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**TO CLICK OR (NOT) TO CLICK? EXPLORING LINGUISTIC STRATEGIES TO GENERATE SENSATIONALISM AND CAPTIVATE READERS WITH IRRESISTIBLE CLICKBAIT**

**Abstract**

In today's world, there is a tendency to present information in a way that seeks to provoke strong emotions or grab attention, often without regard for accuracy. For a considerable period of time, sensationalism has been a persistent presence. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that there is a significant amount of inaccurate information or an excess of misinformation among those who are involved in producing and consuming news, especially when it comes to the concept of sensationalism. Despite being aware of the prevalence of sensationalism in news, especially in headlines, people still opt to click on and explore such content.

This study investigates the language techniques and strategies employed by popular online media platforms in Albania to captivate and engage their audience, enticing them to click on and consume their news articles. The analysis will begin by looking at the various definitions of sensationalism and clickbait provided in scholarly sources, as well as their evolution in the media. Next, we will focus on how online media identifies and utilises certain linguistic techniques. For this study, we monitored five reputable online media platforms over a period of seven days. The objective is to gain a deeper understanding of the specific language techniques employed by journalists to engage and captivate their readers. Based on previous field research, we categorised strategies and approaches. The findings unveil fascinating revelations about how media places a higher emphasis on markets and audiences rather than focusing on content and accuracy, employing various strategies.

**Key words:** *exaggeration, attention-grabbing, language technique, writing technique, analysis of writing style, headline*

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## **Introduction**

### *Exploring the concepts of sensationalism and clickbait*

There has been a long-standing interest in the study of sensationalism and its impact on human behaviour. One notable area of research focuses on the historical connection between sensationalism and the yellow journalism of Pulitzer and Hearst in 1898 (Office of the Historian, 2016). Professor Stevens suggests that throughout history, there has been a method of sharing information that tends to prioritise sensationalism. This occurrence can be traced back to the anthropological records of preliterate societies, where information about an incident involving a man who fell into a barrel while trying to visit his romantic partner would rapidly disseminate along the beach (Stephens, 2007).

Throughout history, even in the era of oral news transmission, there has always been a tendency to embellish stories with a certain level of sensationalism. Research suggests that storytellers have acknowledged the importance of engaging the emotions of their audience in order to capture their attention and gain recognition.

Diverse viewpoints and levels of awareness have surfaced across various time periods and societies. Open societies that value education and knowledge tend to possess a greater understanding of the prevalence of sensationalism. On the other hand, closed communities, or those where the government controls the media, tend to be less inclined towards sensationalism.

Nevertheless, in the present age, information appears to have no limits. “Our society certainly pays enough attention to news. We watch news, read news, debate news, marvel at, puzzle over, curse, and sometimes feel its rush.” (Stephen 2007) The internet plays a significant role in fueling this phenomenon. Advancements in technology have empowered individuals to both consume and create news.

Several studies have provided evidence of a notable decrease in print newspapers, with no clear signs of this trend changing course (Palau-Sampio, 2016; Bazaco et al., 2019; Fidler, 1997). The field of news production and consumption has undergone a notable shift, moving away from traditional print formats and embracing online platforms. This transition has presented a

unique set of challenges for the world of journalism. The influence on journalists to increase viewership and clicks has drastically altered the core values of journalism, redirecting attention away from truth, impartiality, accuracy, and honesty towards emotional appeal, profitability, and sensationalism, among other considerations.

One of the tactics employed to increase click-through rates involved modifying the headlines. In the past, the display of headlines in bold typeface at the start of a written piece served two important purposes: providing a brief summary of the topic and capturing the reader's attention, with the latter being more significant (Ifantidou, 2008). There has been a significant shift towards online publishing in recent times. Jay Beiger coined the term 'clickbait' in 2006 to describe this phenomenon, drawing a comparison between captivating viewers and enticing fish with bait on a hook. Merriam-Webster defines clickbait as something designed to make readers want to click on a hyperlink, especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest." Journalists and news producers tend to view this approach negatively, despite its linguistic unbiasedness. Many times, the headline adopts a tone that is not accurate, sensationalised, speculative, or focused on promoting a product or idea.

The difference between the two (content vs. emotion) appears to be of minimal significance to online media. The greater their emphasis on eye-catching headlines at the expense of substance and precision, the more likely they are to attract readers and consequently boost their financial profits. The media has shifted its focus away from prioritising public content and audience reactions. The media seems to be neglecting another crucial role, gatekeeping. Usually, numerous sources cover the same news, all vying for attention in a race against the clock. To achieve success, one must fully utilise attention-grabbing techniques, often diverting readers and inundating them until a subsequent news item arises to counter and nullify the impact of the initial one.

Several research articles investigate different methods and tactics employed as attention-grabbing techniques. Language, visuals, specific topics, and characters all play a role. Several strategies that have sparked extensive discussions involve the use of eye-catching thumbnails and images, the amplification or manipulation of information, the creation of a sense of curiosity, the incorporation of viral and trending topics, and the creation of underwhelming content. It is clear and understandable that information filled with the methods mentioned is widespread, appearing on various pages of internet media. News content employs various

techniques, such as the use of unrelated images, elliptical sentences, unfinished thoughts, exaggerated typography, attention-grabbing topics that may not directly affect the reader, and gossip about celebrities.

## **Methodology**

In this study, the focus is on analysing the language and stylistic strategies employed in headlines to evoke emotional responses from the reader, although other components also warrant investigation. Prior research has demonstrated that in order to achieve this objective, it was essential to utilise a set of features commonly employed in attention-grabbing content. Several authors have identified unique sets and techniques commonly employed as attention-grabbing tactics. (Kemmm 2022, Prokofeva et al. 2021) We conducted a thorough analysis and identified a specific set as the most suitable representation for the research, taking into account the potential outcomes. In their 2019 study, Bazaco et al. employed a variety of techniques some of which are used in the study. Most of these strategies involve exaggerated claims, sensationalised stories, repetitive content, catchy phrases, incomplete data, and repetition. Furthermore, the authors have integrated several audiovisual components into the collection. However, this study will not specifically examine audiovisual techniques.

This study aims to analyse the language and stylistic techniques used to arouse emotional responses from readers. To some extent, all of the components mentioned deserve careful examination. In traditional journalism, headlines serve as concise summaries of the content or information contained within the article. In digital media, some headlines employ a distinct approach by intentionally omitting important details or identities of characters related to the topic at hand. This approach sparks a sense of curiosity, motivating readers to explore additional details by clicking on the provided link. Hence, headlines serve as “stylistic and narrative instruments that function as decoys to induce anticipation and curiosity in the reader so that they click on the headline and continue reading” (Blom and Hansen, 2015). In certain instances, the information presented in news articles can be disheartening, as it may not align with the expectations set by the article's title.

Strong modifiers paired with rhetorical questions accentuate the importance, enigma, and novelty of the presented information in the news article, creating a sense of intrigue.

Occasionally, readers may feel a psychological urge to respond to rhetorical questions, allowing them to engage their imagination and provide their own answers. By clicking on the link to access the content, readers can validate the accuracy of their interpretation.

Listing, or enumeration, is another technique for capturing the reader's interest in the headline. Applying basic mathematical operations satisfies fundamental human needs for organization and requires less concentration.

Using ambiguity, wordplay, or phrases taken out of context is another technique to generate online traffic. Often, headlines that captivate the majority of readers use language that allows for multiple interpretations, creating ambiguity. These words and phrases are ambiguous because of their multiple interpretations. The inclusion of language that targets individuals or specific groups, along with the use of exaggeration, hyperbole, superlatives, and extreme modifiers followed by exclamatory punctuation, are all additional forms of manipulation. Furthermore, clickbait employs the distinction between less substantial and more substantial news. Information that falls under the category of 'soft news' typically revolves around less serious subjects, such as lifestyle, sports, criminal activity, and celebrity stories. On the contrary, 'hard news' is known for its focus on subjects like politics, economy, and other matters that can greatly impact society's future (Reineman, 2011). Nevertheless, when tackling complex subjects, the news is adept at delivering information in a compassionate and accessible manner. It seems that the field of journalism is moving away from traditional methods towards a more sensationalised approach.

### **Data and findings**

The Albanian Media Institute (2015) and Revista Monitor (2013) conducted surveys and studies to determine the popularity of five distinct online news websites: panorama.com, gjirafa.com, syri.net, balkanweb.com, and gazetaekspress.com. Over the course of seven days, we closely monitored the production of news content at a moderate level of activity. In the initial phase of the observation, the focus was on quantifying the daily publications and assessing the level of public interest generated by each page. The second component of the research focused on identifying the methods used to attract the audience, specifically those related to clickbait. We organised this component according to the criteria established in the previous section. The research consisted of two sections.

The investigation's initial requirement, to narrow down the identification of important information and relevant characters related to the topics, seems to apply this approach to every analysed news source. Despite the factual details about the central character, the protagonist's identity remains undisclosed or enigmatic, inviting readers to unravel the mystery as they navigate through the page.

News outlets often publish articles that highlight disturbing stories without immediately revealing the identities of the individuals involved. For example, a recent article titled "Terrori në Durrës ku babai mbajti peng dy fëmijët e mitur dhe hapi zjarr ndaj RENEA-s me kallashnikov, zbulohet identiteti i 40-vjeçarit (Gazeta Panorama, May 15, 2024) {"Terror in Durrës: Father Holds Two Young Children Hostage and Opens Fire on RENEA with an AK-47, Identity of 40-Year-Old Uncovered" (Gazeta Panorama, May 15, 2024)} sheds light on a deeply troubling incident.

The use of a specific phrase to conceal information is another example of this strategy. "Vetting zbulon shifrat/Sa të hetuar nga SPAK përfituan nga Amnistia Penale! Të metat e sistemit të burgjeve" (Gazeta Panorama, May 9, 2024) {"Vetting reveals numbers? How many people investigated by SPAK profit from criminal amnesty? The flaws of the prison system" (Panorama Newspaper, May 9, 2024)}

"Vizita në Tiranë, ja 3 çështjet themelore që Cameron pritet të diskutojë" (BalkanWeb, 21 May 2024); {"Visit to Tirana: 3 key issues expected to be discussed by Cameron" (BalkanWeb, May 21, 2024) "Vdekja e minatorit në galeritë e kromit në Bulqizë, disa të arrestuar/Detajet (BalkanWeb 21 May 2024)" {"Miner's death in chromium galleries in Bulqiza: Several arrests and details" (BalkanWeb, May 21, 2024)}

"Trafikoi nusen në Itali për prostitucion, Prokuroria e Beratit përfundon hetimet për vjehrrën, ja me sa vite burgim dënohet" (Syri.net, 21 May 2024)

"A scientific article explores the impact of trafficking on women in Italy, specifically focusing on the issue of prostitution. The Berat Prosecutor's Office has recently concluded its investigations into a case involving a mother-in-law, revealing the length of the prison sentence she will face." (Syri.net, May 21, 2024)}

Expressions such as "unveils the data," "vulnerabilities in the system," "three important issues to investigate," or "a handful of people apprehended/details" are examples of clearly defined strategies used in clickbait to withhold information. These phrases and words entice the reader to click on the link and delve into the intricacies of the news content.

Throughout the observation and analysis of the sources, it became evident that the techniques often work together to achieve a common objective. Many authors utilize thriller-style narrative techniques, gradually unveiling information to maintain reader suspense. Numerous studies support the examples above, demonstrating that today's online news media prioritizes the emotional impact of the narrative over its substance and veracity.

Crafting headlines in a way that piques curiosity without revealing too much information is a commonly used technique. From a psychological perspective, these linguistic techniques in communication have a way of captivating the reader's attention. It triggers their natural inclination to delve into their knowledge base in search of an answer. Unconsciously, they feel compelled to click and confirm the accuracy of their guess, thereby satisfying their informational and curious needs.

“Po vidhemi’/Dogjani me tone të ashpra: O prindër ku i keni fëmijët sot? Syri.net 21 May 2024 {“We are being stolen”? Dogjani, in a harsh tone, asked, "Parents, where are your children today?"

“Për Bubulinën, apo për heroinën?” (Panorama, May 21, 2024) {"For Bubulina, or for the heroine?" A recent article appeared in Panorama on May 21, 2024.

“Mani pulite’ shqiptare: A do sjellë SPAK fundin e kastës politike në Shqipëri?” (Panorama, 20 May 2024) {“Will the SPAK bring an end to the political elite in Albania, similar to the "Clean Hands" movement in Italy? A recent publication in Panorama on May 20, 2024, raises this question.

‘A jeni gati?’ Ja cila ish-banore i bashkohet shtëpisë; së ‘BBV3’ sonte” (Syri.net, May 23, 2024) {“Are you ready?" A new resident joins the household in the article "Ja cila ish-banore i bashkohet shtëpisë; së 'BBV3' sonte" (Syri.net, 23 May 2024).}

“Arbana Osmani i rikthehet ekranit? Ja çfarë zbulon ajo” (Syri.net, May 23, 2024). Is Arbana Osmani making a comeback to the screen? What does it reveal? (Syri.net, 23 May 2024)}

The examples provided above reinforce a common approach journalists employ to captivate readers and generate curiosity about the topic. These methods are prevalent in various online media segments, particularly in topics classified as soft news, like celebrity updates, gossip, and lifestyle articles.

A single source employs a strategy of repeating or serializing a particular topic across multiple publications, either on the same day or over several days, to maintain the audience's interest in the content. With each post, they unveil fresh insights by employing various techniques outlined in the literature. This fulfils the reader's curiosity to a satisfactory extent, ensuring their continued interest in the following updates and encouraging further exploration. Occasionally, we enhance this strategy by examining serialization in other media that have tackled the same topic from different angles.

“Aksident i rëndë në Itali, humb jetën 56-vjeçarja shqiptare” (Syri. Net, May 23, 2024); {"Fatal accident in Italy claims the life of a 56-year-old Albanian woman" (Syri. Net, May 23, 2024)}

“Itali/aksident i rëndë, vdes 54-vjeçarja shqiptare” (Syri. Net, May 23, 2024) "Italy/severe accident, 54-year-old Albanian woman dies" (Syri. Net, May 23, 2024).

“Ka bërë goxha vite burg”/ 64-vjeçari shkëmbente SMS me mbesën e tij dhe e ngacmonte s\*ksualisht, gjyshi i të miturës: Është dënuar për vrasje e përdhunim.” (Panorama, May 23, 2024)

The 64-year-old, convicted of murder and rape, exchanged text messages with his granddaughter and sexually harassed her, the minor's grandfather, during his many years in prison. (Panorama, 23 May 2024)}

“E joshte me lekë, mbesa vinte në shtëpi me patatina në dorë”- rrëfëhet gjyshi i 13-vjeçares e cila u ngacmua s\*ksualisht nga 64-vjeçari: Vajza thotë që s’më preku në pjesë të trupit! Ka shenja në...” (Panorama, May 23, 2024)

The grandfather of the 13-year-old girl who suffered sexual abuse from the 64-year-old man recounts, "He lured her with money; the granddaughter would come home with fries in hand."



The girl claims that he did not touch her in certain parts of her body! There are signs in” An article appeared in Panorama on May 23, 2024.

“Vajza më tha ‘atë që mendoni ju s’ë ka bërë’”- flet nëna e 13-vjeçares e cila akuzoi 64-vjeçarin për ngacmim s\*ksual: E kishte kërcënuar ‘po tregove, të vras babin’ (Panorama 23 May 2024)

The mother of the 13-year-old girl, who accused the 64-year-old man of sexual harassment, said, "What you think he did, he didn't do." He had threatened her, "If you tell me, I'll kill your father." (Panorama, May 23, 2024) }

These headlines offer contrasting perspectives, with the first two drawing from her grandfather's testimony and the third from her mother's account. The material includes some additional details to pique readers' curiosity, while maintaining the integrity of the majority of the information. Another common approach in journalism is the strategic use of suspense in headlines. By deliberately withholding information or ending a phrase abruptly, journalists can create intrigue and captivate readers. Additionally, journalists may choose to tackle sensitive topics that resonate deeply with society, such as the issue of sexual abuse involving minors under the age of 18.

Aksident i rëndë në aksin Lushnje-Rrogozhinë, makina përfundoi në afërsi të banesave! Zhduket drejtuesi i mjetit” (Syri.net, 24 May 2024)

“Autostrada në Lushnje, identifikohet shoferi që u përplas me makinë pas një shtëpie në Konjat” (Syri.net, 24 May 2024)

"There was a serious accident on the Lushnje-Rrogozhine road, with a car ending up near residential buildings!" The driver disappears.“ Syri.net published a recent article on May 24, 2024.

{"Driver identified after collision with a car near a house in Konjat on the Lushnje highway" (Syri.net, May 24, 2024)}

These news headlines employ serialisation, along with an increase in the amount of information presented, as their strategy. The initial narrative captivates the reader with the enigma surrounding the driver's disappearance following the collision. The second narrative reveals the driver's identity to the reader.

In situations where the topic holds great importance, relevance, or concern for the community, people commonly employ the technique of serialisation, when combined with elements of suspense and escalation. In addition, it is quite common when an event of scandalous nature takes place.

Exaggerated language, hyperbolic statements, and extreme descriptors are common elements in sensationalised content. Additional cases employ this strategy alongside previous ones to enhance the appeal of the headline.

“Natë e cmendur’/ ish-banorët gati për të hyrë në shtëpinë e ‘BBV3’ (Syri.net, 24 May 2024)

{"Crazy night": former residents ready to enter the house of 'BBV3' (Syri.net, May 24, 2024)}

“Skema piramidale e kredive me dëm 7 milion euro, caktohen 9 masa sigurie dhe 5 ‘arreste ne burg’ (Syri.net, 24 May 2024)

{"A pyramid credit scheme causing 7 million euros in damages has resulted in the implementation of nine security measures and 5 individuals being incarcerated." (Syri.net, May 24, 2024)}

“Penda e zogut të zhdukur shitet me shifrën marramendëse në ankand” (Gjirafa.com, 22 May 2024)

{"Extinguished bird feather sold at a breathtaking price at an auction" (Gjirafa.com, 22 May 2024)}

This strategy typically comes into play when the topic allows for the exploration of quantity and speculation. Perceiving exaggerations and extreme modifiers can be subjective, especially when used with numerical values. In other instances, the story utilizes them as references from characters or everyday people, enclosing them in quotation marks. Sometimes, the story takes their comments out of context to heighten the sense of emotion and anticipation.

Other elements of headline techniques involve highlighting the experiences of well-known individuals, which are typically classified as lifestyle, gossip, or soft news. The importance of these articles, aimed at entertaining and satisfying readers, differs from that of topics rooted in factual information and investigative journalism. As a result, it becomes easier for journalists

to employ various attention-grabbing techniques, even if this leads to a noticeable decrease in the content's overall quality.

Some articles, particularly those in the gossip and lifestyle sections, tend to be overly sensationalised. In these instances, it is not uncommon to come across attention-grabbing headlines accompanied by news articles that are disappointingly brief and fail to meet the level of curiosity sparked by the title.

“A je e pasur ti Françeska?’ ish-banorja përgjigjet në ‘Cherry on Top’! (Sot.com.al, May 24, 2024) at Gjirafa.com {"Are you wealthy, Francesca?" A former BBV3 resident answers 'Cherry on Top'! (Sot.com.al, May 24, 2024) on Gjirafa.com }

“Ish-banorët festojnë ditëlindjen e Meritonit, ja dhurata që Çimi kishte përgatitur për finalistin” (Sot.com.al, May 24, 2024) at Gjirafa.com

{"Former residents celebrate Meriton's birthday; here is the gift prepared by Çimi for the finalist" (Sot.com.al, 24 May 2024) at Gjirafa.com }

## **Conclusions**

Upon closely examining the websites of popular newspapers, it became evident that the headlines employed a number of attention-grabbing techniques. The study's findings were organised according to specific criteria, and the headlines utilised language elements to evoke emotions. However, the research revealed that these criteria were not comprehensive. We can further examine the evolving landscape of journalism and the changing trends in headlines, departing from traditional approaches. The cause of this phenomenon may vary depending on different perspectives. Various factors contribute to this phenomenon, including cultural diversity, the internet's influence on globalization, the fast pace of life, and the demand for easily digestible news.

Each of these options could be a promising area for future research. In our current study, we explored the noteworthy utilisation of language and stylistic tropes in journalism, where the emphasis on profitability often takes precedence over accuracy. News articles employ a variety of methods, including limiting information and concealing character identities, gradually revealing information but leaving some gaps, using questions and rhetorical questions, creating

suspense, repeating and serializing events, employing hyperbole and exaggeration in language and numbers, and occasionally using extreme modifiers that can leave readers feeling let down.

The prevalence of delicate subjects within the Albanian community, despite its relatively small population of approximately 2.7 million individuals (INSTAT 2023), was a remarkable observation. Most headlines tend to focus on distressing subjects such as crime, suicide, violence, murder, domestic violence, femicide, corruption, abuse, catastrophes, and similar matters. It appears to be quite challenging to find a page or a single day without headlines about the subject in question.

There are some constraints to this study. The article does not address the full range of strategies employed in crafting attention-grabbing headlines and does not explore the profound psychological effects these headlines can have on readers. Nevertheless, this study aims to raise awareness in the Albanian context about the shift of journalism from traditional to sensationalist. It would be intriguing to delve deeper into the exploration of how journalism in Albania is adapting to the changing media landscape and digital environment. The article presents various instances where ordinary and exaggerated narratives can undermine the trustworthiness of news. It is crucial to emphasize that the public's demand closely links this phenomenon, leading it to naturally evolve and adapt in the future to satisfy this demand. Looking ahead, this type of research has the potential to provide valuable insights into the development of journalism and present a holistic view of the field throughout history. It would be interesting to expand the scope and analyze how these strategies affect the reader and shape their understanding of the world.

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