



## Information Sensationalism in Social Media Marketing - An EEA perspective

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### Abstract

Sensationalism invokes an unhealthy appeal to human emotion and instinct (Slattery and Hakanen, 1994). It arouses empathy and evokes morbid curiosity (Haskins, 1984) for odd, unusual, undesirable and stupid (Bernstein, 1992) information. While media has been the most indicted of sensationalism, other areas such as cancer research and company take overs have not been spared either. This paper looks at the phenomenon of information sensationalism and its impact on product marketing in the social media milieu using the Environment of Evolutionary Adaptness (EEA) perspective.

Social media has its fair share of sensationalists news that there are even websites that provide ideas for users to create sensational posts (LeFevre, 2019). Users are being forced into a sensationalized 'publishing media' environment thus accustoming social media users to attempting to post that sensationalized content themselves. This attention-seeking behaviour has left people vulnerable to dangerous propaganda and influence campaigns. Last year, teenagers infamously filmed themselves ingesting Tide Pods in attempts to gain more attention and followers, while, more seriously, Russian government operatives posted political propaganda on Facebook that reached 126 million Americans before the 2016 election (Brogunier, 2019). Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg admits that people naturally engage more with sensationalist content. The closer the engagement is, it gets to being so problematic, that it has to be banned (Kastrenakes, 2018). The reason for this could be due to the fact that healthy personal relationships are being drowned out by social media flare-ups with the news (real and fake), sensationalized posts and a commoditized environment that values money over genuine connections (Brogunier, 2019).

Examples of sensationalized posts include engagement bait, where if you are an Aries or a Leo, you are asked to like the post. Withholding information is another marketing gimmick where the lure is based on clicks by alluding to the full detail of the post without being clear on what that detail actually is. Use of sensationalized language or exaggerated headlines are also frowned upon since the subsequent pages don't support the claim. Brands would want to use these tactics, particularly given that engagement is key to maximizing reach within the News Feed algorithm. But such methods also skew the data, which nullifies the effectiveness of the algorithm system - i.e. Facebook is working to showcase the best, most engaging content to users, and these posts undermine that based on an engagement 'hack' (Hutchinson, 2018).

From a health product claims perspective, Facebook has announced a policy of de-ranking posts that included sensational health claims or advertise a product based on health-related claims, such as those that claim to help you lose weight (Hill, 2019). However, areas other than health products don't seem to come under the purview of the de-ranking policy.

From a theoretical perspective, we take the support of environment of evolutionary adaptedness (EEA), a concept developed by John Bowlby who showed that The EEA for any specific organism is the set of reproductive problems faced by members of that species over evolutionary time. From a news perspective, the reason for why sensational news stories may appeal to humans is because they trigger an evolved tendency to attend to information that could have increased a human's reproductive fitness in the environment of evolutionary adaptedness (EEA). Research conducted by Davis and Mcleod et al. (2003) shows that the essence of sensational news is strikingly similar to issues that evolutionary psychology

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identifies as having influenced the success of humans in the EEA; e.g., altruism, reputation, cheater detection, violence, reproductive strategies, and the treatment of offspring (Gaulin &McBurney, 2001; Palmer & Palmer, 2002). Thus, our research plans to investigate how EEA can explain the interest in sensational product advertisements over social media.

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