

INFLUENCE OF CLICKBAIT HEADLINES ON NEWS CONSUMPTION AMONG KUBWA RESIDENTS IN ABUJA

¹ Ishola Kamorudeen LAMIDI PhD; ²Olayiwola Enoch OLAOLUWA

Department of Mass Communication
Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko
Ondo State, Nigeria

¹maildrlam0001@gmail.com/08060218191

²olaoluwaolayiwolaenoch817@gmail.com/07061071399

Abstract

In today's digital age, headlines play a crucial role in shaping how people consume news. This study aims to explore the impact of clickbait on the media habits of Kubwa's residents. The descriptive design was adopted for the study. The research gathers data from 400 Kubwa residents through a structured questionnaire. A comprehensive review of existing literature covers studies on clickbait effects on user responses, political media selection, and its role in viral journalism. The theory was anchored on the agenda setting theory. Findings from the data analysis show a high awareness of clickbait among Kubwa residents, with many relying on social media for news. Perceptions about the reliability of social media, influenced by residency duration, play a key role in shaping news consumption. While clickbait headlines enhance news source credibility, concerns about misinformation and trust erosion persist. The study emphasizes the significant role of clickbait in shaping public opinion and determining viral news stories on social media. Consequently, the study recommended increase media literacy programs, implementation of media ethic guidelines and training programs for journalists to promote responsible reporting and mitigate the negative influence of clickbait on news consumption in Kubwa.

Keywords: Clickbait Headlines, News Consumption, Media Literacy, Public Opinion, Social Media Influence

INTRODUCTION

Clickbait refers to the use of exaggerated, sensational, or deceptive headlines to entice readers into clicking on an image, video, or article link (Mowar et al., 2021). In today's rapidly advancing digital environment, many journalists use this approach in presenting news stories. As the public's desire for information continues to rise, clickbait has become a common method for capturing audience attention and increasing readership. In many instances, readers are encouraged to keep reading in expectation of receiving complete and detailed information. However, the actual content often falls short of the promise made by the headline, making its reliability, accuracy, and quality open to doubt.

According to Maggioro (2015), clickbait headlines are crafted to capture attention by stimulating curiosity. Their main purpose is to draw readers in and persuade them to open a particular article. To achieve this, such headlines often rely on exaggeration, sensational language, and information gaps that encourage users to click for more. As media organizations compete for online visibility, many have embraced this strategy to boost web traffic and generate revenue. Both credible and less credible news platforms now make frequent use of clickbait-style headlines. Recent studies also note that modern clickbait increasingly uses emotionally charged and partisan language, which has raised concerns about how it shapes the attitudes and judgments of online news audiences (Munger et al., 2020, p. 84).

El-Arini and Tang (2014), writing in *Meta News Feed FYI: Click-baiting*, explain that clickbait occurs when a publisher shares a link with a headline that encourages users to click without clearly revealing what the content is actually about. In this sense, clickbait can be seen as a promotional strategy used to increase engagement with digital content. The term itself combines the words *click* and *bait*, highlighting its role in luring audiences into selecting a link while offering little meaningful information in advance. The overall aim of this technique is to direct more traffic to webpages, videos, articles, and

other online materials.

Feldman (2020) further suggests that content marketing is highly competitive because creators are constantly fighting for audience attention, and the headline serves as one of the strongest tools in that struggle. This reflects the reality of the digital environment, where countless articles, videos, advertisements, and social media posts compete for limited public interest. In such a crowded space, attracting and holding attention is difficult. As a result, the headline becomes crucial, since it is usually the first element a reader encounters. A strong and engaging headline can encourage further reading, whereas a weak or unattractive one may cause the content to be ignored altogether.

Broadcast media encountered a similar practice in the late twentieth century through what became known as infomercials. The *WordWeb Dictionary* (Version 10) defines an infomercial as a television advertisement presented in the style of a short documentary. These programmes were typically aired during off-peak periods and were heavily promotional, even though they were framed as though they were offering valuable or transformative information. Although clickbait is now strongly associated with the digital age, the practice of using exaggerated headlines to attract audience attention has a much longer history. Today, social media platforms such as Facebook, along with magazines and advertising-driven websites, frequently feature striking headlines that arouse curiosity but often lead to content that is inconsistent with the promise of the title and overloaded with advertisements.

Historically, this tendency can be traced to the rivalry between William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* in the early twentieth century. In their effort to win larger audiences, both newspapers relied on provocative and sensational headlines that often violated accepted journalistic standards, even though they succeeded in drawing mass readership. In fact, the pattern of exaggerating headlines while providing less substantial content is far older than many assume. During the nineteenth century, this style of reporting became widely recognized as yellow journalism. Yellow journalism refers to a form of news reporting that emphasizes sensationalism, dramatic presentation, and, at times, misleading or exaggerated claims, with the primary aim of attracting public attention rather than promoting accuracy. Its purpose was largely commercial, as eye-catching stories and scandalous headlines were used to increase newspaper sales and readership.

This phenomenon is also relevant to Kubwa, a residential district in Bwari Area Council of the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria. Given the growing rate of internet access and the strong public interest in news within the area, it is necessary to examine how clickbait headlines influence the news consumption behaviour of Kubwa residents. In an age of information overload, it is important to determine whether such headlines weaken critical engagement with news or instead function as an entry point that encourages audiences to access stories they might otherwise ignore. Even though clickbait may be effective in generating traffic, it has attracted considerable criticism because of its deceptive character. When headlines fail to match the substance of the accompanying content, readers may feel misled, dissatisfied, or frustrated. As a result, increasing attention is now being given to the importance of engaging audiences through credible and meaningful content rather than through exaggeration or manipulation.

One of the earliest well-known examples of this practice is the *Great Moon Hoax* of 1835. In that case, *The New York Sun*, then a relatively new newspaper, published a sensational report claiming that life had been discovered on the moon. The story, supposedly based on the observations of the British astronomer Sir John Herschel, attracted enormous public attention for several days. It was later exposed as a fabrication supported by false illustrations. This example shows that sensationalized and misleading news presentation has existed for centuries. It is against this background that the present study was conceived, with the aim of investigating the extent to which clickbait headlines shape the news consumption habits of residents of Kubwa.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The growing use of clickbait headlines in online journalism has raised concerns about their possible effects on news consumption patterns. These headlines are usually framed to arouse curiosity and attract clicks, but they often exaggerate, distort, or oversimplify the content of the stories they introduce. As a result, readers may develop inaccurate impressions of events or consume news in a shallow and fragmented way.

This issue is particularly relevant to residents of Kubwa, an urban community in the Federal

Capital Territory, Nigeria, where access to digital media and online news platforms continues to expand. Because many individuals depend on mobile phones and internet-based platforms for timely information, they are frequently exposed to large volumes of headlines from different sources. In such an environment, readers often make quick decisions about which stories to open based only on headline appeal. This situation creates a risk that sensational or misleading headlines may shape their choices more strongly than the actual credibility or value of the news source.

The problem, therefore, is that the increasing presence of clickbait headlines may be influencing how Kubwa residents select, interpret, and respond to news content. If readers are repeatedly drawn to exaggerated headlines, this may affect their ability to distinguish between credible reporting and misleading content. It may also encourage superficial engagement with news rather than critical and informed understanding.

Against this background, this study seeks to examine how clickbait headlines affect the news consumption behaviour of Kubwa residents. The study also intends to determine whether such headlines influence readers' selection of news stories and their perception of the information presented.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent are Kubwa residents exposed to clickbait headlines?
2. What are the perceptions of Kubwa residents towards clickbait headlines?
3. How do clickbait headlines influence the news consumption patterns of Kubwa residents?
4. What potential implications do clickbait headlines have on the media consumption behavior of Kubwa Residents?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Clickbait Headlines

Candace (2023) states, "a closed compound word for 'click and bait' is a noun with a negative connotation that means a sensationalized title or headline that lures one to click the link". "Clickbait as a form of content designed to gather clicks on search engine result pages". With clickbait, companies attempt to generate traffic on their blogs or websites, often relying on sensationalist headlines to attract attention, Sprout Social (2023).

According to Chen et al. (2015), "clickbait is a term that refers to online content that has a headline whose main purpose is to get web users to click on the linked webpage. The clickbait headline is usually misleading, often over-exaggerating the content's emotional impact. While it is often thought of as a deceptive marketing tactic, it is one of the most effective marketing strategies when it comes to skyrocketing a webpage's view count". The effectiveness of clickbait comes from how the human brain is wired, humans are naturally curious beings. Clickbait, therefore engage this curiosity by promising information of value once a user clicks on the provided link. Clickbait understands how human beings are emotion-driven; they leverage this by creating headlines that engage the audience's anger, joy, outrage, surprise, fear, and sadness.

According to American Marketing Dictionary (2004), Clickbait typically refers to the practice of writing sensationalized or misleading headlines in order to attract clicks on a piece of content. clickbait often relies on exaggerating claims or leaving out key information in order to encourage traffic. The term is generally used in a dismissive sense. Hava (2023) views Clickbait as a marketing and engagement strategy that uses sensationalistic, misleading, withholding, or deceptive content to entice clicks and drive page views. Attention is the currency of the Internet's economy. With so many different websites vying for a finite amount of traffic, clickbait can be a helpful marketing strategy for businesses. However, that is only the case when the content follows through on the promise of the headline. Any well-written article headline will incorporate some clickbait flavour. Every website on the market is vying for clicks, but the only question you need to ask yourself is how far are you willing to go with clickbait to get ahead

Brafton (2022), Clickbait is not only common in editorial content and YouTube videos, but has serious value for business owners on social media platforms as well. When it comes to clickbait, each platform requires its own tactics. But there is a common theme that is carried over from other parts of the internet: Headlines need to be attention-grabbing and have shock value. Clickbait is something of a dirty word in the blogosphere, implying some nefarious intent to trick readers into clicking on a link and being

subjected to an article that doesn't deliver on its tantalizing title. The headline is the most critical component in a piece of clickbait content. By exploiting the "curiosity gap" – a person intense desire to know the answer to vague questions or statements, clickbait may earn attention without high-quality content. While it's true that clickbait titles are marketing poison in many, if not most cases, they can be a major asset in the right hands (Brafton, 2022).

Most often, clickbait is associated with fake news and those spam sites that only want traffic and ad revenue without giving value (The Content Authority, 2023). Clickbait uses some perfectly sound underlying concepts. Rather than turn your nose up at the idea of taking inspiration from clickbait tactics, recognize some of the fundamental truths about human behavior that this type of content thrives on. In some cases, if the title on a piece of clickbait content is catchy and compelling, it will drive people to a website. However, most of the time, clickbait is only successful at driving traffic and it does very little to support conversions. People want sensational headlines, and if you can't draw them in with catchy titles that inspire curiosity, rest assured there is another brand that will. Finding that balance between sensational and clickbait may seem tricky, but if one can keep delivering good content and real value to one's audience, one will never be at risk of falling into the "fake news" trap.

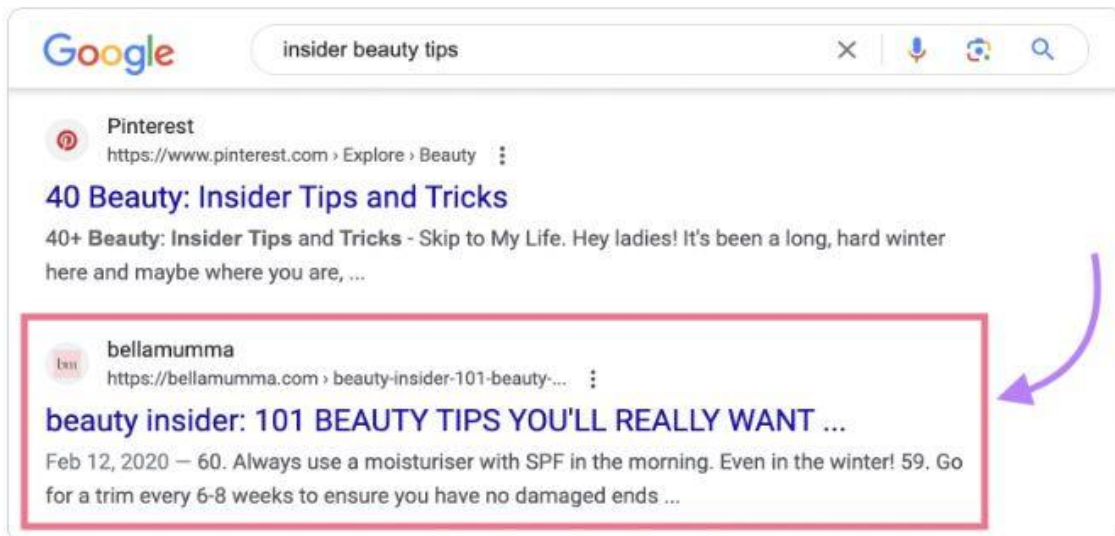
Brafton, (2022) says Clickbait titles, on the other hand:

1. Employ emotional triggers such as curiosity, fear, or anger to capture your attention and entice you to click on the link.
2. Make exaggerated or sensational claims that aren't supported by the actual content of the article.
3. Rely on misleading or vague language to tap into your desire for instant gratification, curiosity gap, and FOMO.
4. Use clickbait words and phrases like "Mind Blowing," "Cringe-worthy," "This weird trick," or "This will shock you" to appeal to your innate desire for novelty or surprise.

Clickbait can appear in many formats. Hava (2023) highlighted three real-life clickbait examples:

Sensationalist Blog Titles

Sensationalist blog titles are designed to be attention-grabbing and evoke strong emotions to entice readers. They often use exaggerated language, hyperbole, or shocking statements to create a sense of urgency or curiosity. The goal is to attract clicks and views by making the content seem more dramatic or significant than it might actually be. If you search for "insider beauty tips" on Google, one of the articles that might come up is from bellamumma entitled, "beauty insider: 101 BEAUTY TIPS YOU'LL REALLY WANT..."



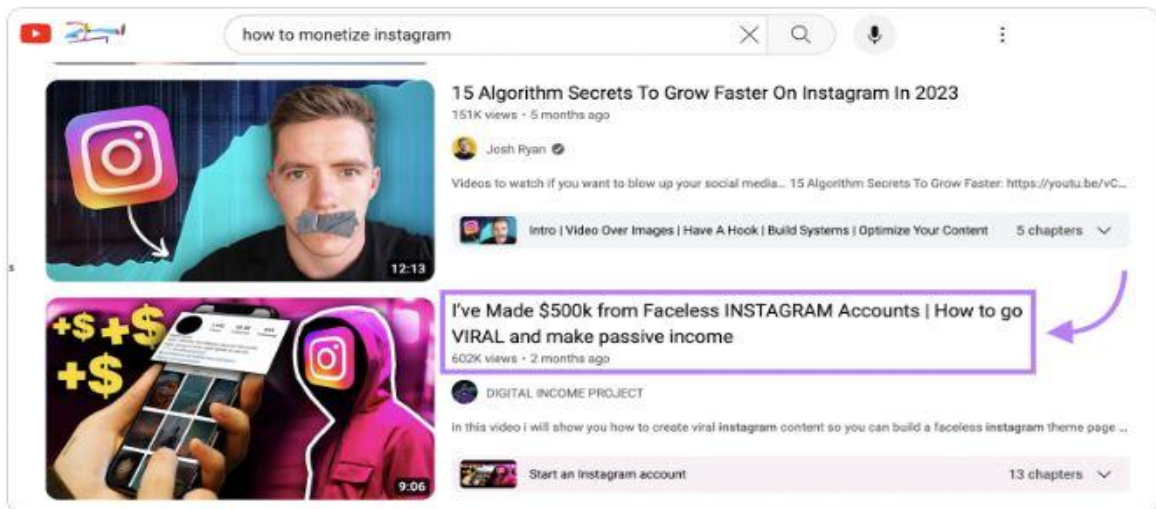
The above title is clickbait because:

- It is all in caps.
- There are too many tips to give.
- The phrase "beauty tips you'll really want" invokes curiosity to get searchers to click

But when you do click, you'll find a surface-level list of widely known beauty advice.

Over-the-Top YouTube Video Titles

Over-the-top YouTube video titles are exaggerated and designed to capture viewers' attention quickly. They often use hyperbole, excitement, or sensational language to create a sense of curiosity or urgency. These titles aim to stand out among the vast content on YouTube and encourage users to click on the video. Common elements include caps lock, exclamation marks, and bold claims. The primary difference between over-the-top YouTube videos titles and sensationalist blog titles lies in the medium and the audience's expectations. The competitive nature of YouTube, paired with shorter attention spans and a desire for instant gratification, can drive some creators to use clickbait titles and thumbnails to boost views. For example, if you search for "how to monetize Instagram," one of the top videos is entitled "I've Made \$500k from Faceless INSTAGRAM Accounts | How to go VIRAL and make passive income."



The video title is clickbait because:

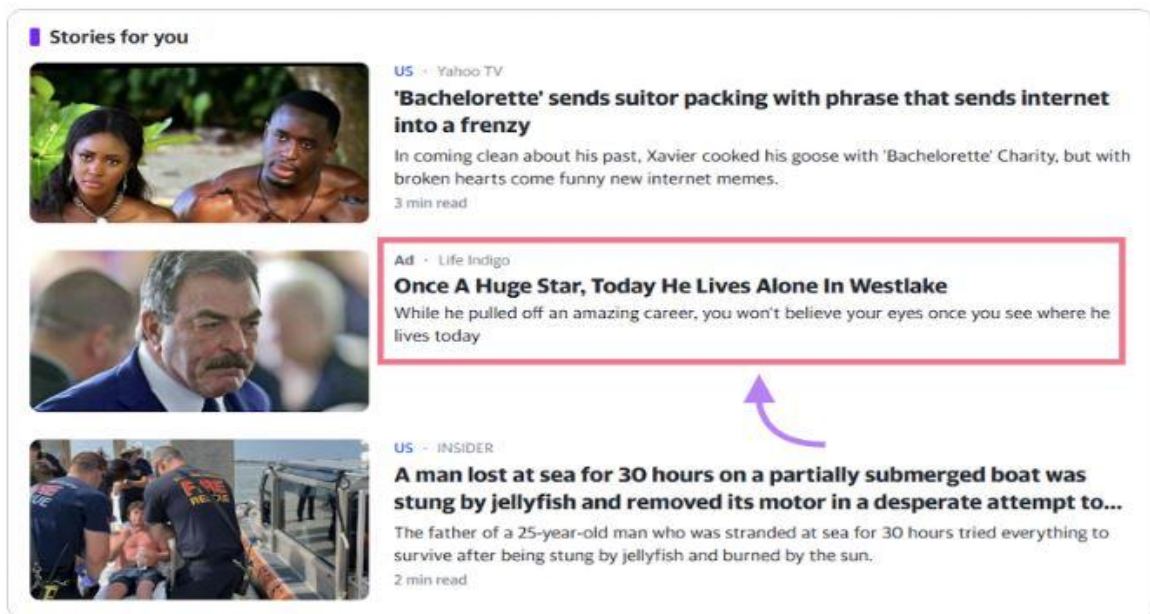
- It uses an impressively high number to capture attention
- It capitalizes words like "VIRAL" and "INSTAGRAM" to stand out
- The phrase "make passive income" invokes curiosity to get viewers to click

But while the video does offer some instructions on how to create an Instagram account and research viral trends, it doesn't provide any tips on how to make passive income, especially in the six-figure range. Instead, it mostly lists out labor-intensive tactics that require a considerable time investment.

Entertainment News Article Headlines

Generally, people are curious about the lives of their favorite celebrities. But not every new article delivers on what its headline promises. Yahoo! News, for example, has an article entitled, "Once A Huge Star, Today He Lives Alone in Westlake."

Stories for you



'Bachelorette' sends suitor packing with phrase that sends internet into a frenzy
 In coming clean about his past, Xavier cooked his goose with 'Bachelorette' Charity, but with broken hearts come funny new internet memes.
 3 min read

Ad · Life Indigo
Once A Huge Star, Today He Lives Alone In Westlake
 While he pulled off an amazing career, you won't believe your eyes once you see where he lives today

US · INSIDER
A man lost at sea for 30 hours on a partially submerged boat was stung by jellyfish and removed its motor in a desperate attempt to...
 The father of a 25-year-old man who was stranded at sea for 30 hours tried everything to survive after being stung by jellyfish and burned by the sun.
 2 min read

This is an example of clickbait because the headline uses phrases like “you won’t believe your eyes” in the description and “once a huge star, today he lives alone” in the title to make you curious. But when you click on the headline you’re directed to a long-winded blog post about more than 15 celebrities and their luxury houses.

Common Elements of Clickbait Headlines

Looking into clickbait headlines shows how one can use psychology and language to grab attention. Media writers use words like excitement and urgency to make audiences get curious and click. Understanding this helps one see the effects and ethics of clickbait in digital content. According to Mormol (2019), some common elements of clickbait headlines were highlighted as:

1. **Surprise:** This is one of the most common clickbait characteristics. Everybody wants to see something new, and clickbait usually leverages this curiosity. This is why titles such as 'Shocking revelations about the lives of past UK Prime Ministers' are so common online. Users don't click to learn about past UK prime ministers, they click to discover these 'shocking' details that will surprise them.
2. **Cliff hanger:** Cliffhanger titles work by creating a curiosity gap. They give readers a small bit of information that encourages them to learn more by clicking on the content. A good example of this is: 'A teacher asked students about their most memorable day; you won't believe what one student answered'. The title has already teased part of the content; audience will therefore want to know what it is about the student response, thereby infusing curiosity as to how the story could be shocking enough to warrant news or media coverage.
3. **Numbers:** Clickbait works by managing a reader's expectations, and numbers are an effective way to achieve this. For example, imagine a content that is concerned with discipline violations in a certain college fraternity. If the title just mentions that the content will cover the fraternity's discipline violations, it might not attract many clicks. Most web users expect fraternities not to attract a few violations. If the headline is 'How a fraternity racked up 40 disciplinary violations in a single semester' then it seems more interesting. It is not about the violations, but the surprisingly high number of violations.
4. **Superlatives:** Superlatives immediately attract attention. A person might not be interested in gardening, but chances are, they might click on an article on the 'largest' pumpkin ever harvested or the oldest horse in the world. Superlatives suggest that this is not just 'run of the mill' content, this is content that covers issues of significance.
5. **Striking call to action:** Clickbait is all about standing out. Having a striking call to action is an effective strategy for a business to differentiate itself. Consider the following two headlines: Click

here to learn more about tax deductions or save money on your tax bill here. Both could be linking to the same content, but the second one will attract more users to click. This is because the call to action is striking, and it appeals directly to the user.

6. **Visual Baits:** There is no better way to attract attention than through engaging visuals. This is a rule in marketing that also applies to clickbait content. Adding sensationalist imagery can attract more clicks. Depending on the content, it can be effective to include imagery with sexual innuendo, violence, cute animals, etc.
7. **Emoji and internet slang:** This is a strategy that works best when the target audience is younger, internet-savvy readers. Emoji and internet slang shows that one identifies with their culture and that the content linked is 'hip' and relevant

According to Hava Salsi (2023), clickbait gains audience attention by appealing to three main psychological triggers. The first is the curiosity gap, which describes the difference between what a person already knows and what they want to know. Clickbait headlines create this gap by presenting information in a dramatic, mysterious, or incomplete way, often hinting at surprising or hidden facts without fully revealing them. Since people naturally want to resolve uncertainty and satisfy their curiosity, they are often motivated to click in order to learn more.

The second trigger is FOMO, or the Fear of Missing Out. Clickbait appeals to this feeling by making readers believe they may miss something important, entertaining, or socially relevant if they do not open the link. Psychological explanations suggest that human beings are naturally driven to seek information about their environment and social world, and that learning new things can be rewarding. Because of this, headlines that suggest exclusive or urgent information can easily attract attention. Even when the topic is trivial, such as celebrity gossip, the wording of the headline can make readers feel excluded unless they click and find out more. In this way, clickbait takes advantage of the desire to remain informed and included in current conversations.

The third factor is the human preference for instant gratification. Hava Salsi (2023) explains that clickbait headlines often promise quick and simple solutions to everyday problems. For example, a headline may suggest that a person can improve productivity immediately by following one easy trick. This type of message appeals to the desire for fast results with little effort, increasing the likelihood that readers will engage with the content. In several ways, clickbait also resembles modern headline-writing practices because it shares a number of persuasive features, such as the following:

- They promise value to the audience, even when the content does not fully deliver on that promise.
- They are brief, direct, and easy to understand.
- They are carefully framed to attract a particular audience and stimulate interest.
- They use strong, emotionally charged words to provoke a reaction from the reader.

Sprout Social (2023) further notes that researchers who studied the sentiment, polarization, and popularity of newspaper headlines found that titles with strongly positive or strongly negative emotional tones attracted more readers than neutral ones. This suggests that emotionally charged headlines are often more effective in drawing attention. As a result, news stories, interviews, blog posts, infographics, videos, and similar content may all appear more appealing when presented with sensational language. However, the key difference between genuinely compelling content and clickbait is often the quality of the material itself. Clickbait is usually associated with weak or low-value content, even when the headline is highly attractive. Its common features include:

- An attention-grabbing headline
- Very short content
- Heavy use of pictures or memes
- Strong promotion for social sharing

Clickbait Rules

The rules of clickbait introduced the convergence of captivating digital content with the delicate balance between engagement and deception. Within the realm of online storytelling, creators employ attention-grabbing tactics to attract audiences, enticing them to click, share, and, in the end, consume the content. Covering everything from crafting compelling headlines to the ethical considerations of sensationalism, these rules navigate the dynamic landscape of the attention economy, where a simple mouse click has the potential to shape narratives and propel digital discourse.

Empirical Review

A number of scholars have examined the subject of clickbait and its influence on audience behaviour. One of such studies was conducted by Supavich, Jeffrey, and Young (2021), who explored the effect of clickbait headlines on audience reactions. The study involved 213 university students in the United States and investigated how different headline styles influenced users' thoughts and emotions. Using an experimental design, the researchers compared traditional news headlines with clickbait headlines. Their findings showed that both cognitive responses and emotional reactions play significant roles in shaping how individuals respond to news content online. This study is relevant to the present research because it provides insight into the ways different headline formats can influence audience engagement and news consumption patterns within a community.

Similarly, Mhelich (2019) examined the relationship among curiosity, clickbait, and audience choices in political media. The study was based on two theoretical perspectives: Information Gap Theory and Selective Exposure Theory. These frameworks were used to explain how individuals decide which news content to consume. The findings revealed that liberals were more likely to select stories with liberal-leaning headlines, while conservatives preferred headlines that reflected conservative viewpoints. This indicates that political orientation significantly shapes the kind of news people are curious about and willing to click on. Mhelich's work is important because it demonstrates that people often choose media content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. This supports the concept of selective exposure, which holds that individuals tend to favour information that confirms their existing attitudes. The study is relevant to the present research because it suggests that political inclinations may also influence how Kubwa residents respond to clickbait headlines.

Theoretical Review

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory, developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), explains the powerful role of the media in influencing what the public considers important. The theory is based on the idea of salience transfer, which means that the media may not necessarily determine what people think, but it greatly influences what they think about. By selecting, emphasizing, and repeatedly presenting certain issues, the media shapes public attention and determines which topics appear most significant in society.

The theory originated from the Chapel Hill study conducted during the 1968 United States presidential election. That study discovered a strong relationship between the issues emphasized by the media and those the public perceived as important. This finding formed the foundation of Agenda-Setting Theory. The theory operates on two key levels. First, it explains how the media directs public attention toward particular issues. Second, it highlights the ability of the media to shape the degree of importance attached to those issues. In essence, the media influences the framework through which people interpret and understand public matters.

In relation to this study, Agenda-Setting Theory provides a useful framework for explaining how clickbait headlines may affect news consumption among Kubwa residents. Through sensational or attention-grabbing headlines, the media may steer readers toward certain topics while making them appear more urgent or significant than others. As a result, clickbait headlines may influence not only the stories Kubwa residents choose to read but also the issues they come to regard as important in the news.

METHODOLOGY

Survey method is adopted for this in order to gather data from a large and diverse group of participants to investigate their opinions, attitudes, or experiences on specific topics or to obtain quantitative data efficiently. The population of this study are social media users who are exposed to clickbait headlines. Four hundred respondents were purposely selected from Kubwa residents in Abuja. A 16-item structured questionnaire was used to collect data for this research work. Copies were administered to each respondent in the sample over the internet.

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