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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Tabloidization in Philippine Online News Media: A Content Analysis

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**ABSTRACT**

This study is a content analysis of the implication of tabloidization in the top online news sites of the Philippines: *Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI)*, *Manila Bulletin (MB)*, and *Philippine Star (PS)*. It sought to: determine the amount of tabloidization concepts observed in the three online news sites; and ascertain whether the amount of tabloidization has a significant association with the ranking of the online news sites. It made use of a correlational descriptive research design to acquire data regarding the current status of the phenomenon which is about the infiltration of tabloidization in news media. Also, it is anchored upon the Uses and Dependency theory and Media Dependency theory. Moreover, the study employed quantitative content analysis and purposive sampling method. The findings of the study show that the ranking of the amount of tabloidization concepts is true for all online news sites, with *individualism* as the highest, followed by *drama*, *entertainment*, and *political* concepts. Moreover, the PDI is found to be the most sensationalized among the three online news sites, followed by PS and MB. Finally, there is an association of the amount of tabloidization to the ranking of the online news sites. With these findings, it is concluded that the use of tabloidization in news media could be a strategy to gain a huge lead in readership and eventually attain the widest market possible.

**KEYWORDS**

Tabloid, Tabloidization, Online News Sites, Content Analysis

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**1. Introduction**

Today, there has been an increased dependence on online news resources. This shift from traditional to internet news consumption is not new. In fact, broadcast news in television has shown a noticeable decrease in ratings, while online news productions are gaining prominence (Lima, 2009). In other words, there is a shift from television news viewership and circulation newspaper readership to newsgathering from online sources. With this, an issue on the shifting of users toward a tabloid-style news online makes a challenge to traditional news outlets.

The current trend of the infusion of tabloidization in the modern news media domain has resulted in an intense controversy among the traditionalists in news media, leading to the advancement of the multidimensional tabloidization concepts. This exemplifies the extent to which the demand of marketing already dictates the newspaper content, tone, and layout that somehow dumbs down news (McNair, 2001). Theoretical assumptions of this idea can be attributed to the goal of the media producers which is to attain a wide audience readership to obtain the largest advertising sales. As serious issues of concern in news resources are being replaced with entertaining contents, news updates are deemed successful in appealing to the widest market possible (Harris, 2005).

Many researchers have studied the presence of tabloidization in news media outlets. The study of Spillane *et al.* (2020) studied the negative impact of visual tabloidization on preliminary impressions of reliability, which may have detrimental effect on the news agency. Also, the study of Lefkowitz (2021) examined tabloidization being linked towards the internet age. Moreover, Cammaerts *et al.* (2014) investigated how tabloidization plays a role in Norwegian News Media. Other studies have also investigated how tabloidization has permeated newspapers today and its impact towards news media outlets (Brandelid & Eklund, 2021; Holt, 2004;

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Popović & Popović, 2013). However, these studies did not include news media outlets in the Philippines, and they are only limited to examining the presence of tabloidization and its effect on either news readers and news producers. Also, these studies did not emphasize whether infusing tabloidization in news articles may have a positive effect on news readership. This means that there is a need to explore tabloidization in online news resources especially from the Philippine context, in order to have a deeper understanding of the strategies that news agencies are using to gain wide readership of their online news. With the changing face of internet news, the study aimed at analyzing the presence of tabloidization in the three online news sites, namely, 1) *Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI)*, 2) *Manila Bulletin (MB)*, and 3) *Philippine Star (PS)*, which are considered as the three top online news sites of the Philippines based on the survey of the Nielsen Consumer and Media View (2013).

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Tabloid*

Before, tabloid referred to a medical pill for some illnesses. However, tabloid today is now used to refer to the sensational tabloid to appeal to human interest, telling stories with many pictures using highly stereotyped prose (Bird, 1992). In the same way, Sparks (2000) define tabloid as something that gives less attention to important events in the society, and somehow devotes more information to the private lives of individuals. Other terms for tabloid include *soft news*, *infotainment*, *yellow journalism*, and recently, *newszak*.

### *2.2 Tabloidization*

Tabloidization is a contemporary style in the culture of mass media wherein sensationalism is much employed. More formally, it is the shift in focus from serious news content to entertainment, sensation, and lasciviousness (Lefkowitz, 2021). The tabloidization framework used in this study is based upon the summarized definitions in eight points: (1) Entertainment and news are combined, but entertainment content is highlighted; (2) News is focused more on the individual rather than on the subject itself; (3) Banalities and weird incidences such as accidents, killings, and freak changes in the weather are given much weight; (4) In-depth analysis and political debates are of less importance; (5) Topics on dramatic subjects such as sex and violence increased in focus; (6) Narcissism is of much weight; (7) Social and human events and happenings are turned into entertaining prose for public consumption; and (8) News is becoming out of context (Currie, 2012).

The development of tabloidization in news media started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when newspapers felt the economic positive impact of allocating sections for sports news and entertainment, which likely considers readers as customers rather than news consumers. This means that the process of tabloidization can be associated with the degradation of the professional journalism standards (Olkkonen & Luoma-Aho, 2011). In other words, traditional news presentation is shifting towards a tabloid-style news presentation today. According to Harris (2005) and Brander (2012), tabloidization or the development of persistent sensationalism in news media has vast origins and characteristics, why it was created and how it was presented to gain more news consumers' favor. They added that the progress gained by the media and other cultural industries nowadays is in congruence with the prevalent regard towards declining standards in education, culture, and politics, however, focused more on issues less relevant to the society.

In addition, tabloid newspapers and broadsheets are different. They differ in shape and size; however, connotatively, their difference lies in their design and content. Tabloids usually contain more sport news, entertainment, and scandal, while broadsheets, which are traditionally-styled news, rely heavily on serious tones and language (McLachlan & Golding, 2000). This means that tabloidization may be present in traditional news but in a smaller number of occurrences, not more than 50% of the total present concepts, and vice versa (McLachlan & Golding, 2000).

### *2.3 Reasons for Tabloidization*

Sparks (2000) presents three major themes in social change especially on issues regarding media and their audiences. He reasoned that the improvement in the level of education and literacy of the overall population, in general, has shown growth in the market for serious newspaper readership. However, the next theme that pertains to the changes of the family structure and labor market contradicts to the market potential. The increase of population among women does not support positive environment for the quality press because newspaper content is generally having male focus that reduces the likelihood of female interests. Third, having an increasing number of college students graduating makes the job share not measuring up, which leads to possible dissatisfaction among college graduates in terms of the status quo. These three factors could make general disturbance in the news and news media outlets. Moreover, the presence of tight competition among the commercial news producers forces the journalists and editors to craft and tailor their product as never before. Also, there is dissatisfaction of the political and big-time people's power, which now becomes the main element of traditional media news (Harris, 2005). This type of content is observed to be unintriguing and useless by many news consumers, looking at it as undesirable (Sparks, 2000).

Golding and Elliott (2000) also gave a parallel idea between tabloidization and news consumers, stating that the goal of the journalists to attract an audience may cut across some moral and professional principles that should be upheld by the journalist

community. However, this method is attributed to the argument that for the audience to have access to the target information, their attention must be caught first. Hence, tabloidization is employed both as a strategic medium for some journalistic standards (Harris, 2005).

#### 2.4 Importance of Tabloidization

Since tabloidization is found to be present, may it be consciously or unconsciously in media today, then it matters since the media inform the people about what is going on around. Without media in any form, people would have ignorance about anything unseen or unheard directly from another person. Little and McGivern (2016) mentioned that media represent the basic and usually, the only source of information about various topics and events. Therefore, it exists for the majority of the people to be informed about the significant events happening around, offering some powerful delivery on how to understand these events taking place.

Moreover, the debate over the possible effects of media has moved researchers to conduct critical studies revealing that news offers a way for people to have a grasp of the social world, as well as routines, conventions, and values held by journalism (Carey, 1988). This means that media and journalism work together to create advances in the field by keeping people informed of the cultural and political experiences of one's own culture and the culture of others.

#### 2.5 Review of Related Studies

The study of Currie (2012) aimed at examining whether New Zealand joins the conventional trend of employing concepts of tabloidization in their news presentation using both front-page and content composition analysis. Results show that the individualized and dramatic concepts are dominant in the research samples, with political and entertaining concepts holding less prominence. The study recommends having more print media to be compared and studied in order to gain more vivid results. Also, the study of Ndirangu (2013) studied tabloidization in *The Nairobiian* newspaper in Kenya, where it is found out that the headlines down to the other components of the newspaper exhibit an extensive use of entertainment, gossips, and other relevant tabloidization concepts to attract the attention of the Kenyan people. This study concludes that tabloidization is becoming rampant, and that the newspaper's persuasion style tends to modify the beliefs and attitudes of news consumers.

Moreover, Lima's (2009) study sought to examine the shift of traditional news media to tabloid-style news in U.S. through studying the story topic, layout and graphics, as well as photographs and illustrations, writing style, and validity of online news and objectivity evidence of the online news articles from CNN, CBS, and ABC. Results reveal that these online news outlets demonstrate a more tabloid-style of disseminating information. This means that these online news sites are adding much product of tabloid-style news in their content. A related study conducted by Brandelid and Eklund (2021) also studied 200 newspaper articles from Swedish news regarding COVID-19 vaccine. Though objectivity was observed, tabloidization concepts still permeate in the news coverage.

In addition, a long-term study by Esser (1990) presented researches about the print media. One of which is the historical work of Golding and McLachlan (2000), which analyzes the content of print media and its connection to tabloidization. The range, style, and form of the British press in 1997 were examined. And, upon its completion in 2000, findings reveal that tabloidization is already characterized by less text but more images, fewer international news, and more on entertainment news stories. It was also found out that people's attention was easy to get with the enrichment of tabloidization in the news content. The study of Popović and Popović (2014) also found that tabloidization in news progresses with sensationalism. This means that topics already gave way to scandalous subjects sneaking into people's privacy. It was also added that tabloid-style news is manipulating consciousness to create dependence. With this low level of journalistic processing, journalism reflects the degradation of real values.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

The descriptive research design is used to gather information about the current status of the phenomenon which is about the infiltration of tabloidization in news media. Specifically, it made use of correlational descriptive research design since this study describes "what exists" with respect to the count of the occurrence of tabloidization concepts in the news articles. This also comprises the collection of data to determine the relationship that exists between the two quantifiable variables – tabloidization and the ranking of the online news sites.

#### 3.2 Sampling Method

To examine how far tabloidization has gone through the news media with the consideration of time constraint, the purposive sampling method was used in the selection of the online news sites to be studied: *Philippine Daily Inquirer (PS)*, *Manila Bulletin (MB)*, and *Philippine Star (PS)*, which are the top three (3) online news sites in the Philippines. Moreover, these sites were chosen based on content, popularity, and relevance identified by the web filtering reference survey, Nielsen Consumer and Media View (2013) survey.

**3.3. Data Gathering Procedure**

This study adopts the conceptual approach in measuring certain concepts that exist in the content, which is necessary in deconstructing the composition of the articles. Only the relevant and important concepts were considered into account, namely: *individualism, drama, political* and *entertainment*. *Individualism* measures the frequency of mentioning individuals and what they did in the text. “Mr. Lloyd Talde – the rescuer” is an example of an individualized concept (equivalent to two counts). Secondly, the number of *dramatic* concepts was measured by counting the frequency of factually-redundant emotional words infused in the story, such as ‘sorrow,’ ‘trauma,’ and ‘horror.’ Thirdly, the *political* elements were measured by counting the frequency of political concepts, such as ‘government inquiry.’ Lastly, the *entertaining* concepts were measured by identifying the infusion of amusement or pleasure in the text, such as “He loves giving gifts to people” (counted as one).

Moreover, the data collection went through a course of one full business week. This means that the data were gathered for five consecutive days retrieving the top ten news stories from the homepages of each online news site. This gave a total of 30 stories per day being gathered. Throughout the whole duration of data gathering, there were 150 news stories (N=150) analyzed. All of these stories were collected at the same time, between 6 A.M to 3 P.M to maintain consistency.

Furthermore, even though the researcher is deemed the only coder, a test on reliability was still conducted to determine the coding accuracy. To obtain validity of results, three external individuals were asked to do the coding of the news articles (N=150). They were given with instructions as to the qualifications of tabloidization concepts to be counted. When coding was done, all data from each of the coded news articles as analyzed by the external coders were matched up to the researcher’s coding results and were then compared to determine the level of correlation. The measure of the strength resulted to 0.31703 in *Chronbach’s Alpha*, which means that the results from the inter-coding reliability test reflects a reliable coding.

**3.4 Statistical Treatment**

Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, mean, and percentage counting were used to answer the problems of the study. Frequency count was used in counting the relevant concepts found in each article. Then, the mean and percentage counting were taken from the results of the frequency counts to supply the variables needed to answer the problems. To answer the final problem, *Chi-Square Test for Independence* was used to examine whether there is a significant association between the implication of tabloidization in news media to the ranking of the three online news sites (PDI, MB, and PS).

**4. Results and Discussion**

*4.1. What is the amount of tabloidization concepts observed in the online news sites ?*

Table 1 shows the number of tabloidization concepts observed and counted from the articles under the different online news sites. It reveals that *Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI)* has a total of 1,308 tabloid concepts, followed by *Philippine Star (PS)* with a total of 1,113 counted concepts, and *Manila Bulletin (MB)* with a total of 1,110 counted concepts.

*Table 1*  
Tabloidization Concepts in the Online News Sites

Online News sites	Concepts	Amount of Concepts	Mean Occurrence	Ranking
Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI)	Entertainment	116	64.40	3 <sup>rd</sup>
	Drama	228		2 <sup>nd</sup>
	Individualism	909		1 <sup>st</sup>
	Political	55		4 <sup>th</sup>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1308</b>		
Manila Bulletin (MB)	Entertainment	25	55.50	3 <sup>rd</sup>
	Drama	94		2 <sup>nd</sup>
	Individualism	969		1 <sup>st</sup>
	Political	22		4 <sup>th</sup>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1110</b>		
Philippine Star (PS)	Entertainment	79	55.65	3 <sup>rd</sup>
	Drama	101		2 <sup>nd</sup>
	Individualism	897		1 <sup>st</sup>
	Political	36		4 <sup>th</sup>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1113</b>		

The results imply that Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI) is the most sensationalized among the three online news sites, followed by Philippine Star (PS) and Manila Bulletin (MB), which are just very close to each other. PDI has the most number of tabloid-relevant

concepts making a huge contrast to the two remaining online news sites. This reflects its heavy use of tabloidization concepts for media consumption. Based on the Nielsen Consumer and Media View (2013) survey, PDI is incontestably the country's most widely circulated and read newspaper. With almost 3 million readers daily from all over the country, it enjoys 50% of market share, making it the top in readership surveys (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2012).

Moreover, results also reveal that *individualism* comprises the highest number of frequencies, followed by *drama*, *entertainment*, and *political*. In other words, the frequency ranking of the concepts is true for all the online news sites. This means that media deals mostly with individuals to catch news consumers' attention rather than the other tabloid concepts. The following *individualized concepts* commonly used are 'people,' 'the president' – *who is...*, 'the head of,' and the pronouns – 'he,' 'she,' and 'they.' Also, *dramatic concepts* include 'happily' and 'strongly.' Moreover, the *political concepts* commonly used are 'law,' 'bill,' and 'the government.' However, *entertainment* has no common concept found in all the online news sites which could be attributed to its limited occurrence.

As noticed, *individualism* is at its height of occurrence which may be employed to have more news consumers. This outcome is true to the study of Harris (2005) and the study of Ray (2006), wherein *individualism* is also the most used tabloid concept in all newspapers covered by their studies. They found out that the focus of individuals in news readership enlightens people's mood and excitement. This is why tabloidization focuses more on people than the other concepts. Currie's (2012) research also shows that *individualism* concept is the most frequent, while the other concepts come to follow. This means that news articles talk more of individuals – may it be public, political, or any famous or intriguing individuals – that may, in one way or another, boost the taste of their news towards news consumers.

With these results, it is evident that tabloidization has moved the world of media. This result is similar to Golding and Elliott's (2000) claim that news media today, as maneuvered by journalists, may engage in lowering some moral and professional standards to gain press attention (Harris, 2005). This would point out to the usual argument that in order to inform, the attention should be gained first. Esser (1999) also added that news media have even usually focused on tabloid-style news today, especially that researches show that tabloid-style news increases the sale. Accordingly, it invites people's attention and fills their needs, in which the Uses and Gratifications theory, together with Media Dependency Theory (MDT), presuppose that audiences want to be informed or educated with mixtures of drama, entertainment, and other attention-catching manipulations in media. These could be reasons why tabloidization is used in presenting information among news media sources today.

4.2 Is there an association of the amount of tabloidization to the ranking of the online news sites?

Table 2

Association of Tabloidization to the ranking of the online news sites

	<b>P value</b>	<b>Significance</b>
Pearson Chi-Square	.000	Significant

\*\*significant - .000 to .05  
 Not significant if 2-tailed than 0.05

Table 2 shows the *Chi-Square Test for Independence* which presents whether there is an association between the amount of tabloidization to the ranking of the online news sites or there is none at all.

The test shows the *P* value of .000. Since the *P* value does not exceed 0.05, this means that there is a significant association between the amount of tabloidization to the ranking of the online news sites. This also means that the more sensationalized online news is, the catchier it would become to news consumers. Table 3 presents the detailed crosstabulation of the online news sites and relevant concepts.

Table 3  
Crosstabulation of the Online News sites and the Relevant Concepts

			Concepts				
			Entertainment	Individualism	Drama	Political	Total
<b>Online News Sites</b>	PDI	Count	116	909	228	55	1308
		% within Concept	52.7%	32.8%	53.9%	48.7%	37.0%
	MB	Count	25	969	94	22	1110
		% within Concept	11.4%	34.9%	22.2%	19.5%	31.4%
	PS	Count	79	897	101	36	1113
		% within Concept	35.9%	32.3%	23.9%	31.9%	31.5%
<b>Total</b>	Count	220	2775	423	113	3531	
	% within Concept	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

As presented in Table 3, PDI has a total of 1,308 counts with a percentage of 37.0%, while MB and PS have 1,110 and 1,113 counts of 31.4% and 31.5%, respectively. Furthermore, the total count of all the concepts from all the online news sites reaches up to 3,531. This is the number of counts observed from all the articles of the three online news sites during the five-day data gathering duration. As what the Nielsen Consumer and Media View (2013) had surveyed, PDI ranked first, followed by MB, and PS. However, there is found a significant association of the amount of tabloidization to the ranking of the online news sites since there is only a slight difference between MB and PS.

The results imply that tabloidization has something to do with media in effect to the society. That is, the higher the concentration of tabloidization in news media, the higher the market may also be. In other words, more people would favor tabloidized news than those with serious language and tone based upon their needs for satisfaction based on the Media Dependency theory (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). This also means that people’s choice is anchored upon their reasons for self-gratification. Since PDI is found to have taken most favor from the viewers based upon its ranking, then it follows that people find their news more appealing to their taste. Reasons may be of the following – enlightens mood, gives relaxation, helps escape from the stresses of daily life, informs or educates, and enhances social interaction (Katz *et al.*, 1974).

Because of this, the audience members are considered active media consumers who have the capability of choosing media for themselves that may have implications for their lives (Baran & Davis, 2009). As what the Uses and Gratifications Theory presumes, audiences are the ones responsible in choosing media for the purpose of meeting their desires and needs for gratification. Also, it has become a heuristic value nowadays, knowing that it gives idea to communication scholars about a perspective in which ideas on media choice, impact, and consumption can possibly be viewed (Baran & Davis, 2009).

In short, it proposes that media use is moved by the goals and needs of the news consumes themselves, and that actively participating in the process of communication limits, facilitates, or otherwise influences the indulgences and the effects that exposure associates (Katz *et al.*, 1974). Media infuses tabloidization in their news for the purpose of satisfying the needs of their viewers. Since the online news sites are found to be manipulating media, which subtly drives away viewers from more important issues in the society and let them be entertained with less relevant ones (Lima, 2009), the results of this study warns viewers. This raises awareness about being able to receive relevant news stories or not. However, knowing that the taste of people toward news consumption depends upon the affective, tension-release, cognitive, cultural, and social-integrative needs (Katz *et al.*, 1973), there is no blame that media still sustains the people’s needs especially about being informed about the events in the society.

**5. Conclusion**

This study aimed to determine the amount of tabloidization concepts observed in the three online news sites and ascertain whether the amount of tabloidization has a significant association with the online news sites’ ranking. Results reveal that the amount of tabloidization concepts is true for all online news sites. *Individualism* is the highest, followed by *drama*, *entertainment*, and lastly, *political* concepts. Also, PDI is discovered to be the most tabloidized among the three online news sites, followed by PS. Furthermore, findings reveal that there is an association of the amount of tabloidization to the ranking of the online news sites.

Generally, this study presents an empirical evidence that tabloidization makes an important ingredient in news media, and that its employment in news report undeniably increases impact to news consumption. This study also asserts that with tabloidization, news media outlets may have a big probability of capturing widest market possible and eventually gain prominence in news

production and consumption. As this study is only limited to examining the occurrence of tabloidization concepts from written online news, other news media sources such as verbally-delivered online news report with consideration of the non-linguistic features presented may also be included in future researchers.

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