Christian Burgers and Anneke de Graaf

Language intensity as a sensationalistic news feature: The influence of style on sensationalism perceptions and effects

Abstract: This article extends the definition of sensationalism to print media by arguing that language intensifiers may be an aspect of sensationalism. In addition, this paper investigates if an indirect effect can be established by which sensationalistic message features influence news reception through the perception of sensationalism. Two between-subjects experiments show that sensationalistic message features like intensifiers increase perceived language intensity (PLI). In experiment 1, intensifiers had a negative effect on news article appreciation, which was not influenced by PLI. Experiment 2 revealed positive indirect effects of intensifiers through PLI on newsworthiness and news article appreciation.

Keywords: language intensity, sensationalism, journalism, printed news, linguistic style

1 Introduction

Over the past decades, many social actors have expressed their concerns about what they perceive as the declining quality of news (cf. Kalyango and Eckler, 2010; McChesney, 2012; Plasser, 2005). One of the reasons for this perceived decline in quality is the increase of tabloidization (Esser, 1999) and sensationalism (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, and Beentjes, 2005). In tabloidization, news values from tabloid newspapers “spill over to the quality press”, which implies that “serious media adopt the tabloid agenda” (Esser, 1999, p. 293). In other words, the process of tabloidization entails a convergence between the tabloid and quality media in that they become more alike.

One way in which this process of tabloidization can take place is by using sensationalistic ways to present the news. Studies have shown that, more and more, sensationalistic news features such as zoom-in camera action and a fast-

Most studies that investigate sensationalism focus on television news (e.g., Hardy et al., 2010; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2008; Kleemans, Hendriks Vettehen, Beentjes, and Eisinga, 2012). However, sensationalism may be present in printed news as well. Although camera action is not relevant to printed news, specific features of the form of the message may be related to sensationalism in written texts. This paper posits that intensifiers may be one textual feature that make a printed news item more sensationalistic. As such, the present paper sets out to extend the concept of sensationalism to the textual domain.

In addition to the textual features that make a printed news message sensationalistic, it is important to study the readers’ responses to these features (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2008). As the root of the term already suggests, sensationalism refers to a sensation or experience of the recipients of the message. Therefore, this perception of sensationalism – or whether recipients actually find a news item more “sensation arousing” – is a very important aspect of sensationalism, which is likely to be responsible for subsequent effects (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2008). This is in line with O’Keefe (2003), who posits that specific message characteristics may evoke a state in a recipient, which in turn may lead to effects of the message. As sensationalism is expected to have several effects, such as recipient appreciation and perceptions of reality (Grabe et al., 2001; Slattery, Doremus, and Marcus, 2001), this study will address the role of sensationalistic message characteristics as well as readers’ perceptions of sensationalism.

2 Extending the definition of sensationalism to printed news

While sensationalism has been defined in different ways by different authors (cf. Kleemans and Hendriks Vettehen, 2009, for a review), one of the most used definitions is that sensationalistic news features are “content features or formal features of messages that have the capability to provoke attention and arousal responses in viewers” (Kleemans and Hendriks Vettehen, 2009, p. 229). This definition of sensationalism states a duality in message features that can be called sensationalistic: They can be either related to the content or to the form of the news message.
Scholars that connect sensationalism to content mainly argue that some topics are inherently sensationalistic. For instance, Slattery et al. (2001) argue that news stories are sensationalistic if they deal with such topics like violence and crime or accidents and disaster. Other topics that have been associated with sensationalism are topics that can be associated with soft news like human interest stories (Slattery and Hakanen, 1994). For instance, in January 2013, the Dutch media widely reported about the divorce of Dutch soccer player Rafael van der Vaart and TV personality Sylvie van der Vaart. In the Dutch quality media, however, the debate mainly centered around the question whether the topic was fit for discussion in quality media (e.g., De Rek, 2013), indicating that quality media were unsure whether a topic like a celebrity divorce should only be dealt with in the tabloid media or whether the quality media should also discuss the topic.

Besides content features, formal features can be sensationalistic as well. For instance, formal features of sensationalism include video maneuvers like zoom movements and an eye-witness perspective as well as audio manipulations like the use of music or an obtrusive tone of voice (Grabe et al., 2001). Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2008) add another formal element to this definition of sensationalism: the use of interviews with laypersons about a certain news topic. Finally, Hendriks Vettehen, Beentjes, Nuijten, and Peeters (2010) propose that close-ups of human faces are aspects of sensationalism as well. These perspectives on sensationalism have in common that they analyze formal features of sensationalism from the perspective of television news. In printed news, however, other aspects of the form of the message may lead to an increase in sensationalism.

Formal features of sensationalism in print news are related to the article’s style. In Shapiro’s (2010) framework to evaluate newspaper quality, the dimension of “style” includes such elements as word choices and linguistic packaging. When looking at word choices and linguistic packaging, quality reporting is typically associated with presenting information in a sober style, while sensationalistic reporting can be considered the opposite (cf. Semetko and Valkenburg’s 2000 distinction between sober and sensationalist newspapers). In a content analysis of science news in the UK and US press, Jensen (2012) also connected word choice to journalistic quality. He observed that the UK tabloid press were especially sensationalistic, because they “operated unfettered by the norms of journalistic balance or objectivity” (Jensen, 2012, p. 50). Therefore, the degree to which a newspaper article refrains from using neutral language may be an indicator of sensationalistic news.

One of the ways in which an article can refrain from using neutral language is the use of intensifiers. In the persuasion literature, this is a stylistic choice...
that is described as language intensity (cf. Hamilton, Hunter, and Burgoon, 1990; Hamilton and Stewart, 1993). According to Hamilton and colleagues, language intensity has two dimensions: (1) specificity and (2) emotionality. Specificity refers to “the degree to which a source makes precise reference to attitude objects in a message” (Hamilton and Stewart, 1993, p. 231). This means that more specific (and more intense) language is typically more concrete and vivid, while less specific (and less intense) language is typically more abstract and vague (Hamilton and Stewart, 1993). The Linguistic Category Model (LCM) (Semin and Fiedler, 1988; 1992) provides actual suggestions on what distinguishes concrete from abstract language. According to the LCM, concrete language typically uses descriptive action verbs (e.g., John hits Pete): These give an actual description of the situation under discussion. The LCM posits that abstract language is typically conveyed through adjectives (e.g., John is aggressive): These do not describe the situation under discussion, but rather infer dispositional qualities about the person being described.

Next to specificity, emotionality is the second dimension of language intensity (Hamilton and Stewart, 1993). Emotionality is seen as the “degree of affect expressed in the source’s language” (Hamilton and Stewart, 1993, p. 231). It is particularly this dimension of language intensity that is relevant to our discussion. After all, a sensationalistic style is also categorized by the degree to which the report differs from objective (non-evaluative) reporting.

Various authors provide overviews of linguistic means that can be used to increase emotionality. For instance, Renkema (1997) makes a distinction between semantic and lexical intensifiers. Semantic intensifiers are words that can be replaced with a less extreme version (e.g., gigantic is an intensifier of large). Lexical intensifiers are words that can be removed from the text, resulting in a decrease in intensity (e.g., very intensifies large in the expression very large). Pander Maat (2004) expands upon Renkema’s (1997) scheme and argues that intensifiers can be found in a variety of grammatical categories like adjectives (gigantic as intensifier of large), adverbs (e.g., even as in the expression even faster), quantifiers (e.g., millions) and connectives (e.g., furthermore). Pander Maat (2004) also argues that so-called detensifiers that reduce the intensity (e.g., words like probably) are a part of language intensity, because they reduce emotionality and thus also explain variance in the variable of language intensity. Van Mulken and Schellens (2012), finally, introduced the Language Intensity Model (in Dutch: Taal Intensiteit Model or TIM), which presents an overview of categories of intensifiers which – next to the categories already mentioned – also includes nouns (e.g., spectacle instead of trial), verbs (e.g., gobble instead of eat), exaggerations (e.g., I had to wait for a century) and repetition (e.g., very, very, very bad).
Many authors treat the concept of language intensity as a message characteristic (e.g., Pander Maat, 2004; Renkema, 1997). However, some researchers have acknowledged that a message also needs to be perceived as intense in order to have effects (Hamilton et al., 1990; Hamilton and Stewart, 1993). To test if the use of intensifiers indeed increases the intensity of the message, Hamilton and Stewart (1993) developed the language intensity scale and used this test as a manipulation check in their experiments to see if the intensified version was indeed perceived as more intense than the version without intensifiers. However, the manipulation checks that were reported demonstrate that the use of intensifiers does not always increase the intensity readers see in a text and, subsequently, the effects of the message (Hamilton et al., 1990; Hamilton and Stewart, 1993). In other studies, intensifiers did impact readers’ perceived language intensity (cf. Van Mulken and Schellens, 2012, exp. 1–2). This is in line with research on sensationalism in television news, which showed that perceptions of sensationalism are important in recipients’ responses to the message (Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2008).

Since we see language intensity as an aspect of sensationalism in printed news, it is important to investigate whether language intensity functions similarly in printed news messages. Our first hypothesis is thus:

H1: The use of intensifiers in news articles increases perceived language intensity.

An increase in perceived language intensity may in turn have specific message effects. For instance, some studies on language intensity in persuasive communication demonstrated that an increase in intensity can positively impact such variables as attitudes (Bankhead, Bench, Peterson, Place, and Seiter, 2003), behavioral intentions (Craig and Blankenship, 2011) and behavior (Andersen and Blackburn, 2004). Various studies have also shown that sensationalism in TV news can have effects on thoughts about the news article (e.g., Zhou, 2005), recognition (e.g., Lang, Shin, Bradley, and Wang, 2005), the attitude towards the news article (e.g., Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2008) and news preferences (e.g., Kleemans et al., 2012). Thus, we propose that language intensity in news reports may also have effects: By increasing the emotional intensity attached to a subject in a news article, readers may find it more relevant that the story in question is reported upon (and thus may find the article more newsworthy) and may appreciate the article more. Furthermore, given that intensifiers can be effective persuasive devices (Andersen and Blackburn, 2004; Bankhead et al., 2003; Craig and Blankenship, 2011), they may also help to shift the beliefs of news readers to become more in line with those presented in the news article.

Yet, in order for sensationalistic news features to have effects, it is first important that these features are noticed. For instance, for the attitude towards
the story, Hendriks Vettehen et al. (2008) demonstrate that, in television news, emotional arousal mediates the relationship between sensationalistic news features and the attitude towards the story. For written news stories, perceived language intensity may serve a similar function: Only when a news text is perceived as intense, is it possible that the news article has a differential impact compared to an article that is perceived as less intense. Our second hypothesis is thus:

H2: Perceived language intensity mediates intensifier effects on (a) newsworthiness, (b) attitude towards the news article and (c) belief content.

Finally, various studies suggest that the level of negativity can be an important moderator of language intensity effects. Many studies in social psychology document the negativity bias (e.g., Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs, 2001; Ito, Larsen, Smith, and Cacioppo, 1998; Vaish, Grossmann, and Woodward, 2008 and many others) which posits that negative information has a greater impact on individuals than positive information. When comparing positive and negative words on intensity, various scholars argue that negative words are perceived as more intense than their positive counterparts (e.g., Crandall, 1975; Jing-Schmidt, 2007; Liebrecht, Hustinx, and Van Mulken, 2012). These findings have implications for language intensity in news texts: After all, if equivalent information is presented in negative rather than with positive terms (cf. valence framing; Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), it may be assumed that the information presented in the negative frame is perceived as more intense, especially when intensifiers are used. Thus, we expect a moderation of valence framing in that, especially in a negative frame, information with intensifiers is perceived as more intense than information without intensifiers. Thus, our third hypothesis is:

H3: (a) In a negative frame, using intensifiers in news articles increases perceived language intensity. (b) In a positive frame, using intensifiers does not increase perceived language intensity.

3 Experiment 1: Method

3.1 Participants and design

A total of 151 adult respondents participated in an online experiment in which they were randomly assigned to one of the conditions in a 2 (use of intensifiers: intensifiers vs. no intensifiers) × 2 (framing: positive vs. negative) between-sub-
jects design. The average age was 34.2 years \((SD = 16.7)\). A small majority of participants \((55.0\%)\) was female. A large majority of participants \((96.7\%)\) reported to read at least one newspaper in an average week.

3.2 Materials

When conducting a study on the effects of printed news, it is possible that the opinion on various political and social actors may change rapidly depending on the public agenda of the day. To control for these influences, it was decided to create a news article from the journalistic genre of ‘general news’, that is, economic, social or cultural news that is not on the present public agenda (Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky, 2010). The issue that was used in this experiment was the introduction of a ban on bringing flowers as presents to hospital visits. The rationale behind this ban was that flowers could contain bacteria that could further damage the immune system of hospital patients.

The article opened with two opening sections in which the problem of the bacteria in flowers was introduced. The final section contained our framing manipulation: Our condition with negative framing contained a loss frame, because it emphasized the negative effects of continuing to allow people to bring flowers to hospital. The condition with positive framing contained a gain frame, because it emphasized the positive effects of forbidding people to bring flowers into hospitals.

For the manipulation of intensifiers, we followed the models of Pander Maat (2004) and Renkema (1997) and added both semantic and linguistic intensifiers to the article. Semantic intensifiers are intensifiers that can be replaced by a more moderate version \(e.g.\), gigantic number is a semantic intensifier of large number. Linguistic intensifiers are words that can be removed, which should result in a decrease in emotionality \(e.g.\), extremely dangerous is a linguistic intensifier of dangerous. All intensifiers focused on the dimension of emotionality (Hamilton and Stewart, 1993), because they exaggerated the evaluative valence of the subject under discussion. The version with intensifiers contained 16 intensifiers. In their original Dutch version, the number of words of the versions differed between 283 and 304, depending on condition. Appendix A contains an English translation of our stimuli.

3.3 Instrumentation

A questionnaire was developed that measured perceived language intensity, newsworthiness, attitude towards the article, and belief content.
To measure *perceived language intensity*, six items from the perceived language intensity scale (Hamilton and Stewart, 1993) were used. On 7-point Likert scales, participants were asked to which degree they felt the article to be intense, strong, extreme, forceful, emotional and vivid ($\alpha = .75$).

As a measure of *newsworthiness*, participants were asked how they rated the importance of the news. They were presented with four items on 7-point Likert scales ($\alpha = .86$). Sample items include “I think that this news article is important” and “I think that this news article should be printed on the front page of the newspaper”.

For the *attitude towards the article*, participants were asked five questions on 7-point semantic differential scales ($\alpha = .83$). Participants were asked if they considered the article’s language to be bad-good, boring-interesting, negative-positive, horrible-fantastic and stupid-great.

As measures of *belief content*, participants were asked to assess four items about the dangers of bringing flowers to a hospital (e.g., “Flowers are bad for your health” and “Many patients get ill from flowers”). These four items formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = .73$).

### 4 Experiment 1: Results

The first hypothesis suggested that the use of intensifiers (in this case: exaggerations) would increase perceived language intensity. Table 1 shows the average scores and standard deviations of this variable per condition.

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<th>Without intensifiers</th>
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<th>With intensifiers</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative framing</td>
<td>Positive framing</td>
<td>Negative framing</td>
<td>Positive framing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived language intensity</td>
<td>3.71 (.88)</td>
<td>4.03 (.80)</td>
<td>4.28 (.92)</td>
<td>4.10 (1.08)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newsworthiness</td>
<td>4.26 (1.24)</td>
<td>4.69 (1.48)</td>
<td>4.29 (1.11)</td>
<td>4.53 (1.59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude towards the article</td>
<td>4.17 (.85)</td>
<td>4.40 (1.12)</td>
<td>3.87 (.88)</td>
<td>3.90 (.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief content</td>
<td>3.97 (1.30)</td>
<td>3.76 (1.14)</td>
<td>3.50 (1.17)</td>
<td>3.48 (1.23)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Table 1**: Experiment 1: Average scores (and standard deviations) of perceived language intensity ($1 = \text{low perceived intensity}, 7 = \text{high perceived intensity}$), newsworthiness ($1 = \text{low newsworthiness}, 7 = \text{high newsworthiness}$), attitude towards the news article ($1 = \text{very negative attitude}, 7 = \text{very positive attitude}$) and belief content ($1 = \text{beliefs implied by text very unbelievable}, 7 = \text{beliefs implied by text very believable}$), by intensifier condition.
With regard to \( H1 \), the use of intensifiers had an effect on perceived language intensity \((F(1,147) = 4.40, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .03)\). Confirming the first hypothesis, the news article with intensifiers was perceived as more intense \((M = 4.19, SD = .99)\) than the news article without intensifiers \((M = 3.89, SD = .84)\). We found no main effect of framing \((F < 1)\) or interaction effect of framing and intensifiers \((F(1,147) = 2.87, p = .093)\), providing no support for \( H3 \).

The second hypothesis, then, suggested that perceived language intensity would mediate the effects of intensifiers on the dependent variables. However, no indirect effects could be established (Preacher and Hayes, 2008), because perceived language intensity was not related to any of the dependent variables (attitude towards the article: \( r = .07, p = .41 \), newsworthiness: \( r = .01, p = .94 \), belief content: \( r = -.008, p = .92 \)).

We subsequently conducted a 2 (intensifiers vs. no intensifiers) × 2 (positive vs. negative framing) MANOVA with attitude towards the article, newsworthiness and belief content as dependent variables. We observed a main effect of intensifiers \((\text{Wilks' } \lambda = .93, F(3, 145) = 3.90, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .08)\). Subsequent univariate analyses showed that intensifiers had no effects on newsworthiness \((F < 1)\) and belief content \((F(1,147) = 3.63, p = .059)\). However, the use of intensifiers had a negative effect on the attitude towards the news article \((F(1,147) = 6.55, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .04)\), which indicated that a text with intensifiers \((M = 3.88, SD = .90)\) was appreciated less than a text without intensifiers \((M = 4.30, SD = 1.01)\). We found neither a main effect of framing \((\text{Wilks' } \lambda = .97, F(3, 145) = 1.42, p = .24)\) nor an interaction effect of framing × intensifiers \((\text{Wilks' } \lambda = .99, F(3, 145) < 1)\).

5 Experiment 1: Conclusion and discussion

Results support the first hypothesis. The data demonstrate that the use of exaggerations can indeed increase the perceived language intensity. This implies that perceived language intensity could be a possible mediating state that could explain the effects of the use of intensified language.

Hypothesis 2, which predicted that perceived language intensity would mediate the effects of the use of intensifiers, could not be confirmed. The same was true for hypothesis 3, which argued that the effects of intensifiers would be most pronounced in the version with negative framing. However, the attitude towards the article was more negative for the news texts that used intensifiers. On the one hand, this finding is in line with the negative link that has been made between sensationalism and newspaper quality (e.g., Gladney, 1996): The use of sensationalistic features like intensifiers may decrease the credibility of
an article and thus its appreciation as well. The results also demonstrate that intensifiers may operate distinctly from perceived language intensity. After all, perceived language intensity was successfully manipulated, but intensifiers had an effect independently of perceived language intensity. On the other hand, the negative relationship between the use of intensifiers and the attitude towards the article may also have come from an unnatural perception of the article. It is possible that our participants were surprised by the news topic and did not find the statement that flowers could make patients sicker very believable. To investigate this question further, Experiment 2 was conducted. In this experiment, another issue was chosen which was expected to receive more newspaper attention: diabetes.

6 Experiment 2: Method

6.1 Participants and design

A total of 114 adult respondents participated in an online experiment in which they were randomly assigned to one of the conditions in a 2 (intensifiers vs. detensifiers) × 2 (positive vs. negative framing) between-subjects design. The average age was 28.0 years (SD = 11.1). A small majority of participants (57.0%) was female. A large majority of participants (93.9%) reported to read at least one newspaper in an average week.

6.2 Materials

In this experiment, another news article was constructed from the journalistic genre of ‘general news’ (Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky, 2010). This article was about diabetes and had a similar set-up to the article in the first experiment. Again, we first introduced the topic after which the final section contained either a loss frame (negative framing) or a gain frame (positive framing).

In order to keep the number of words more equal between versions than in Experiment 1, we changed our manipulation of intensifiers slightly. Following Pander Maat (2004), we included either linguistic intensifiers or linguistic detensifiers. Intensifiers were either quantifiers (e.g., “a big part of the increase of diabetes”) or qualifiers (e.g., “the number of diabetics in the Netherlands will inevitably increase”), which are both considered as language devices that may signal an increase in language intensity (Pander Maat, 2004; Renkema, 1997). In the detensifier version, the strength of the quantifiers and qualifiers
was manipulated when they were replaced with linguistically moderate versions (e.g., “a small part of the increase” and “the number of diabetics in the Netherlands will probably increase”). With this manipulation, the number of words differed between 252 and 257 in their original Dutch version. Appendix B contains an English translation of our materials.

6.3 Instrumentation

The same items to measure newsworthiness ($\alpha = .79$) as in experiment 1 were used. To measure perceived language intensity, we used five items from the perceived language intensity scale (Hamilton and Stewart, 1993) and asked to which degree they felt the article to be intense, strong, forceful, emotional and vivid ($\alpha = .83$). In the context of diabetes, we did not include the item of ‘extreme’, because we felt that this item did not fit the article which favors an increase in measures battling diabetes.

To tap the attitude towards the news article, we used a different scale from experiment 1, because items like great and fantastic did not seem appropriate for an article on diabetes. Participants were asked to which degree they thought the article to be interesting, useful, informative, pleasant to read, and nice to read ($\alpha = .81$). For belief content, participants were asked six questions related to the solutions that were mentioned in the text (e.g., “the government should stimulate programs aimed at persuading people to adopt a healthier lifestyle”, $\alpha = .72$).

7 Experiment 2: Results

Table 2 shows the average scores and standard deviations of this variable per condition.

Our first hypothesis stated that intensifiers could increase the perceived language intensity of a news article. This hypothesis was confirmed, because the news article with intensifiers ($M = 4.49, SD = .99$) was perceived as more intense than the news article with detensifiers ($M = 4.11, SD = 1.08; F(1,110) = 4.09, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .04$). We found neither a main effect of framing ($F(1,110) = 2.04, p = .16$) nor an interaction effect of framing and intensifiers ($F < 1$), which disconfirms H3.

Our second hypothesis stated that perceived language intensity mediates framing effects on newsworthiness, the attitude towards the news article, and belief content. We first investigated whether framing and intensifiers have direct
effects on these dependent variables by conducting a 2 (intensifiers vs. no intensifiers) × 2 (positive vs. negative framing) MANOVA with attitude towards the article, newsworthiness and belief content as dependent variables. We observed no main effects of intensifiers (Wilks’ λ = .99, F(3, 108) < 1) and framing (Wilks’ λ = .94, F(3, 108) = 2.13, p = .11) or an interaction effect of framing and intensifiers (Wilks’ λ = .97, F(3, 108) = 1.20, p = .31). Even though we found no direct effects of our independent variables on our dependent variables, recent statistical research into mediation analysis argues that mediation can still occur (Hayes, 2009; Preacher and Hayes, 2008).¹

For mediation to be possible, two prior assumptions should be satisfied. First, the independent variable should have an effect on the proposed mediator. As demonstrated above, this is the case for the effect of intensifiers on perceived language intensity. Second, the proposed mediator should be associated with the dependent variable. Correlation analyses show that perceived language intensity was not associated with belief content (r = .10, p = .30). However, according to the well-known logic of Baron and Kenny (1986), mediation can only occur when the independent variable has a direct effect on the dependent variable, which was not the case in this experiment. However, Hayes (2009) has recently challenged this assumption of mediation analysis in the classical, Baron-and-Kenny way and argued that mediation can also be found in the absence of a direct effect of the independent on the dependent variable (see Hayes, 2009, pp. 413–415; Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, and Petty, 2011). To distinguish between the classical mediation analysis advocated by Baron and Kenny (1986) and this type of mediation analysis, the term indirect effect is used to describe the effect of the independent variable × the mediator on the dependent variable.

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<td>Attitude towards the article</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belief content</td>
<td>5.20 (.78)</td>
<td>5.45 (.61)</td>
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Table 2: Experiment 2: Average scores (and standard deviations) of perceived language intensity (1 = low perceived intensity, 7 = high perceived intensity), newsworthiness (1 = low newsworthiness, 7 = high newsworthiness), attitude towards the news article (1 = very negative attitude, 7 = very positive attitude) and belief content (1 = beliefs implied by text very unbelievable, 7 = beliefs implied by text very believable), by intensifier condition.
language intensity was positively associated with both newsworthiness ($r = .38$, $p < .001$) and the attitude towards the article ($r = .43$, $p < .001$).

These analyses show that the use of intensifiers leads to an increase of perceived language intensity and that perceived language intensity is positively associated with newsworthiness and the attitude towards the article. This means that it is possible to test for an indirect effect of intensifiers (through perceived language intensity) on these two dependent variables, even in the absence of a direct effect of intensifiers on the dependent variables. To test for an indirect effect, the method and macro developed by Preacher and Hayes (2008) were used.

Preacher and Hayes’ (2008) macro uses a bootstrapping procedure to estimate the indirect effect by multiplying the direct effect of the independent vari-

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<td>Effect of intensifiers on PLI (a path)</td>
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<td>Total effect (c path)</td>
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<td>Indirect effect (via PLI)</td>
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<td>Model $R^2_{adj} (p)$</td>
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<td>.18</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of intensifiers on PLI (a path)</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>&lt; .05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of PLI on attitude towards the article (b path)</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of intensifiers on attitude towards the article</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total effect (c path)</td>
<td>-.009</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effect (c’path)</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect (via PLI)</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
<td>.009–.17*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model $R^2_{adj} (p)$</td>
<td>.18 ( &lt; .001)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Indirect effects analysis of intensifiers on newsworthiness and the attitude towards the article via perceived language intensity (PLI). The main effect of framing is included as a covariate.

Note: mediation with 5,000 bootstrap samples.

* Indirect effect is significant with a certainty of $p < .05$, because the confidence interval does not include zero.
able on the mediator with the direct effect of the mediator on the dependent variable, controlling for the influence of other variables (in this case: framing). Table 3 shows descriptive information. These mediation analyses show significant indirect effects of intensifiers via perceived language intensity on both newsworthiness (0.0715, SE = 0.0413, 95% CI = [0.0061, 0.1708]) and attitude towards the article (0.0752, SE = 0.0409, 95% CI = [0.0089, 0.1730]). This means that hypotheses 2a and 2b can be confirmed.

8 Experiment 2: Conclusion and discussion

This second experiment also confirmed the first hypothesis and showed that intensifiers can increase perceived language intensity compared to detensifiers. In addition, indirect effect analyses showed an indirect link between intensifiers and newsworthiness and the attitude towards the article: Intensifiers increased perceived language intensity, which in turn increased newsworthiness and the attitude toward the article, confirming hypotheses 2a and 2b. These results provide the first empirical evidence to suggest that perceived language intensity can be a mediating state between the use of intensifiers in news articles and the responses to the news article in question. Finally, an interaction between intensifiers and framing could not be established which disconfirms H3.

9 General conclusion and discussion

This paper looked at the influence of intensifiers and framing on the reception of news articles. It started out by extending the definition of sensationalism to print media and argued that in print media, the intensity of the language could be one of the indicators of sensationalism. In addition, it was argued that the perception of a news article as intense is an important aspect of sensationalism in printed news. The results of both experiments provide empirical support for hypothesis 1. The use of intensifiers in news articles increased the perceived language intensity of both texts, indicating that readers indeed experienced texts with intensifiers as more intense and arousing.

However, with regard to hypothesis 2, the effects of intensifiers on responses to the news articles differed in the two experiments. In the first experiment, perceived language intensity was not related with one of the dependent variables, while intensifiers decreased the attitude towards a news
article, which is in line with studies that have investigated newspaper quality (Gladney, 1996; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). This first experiment suggests that the use of a sensationalistic message feature like language intensity decreases the credibility of an article and thus its quality as well. However, in order to bolster this argument, future research should replicate our study and include an explicit measure of credibility. Additionally, the results of the first experiment suggest that intensifiers accomplish this goal through other means than a perception of language intensity.

However, the materials in the first experiment were about a topic that participants may have found unnatural as a newspaper article. They may have found the claims unlikely and thus have believed the article even less when the claims were exaggerated. The second experiment used a different, more natural topic and showed different results from the first experiment. In this experiment, the indirect effect of intensifiers through perceived language intensity was positive on newsworthiness and the attitude towards the article. These results show that language intensity as an aspect of sensationalism can have positive effects on the perceptions of news articles.

These findings also have important implications for discussions on sensationalism and tabloidization (e.g., Esser, 1999; Kleemans and Hendriks Vettehen, 2009), as our findings show that using sensationalistic message features like intensifiers impacts participants’ evaluation of the article (both experiments, albeit in different directions) and participants’ perceived newsworthiness of the article (experiment 2). Interestingly, adding intensifiers to increase the emotionality of a topic did not affect participants’ belief content about the topic (both experiments).

While it is possible that the topics of the materials were responsible for the differences between experiments 1 and 2, it may also be possible that the effects of intensifiers depend on the type of intensified language that is used. Renkema (1997) argues that various lexical elements like qualifiers, quantifiers, and prefixes can be examples of intensified language. However, he states that intensifiers can also be semantic or stylistic. It may be possible that different types of intensifiers may have different reader effects. Future research should take up on the challenge of unraveling under which conditions the use of intensifiers leads to which kinds of message effects.

Across our two experiments, we also consistently found no effects of our framing manipulation, indicating that positive vs. negative framing does not moderate the effects of intensifiers. This is in contrast to earlier studies that found that negative intensifiers were perceived as stronger than positive intensifiers (e.g., Crandall, 1975; Liebrecht et al., 2012). Yet, these studies investigated either single words or very short scenarios. The fact that we used longer texts...
may account for these differences. Future research may want to investigate this issue further and investigate under which conditions the perceived intensity of positive and negative intensifiers differs in longer texts.

Some other caveats of our study can be noted. Our experimental materials were presented to participants in isolation (i.e., outside of the context of a newspaper) and on a computer screen. This could imply that participants processed the texts differently from when they would have read the article in a newspaper. Presenting the articles in the context of a (fake) newspaper could have the added advantage that the article could be manipulated on other aspects of sensationalism. For instance, the lay-out of this newspaper could be manipulated to look like a sensationalistic tabloid paper, which may induce a feeling of sensationalism by other means than language. The use of big headlines and relatively large and shocking visuals may also evoke a sense of sensationalism. Secondly, measures of attitude towards the article differed between the two experiments, which may have influenced results on this variable. We suggest that future research uses the measure of the second study, because this measure is more appropriate across different topics. Finally, this study did not include dispositional characteristics that could also moderate effects of sensationalism in print media (cf. Kleemans et al., 2012). Future research could investigate what kinds of dispositional characteristics have what kind of effects on the perception of sensationalism.

This paper extended the definition of sensationalism to print media to also include language intensity. Of course, language intensity may not only play a role in print media: Future research may also investigate if language intensity in television news can evoke a sense of intensity and sensationalism as well. In sum, this study has provided a promising avenue for further research by showing that the presence of intensifiers in newspaper articles increases the perception of language intensity and that this perception can make the article more newsworthy and appreciated.

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Bionotes

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Appendix A

Stimulus materials used in Experiment 1

CBS: Flowers extremely [linguistic intensifier] dangerous for hospital patients

ROTTERDAM – It can be extremely [linguistic intensifier] dangerous for the health of patients if they have flowers placed nearby. Ten percent of hospital patients got seriously [linguistic intensifier] ill when they had flowers placed next to their bed.

This is shown in statistics that were presented by the Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) earlier today. Based on this study, the CBS estimates that, on an annual basis, more than 5000 patients are involved: a gigantic [semantic intensifier] / large [no intensifier] number, indicating four times a sold-out Carré [famous theater in Amsterdam, linguistic intensifier]. Next to their existing symptoms, these patients developed a serious [linguistic intensifier] shortness of breath and dizziness. Other patients recovered more slowly and some patients lost consciousness. The cause for these problem is the excessive [linguistic intensifier] amount of pathogens and micro organisms living in flowers and flower water, making patients critically [linguistic intensifier] ill.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative framing</th>
<th>Positive framing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If it remains allowed to bring flowers into any hospital in the Netherlands, a terrifyingly [linguistic intensifier] high number of people will get ill unnecessarily in hospitals, according to Willem van der Velde, a Professor of Molecular Microbiology at the University of Groningen.</td>
<td>If it is forbidden to bring flowers into any hospital in the Netherlands, so much fewer [linguistic intensifier] people will get ill unnecessarily in hospitals, according to Willem van der Velde, a Professor of Molecular Microbiology at the University of Groningen. He thinks that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Negative framing

He thinks that the CBS statistics are a "cause for major alarm" [semantic intensifier] / worrying [no intensifier]. These statistics are not new. In 1999, the Department of Health Services conducted a similar study into the alleged negative effects of flowers on patients' health, which showed similar disturbing [linguistic intensifier] results. Based on the previous study, the Department of Health Services took action. Van der Velde says: "In 71 of 142 Dutch hospitals, it is still allowed to bring in flowers. We know that in these hospitals a sea of patients [semantic intensifier] / many patients [no intensifier] get much more [linguistic intensifier] ill than in hospitals were it is forbidden to bring in flowers. It is disastrous [semantic intensifier] / bad [no intensifier] that so many hospitals took so few measures; the health risk will only increase enormously [linguistic intensifier] in this way.

Positive framing

the CBS statistics are a "cause for major alarm" [semantic intensifier] / worrying [no intensifier]. These statistics are not new. In 1999, the Department of Health Services conducted a similar study into the alleged negative effects of flowers on patients' health, which showed similar disturbing [linguistic intensifier] results. Based on the previous study, the Department of Health Services took action. Van der Velde says: "In 71 of 142 Dutch hospitals, it is now forbidden to bring in flowers. We know that in these hospitals a sea of patients [semantic intensifier] / many patients [no intensifier] do not get much more [linguistic intensifier] ill than in hospitals were it is forbidden to bring in flowers. It is fantastic [semantic intensifier] / good [no intensifier] that so many hospitals took so many measures; the health risk will only decrease enormously [linguistic intensifier] in this way.

Note: English translation from original Dutch; intensifiers marked in bold and italics, framing manipulation underlined.

Appendix B

Stimulus materials used in Experiment 2

Number of diabetics on the rise

GRONINGEN – The number of people in the Netherlands with diabetes will certainly [intensifier] / likely [detensifier] increase in the coming years. This is shown in a new study by the RIVM [The Dutch national institute for public health]. Last year, only 740,000 Dutch people were known to suffer from diabetes. It is expected that this number will increase to 1.3 million in the coming years.

Because of the ageing population and because people generally live longer, the number of diabetics in the Netherlands will inevitably [intensifier] / probably [detensifier] increase in the coming years. A big [intensifier] / small [detensifier] part of this increase can be ascribed to the number of people with obesity and a lack of physical exercise. This part can largely [intensifier] / somewhat [detensifier] be prevented, which is why more attention for preventive measures is needed.
Negative framing  Positive framing

Diabetes specialists of the Medical Center of the University of Groningen (UMCG) have proposed a number of measures that are aimed to prevent diabetes in the future. It argues that physical exercise, quitting smoking and a regular and healthy diet should be stimulated. Without these measures, we will have an immense [intensifier] / fair [detensifier] increase in new diabetics in the next fifteen years. Dr. Arianne van den Hark, a diabetes specialist at the UMCG, warns for the domino effect that can be caused by diabetes: “Besides fatigue and returning infections, diabetes can lead to many other illnesses such as heart and vascular diseases, and a reduction of eyes and kidneys. When the Netherlands stops to invest in the search for effective measures to stimulate healthy nutrition and plenty of physical exercise, diabetes, along with obesity and inactivity, will definitely [intensifier] / probably [detensifier] increase.

Note: English translation from original Dutch; intensifiers marked in bold and italics, framing manipulation underlined.

References


