the online environment, in the long run, they will reduce the credibility of the posted news. Sensational headlines used for serious news and information should be used with prudence, in order not to lose trust and credibility. Another option is to fine-tune the design of the sensational in order not to be obvious to the general public.

It is obvious that in a digitalized world where most of the consumed information is sorted by automated intelligent systems, it is difficult to have a successful communication without a quick spread of information, but it is still important to maintain the credibility of the presented or posted information. There should be also a discussion about the algorithms for spreading information in the online environment. Many of those algorithms rely on the popularity of information in spreading it, and, consequently, sustain the success of sensational news. However, in the long run, spreading information with low credibility will reduce the overall trust in the platform. Consequently, for the platforms used by content creators, it is important to optimize the algorithms and systems for spreading news and information in order to maintain their credibility.

Our study presents a relatively simple research model about the impact of sensational and breaking news on the credibility of the posted content. In spite of its simplicity, the model has important implications for both theory and practice. As mentioned in the discussions part, news channels and sites, platforms, and content creators should optimize their sensational headlines in order to maintain their credibility. In terms of theory, we aim to develop this model by further analyzing the factors that affect the use and credibility of sensational and breaking news headlines. There are several other aspects, such as the

source credibility, characteristics of readers, or context that might affect the credibility of a piece of information, which needs further investigations.

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