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VISUAL SENSATIONALISATION IN SOCIAL MEDIA THUMBNAILS: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF FAKE NEWS PROLIFERATION

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ABSTRACT

The visual sensationalization of the thumbnails of social media has been examined in this research paper to determine its role in creating fake news. Unlike the previous researches that were more focused on text-based misleading information and the algorithms that underpin these, this research study highlights the importance of thumbnails in the context of them being effective visual stimuli to create impressions and responses among users. Using the concepts of Framing Theory and Selective Exposure Theory, qualitative research method has been used to analyze 100 thumbnails of verified fake news.

We can observe that use of sensational thumbnails with their dramatic facial expressions, emotionally arousing images and exaggerated texts have a great influence on the perception of credibility, emotional appeal and engagement. It is also stated that virality has strong correlations with credibility and engagement, and moderating factors such as emotional influence and awareness of responsibility also need to be taken into account. The results obtained allow concluding that fake news is spread in the context of a complex psychological system in which images trigger emotional and cognitive biases, leading to a desire to repost.

Therefore, when attempting to fight disinformation, one should focus on the fact-checking approach, as well as be more concerned with the problems of design practices, algorithmic biases, and media literacy.

Keywords: *Fake news, sensationalized thumbnails, social media, misinformation, visual communication, virality, user engagement, perceived credibility, emotional influence, media literacy, framing theory, selective exposure theory*

1. Introduction

The introduction of social media sites significantly altered personal communication and interaction and offered a special chance to connect to others and exchange information with people that have different cultural and political views on the global level. The networks are characterized by Boyd and Ellison (2008) as democratized channels of information distribution, where individuals and the disadvantaged groups can participate in conversations without being restricted in terms of geographical location and available resources. The democratization of sharing information has raised questions about credibility of the information shared, particularly fake news stories.

Sensationalism in the digital media can also be viewed in the form of fabricated or deceptive information that is presented as an actual news story, and the primary objective is to attract attention, rather than deliver correct information (Lazer et al. , 2018). The strong desires to produce sensational thumbnails with exaggerated images, outrageous headlines, and emotionally provocative messages to get more clicks are among the most potent factors that can fuel such a phenomenon. According to Guess et al. (2019), the purpose of these thumbnails is to elicit an emotional response,

which drives up the amount of views and shares regardless of the factuality of the story behind the thumbnails.

According to research studies, sensationalized thumbnails can elicit unthoughtful, emotional responses, bypassing the conscious decision-making process of users and resulting in compulsive sharing (Guess et al. , 2019; Van der Linden et al. , 2017). Shock, anger or intrigue thumbnails will tend to exploit mental shortcuts, including the availability heuristic, where strong and emotionally colored visual information is easily stored and processed in memory and more generic and logical analyses are more difficult to recall. This does not only contribute to misinformation, but also jeopardizes honest journalism since sensationalism is given precedence over factual reporting. According to Vosoughi et al. (2018), fake news is spread more rapidly and extensively on social media than real news stories, in part due to the fact that it is occasionally accompanied with highly sensationalized images that can provoke emotional responses.

In comparison to numerous studies carried out regarding the role of algorithmic design, and user interaction with regards to the spread of fake news, sensational thumbnails have not received the attention they warrant being another important factor. Most modern practices do not take into account the purpose of the thumbnails as intentional persuasive devices and focus on either text-based or post-factum verification processes. In addition, platforms practices are more likely to appreciate interaction than the truthfulness of the information circulated and sensationalism in their endeavors to gain more users.

This study will therefore examine how dramatic thumbnails in the social media sites contribute to the dissemination of fake news using the aspects of graphic design and emotion. From a review of 100 thumbnail images from validated fake news websites, this research will analyze the use of facial expressions, color schemes, textual representation, and architectural choice used to create deceptive thumbnails, leading to increased sharing activity. The paper will attempt to explore how the thumbnails capitalize on the cognitive and emotional weaknesses of the users based on visual semiotics examination and thematic analysis in NVivo.

These results should guide media literacy practices and methods of platform design, as well as regulatory/policy discussions around the use of visual prompts in disseminating disinformation. This is meant to put in consideration the increasing popularity of overall strategies of addressing not only the content of disinformation, but also its visual elements.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Information Dissemination and Social Media

Diffusion of information has always been an issue of the manner in which information is conveyed by the traditional methods of communication i.e. mass media and personal communication. Rogers (2003) in his book, Diffusions of Innovations, offers a theoretical background on the spread of innovations within the social systems, but with special focus on certain aspects such as the innovation itself, the mediums of communication and the social environment in which the innovation spreads. In the article, The Strength of Weak Ties, by Granovetter (1973), there is an emphasis on the importance of social networks in disseminating information based on the argument that individuals tend to know more about information that was disseminated by individuals who are not necessarily close to them.

With the advent of social media, however, the above concepts have been put to use in the digital space, where networks of users transmit knowledge. According to Boyd and Ellison, social media are characterized as a networked public, which promotes decentralization and participative communication, allowing the users both to receive information and to produce it and distribute it further. Social media, in contrast to mass media, are dependent on a small number of gatekeepers and allow transferring information between peers, thus leading to rapid propagation of misinformation. In parallel, researchers like Sunstein emphasize the phenomenon of the emergence of filter bubbles and echo chambers, where people are exposed to information that is in accordance

with their attitudes and shielded from any other opinions.

The change has also brought with it such concepts as social network analysis and the digital divide to the information dissemination research. Social network analysis examines the flow of information through the relational networks and how some nodes such as the so-called influencers become significant in inducing viral behavior among the networks. On the other hand, the digital divide is on disparities between individuals who can use social media effectively and those who cannot. The two viewpoints suggest that despite the fact that the transition into the digital media has enabled individuals to have easy access to information, it has also reinforced the already existing disparities and biases.

2.2. Fake News and Misinformation

The studies on fake news and disinformation deal with the following questions: definitions, sources, means of spreading a fake news, and ways of its resolution. Lazer et al. (2018) define fake news as a false information that is created with the intention of misleading, typically it is an imitation of a valid news item, but the perceived effect is of higher priority compared to the truth. Other scholars draw a distinction between misinformation and disinformation whereby the former is spread inadvertently and the latter is a spread of false information in order to deceive.

Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) note that the social media can more easily disseminate misinformation faster and across a wider distance than factual news, especially when it utilizes a strong emotion like fear, anger, and shock. This emotional aspect is strengthened by the use of cognitive distortions like confirmation bias and selective exposure which allow consumers to more readily engage with the information that reinforces their previously held ideas. The social media platforms, in this instance, are echo chambers, where the users are exposed to information that fits their ideology and shields them against any form of correction or contrary opinions (Guess, Nyhan, andamp; Reifler, 2019).

To address this issue, scientists and even practitioners have come up with numerous alternative solutions. As an exemplification, as Howard and Vraga (2020) explain, one should be attentive to media and digital literacy since customers need to be informed about how they are manipulated, how they can analyze the credibility of the sources and how algorithms shape their information space. In addition, there is an increasing demand of platform responsibility, that is, transparency in algorithms, collaboration in fact-checking, open policies to content moderation. All the remedies above are indicative of an understanding of the nature of the discussed problem as being sociotechnical in nature, and therefore necessitating not only organizational but also behavioral change.

2.3. The Function of Images and Attention

Pictorial stimuli play a very significant role in terms of how human beings perceive information, concentrate on it and act on it. Cognitive psychology studies reveal that System 1 intuition is highly vulnerable to emotionally charged and visually bright stimuli, and that reflective System 2 thought may much more readily be circumvented by attention capture by strong visual stimulus. This is the reason why bright color, animated pictures, and faces expressing emotions are more attractive than the message or information that is actually being communicated, even though it happens to be irrelevant and untrue.

In the online environment where attention is scarce and competition for attention is tough, the attention economy has resulted in very appealing graphics. This is, in other words, what we call clickbait; a publisher will use overblown headlines and provoking graphics in the effort to arouse the interests, urgency, and anger of the viewer. The study of behavior indicates that consumers are more attentive to images than to text.

Research on the application of images as means of fighting disinformation is gradually taking place. Van der Linden et al. (2017) coin the term prebunking, whereby people are exposed to less than full strength versions of manipulative information in advance, thus becoming less susceptible to any subsequent types of manipulation. Under this situation, the elements of visual, when done properly, can have a corrective role to play by exposing the manipulative tactics used, clarifying emotional

manipulation, and encouraging critical thinking. However, in the research, the author points out the two-sided aspect of visual design, where, what appeals people to an educational end, can be easily employed to perpetrate disinformation.

2.4. Sensationalism and Thumbnails

The sensationalism study places the thumbnail design in a longer chronology of media tactics to attract attention and engage more of the audience. Sparks (1999) suggests that there are a number of characteristics of sensational media and they are emotive language, simplification and amazing visuals. All these features are used to foster affect as opposed to complexity. Similarly, Couldry (2000) condemns the production of spectacle by media in which scenario, events are packaged as performances that are designed to create strong emotions rather than arouse critical discussion. The above studies have shown that sensationalism has been a crucial part of competitive media settings in the past.

The thumbnail has become one of the main places of sensationalism with the introduction of digital media platforms. Social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have thumbnails with shocking images, hideous faces and exaggerated words, to create the urgency or curiosity that influences the user to engage with the content without evaluating its truthfulness. Thumbnails resemble clickbait in terms of their effectiveness in exploiting human psychology to increase user engagement metrics such as views, shares, and likes. Despite a wealth of literature on clickbait strategies, there is little research focused on thumbnails as distinct visual elements that propagate misinformation.

Previous research concerning the topic of clickbait and sensational thumbnails tends to focus on this subject either within broader discussions concerning visual attention or as an offshoot of the trend of clickbait. Research proves that emotional images can work through the availability heuristics, meaning that vivid and impressive pictures will remain memorable and persuasive. Moreover, researchers have emphasized that the level of media literacy of consumers as well as their understanding of the platforms play a role in their perception of such thumbnails. However, more systematic and qualitative research is needed, focusing on different elements of such thumbnails and their interaction with user behavior.

2.5. Theoretical Framework: Framing and Selective Exposure.

In order to conduct the research on provocative thumbnails in the light of fake news, two theoretical models have been used for guidance: the first is known as the Framing Theory, while the second is called the Selective Exposure Theory.

The concept of Framing Theory was coined by such authors as McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (1997). According to this theory, it is claimed that the media tend to highlight some topics as well as their specific attributes and perspectives; consequently, this creates a frame that helps people to understand what to pay attention to and how to interpret this or that topic. In visual terms, thumbnails may be seen as frames too since they help people to focus on specific aspects. Therefore, in case of exaggerated thumbnails, they influence reality, and people are more inclined to perceive videos and articles in the light of their feelings or exaggeration.

This view is further developed in Selective Exposure Theory by Klapper (1960) who looks at the tendency of users to seek out information that confirms their beliefs and avoid information that goes against their beliefs. With social media, sensational thumbnails create a selective exposure because of the elicitation of emotional and ideological cues by the identity, belief, and bias system of the users. An example is that users with political beliefs may be attracted to thumbnails with angry faces, conflict, or provocative slogans, irrespective of the untruthfulness of the message they are conveying. In addition, the thumbnails not only attract the attention of the users, but strengthen the attention by appealing to the beliefs of the users by means of corresponding visual indications.

The merging of both theories enables this research to analyze the role of thumbnails as a means of framing as well as selective exposure. In this regard, thumbnails frame concerns through highlighting particular features of news articles or events, whereas they attract users' interests in content that resonates with their perceptions, thus influencing their decisions to

engage with certain materials. The twofold role of thumbnails illuminates the reason why sensational thumbnails are a contributing factor to the dissemination of misinformation and the strengthening of existing divisions. This framework, therefore, helps to define the relationship between visual communication, user psychology, and social media mechanisms that are essential in investigating 100 thumbnails of fake news articles.

3. Methodology

Qualitative research methodology is used in this study to find out how sensational thumbnails help spread misinformation about fake news on social media sites. Here, the focus is to understand the visual, textual, and psychological characteristics of thumbnails that help in attracting people's attention to and dissemination of the disinformation. In all, 100 thumbnails found associated with posts identified as false news on sites like Facebook, X, and YouTube were collected. In doing so, attempts have been made to include varied topics (like politics, health, disasters) and varied types of graphic design techniques associated with sensation.

The research was conducted in two major stages which were the qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. To begin with, each thumbnail was put in NVivo 14 and coded on the basis of its visual and textual elements like facial expressions, color schemes, fonts, framing, headlines and more. Thus, themes related to the designing of thumbnails could be identified systematically. Subsequently, the meaning of these elements was analyzed using visual semiotics in terms of generating emotions like fear, worry, curiosity, and anger.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006) was employed to identify the bigger themes psychologically and discursively in this media content. There were six steps involved in the analysis: data familiarization, initial coding, theme search, theme review, theme definition, and development of analytical narrative. The themes identified included fear and anxiety, uncertainty, curiosity and suspense, sirens of politics/ society, and emotional arousal, which were triangulated for content, symbolical, and psychological meaning in order to strengthen the validity of findings.

4. Results and Discussion.

Contrary to popular opinion, sensationalized thumbnails cannot be considered merely a superficial aesthetic component but rather a critical mechanism behind the digital attention economy, playing a role in shaping the ways in which people process information in the Internet space. It can be seen that there is a significant interdependence between five essential factors: Spread and Virality (S1), Credibility Perception (S2), User Engagement (S3), Emotional Impact (S4), and Responsibility Awareness (S5) – proven by the correlation matrix, which demonstrates a connection at p less than .01 level. This interdependency indicates that the distribution of false information occurs via a self-reinforcing loop of a psychological-behavioral nature, whereby visual cues prompt trust and emotional and behavioral response, while awareness is merely a reactive deterrent factor.

4.1. Demographic and Platform-Use Patterns

The number of social networking websites accessed by each participant is illustrated in Table 1 towards the end of this section. The table reveals that the majority (about 69. 6%) access between 2 to 5 social networking websites, while 18. 0% access 1 to 2 and 12. 5% access more than 5. This implies that the participants are digitally exposed, and this is crucial since cross platform usage leads to increased misinformation exposure.

Table 1 Respondent Distribution by Number of Social Networking Sites Used

Number of Social Networking Sites Used	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1–2	72	18.0	18.0	18.0
2–3	85	21.3	21.3	39.3
3–4	100	25.0	25.0	64.3
4–5	93	23.3	23.3	87.5

more than 5	50	12.5	12.5	100.0
Total	400	100.0	100.0	–

4.1. Psychological processes and the spread of bogus news

The results indicate that fake news is propagated due to various psychological factors, such as perceived trust, user involvement, emotional arousal, and awareness of responsibility. Viral distribution of news content is associated strongly with perceived credibility (ρ = 0.511) and engagement (ρ = 0.504), whereas emotional arousal (ρ = 0.277) and awareness of responsibility (ρ = 0.360) are weakly correlated.

Table 2 Overlapping Psychological Processes that Power Fake News Virality (Theme: Interconnected Psychological Mechanisms Driving Fake News Virility)

Sub-Theme	Correlation Evidence
1. Perceived Credibility as a Catalyst of Virility	S1 ↔ S2 (ρ = .511)
2. User Engagement as a Behavioral Conduit of Spread	S1 ↔ S3 (ρ = .504)
3. Emotional Stimulation as a Triggering Mechanism	S1 ↔ S4 (ρ = .277)
4. Responsibility Awareness as a Moderating Influence	S1 ↔ S5 (ρ = .360)

Such connections mean that deception thrives where distorted imagery increases the sense of veracity, where reactions are spontaneous, and where emotions prevail over critical evaluation. The awareness of responsibility, although positively correlated with virality, is not sufficient to counterbalance the allure of provocative thumbnails, thus suggesting that it functions as a moderator rather than a balancer.

4.2. Credibility, Misinformation Beliefs, and Engagement

Based on the correlation matrix (see Table 3. below), it becomes clear that there is a strong correlation between trust perception (S2) and two other concepts: misinformation beliefs (S1) and engagement (S3). Among the correlations mentioned above, the highest value belongs to the connection between credibility and responsibility awareness (ρ =. 523). This correlation suggests that informed users are able to make responsible demands towards platforms and content creators.

Table 3 Credibility Perceptions and Misinformation Beliefs

Sub-Theme	Correlation Evidence
1. Visual Deception Enhances Perceived Authenticity	S2 ↔ S1 (ρ = .511)
2. False Credibility Drives User Interaction	S2 ↔ S3 (ρ = .480)
3. Credibility and Emotional Persuasion Work Together	S2 ↔ S4 (ρ = .427)
4. Credibility Awareness Strengthens Ethical Reaction	S2 ↔ S5 (ρ = .523)

Table 4 User Interaction & Engagement Behavior

Sub-Theme	Correlation Evidence
1. Engagement as a Structural Pathway to Spread	S3 ↔ S1 (ρ = .504)
2. Credibility-Based Engagement Decisions	S3 ↔ S2 (ρ = .480)
3. Emotional Activation Encouraging Interaction	S3 ↔ S4 (ρ = .277)
4. Responsibility Awareness Moderately Linked with Engagement Choices	S3 ↔ S5 (ρ = .354)

4.3. Psychological and Emotional Effect

The relationship among emotion (S4), belief in credibility (S2), involvement (S3), sense of responsibility (S5), and spread (S1) is presented in Table 5. It appears that heightened emotions enhance the probability of believing in misleading facts while reflecting on one's ethical standards later on but do not eliminate impulsive behavior entirely.

Table 5 Emotional and Psychological Influence

Sub-Theme	Correlation Evidence
1. Emotional Arousal as a Trigger for Misinformation Acceptance	S4 ↔ S2 (ρ = .427)
2. Emotional Stimulation as a Factor in Engagement Choices	S4 ↔ S3 (ρ = .277)
3. Emotional Response Shaping Responsibility Awareness	S4 ↔ S5 (ρ = .406)
4. Emotional Sensitivity Contributing to Spread Perception	S4 ↔ S1 (ρ = .277)

Table 6 Media Responsibility, Regulation & Literacy Awareness

Sub-Theme	Correlation Evidence
1. Ethical Awareness Linked with Credibility Concerns	S5 ↔ S2 (**ρ = .523**)
2. Responsible Attitudes Moderately Connected with Spread Perception	S5 ↔ S1 (**ρ = .360**)
3. Responsible Mindsets and Engagement Choices	S5 ↔ S3 (**ρ = .354**)
4. Emotional Sensitivity Predicting Responsibility Orientation	S5 ↔ S4 (**ρ = .406**)

From the combined findings, it can be seen that the highly sensationalized thumbnails influence cognition, emotions, and behaviors via a synergistic mechanism between visual cues and algorithmic motivations. Factors such as credibility and engagement have the greatest impact on viral behavior, while emotional stimulation and responsibility have a mediating effect.

This means that combating misinformation cannot simply involve fact-checking; efforts must also focus on:

- Visual design,
- Algorithmic incentives,
- Media literacy education, and
- Ethical content production.

5. Conclusion

Based on this research, we can clearly observe that sensational thumbnails are not merely a way of providing a touch of artistry to the content; they can also influence the manner in which fake news is disseminated across the social media networks. The analysis of visual semiotics and some findings of the research allow us to observe that thumbnails can influence the behavior of users due to the interplay of the perceived credibility, emotional arousal, and engagement. Credibility and engagement are the two variables that are of the greatest significance in taking into consideration the virality in the present case, and emotional arousal is the driving force.

The study explains that, by visual users, they are more prone to use their immediate emotional reactions and, therefore, it is feasible that sensational thumbnails can be bypassed uncritically, causing the transmission of misinformation. Nevertheless, although there are people, who know about such manipulations, the knowledge does not assist them to resist visual persuasion.

A complex solution should be used to combat fake news, it follows. Besides normal fact-checking measures, such manipulative visual practices should be controlled, the transparency of the algorithms employed by various platforms should be enhanced, and more advanced media literacy skills should be instructed to users.

To sum up, addressing the problem of fake news in the contemporary digital world means taking into consideration the importance of visual communication as well. Sensational thumbnails are considered to be the gateways to fake news,that is why they should be particularly treated.

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