

Full Length Research Paper

'Clickbait-style' headlines and journalism credibility in Sub-Saharan Africa: Exploring audience perceptions

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In the proliferated age of technologies, the field of journalism has been faced with several challenges that have inevitably pushed journalism practice to unprecedented heights. Overtly, journalists have resorted to various strategies to compete with various media platforms such as social media and other citizen journalistic strategies. Journalists have also resorted to the use of advertising/strategic communication methods to spice up their news stories and attract a large following. Particularly, journalists now use clickbait styles to draw more readership of their own stories. While this has been perceived as a pitfall for journalism, others have argued in favor of these strategies suggesting that they have no effect on the credibility of the media and journalism at large. This experimental study, therefore, set out to understand how the audience perceives clickbait-style headlines in relations to media credibility. Particularly, the study examined whether the Zambian and Tanzanian online news consumers observe the same distinction in the credibility of news content alleged to exist between clickbait and traditional news reporting, and whether perceptions of clickbait headlines lead to lower credibility for news articles. The findings suggest strong statistical evidence that clickbait headlines pose negatives effects on the perceptions of journalistic credibility in Zambia and Tanzania.

Key words: Journalism credibility, clickbait, news wire-copying, online news consumers, Zambia, Tanzania.

INTRODUCTION

The media in most sub-Saharan Africa is often accused of mediocracy, sensationalism, and many other unethical

practices (Mfumbusa, 2008) that continue to impede professionalism. The rise in technological use and

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Advancements among the audience and journalist themselves has exacerbated the problem, therefore, creating a schism between what is and what is not credible (Kerunga et al., 2020). In an effort to improve their practices and reach out to a larger audience, the neoliberal media, mostly driven by market models (Gondwe, 2014), has exorbitantly resorted to fully adapting to advanced technologies including news 'clickbait'-style headlines. These practices, designed to drive web traffic and attention (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020), center their discussions on the reformulation and republishing of news based on the use of clickbait headlines. Some strains of worries have wondered whether such an adaptation is making journalistic practices worse. Questions of whether such practices cheapen the field of journalism and drive away the audience continue to underscore the debates.

While some scholars have supported such a move, others continue to debate as to whether journalistic credibility is still a feasible option in the age of the internet (Asongu and Nicholas, 2019; Gondwe, 2018; Metzger et al., 2003; Kioussis, 2001). Undergirding much of this criticism, is the notion that "these practices, which may produce short-term gains in web traffic, are ineffective in the long run as audiences get tired of them" (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020). That is, according to Klinger and McBride (2016), Owens (2015), and Smith (2014), "clickbait underneath sensational headlines are a sure way to erode journalistic credibility and lose your audience as they view your content as uninformative, low-quality commodity news". This argument is consistent with some contenders who believe that their work is of a higher form.

Despite a plethora of literature on this topic, some gaps still exist regarding audience perceptions of "clickbait" content. A number of studies, particularly in advertising have been studied to assess the influence of 'clickbait-styled' headlines on consumers' choices of a product. In journalism, most existing studies focus on how clickbait impede journalistic professionalism and credibility. However, there is a dearth of research on the perceptions that the media consumers have. Worse, little or no research exists in sub-Saharan Africa, therefore, leaving gaps in literature on the role that 'clickbait-styled' headlines play in reshaping and allowing the technologically infused field of journalism adapts to the changes.

It is for this reason that this experimental study sets out to examine whether the Zambian and Tanzanian online news consumers observe the same distinction in the quality and credibility of news content alleged to exist between clickbait and traditional news reporting, and whether the credibility of a news story is affected by how

the audience perceive clickbait headlines in the news story.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Clickbait and journalism

Several definitions of clickbait exist. However, what underscores these definitions is the idea that clickbait styles are a strategy of drawing attentions to information online by "maximizing the traffic such hastily produced ephemeral content can draw" (Coddington, 2019). Simply put, clickbait refers to sensationalized headlines that encourages the consumer to online news click and follow a link that they had not intended for. This link would automatically lead them to an article, image, or video that a journalist or any other media personnel wants the consumer to see. Generally, most critics accuse clickbait styling as often appealing to your emotions and curiosity. This is because the moment a consumer clicks on a link, the website hosting the link earns revenue from advertisers, but the actual content is usually of questionable quality and accuracy (Hamblin, 2014; Smith, 2014). This strategy is especially common in advertising where profit maximization overrides corporate social responsibility. These strategies have always been used across time although their proliferations have become more manifest in the digital age where a boom of media platforms has become more prevalent. What has remained consistent, though, is the purpose of such strategies to draw consumers' attention using various unconventional means.

In journalism, the tension of clickbait is often rooted in two dichotomous purposes: to communicate important information about the news story and to draw the reader's attention (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020; Andrew, 2007). According to Dor (2003), such an understanding has "led to journalist holding a tacit set of ideas about what constitutes an appropriate headline, that is, short, clear, interesting, emphasizing new information and people with high news value, and connecting to prior events and assumptions". Other studies pursuing the same approach have demonstrated that most clickbait styled headlines tend to exaggerate the tone of the news story especially when that story has a negative genre (Gondwe, 2020; Ecker and Lewandowsky, 2014).

Given the fact that most news sources have moved to online context; "clear and unambiguous headlines are no longer valued as they once were" (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020). Also, the idea that the value of a

headlines should be in reading the headline itself, rather than the accompanying article (Dor, 2003), has phased out. The reality is that the economic incentives accompanied by drawing as audience as possible have led journalists to a new strategy of writing headlines that maximize clicks. Molyneux and Coddington (2020) and Tandoc (2014), for example, observed that, among many other effective tactics, is the use of headline whose deliberate ambiguity lure the audience or news consumer into reading the whole news story or “whose brashness and undue certainty oversell the ambiguity of the actual news contained within, a practice commonly referred to as clickbait” (Hamblin, 2014; Smith, 2014). While this might sound as a worthwhile strategy for the media, the problem comes up when quality is compromised by the value of clickbait. For example, in one of the studies, Silverman (2015) was able to demonstrate that 13% of all the stories studied contained some misleading dissonance between headline and text in the sense that what was in the headline was completely different from what the text talked about.

‘Clickbait’ journalism in Zambia and Tanzania

In Zambia and Tanzania, such occurrences were only common in sensational news stories (Chama, 2017) referred to as *Udaku* in Tanzania (Clarke, 2013; Mfumbusa, 2010). Although using a different strategy (since they were hard copy tabloids), their aim was to attract readership and the purchase of those tabloids through sensational and appealing headlines. Several studies emerged critiquing the kind of reporting with some suggesting that it was unprofessional (Masanja, 2019; Mfumbusa, 2010; Strelitz and Steenveld, 2005), and other scholars arguing in favor of the sensational genres that they told the ‘true’ African story (Chama, 2017; Wasserman, 2010; Djokotoe, 2004). Despite the variations in perceptions of sensational reporting, a general consensus suggested the fact that professional journalism credibility was compromised in the sense that quantity did not amount to quality. At most, the audience began to treat news from their local media as simply entertainment. This implies that while readership of the tabloids was increasing, credibility was dwindling. This is because quality and credibility have always been treated as an overlap.

There is still a dearth of empirical research as to what constitutes credible or professional/quality journalistic reporting in Zambia and Tanzania. However, some findings from other geographical areas can be extrapolated. Particularly, Neuberger’s (2014) study suggests that “when

audiences are asked about what signals good journalism, many of their responses are not nearly as sophisticated as the detail of scholarly criteria might imply. Other than diversity, relevance, accuracy, comprehensibility, impartiality, and ethics, many audiences are comfortable to perceive a media that tells their story as credible (Djokotoe, 2004). For Djokotoe (2004), it is not about the number of political stories told, for they serve the elite few, but the stories that are issue-based, and on grassroots telling the story of the most common individual. The truth is that despite the fact that credibility is defined in a framework of believability and associated with idealized norms of journalistic practice, such as objectivity (Kerunga et al., 2020; Gondwe, 2018; Metzger et al., 2003) its real meaning is multidimensional. This has become especially true in the new technological age where journalists have to compete not only with other media but with citizen journalist. Some journalists in Zambia and Tanzania, particularly freelance journalists with blogs and YouTube as their outlets continue to find ways of increasing their audience and especially through clickbait-styled headlines. As a result, credibility is perceived as multifaceted and operationalized by measuring trustworthiness, accuracy, fairness, balance, absence of opinion, completeness, authenticity and believability (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020; Gondwe, 2018). Such discrepancies, therefore, provide a fertile ground for us to test the notion of clickbait headlines and how they are tied to credibility. Thus, the following was asked:

RQ1: Will the audience rate news stories with clickbait-styled headlines lower than news stories with traditional headlines in terms of (a) quality? (b) credibility.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study replicated Molyneux and Coddington’s (2020) operationalization approach. As a procedure, the research question was tested through an experimental design. Particularly, a 2 × 2 factorial design was employed (reporting style × writing proficiency while varying these elements in single stimuli set).

Sample selection

Our sample data was recruited from a WhatsApp group comprising former university students of St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT) and from two other groups nested on Facebook. A total of $N = 362$ from Zambia and $N = 421$ participants from Tanzania agreed to participate after responding to some qualifying criterion question. Generally, the criteria were that they indicate whether they were avid consumers of news. Second, participants were limited to individuals above the age of 18 and living in Zambia or Tanzania. Gender

quotas were imposed to ensure that the sample was balanced. Indeed, 62% female and 48% male participants were included. The average age of the participants was 33 years old. Data was collected from April 2020 to August 2020, indicating a period of at least five months.

Stimuli

Stimuli included real news stories that were published in legit online media outlets. In Zambia, stories were collected from *ZNBC* and *Mwebantu* media. *ZNBC* was selected because it is the national media that is still consumed in different modalities by the majority of people. On the other hand, *Mwebantu* media is an online platform hosting and reaching out to more than one million people. For Tanzania, stories from *TBC-online* and *Michuzi* blogs were used. The same justification for selected stories in the Zambian was used for Tanzania. For each of the stimuli stories, it was assessed that they had a clickbait-style heading that were rewritten into a traditional style. For example, a story about a Zambian artist MC-Wabwino read, "The real reason we would not hear from MC – Wabwino". The comments that followed seemed to suggest that he had either died, yet he just retired from Music and took a new career. For such a headline, it was rewritten as follows "MC-Wabwino bids farewell to music".

Manipulation check, was focused on observing whether the audience noticed and reacted to distinctions that professional journalists make. In other words, is to know whether news consumers or the audience as a whole pay attention to the differences between the traditional styles and what most professional journalists consider as credible versus non-professional and what most journalists would consider as unreliable. Therefore, it was started by testing the effectiveness of the headlines generated. Second, participants were asked to determine the headline they thought best fit the definition, "The headline was written with the purpose of enticing the consumer to click on it rather than to convey information." Surprisingly, more participants chose the headline clickbait-styled headlines (Zambian news story: $\chi^2(1) = 7.3, p < 0.01$; Tanzanian news story: $\chi^2(1) = 5.1, p = .01$). Several reasons such as motivations for consuming the type of news, the kind sources, etc., can help explain these choices. However, this study is more concerned not at the motivational reasons but on whether the audience perceived such strategies as compromising the credibility of the news story.

Operationalization process

An online survey questionnaire was created via google forms for our quasi experimental participants whom randomly were assigned to either the first or second condition: the original story with a traditional headline, or the original story with a clickbait headline. Second, participants were asked to rate the story assigned to them based on quality and credibility, and then answered some demographic questions regarding their news literacy and consumption tendencies. Our independent variables (IVs) in this case were headline style that included either traditional or clickbait, while the dependent variables (DVs) were represented by credibility and quality. Finally, demographics and news consumption tendencies were measured as control variables.

To measure credibility, a common scale was employed used by

several authors. As per rule, participants were asked to rate their agreement with headlines on a point-5 scale to indicate whether the story can be trusted or not. Responses were then summed up and divided the number of items in the scale to produce the index of story credibility ranging from 1 - 5. The results indicated that the Zambian story provided $M = 2.73, SD = 0.51, \alpha = 0.89$, and the Tanzanian story (stimuli) was $M = 4.59, SD = 0.66, \alpha = 0.92$; therefore, providing us an average alpha of ($\alpha = 0.85$) for all credibility items. Quality on the other hand was measured by asking the participants to rate their agreement with statements such as "considers different opinions," "reports relevant facts," "is complete," "is objective," "does not contain errors or contradictions," "is understandable," "does not insult or discriminate." This was also rated on a 5-point scale and providing us with an average alpha ($\alpha = 0.87$) for all quality items. Online news consumption was measured with a similar scale but asking individuals their sources of news and how often they consume news. News literacy was also measured on the 5-point scale but asking questions about the level of understanding of a news story and how much time they dedicate to details of the story.

FINDINGS

In order to answer question RQ 1, a One-Way ANOVA test was used. The main reason was to control for various reporting styles that would act as intervening or confounding variables. The Zambian stimuli story with a clickbait styled headline was perceived as of low quality ($F(1, 524) = 8.213, p < 0.05$), despite the fact that it provided no statistical significant difference of credibility if based on the clickbait headline. On the other hand, the Tanzanian stimuli story with a clickbait-styled headline was equally rated lower in terms of quality ($F(1, 604) = 3.78, p < 0.07$) even when this difference only approached significance. To be specific, stories from mainstream media in Zambia and Tanzania (*ZNBC* and *TBC online*) exhibited less effects on credibility in the sense that most of their headlines were traditional and did not possess elements of clickbait-styled headlines. Therefore, there quality was perceived as high even when the credibility of the story was in question. On the other hand, stories from sensational media outlets - *Mwebantu* and *Michuzi* blog were perceived as both dwindling in terms of credibility and quality. However, the reasons to this problem were less about the clickbait-styled headlines, but the reportage style, source of the story, and the literacy levels of the consumers. This implies that by itself, clickbait-styled headlines had little or no significant effects on audience's perception of the news story.

In summation, the findings suggest strong statistical evidence that clickbait headlines pose negative effect on the perceptions of journalistic credibility in Zambia and Tanzania. However, variations were found between two countries. In Zambia, clickbait styled headlines were

perceived to have little or no effect on journalism credibility and quality. This was different from respondents in Tanzania. Second, clickbait styled headlines, by themselves seemed to account for little or no effects on perception level of credibility and quality. Confounders and intervening variables such as writing proficiency and media literacy accounted for some of the effects. Comprehensively, the results tend to suggest clickbait headlines may still have the ability to lower perception level of credibility and quality.

DISCUSSION

This experimental study was conducted to examine whether the Zambian and Tanzanian online news consumers observe the same distinction in the quality and credibility of news content alleged to exist between clickbait and traditional news reporting, and whether perceptions of 'clickbait-styled' headlines lead to lower credibility for news articles. Clickbait-styled headline, was defined as "the practice of writing headlines that withhold information or oversell the story in order to entice readers to click through" (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020). As observed in the findings, the study was able to demonstrate that although 'clickbait-styled' headlines may have the ability to lower the perceptions of credibility and quality of professional journalism practices, the audiences were not necessarily put off by the new strategies. Particularly, the findings suggest that the motivations for consuming some news stories over the other, overrode the quality and credibility as a criterion for consuming a particular story. These findings are consistent with studies conducted by Chama (2015), Wasserman (2010), Mfumbusa, (2010), and Djokotoe (2004), who argue that a true story is what determines the motivations for consuming it. The argument is equally consistent with Gondwe et al., (2021)'s findings on the various motivations of news consumption including the role that a particular news story is playing in the lives of the consumers.

Further compound of the findings suggest that the theories were employed indeed to provide guidance to understanding the role of clickbait-styled headlines. As laid out earlier, the core purpose of clickbait is to communicate vital information and draw the attention of the reader (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020). These two objectives are equally the objectives of professional journalism, regardless of the styles used: To communicate important information and to draw the attention of the news consumer. The challenges lie on the strategies to be used. This is why media law and ethics becomes a

relevant field in journalism practice. For decades now, journalism practice has favored traditional and professional styles of reporting even when they fail to deliver a message that most Africans can associate with. As Mfumbusa (2010) had argued, journalism in Africa is simply western in African fabrics. Therefore, 'clickbait-styled' headlines that seem to mimic sensational journalism, which has drawn a lot of audiences in most sub-Saharan Africa (Chama, 2017; Wasserman, 2010), are also favored by the audience. Credibility in this case, is only perceived in the consistence of events and not in the traditional way of telling the truth. If anything, most people tend to have less trust in professional journalistic writing. This is because of the focus on political issues and sacrificing public interests and space in the media at the expense of political issues. To some extent, these findings are in tandem with the normative claims that clickbait-styled headlines undermine media quality and credibility. Stories with clickbait headlines in this study were consistently assessed as possessing lower quality and credibility. However, these differences were significant in only one case where a clickbait was present. This suggests that the effect of clickbait headlines on story credibility and quality might be negative in nature, yet at a level where statistical supporting evidence could not be inferred.

In their recent study, Molyneux and Coddington (2020) for example, were able to demonstrate that that "audiences were not put off by the aggregation itself, and indeed, may not even notice it". The same conclusion was made about 'clickbait-styled' headlines. These findings are also consistent with Scacco and Muddiman (2016) study which provided evidence of marginally negative effect of news reporting strategies like clickbait. However, there subsequent study (Muddiman and Scacco, 2019) provided more negative and less ambiguous reactions to the clickbait-styled headlines, suggesting that the audience were comfortable with them and did not associate them with poor quality or lack of credibility. In particular, Muddiman and Scacco's (2019) study was able to demonstrate that "overheated headlines designed to stoke outrage decrease readers' intended engagement with a news source and the credibility of that source after reading a headline and article, though those headlines do not withhold information as the ones in these studies and our own do." Nonetheless, this does not imply that the audience will always not be affected by the 'clickbait-styled' headlines especially if the media has not openly defined itself to the audience as such. In other words, there is still a danger of losing media quality and credibility if a professional media outlet consistently presented itself in that manner. For example, the general statements,

suggest that the Zambian National Media (ZNBC) has lost its credibility despite their emphasis on professional and traditional styles of reporting. On the other hand, sensational media outlets in both Zambia and Tanzania tend to be gaining more consumers for entertainment and well as credibility purposes. This is also true in other sub-Saharan African countries such as South Africa. Regardless of the overwhelming findings, the results suggest that journalists and other media outlets use clickbait-styled headlines sparingly. Overall, these findings attempt to debunk the anxiety alluded by most professional journalists and media observers that clickbait impedes professionalism, thus lowering the credibility of the field. While this may be true on the part of the journalists, the audiences seem to care less, and most probably focus on the motivations for using that particular media (Gondwe and Some, 2020) or the source of that particular news item. It is indeed right to worry about professionalism and what journalists are giving to the audience. However, the need to understand the motivations for consuming a particular media or news item, and what most audience value as important should underscore journalism practice.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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