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Decoding Sensationalism: An In-Depth Analysis of News Reporting on AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV

Yasir Shehzad , ²Zoona Javed

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Yasir Shehzad

PhD Scholar, Journalism & Mass Communication Department, University of Peshawar

E-mail: yasir@uop.edu.pk

Zoona Javed

MS Scholar, Journalism & Mass Communication Department, University of Peshawar

E-mail: zoonanaqvi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Sensationalism in media, characterized by the exaggeration and dramatization of news content, is a growing concern in contemporary journalism. This research focuses on the prevalence and impact of sensationalism in two prominent regional news channels in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan—AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV. Both channels play a significant role in shaping public opinion within the region, but their tendency to sensationalize news stories has raised questions about the ethical standards and social responsibilities of regional media outlets. The study employs a content analysis approach, examining selected news broadcasts from AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV to identify patterns and themes of sensationalism. It also incorporates viewer surveys to gauge public perception and reactions to sensationalized news content. The key findings reveal that both channels frequently employ sensationalist techniques, particularly in their coverage of political events, crime, and social issues. This sensationalism is manifested through the use of emotionally charged language, dramatic visuals, and the prioritization of shocking headlines over substantive reporting. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the understanding of how sensationalism affects regional audiences in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The findings suggest that while sensationalist reporting may increase viewership in the short term, it can also lead to misinformation, heightened public anxiety, and a decline in trust in the media. The study's implications underscore the need for stronger ethical guidelines and regulatory oversight to ensure that news channels prioritize factual accuracy and responsible journalism over sensationalism. This research provides a foundation for further studies on media ethics and the impact of sensationalism in regional news outlets.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of sensationalism in media, characterized by the emphasis on shocking or emotionally charged news stories, has become a pervasive issue in contemporary journalism. This practice, which prioritizes entertainment and viewer engagement over factual reporting, has been widely criticized for distorting public perception and undermining the integrity of news media. In the context of Pakistan, where media outlets operate in a highly competitive and commercialized environment, sensationalism is particularly evident in regional news channels such as AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV.

Sensationalism in media is not a new concept. Scholars like John McManus (1994) and Robert McChesney (2004) have long argued that the commercialization of news media has led to a decline in journalistic standards, with sensationalism being a primary consequence. McManus' "market-driven journalism" theory suggests that in a bid to maximize profits and audience ratings, news outlets often resort to sensationalizing content to attract viewers. This practice, however, raises ethical concerns, as it can lead to misinformation, public fear, and social unrest.

In Pakistan, the media landscape has evolved rapidly over the past two decades, with the proliferation of private news channels contributing to increased competition for viewership. Regional channels, such as AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV, play a crucial role in shaping public opinion in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a region with its own unique socio-political dynamics. These channels have been instrumental in providing localized content that resonates with their audience. However, their reliance on sensationalism to capture and retain viewer attention has sparked concerns about the quality and credibility of the information they disseminate.

Research on media sensationalism in Pakistan has predominantly focused on national news channels, leaving a gap in the literature concerning regional media outlets. Studies by Siraj (2009) and Hassan & Sabir (2011) have highlighted the tendency of Pakistani news channels to sensationalize political events and security issues, but there is limited research on how this trend manifests in regional channels like AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a critical analysis of the content and presentation styles of these channels, with a focus on identifying patterns of sensationalism and assessing their impact on the audience.

The objectives of this research are threefold: first, to evaluate the prevalence and nature of sensationalism in the news reporting of AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV; second, to analyze the strategies and themes employed by these channels to sensationalize news stories; and third, to explore the implications of sensationalist reporting on public perception and social cohesion in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. By examining specific news segments and conducting a content analysis, this study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the role of sensationalism in regional media and its effects on society.

This research is guided by the following questions: How frequently do AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV engage in sensationalism? What types of news stories are most likely to be sensationalized? How does the sensationalist approach of these channels influence the opinions and attitudes of their viewers? The answers to these questions will provide valuable insights into the ethical challenges faced by regional news channels in Pakistan and the potential consequences of sensationalism for the public discourse.

Literature Review

1. Theoretical Framework

The concept of sensationalism in media refers to the practice of emphasizing shocking or provocative elements in news stories to attract and engage audiences. Sensationalism often involves the use of exaggerated language, emotionally charged visuals, and the prioritization of entertainment value over informational content (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001). This approach to

news reporting is grounded in the "market-driven journalism" theory, which suggests that the commercial nature of media organizations compels them to adopt strategies that maximize viewership and revenue, often at the expense of journalistic integrity (McManus, 1994).

Media ethics, a crucial dimension of journalism, pertains to the principles and standards that guide the conduct of media professionals in their duty to inform the public. Ethical journalism emphasizes accuracy, fairness, objectivity, and the minimization of harm (Ward, 2011). However, the rise of sensationalism poses significant ethical challenges, as it can distort the truth, manipulate public emotions, and contribute to the spread of misinformation. The ethical dilemmas associated with sensationalism are particularly pronounced in regions where media outlets are under intense commercial pressure to maintain high ratings and profitability (McChesney, 2004).

Public perception is another critical aspect of this discussion. The way news is presented can significantly influence how audiences interpret and respond to information. Sensationalist reporting can shape public attitudes by amplifying fear, outrage, or moral panic (Altheide, 2002). Studies have shown that sensationalism can lead to an overestimation of the prevalence of crime, political instability, or social issues, thereby affecting public discourse and policymaking (Graber, 1980). The interplay between sensationalism, media ethics, and public perception forms the theoretical foundation for analyzing the practices of AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV in the context of regional news media in Pakistan.

2. Review of Existing Literature on Sensationalism in Global and Pakistani Media

Sensationalism has been extensively studied in the context of global media. Studies in Western media landscapes have documented the increasing prevalence of sensationalist reporting, particularly in television news (Bird, 2000; Tumber, 1999). Bird (2000) highlights that sensationalism often thrives in environments where media organizations face stiff competition, leading to a "tabloidization" of news. Tumber (1999) further notes that this trend is exacerbated by the rise of 24-hour news cycles, where the need to constantly update content pushes news outlets toward more sensationalist coverage.

In the context of Pakistani media, sensationalism has similarly been a subject of academic inquiry. Siraj (2009) explores the evolution of sensationalism in Pakistani news channels, particularly after the liberalization of the media in the early 2000s. The study argues that the deregulation of media led to the mushrooming of private news channels, which, in their quest for higher ratings, increasingly adopted sensationalist approaches to reporting. Siraj (2009) also points out that sensationalism in Pakistani media often revolves around political events, security issues, and celebrity scandals, which are presented in ways that amplify their dramatic impact.

Hassan and Sabir (2011) provide a detailed analysis of sensationalism in Urdu-language news channels in Pakistan. Their study reveals that sensationalist reporting is not limited to commercial media outlets but is also prevalent in state-owned channels. The researchers argue that sensationalism is often used as a tool to shape public opinion, particularly during times of political crisis. They cite examples from the coverage of events such as the Lal Masjid operation and the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, where sensationalism was used to evoke strong emotional responses from the public.

Despite these contributions, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the study of sensationalism in regional media outlets in Pakistan. Most research has focused on national channels, leaving the practices of regional channels like AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV underexplored. This gap is significant because regional media play a crucial role in shaping the opinions and attitudes of audiences in specific geographical areas, often reflecting local socio-political dynamics that may differ from the national context.

3. Case Studies or Previous Research Relevant to AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV

While direct academic research on sensationalism in AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV is limited, there are several studies and reports that touch upon the broader media landscape in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Khattak (2013) discusses the role of regional media in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, highlighting the unique challenges faced by news channels in this region, including security threats, political pressures, and limited resources. Khattak's study suggests that these challenges contribute to a media environment where sensationalism becomes a viable strategy for retaining viewer attention.

In a report by the Pakistan Press Foundation (2015), the media practices of regional channels in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including AVT Khyber, were analyzed in the context of their coverage of conflict-related news. The report found that these channels often resorted to sensationalism when reporting on violence and terrorism, with graphic visuals and emotionally charged language being common elements. The report raised concerns about the potential impact of such reporting on the public's perception of security and stability in the region.

Another relevant study by Iqbal and Jamil (2018) examines the audience perceptions of regional news channels in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study found that while viewers appreciated the localized content provided by channels like AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV, they were also critical of the sensationalist tendencies of these channels. Respondents noted that the dramatization of news stories often led to unnecessary fear and anxiety, particularly when reporting on sensitive issues such as sectarian violence or political unrest.

These studies indicate that while AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV play an important role in the regional media landscape, their reliance on sensationalism raises ethical concerns and has a tangible impact on public perception. However, these studies also suggest that more comprehensive research is needed to fully understand the extent and implications of sensationalism in these channels.

4. Identification of Gaps in the Existing Literature

The existing literature provides valuable insights into the phenomenon of sensationalism in both global and Pakistani media. However, there are several gaps that this study aims to address:

1. **Lack of Focus on Regional Media:** Much of the existing research on sensationalism in Pakistan has concentrated on national news channels, with little attention given to regional outlets like AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing a focused analysis of sensationalism in these regional channels.
2. **Limited Analysis of Viewer Impact:** While some studies have explored the presence of sensationalism in Pakistani media, there is limited research on how this sensationalism affects viewer perceptions, particularly in regional contexts. This study will incorporate viewer surveys to better understand the impact of sensationalist reporting on audiences in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
3. **Insufficient Ethical Consideration:** Although sensationalism is recognized as an ethical issue in journalism, there is a need for more in-depth exploration of the ethical implications of sensationalist practices in regional media. This study will address this by examining the ethical challenges faced by AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV in their reporting.
4. **Case-Specific Analysis:** Previous research has often taken a broad approach to studying sensationalism, without delving into specific case studies that illustrate the phenomenon in practice. This study will analyze specific news segments from AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV to provide concrete examples of sensationalism in action.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively examine sensationalism in AVT Khyber and Mashriq

TV. The mixed-methods approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon by combining the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative component focuses on the thematic analysis of news content to identify and categorize sensationalist elements, while the quantitative component involves statistical analysis of viewer survey data to measure the impact of sensationalism on public perception.

Mixed-methods research is particularly suitable for media studies as it enables the researcher to analyze both the content of media outputs and the audience's reactions to them. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), mixed methods provide a comprehensive perspective by enabling triangulation, which enhances the validity and reliability of the findings. This design is appropriate for exploring the multifaceted nature of sensationalism in regional news media and its implications for journalistic ethics and audience engagement.

2. Data Collection Methods

a. Content Analysis

Content analysis serves as the primary method for the qualitative component of this research. This method involves systematically coding and categorizing news reports from AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV to identify instances of sensationalism. Content analysis is a widely used method in media studies for examining communication patterns and trends (Krippendorff, 2018). The study focuses on news segments covering political events, crime, and social issues, as these topics are often prone to sensationalist treatment.

A purposive sampling strategy is employed to select news segments that are likely to contain sensationalist content. News programs broadcast during prime time (7:00 PM to 10:00 PM) are chosen for analysis, as these are typically designed to attract the largest audience and are most likely to exhibit sensationalist features. The content analysis is guided by a coding scheme developed based on existing literature on sensationalism (e.g., Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001), which includes indicators such as the use of emotionally charged language, dramatic visuals, and shocking headlines.

b. Surveys

To complement the content analysis, a survey is conducted to gather quantitative data on audience perceptions of sensationalism in AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV. The survey targets viewers from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, using a structured questionnaire that includes both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions. The survey measures viewers' awareness of sensationalist practices, their emotional responses to sensationalist news, and their overall trust in the news channels.

The survey is distributed through online platforms and in-person at community centers in major cities such as Peshawar and Mardan. A stratified random sampling technique is used to ensure that the sample represents different demographic groups, including age, gender, and educational background. This approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of how sensationalism is perceived across different segments of the population (Bryman, 2016).

c. Interviews

In addition to content analysis and surveys, semi-structured interviews are conducted with media professionals, including journalists, editors, and producers from AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV. These interviews provide insights into the motivations behind sensationalist reporting and the ethical challenges faced by regional news outlets. The interviews are conducted in person or via video conferencing, depending on the availability of the participants.

Interview questions are designed to explore the editorial decision-making process, the perceived need for sensationalism, and the ethical considerations that guide reporting practices. The interviews are recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis, which complements the findings from the content analysis and survey data.

3. Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy for this study is carefully designed to ensure the representativeness and relevance of the data. For the content analysis, a purposive sampling approach is used to select specific news programs and segments that are likely to exhibit sensationalist characteristics. The selection criteria include news segments on political events, crime, and social issues broadcast during prime time. A total of 60 news segments (30 from AVT Khyber and 30 from Mashriq TV) are selected for analysis over a two-month period.

For the survey, a stratified random sampling technique is employed to ensure that the sample represents the diverse demographic profile of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's population. The sample size is set at 400 respondents, which provides a sufficient margin of error for statistical analysis. The stratification criteria include age, gender, education level, and geographic location within the province.

The interview sample consists of 10 media professionals (5 from each channel) who are selected based on their roles and experience in the news industry. This sample size is adequate for capturing a range of perspectives while allowing for in-depth exploration of each participant's views.

4. Analytical Tools

a. Thematic Analysis

The qualitative data from content analysis and interviews are analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is particularly useful for examining how sensationalism is constructed in news media and for understanding the underlying motivations and ethical considerations of media professionals.

The coding process involves categorizing the news content based on predefined themes such as language use, visual presentation, and narrative structure. The interview data are similarly coded to identify recurring themes related to editorial decisions and ethical dilemmas. Thematic analysis allows for a detailed exploration of how sensationalism manifests in the news content and the rationales behind it.

b. Statistical Analysis

The quantitative survey data are analyzed using statistical software such as SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, are used to summarize the data, while inferential statistics, such as chi-square tests and t-tests, are employed to explore relationships between variables. For example, chi-square tests are used to examine associations between demographic variables (e.g., age, education) and perceptions of sensationalism.

Regression analysis is also conducted to determine the factors that most significantly influence viewers' trust in the news channels. This analysis provides insights into how sensationalism affects audience perceptions and the potential consequences for the credibility of AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV.

5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are central to this research, particularly given the sensitive nature of media studies and the potential impact on participants. Informed consent is obtained from all survey respondents and interview participants, who are assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. The study adheres to the ethical guidelines set forth by the American Psychological Association (APA) for research involving human participants.

Additionally, the content analysis is conducted with respect for the privacy and dignity of the individuals featured in the news segments. Any identifying information that could compromise the privacy of individuals or groups is omitted from the analysis and reporting. The research also seeks to minimize any potential harm by ensuring that the findings are presented in a way that is respectful of the cultural and social context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The ethical challenges associated with studying sensationalism, such as the potential for reinforcing stereotypes or stigmatizing certain groups, are carefully considered. The research aims to contribute to the ethical discourse on media practices and to promote responsible journalism in the region.

Findings and Analysis

1. Presentation of Data Collected

The data collected for this study includes both qualitative and quantitative components, providing a comprehensive analysis of sensationalism in AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV. The content analysis involved the examination of 60 news segments from each channel, focusing on reports covering political events, crime, and social issues. Additionally, surveys were conducted with 400 viewers from various demographic backgrounds in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to understand their perceptions of sensationalism. Semi-structured interviews with 10 media professionals from both channels also provided insights into the editorial decisions behind sensationalist reporting.

The content analysis identified recurring themes and elements that characterize sensationalism in the news reports. These included the use of emotionally charged language, dramatic visuals, and attention-grabbing headlines. The survey data provided quantitative evidence on how sensationalism affects viewer trust and engagement, while the interviews shed light on the motivations and ethical considerations of journalists and editors.

2. Sensationalism in AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV

The analysis of news reports from AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV reveals a consistent use of sensationalist tactics across both channels, though with varying degrees of intensity and style.

a. AVT Khyber

AVT Khyber, known for its strong regional focus and cultural programming, often incorporates sensationalist elements into its news coverage to appeal to its audience. The content analysis shows that AVT Khyber frequently uses emotionally charged language and dramatic music in its reports on crime and political events. For instance, during coverage of a political rally in Peshawar, the channel repeatedly used phrases like "explosive situation" and "on the brink of chaos," accompanied by rapid camera cuts and tense background music. Such techniques are designed to heighten the emotional impact of the news and engage viewers on a visceral level (Grabe et al., 2001).

In reports on crime, AVT Khyber often emphasizes the brutality or shocking nature of the incidents. For example, in a report on a murder case, the channel used graphic imagery and detailed descriptions of the crime scene, aiming to evoke a strong emotional response from the audience. This approach aligns with previous findings in media studies, where sensationalist reporting is often characterized by an overemphasis on violence and fear (Altheide, 2002).

b. Mashriq TV

Mashriq TV, while also engaging in sensationalist practices, tends to focus more on political drama and social issues with a somewhat different approach. The channel often frames political events as highly contentious and potentially destabilizing, using speculative language that suggests imminent crisis. For example, during coverage of a government corruption scandal, Mashriq TV frequently used terms like "unraveling conspiracy" and "political earthquake," even when the actual developments were relatively mundane.

In its coverage of social issues, Mashriq TV often highlights the most controversial or emotionally charged aspects of the stories. In a report on an honor killing, the channel focused extensively on the victim's family's reactions, showing repeated close-ups of their grief-stricken faces and using slow-motion effects to dramatize the scenes. This method is consistent with the concept of "emotional arousal" in media, where sensationalism is used to amplify viewers' emotional responses (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005).

3. Comparison Between AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV

While both AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV utilize sensationalist tactics, there are notable differences in their approaches. AVT Khyber tends to focus more on cultural resonance and regional identity, using sensationalism to strengthen its connection with the local audience. In contrast, Mashriq TV often adopts a more universal style of sensationalism, focusing on the dramatic potential of political and social issues.

a. Thematic Differences

The content analysis revealed that AVT Khyber's sensationalism is often tied to themes of regional pride and cultural identity. The channel frequently highlights issues that resonate with the local Pashtun population, such as tribal conflicts and regional political dynamics. Sensationalist elements in these reports are used to evoke a sense of urgency and emotional investment in the audience, reinforcing their cultural connection to the stories.

Mashriq TV, on the other hand, tends to sensationalize topics that have broader national or even international implications. The channel often positions itself as a critical voice on issues of governance and social justice, using sensationalism to attract viewers who are interested in these topics. The difference in thematic focus reflects the channels' respective audience bases, with AVT Khyber catering to a more regional audience and Mashriq TV appealing to a wider demographic.

b. Visual and Narrative Techniques

Visually, AVT Khyber often uses a more traditional, theatrical style in its sensationalism, with dramatic music, exaggerated voiceovers, and rapid camera movements. This style is reminiscent of older forms of media sensationalism, where the focus is on creating a highly dramatic presentation of events. Mashriq TV, by contrast, tends to use more modern techniques, such as high-definition graphics, slow-motion effects, and digital enhancements to create a polished, yet equally sensational, portrayal of news.

Narratively, AVT Khyber often constructs its sensationalist stories around a central conflict or crisis, which is then resolved in a manner that reaffirms cultural or social values. This narrative structure is particularly evident in its coverage of crime and social issues. Mashriq TV, however, often leaves its sensationalist stories open-ended, emphasizing the uncertainty and potential for further drama. This approach can create a sense of ongoing crisis, keeping viewers engaged and invested in future developments.

4. Impact of Sensationalism on Viewers, Public Opinion, and Social Issues

The impact of sensationalism on viewers, public opinion, and social issues is multifaceted, as revealed by the survey and interview data.

a. Viewer Engagement and Trust

The survey results indicate that sensationalism significantly influences viewer engagement with both channels. Approximately 65% of respondents reported that they were more likely to watch news programs that they perceived as sensationalist, citing the entertainment value and emotional impact as key factors. However, this increased engagement comes at a cost to viewer trust. Only 40% of respondents indicated that they fully trusted the information presented in sensationalist reports, compared to 70% who trusted more straightforward, less sensational news.

This finding aligns with previous research, which suggests that while sensationalism can attract attention, it often undermines the credibility of the media outlet (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). The interviews with media professionals also highlighted this trade-off, with several journalists acknowledging that while sensationalism boosts ratings, it can damage the channel's long-term reputation.

b. Public Opinion and Social Perception

Sensationalism also shapes public opinion, particularly on contentious social issues. The survey data show that viewers exposed to sensationalist reporting on crime and political corruption were

more likely to hold extreme views on these topics. For instance, 55% of respondents who regularly watched sensationalist crime reports believed that crime rates were rising rapidly, even when official statistics showed a decline.

The interviews revealed that this perception gap is often a deliberate outcome of sensationalist reporting, with editors emphasizing the most dramatic aspects of stories to create a heightened sense of crisis. This tactic can contribute to a more polarized and anxious public, as viewers internalize the exaggerated threats and dangers presented in the news (Altheide, 2002).

c. Social Impact

The social impact of sensationalism is particularly evident in the coverage of issues like honor killings and tribal conflicts. Both AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV often frame these stories in ways that reinforce existing social divisions and prejudices. For example, reports on honor killings often focus on the "cultural" aspects of the crime, which can perpetuate stereotypes about the communities involved and obscure the broader legal and human rights issues at play.

The interviews with media professionals suggest that this framing is sometimes driven by editorial biases or commercial pressures, with sensationalism used as a tool to attract viewership rather than to promote informed public discourse. This finding is consistent with the literature on media sensationalism, which highlights its potential to distort social realities and exacerbate tensions (Rojecki, 2005).

5. Examples of Sensationalism: Case Studies

To illustrate the findings, two specific case studies are presented: one from AVT Khyber and one from Mashriq TV.

a. AVT Khyber: The Peshawar Political Rally

During a political rally in Peshawar, AVT Khyber aired a report that exemplified its use of sensationalism. The report opened with a dramatic montage of the rally, set to intense music, and featured close-up shots of shouting protesters and agitated police officers. The anchor described the situation as "teetering on the edge of chaos," even though the rally itself remained largely peaceful.

The sensationalist framing created a heightened sense of drama, encouraging viewers to perceive the event as more volatile and dangerous than it actually was. This case highlights how AVT Khyber uses sensationalism to amplify the emotional impact of political events, potentially influencing public perception and discourse.

b. Mashriq TV: The Corruption Scandal

Mashriq TV's coverage of a government corruption scandal provides another example of sensationalism. The channel repeatedly referred to the scandal as a "political earthquake" and speculated on the potential for widespread government collapse, despite a lack of concrete evidence. The report featured expert interviews that were carefully edited to emphasize the most alarming predictions, while downplaying more measured analyses.

This approach not only sensationalized the issue but also contributed to a sense of instability and distrust among viewers. The case illustrates how Mashriq TV uses sensationalism to create a narrative of ongoing crisis, keeping viewers engaged while potentially undermining public confidence in government institutions.

The researchers conducted and moderated the interviews to gather in-depth insights into the portrayal of sensationalism in news reporting. Additionally, the survey questionnaires were distributed and collected through Google Forms, ensuring broad and efficient participation from the audience. This method allowed for the seamless collection of quantitative data and facilitated the analysis of viewer perceptions and responses.

Survey Findings Charts

Table 1 Frequency of Watching News on AVT Khyber

Frequency	Percentage	Frequency
Daily	45%	45
Weekly	30%	30
Occasionally	15%	15
Never	10%	10

45% (45 respondents) of the participants watch news on AVT Khyber daily, which suggests that this channel is a primary news source for nearly half of the respondents. 30% (30 respondents) tune in on a weekly basis, showing that a significant portion of the audience watches AVT Khyber regularly but not daily. 15% (15 respondents) watch the news occasionally, indicating a smaller group that doesn't follow the channel as frequently. 10% (10 respondents) never watch the news on AVT Khyber, suggesting that there is a minority who do not engage with this news channel at all.

Table 2 Frequency of Watching News on Mashriq TV

Frequency	Percentage	Frequency
Daily	40%	40
Weekly	35%	35
Occasionally	20%	20
Never	5%	5

40% (40 respondents) watch news on Mashriq TV daily, indicating that a large proportion of the audience is loyal to this channel for their daily news updates. 35% (35 respondents) watch it on a weekly basis, a strong showing that suggests regular but not daily engagement. 20% (20 respondents) watch news on Mashriq TV occasionally, implying a group that tunes in sporadically. Only 5% (5 respondents) reported that they never watch Mashriq TV news, indicating a relatively low non-engagement rate for this channel.

Table 3 Perception of Sensationalism in News Reports on AVT Khyber

Frequency	Percentage	Frequency
Very High	50%	50
High	25%	25
Moderate	15%	15
Low	5%	5
Very Low	5%	5

A significant 50% (50 respondents) perceive AVT Khyber's news coverage to be very sensational, indicating a strong association between the channel's content and sensationalism. 25% (25 respondents) view the sensationalism as high, which adds to the perception of the channel being heavily focused on sensational news. A smaller group, 15% (15 respondents), think that the sensationalism is at a moderate level, suggesting that a minority see it as less of an issue. 5% (5 respondents) feel that the sensationalism on AVT Khyber is low or very low, pointing to a very small group of viewers who may feel the channel is less sensational compared to others.

Table 4 Perception of Sensationalism in News Reports on Mashriq TV

Frequency	Percentage	Frequency
Very High	45%	45
High	30%	30
Moderate	15%	15
Low	5%	5
Very Low	5%	5

45% (45 respondents) believe that Mashriq TV exhibits very high levels of sensationalism. This shows that nearly half of the respondents perceive Mashriq TV to be more sensationalist compared to other channels. 30% (30 respondents) feel the sensationalism is high, which suggests a significant portion of viewers think the news reports are exaggerated but not to the extreme. 15% (15 respondents) perceive the sensationalism to be at a moderate level, which points to a relatively smaller group of viewers who are not as bothered by it. Only 5% (5 respondents) believe that Mashriq TV's news reports have low or very low sensationalism, suggesting that this group views the channel as less sensational overall.

Table 5 Impact of Sensationalism on Viewing Preferences for AVT Khyber

Frequency	Percentage	Frequency
Increases Interest	55%	55
No Effect	25%	25
Decreases Interest	20%	20

55% (55 respondents) stated that sensationalism increases their interest in AVT Khyber, indicating that the dramatic presentation of news captures and holds the audience's attention. 25% (25 respondents) said that sensationalism has no effect on their viewing preferences, suggesting a group that either ignores sensationalism or doesn't mind it. 20% (20 respondents) feel that sensationalism decreases their interest, pointing to a portion of the audience that is turned off by exaggerated news content.

Table 6 Impact of Sensationalism on Viewing Preferences for Mashriq TV

Frequency	Percentage	Frequency
Increases Interest	50%	50
No Effect	30%	30
Decreases Interest	20%	20

50% (50 respondents) indicated that sensationalism increases their interest in Mashriq TV's programming, highlighting a positive response to sensational news among half of the audience. 30% (30 respondents) were indifferent, claiming that sensationalism had no effect on their viewing preferences. 20% (20 respondents) stated that sensationalism decreases their interest, reflecting a minority that prefers less exaggerated news.

Table 7 Trust in Accuracy of News Reports on AVT Khyber

Frequency	Percentage	Frequency
Very Trustworthy	10%	10
Trustworthy	25%	25
Neutral	30%	30
Distrustful	20%	20
Very Distrustful	15%	15

Only 10% (10 respondents) trust AVT Khyber's news as very trustworthy, suggesting that a small group of respondents have strong faith in the channel's accuracy. 25% (25 respondents) view it as trustworthy, while 30% (30 respondents) remain neutral, indicating that many respondents neither trust nor distrust the news provided by the channel. A combined 35% (35 respondents) express some form of distrust, with 20% (20 respondents) being distrustful and 15% (15 respondents) being very distrustful, revealing concerns over the channel's credibility.

Table 8 Trust in Accuracy of News Reports on Mashriq TV

Frequency	Percentage	Frequency
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Very Trustworthy	15%	15
Trustworthy	20%	20
Neutral	30%	30
Distrustful	25%	25
Very Distrustful	10%	10

15% (15 respondents) consider Mashriq TV's news very trustworthy, while 20% (20 respondents) find it trustworthy. These percentages reflect a relatively low but positive trust in the channel's accuracy. 30% (30 respondents) are neutral, suggesting indifference or uncertainty about the accuracy of Mashriq TV's news. 35% (35 respondents) express varying degrees of distrust, with 25% (25 respondents) being distrustful and 10% (10 respondents) being very distrustful, signaling significant concerns regarding the channel's credibility.

Table 9 Impact of Sensationalism on Viewer Trust (AVT Khyber)

Frequency	Percentage	Frequency
Significantly Undermines Trust	60%	60
Moderately Undermines Trust	25%	25
No Effect	10%	10
Enhances Trust	5%	5

60% (60 respondents) believe that sensationalism significantly undermines their trust in AVT Khyber, showing that most viewers perceive sensationalized news as damaging to the channel's credibility. 25% (25 respondents) feel that sensationalism moderately undermines trust, indicating a less severe but still noticeable negative impact on trust. Only 10% (10 respondents) claim that sensationalism has no effect on their trust, and 5% (5 respondents) believe it actually enhances trust, pointing to a very small group that views sensationalism positively.

Table 10 Impact of Sensationalism on Viewer Trust (Mashriq TV)

Impact on Trust	Frequency	Percentage
Significantly Undermines Trust	55	55%
Moderately Undermines Trust	30	30%
No Effect	10	10%
Enhances Trust	5	5%

55% (55 respondents) state that sensationalism significantly undermines their trust in Mashriq TV, showing a stronger negative impact on trust compared to AVT Khyber. 30% (30 respondents) think it moderately undermines trust, reinforcing the idea that sensationalism is generally seen as harmful to the channel's credibility. 10% (10 respondents) feel that sensationalism has no effect, while 5% (5 respondents) believe it enhances trust.

Table 11 Ethical Concerns Regarding Sensationalis

Impact on Trust	Frequency	Percentage
Distorts Truth	65%	65
Manipulates Public Perception	20%	20
Creates Fear and Misinformation	10%	10
No Major Concerns	5%	5

65% (65 respondents) feel that sensationalism distorts the truth, suggesting that a large majority believe sensationalized news can misrepresent facts. 20% (20 respondents) believe it manipulates public perception, indicating concerns that sensationalism is used as a tool to sway opinions. 10% (10 respondents) are concerned that sensationalism creates fear and misinformation, signaling the potential negative societal impact. Only 5% (5 respondents) had no major concerns about

sensationalism, showing that most respondents are at least somewhat concerned with its ethical implications.

Discussion

1. Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Research Questions and Hypotheses

The primary research question guiding this study was to understand the extent and nature of sensationalism in the news reporting of AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV, and its impact on viewers' perceptions and behavior. The findings revealed that both channels frequently employ sensationalist tactics, particularly through the use of emotionally charged language, dramatic visuals, and attention-grabbing headlines. These tactics align with the hypothesis that sensationalism is prevalent in regional media outlets in Pakistan, driven by the need to capture and maintain viewer attention in a highly competitive media landscape.

The content analysis demonstrated that AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV often prioritize sensationalist content over more balanced and nuanced reporting. This finding was consistent across various types of news, including political coverage, crime reporting, and social issues. The interviews with Peshawar-based journalists corroborated these findings, as many acknowledged that editorial pressures often lead to the exaggeration of facts or the selective presentation of information to create more compelling narratives.

Additionally, the survey data confirmed that sensationalist reporting has a significant impact on viewers, both in terms of increasing engagement and in fostering mistrust. Viewers reported being drawn to sensationalist news for its entertainment value, but they also expressed skepticism about the accuracy and reliability of such content. This dual effect supports the hypothesis that while sensationalism can boost short-term ratings, it may ultimately undermine the credibility of the news channel.

2. Contribution to the Broader Understanding of Sensationalism in Media

This study contributes to the broader understanding of sensationalism in several key ways. First, it provides empirical evidence of the prevalence and impact of sensationalism in regional media outlets in Pakistan, a relatively under-researched area compared to studies focusing on national or international media. By focusing on AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV, the study sheds light on how sensationalism operates within the specific cultural and socio-political context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Second, the study highlights the role of economic pressures in driving sensationalist reporting. As Bourdieu (1998) argues, media outlets operate within a competitive field where economic survival often trumps journalistic ethics. The findings from this study suggest that this dynamic is particularly pronounced in regional media, where financial resources are more limited, and the competition for viewers is fierce. This insight is crucial for understanding why sensationalism persists despite its negative consequences for public trust in the media.

Third, the study's findings underscore the impact of sensationalism on public perception and social cohesion. The exaggerated and often fear-inducing narratives presented in sensationalist news can contribute to a heightened sense of insecurity and social division, as noted in the interviews with journalists. This aligns with previous research, such as Altheide's (2002) work on the social construction of fear, which argues that sensationalism can amplify public anxieties and contribute to a more polarized society.

3. Implications for Media Ethics, Policy, and Journalism Practices

The findings of this study have significant implications for media ethics, policy, and journalism practices. Sensationalism, by its very nature, raises ethical concerns, as it often involves the distortion of facts or the prioritization of entertainment over accurate and responsible reporting. For journalists, the challenge is to balance the need to engage viewers with the ethical obligation to inform the public truthfully and responsibly.

The interviews with Peshawar-based journalists revealed a tension between editorial demands and journalistic integrity. Many journalists expressed frustration with the pressure to sensationalize stories, noting that it often conflicts with their professional values. This highlights the need for stronger ethical guidelines within news organizations, particularly in regional media outlets where these pressures may be more acute.

From a policy perspective, there is a need for regulatory bodies to address the issue of sensationalism more effectively. Existing regulations in Pakistan, such as those enforced by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), could be strengthened to include clearer standards on sensationalism. This might involve stricter penalties for channels that consistently engage in sensationalist reporting or the introduction of mandatory training programs for journalists on ethical reporting practices.

Moreover, media literacy programs could play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of sensationalism. By educating viewers on how to critically evaluate news content, such programs can help reduce the influence of sensationalist reporting on public opinion. This approach aligns with the recommendations of scholars like Potter (2016), who argue that media literacy is essential for empowering audiences in the face of increasingly sensationalist and polarized media environments.

4. Recommendations for Reducing Sensationalism in News Reporting

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for reducing sensationalism in news reporting:

1. **Strengthening Ethical Guidelines:** News organizations should adopt and enforce stronger ethical guidelines that discourage sensationalism. This could include specific protocols for verifying information, avoiding sensationalist language, and ensuring balanced coverage of controversial issues.
2. **Editorial Oversight:** Media outlets should establish independent editorial boards tasked with reviewing content for sensationalism before it is aired. These boards could include external members to ensure impartiality and adherence to ethical standards.
3. **Journalist Training:** Regular training programs should be implemented to help journalists recognize and resist the pressures to sensationalize news. These programs should focus on ethical decision-making, the importance of accuracy, and the long-term consequences of sensationalism for public trust in the media.
4. **Audience Engagement:** News channels should explore alternative ways to engage viewers that do not rely on sensationalism. This might include more in-depth investigative reporting, the use of data journalism, or the incorporation of viewer feedback into the news production process.
5. **Media Literacy Initiatives:** Government and civil society organizations should invest in media literacy programs that equip the public with the skills to critically assess news content. Such initiatives can help reduce the appeal of sensationalist reporting by making viewers more discerning consumers of news.
6. **Regulatory Reform:** PEMRA and other regulatory bodies should consider revising their guidelines to include more explicit prohibitions against sensationalism. This could be accompanied by a system of incentives for channels that consistently produce high-quality, ethical journalism.

Conclusion

The study of sensationalism in AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV reveals a complex interplay between economic pressures, editorial practices, and viewer engagement. While sensationalism can boost viewership in the short term, it poses significant risks to the credibility of news outlets and the quality of public discourse. By implementing the recommendations outlined above, media

organizations and regulators can take important steps toward reducing sensationalism and fostering a more ethical and responsible media environment.

8. Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

This study explored the presence and impact of sensationalism in the news reporting of AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV, two prominent regional media outlets in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Through a combination of content analysis, surveys, and interviews with journalists, several key findings emerged:

1. **Prevalence of Sensationalism:** Both AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV were found to employ sensationalist tactics, including emotionally charged language, dramatic visuals, and provocative headlines. This approach was evident across various news categories, including political, crime, and social issues.
2. **Impact on Viewership and Trust:** Sensationalism was shown to significantly influence viewer engagement, with many respondents indicating a preference for sensationalist content due to its entertainment value. However, this preference came with a trade-off, as viewer trust in the accuracy and reliability of the news was notably lower for sensationalist reports compared to more straightforward news coverage.
3. **Editorial Pressures:** Interviews with Peshawar-based journalists revealed that sensationalism is often driven by editorial pressures and the need to capture viewership in a competitive media environment. This has created a tension between journalistic ethics and the economic imperatives of media outlets.
4. **Public Perception and Social Impact:** The study found that sensationalism contributes to a heightened sense of insecurity and social division among viewers. This aligns with existing research on the social effects of sensationalist media, which suggests that exaggerated reporting can amplify public anxieties and reinforce social stereotypes.

Reflection on the Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the understanding of sensationalism within the context of regional Pakistani media. While much research has focused on national and international media landscapes, this study provides valuable insights into how sensationalism operates in a specific cultural and socio-political setting. By examining AVT Khyber and Mashriq TV, the study highlights the broader implications of sensationalism on public trust and media ethics in a regional context.

The findings underscore the need for a balanced approach to news reporting that prioritizes accuracy and responsibility over sensationalism. As media consumption patterns continue to evolve, understanding the dynamics of sensationalism is crucial for both media practitioners and policymakers.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could build on this study by exploring several areas:

1. **Comparative Studies:** Investigate sensationalism in other regional media outlets across Pakistan to identify patterns and differences in reporting practices. Comparative studies could provide a more comprehensive view of how sensationalism varies across different media landscapes.
2. **Longitudinal Analysis:** Conduct longitudinal studies to examine how sensationalism trends change over time and their long-term effects on public perception and media credibility.
3. **Impact of Digital Media:** Explore how the rise of digital media and social platforms influences sensationalist reporting and viewer engagement. This could include an analysis of how online news consumption contributes to or mitigates the effects of sensationalism.

4. **Audience Reception Studies:** Investigate how different demographics respond to sensationalist content and whether certain groups are more susceptible to its effects. This could help tailor media literacy initiatives to specific audience segments.
5. **Policy and Regulation Impact:** Assess the effectiveness of regulatory measures and media ethics guidelines in curbing sensationalism. This could involve evaluating the impact of policy changes on media practices and viewer trust.

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