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ANALYTICAL CLICKBAIT STRATEGIES IN NEWS HEADLINES: A CASE STUDY OF MSTAR

Siti Aishah Chu Abdullah^{1*}, Azza Azreenas Azman²

¹ Faculty of Education, Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia
Email: asachu@unimas.my

² Faculty of Education, Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia
Email: 78945@siswa.unimas.my

* Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

In the contemporary digital landscape, clickbait strategies may drive engagement, but they can also erode the credibility of both content and media organisations. This study adopted a quantitative research methodology to examine the use of clickbait headline strategies and identify recurring patterns among online journalists. The content analysis focused on news headlines, revealing three predominant types employed by *mStar* on *TikTok*, namely celebrity-focused, intriguing, and emotive headlines. Among these, celebrity-driven headlines are most prevalent, followed by intriguing and emotive ones. While sensational or emotionally charged headlines are effective in increasing audience engagement on *TikTok*, they pose a challenge to journalistic integrity. Content creators must strike a careful balance between attracting readers and maintaining credibility in the fiercely competitive digital media space. To navigate this, it is crucial to evaluate how audiences perceive the influence of clickbait on the credibility and trustworthiness of journalism in the digital age.

Keywords:

Journalistic Integrity, Clickbait Strategies, News Headlines, Audience Engagement, Sensationalism, *mStar*, *TikTok*

Introduction

In an era increasingly shaped by the pervasive influence of social media, journalism faces a critical challenge in maintaining credibility and trustworthiness amid the growing prevalence of clickbait content. The rise of sensationalised headlines and the spread of misinformation across various digital platforms have raised serious concerns about the reliability of journalistic practices. According to Rosenbaum, Bonnet, and Berry (2021), the evolving digital landscape

has disrupted traditional journalistic standards, often compromising them in favour of sensationalism and the relentless pursuit of virality.

As social media continues to redefine how news and information are consumed, its role in shaping public discourse has become more pronounced. Tandoc, Thomas, and Bishop (2021) argue that clickbait headlines exploit the curiosity gap, triggering a psychological impulse in readers to engage with content in search of closure. However, this practice has sparked ongoing debates about its implications for journalism's credibility and trustworthiness.

This shift in news consumption has blurred the boundaries between responsible journalism and sensationalised narratives, creating an environment where the pursuit of clicks often takes precedence over factual accuracy and ethical reporting. As a result, declining public trust in media institutions has far-reaching consequences for information dissemination, civic engagement, and the democratic process. Myllylahti (2019) highlights that in navigating this complex landscape, journalists and media organisations must balance the need to capture audience attention with their fundamental responsibility to uphold truth, accuracy, and ethical standards.

In today's digital ecosystem, online media platforms frequently employ clickbait strategies to attract readership and increase engagement. However, the use of misleading or exaggerated headlines can have detrimental effects on the perceived credibility of both the content and the media outlets themselves.

Despite the widespread adoption of clickbait tactics in digital journalism, there remains a gap in understanding how these strategies are deployed, particularly in the context of news and entertainment in Malaysia. This study seeks to examine clickbait headline patterns, identifying the techniques commonly used by news organisations on social media platforms to engage audiences while assessing their impact on journalistic integrity.

Literature Review

Hurst (2016) examines the impact of clickbait headlines on the perceived credibility of online sources, particularly in the context of science news dissemination on *Facebook*. Through an online experiment, participants were exposed to either clickbait or traditional science news headlines, with variations in source type (educational vs. news) and source credibility (low vs. high). The findings indicate that clickbait headlines negatively affect perceived source credibility, with lower-credibility sources suffering a greater decline when employing clickbait strategies. While clickbait may effectively attract readers, it ultimately undermines the trustworthiness of the source. These findings have significant implications for science communicators and online content creators, as they highlight the trade-off between engagement and credibility in science communication.

Building on these concerns, Munger et al. (2020) explore the effects of clickbait headlines on media learning outcomes, focusing on their influence on content recognition and comprehension. Through a series of online experiments, the study compares different headline styles, such as clickbait-questioning, clickbait-exaggerated, and accurate alongside variations in article length (headline-only vs. full article). The results demonstrate that accurate headlines, particularly when paired with full articles, lead to the highest levels of recognition and comprehension. In contrast, sensationalist and misleading clickbait headlines are associated with lower recognition and comprehension scores. This study reinforces the importance of

accurate headlines in promoting media literacy and ensuring that readers engage with and retain factual information.

Beyond individual comprehension, credibility perceptions of news sources are also shaped by broader public attitudes. Carr et al. (2014) investigate how media skepticism and political cynicism influence perceptions of mainstream and citizen journalism. Conducting a web-based experiment with a representative sample of U.S. adults, the study randomly assigned participants to either mainstream or citizen news report conditions. The findings reveal that individuals with heightened media skepticism and political cynicism tend to perceive both mainstream and citizen journalism as less credible. Notably, political cynicism had a stronger negative impact on credibility perceptions than general media skepticism. The study also highlights that while citizen journalism is often regarded as an alternative to traditional media credibility issues, those with deep-rooted skepticism may not necessarily find it more trustworthy.

In examining the tactics used to engage audiences, Bazaco, Redondo, and Sánchez-García (2019) analyse the strategic use of clickbait in digital media. Their study focuses on major news outlets such as *elpais.com* and *elmundo.es*, revealing how these platforms employ various techniques to maximise audience engagement. Key strategies include the use of incomplete information in headlines to create an “information gap” that compels readers to click, as well as the repetition and serialisation of news stories to sustain audience interest. Additionally, the study finds that the incorporation of trivial content, such as celebrity news, effectively attracts readership. While these methods enhance engagement, they also raise ethical concerns regarding journalistic integrity and audience trust, reinforcing the ongoing debate over the responsible use of clickbait in digital journalism.

As digital platforms increasingly influence news dissemination, Lischka and Garz (2021) examine how algorithmic curation impacts the supply of clickbait content. Using a game theory framework, the study explores the interactions between journalists, users, competitors, and digital platforms in determining the level of clickbait employed by news outlets. The findings indicate that news organisations adjust their clickbait strategies in response to industry-wide trends and audience behaviour. The study further analyses the effects of algorithmic curation on platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*. While *Twitter*'s algorithmic changes did not significantly increase clickbait usage, *Facebook* initially struggled to reduce clickbait. However, a subsequent algorithm update, employing a supervised learning approach to detect and suppress clickbait, successfully led to a sustained decrease in its prevalence. These findings highlight the role of platform governance in shaping journalistic practices and the evolving relationship between media outlets and algorithmic oversight.

Shifting from clickbait to broader headline integrity, Carcioppolo, Lun, and McFarlane (2022) investigate the issue of incongruent headlines in news articles and their impact on public trust. Their study differentiates incongruent headlines from clickbait and sensationalism, discussing their implications for news aggregation and journalistic credibility. The authors propose methodologies for detecting headline incongruence, including the extraction of key claims from articles and the application of title generation and summarisation techniques to assess headline accuracy. The findings emphasise the need for reliable headlines to support informed readership and counteract misinformation. The study ultimately calls for further research into effective headline detection methods, underscoring the broader consequences of misleading headlines on public perception and trust in journalism.

Taken together, these studies provide a comprehensive view of the challenges surrounding journalistic credibility in the digital age. Baharom, Ghazali, and Ahmad (2023) further expand on these issues by examining the broader influence of social media on journalism, the importance of critical evaluation of online sources, and the role of fact-checking in verifying digital information. Their research highlights the ongoing competition between traditional and online media, emphasising the crucial need for accurate, trustworthy reporting in shaping public discourse. Collectively, these works underscore the evolving landscape of journalism and the ethical dilemmas posed by the pursuit of engagement at the expense of credibility.

The credibility of journalism is increasingly threatened by the prevalence of clickbait, media skepticism, and algorithmic influence. While clickbait strategies enhance audience engagement, they often compromise trust and comprehension. Political cynicism further shapes public perceptions of both mainstream and citizen journalism. The reliance on clickbait in digital media raises ethical concerns, while algorithmic curation influences its dissemination. Additionally, incongruent headlines contribute to misinformation, underscoring the need for accuracy and integrity in news reporting.

Method

The study employed a quantitative research approach to analyse clickbait headline strategies and identify common patterns used by online journalists. This approach involved content analysis of news headlines, a research method used to examine specific words, themes, or concepts within quantitative data, such as text. Content analysis enables researchers to assess the frequency, significance, and relationships of particular terms and ideas (Mackey & Bryfonski, 2018).

This study focuses on *mStar*, a Malay-language news website in Malaysia owned by Star Media Group Berhad, which also publishes *The Star* newspaper. Available since October 15, 2005, *mStar* has expanded its presence across various digital platforms, including *TikTok* and other social media channels. *TikTok* was selected for this study due to its rapid growth and increasing influence, particularly among younger demographics, where it serves as a key news source. Consequently, this study examined news headlines posted by *mStar* on *TikTok* to identify patterns in clickbait headline strategies.

Headlines were collected over a one-week period from November 11 to November 17, 2024. This timeframe allowed the study to capture a variety of news stories, including breaking news, ongoing events, and slower news cycles, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of news dissemination on the platform. A one-week period provided a balanced snapshot of clickbait trends and patterns without the complexities associated with longer sampling durations, which may introduce significant temporal variations (Yang et al., 2019). A total of 61 headlines were gathered during this period, focusing on headlines accompanying video posts uploaded by news organisations. These headlines reflect the style and tone of the content strategies employed. On average, the selected *TikTok* accounts posted 9 to 10 times per day, demonstrating a high frequency of content generation aimed at maintaining audience engagement. This volume of posts provided a diverse dataset, capturing various headline formats and styles within the selected timeframe.

Purposive sampling was used to select the headlines for analysis. This method was deemed appropriate as it enabled the deliberate selection of *TikTok* posts featuring headlines written in

Malay. By focusing on Malay-language content, the study aimed to examine headline strategies within a specific cultural and linguistic context.

This study adapts the news headlines classification procedure developed by Rana, Khalid, and Akbar (2014) and Rana et al. (2015), initially designed to categorise news headlines in the media sector. The procedure consists of key constructs, such as pre-processing, document indexing, feature selection, and news headlines classification. Although the original procedure offers a solid basis for headline classification, adjustments were necessary to align it with the focus of this study, which involves identifying and categorising clickbait headlines.

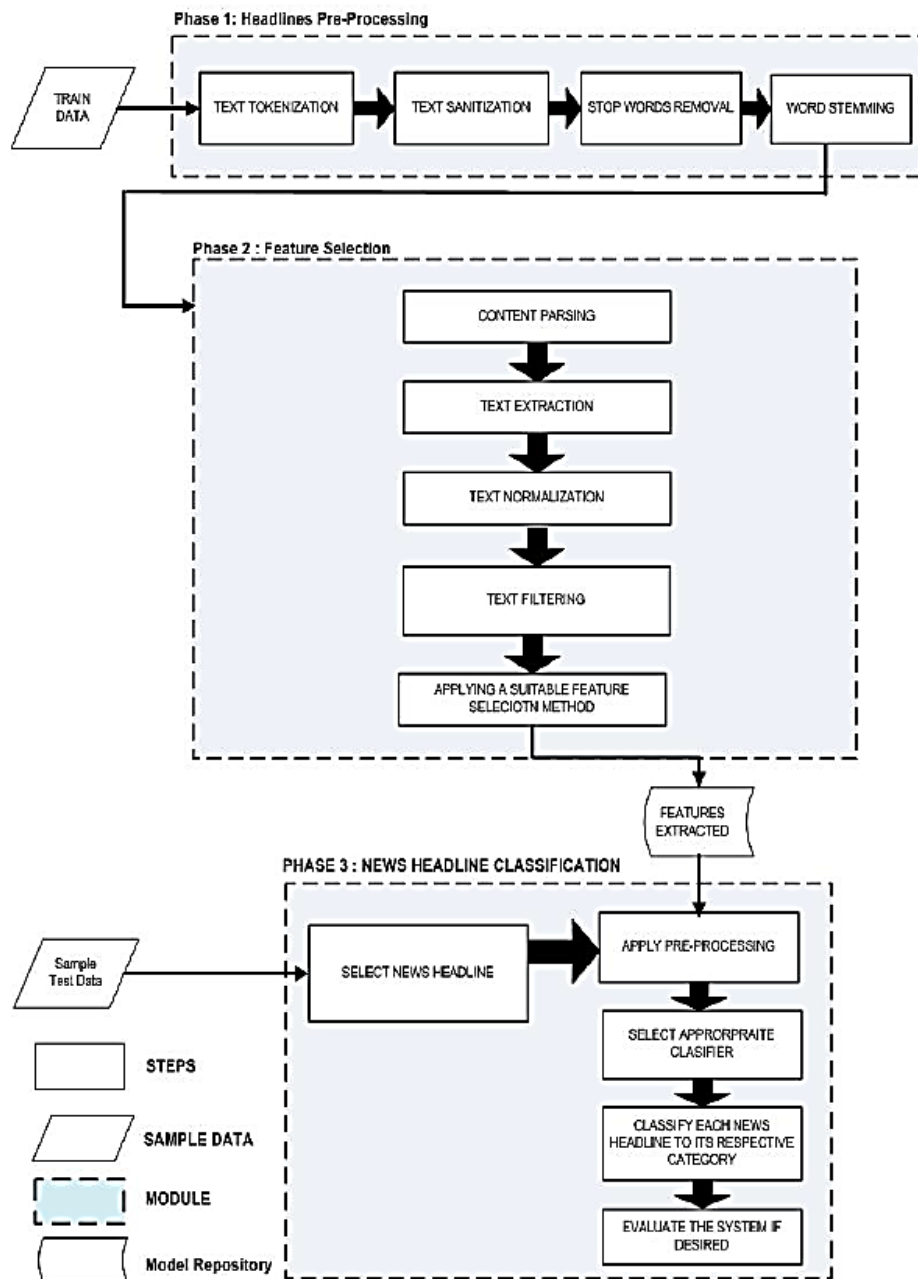


Figure 1: News Headline Classification

Source: (Rana, Khalid, Akbar, 2014; Rana et al., 2015)

The procedure (see Figure 1), as proposed by Rana et al. (2014) and Rana et al. (2015), outlines a structured approach for classifying news headlines. It incorporates pre-processing, feature selection, and classification techniques that transform unstructured textual data into structured formats, aiding in efficient classification and analysis. By integrating these components, the procedure enables researchers to uncover patterns within textual data.

In response to the unique challenges of clickbait headlines in contemporary media, several modifications were made to adapt the procedure for this study's specific objective. These changes were designed to enhance the identification, analysis, and classification of clickbait content. The revised procedure, presented in Figure 2, is structured into three distinct phases, which involves pre-processing, feature selection, and clickbait headline classification, all contributing to the study's goal of detecting and categorising clickbait headlines.

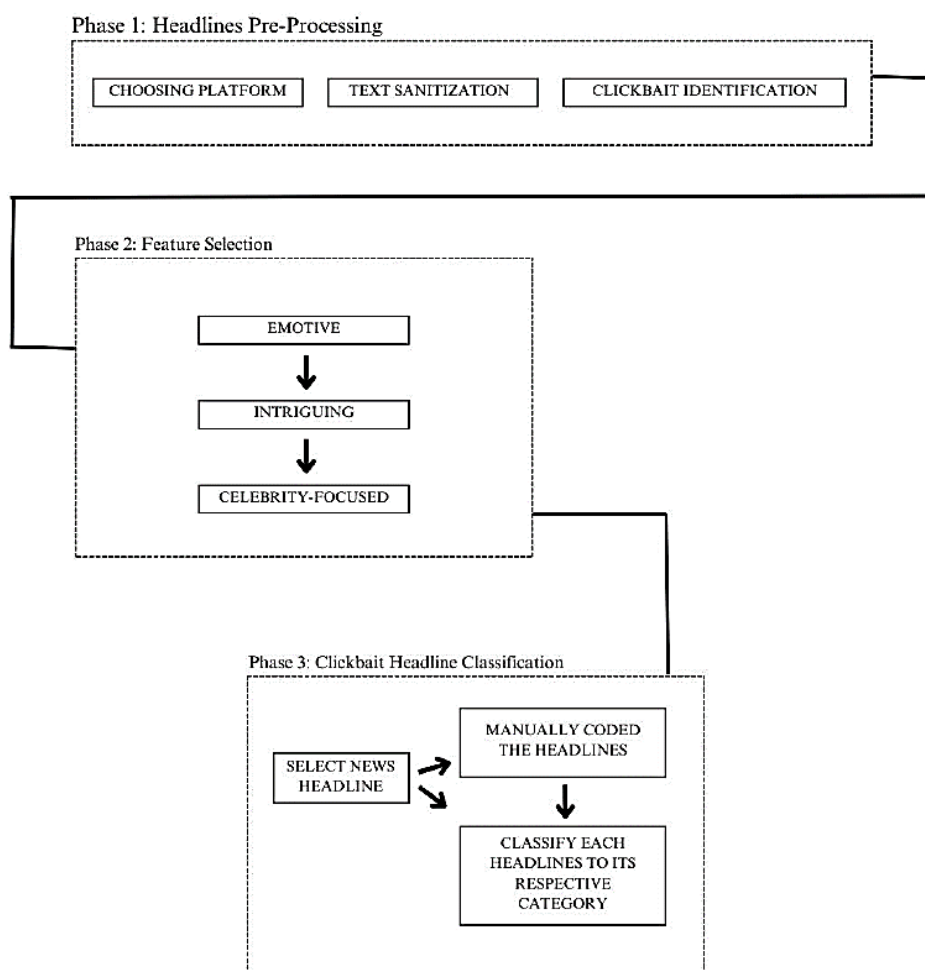


Figure 2: Clickbait Headline Classification

The pre-processing phase prepares the dataset for analysis. It begins by selecting platforms or sources to gather a representative set of news headlines. Once collected, the data undergoes text sanitisation to eliminate inconsistencies and irrelevant elements, ensuring reliability. Basic criteria are then applied to identify potential clickbait headlines, setting the foundation for subsequent analysis.

In the feature selection phase, key characteristics that distinguish clickbait headlines from non-clickbait ones are identified. This study focuses on three primary features, presented in Table 1, namely emotive headlines, which evoke strong emotional reactions such as curiosity, surprise, or shock (Horner et al., 2021); intriguing headlines, which raise suspense or unanswered questions to prompt clicks (Nwala & Umukoro, 2017); and celebrity-focused headlines, which attract attention through references to well-known figures. These features, often used to drive user engagement, are crucial to the clickbait phenomenon (Dubied & Hanitzsch, 2013).

The final phase involves classifying headlines based on the identified features. A subset of headlines is selected for detailed analysis, manually labelled to ensure accurate classification, and then grouped into predetermined categories, such as emotive, intriguing, or celebrity-focused. This classification process ensures that the categorisation of clickbait headlines is accurate and grounded in the theoretical framework established in the previous phase.

Table 1: Indicators of the Clickbait Headline Categories

Category	Explanation
Emotive	The use of emotive headlines to provoke intense emotional responses, such as curiosity, surprise, or shock, leading to increased user engagement, including actions like sharing or withholding information, particularly driven by negative emotions.
Intriguing	The ability of intriguing headlines to generate suspense or pose unanswered questions, prompting readers to click for more details. This strategy, common in news and magazine headlines, enhances reader engagement.
Celebrity-focused	The employment of celebrity-focused headlines referencing well-known figures to capture attention and drive engagement, with celebrity news, once limited to tabloids, now becoming a major force in media consumption.

The performance of each headline was then evaluated using engagement metrics, specifically the number of likes and shares. These metrics were recorded to measure the effectiveness of different headline categories in capturing audience attention and driving user interaction. This analysis provided insights into audience preferences and identified the types of headlines that generated the highest levels of engagement.

Results

The collected data identifies three primary categories of headlines utilised by *mStar*, a news organisation on *TikTok*, namely celebrity-focused headlines, intriguing headlines, and emotive headlines. Table 2 illustrates the frequency distribution of these categories.

Table 2: Frequency of Clickbait Headlines

Category	Frequency (<i>n</i> = 61)	Percentage (100%)
Emotive	19	31.1
Intriguing	20	32.8
Celebrity-focused	22	36.1

As presented in Table 2, celebrity-focused headlines account for the largest proportion at 36.1% ($n = 22$), followed by intriguing headlines at 32.8% ($n = 20$) and emotive headlines at 31.1% ($n = 19$).

Table 3: Celebrity-focused Headlines Engagement Metrics

Headlines	Likes	Shares
1. Obses dengan tasbih digital, Ruhainies mahu berselawat 1,000 kali sehari	1910	189
2. Peminat tak dapat terima hakikat, Rihanna beri bayangan bersara sebagai penyanyi	86.23k	723
3. Aepul Roza gubah lagu duet, hadiah gelaran juara The Chosen One 2024 buat Kiki Fateeha	386	22
4. Fattah Amin hero dalam MV 'Jadi Ajar Aku', Aina Abdul tunai permintaan ibu - "Nasib baik mak tak minta menantu"	2392	35
5. Akibat tak bayar caruman Perkeso, Shuib dan pengarah Bubblebee kena denda RM17,500	12.1k	370
6. Instagram 37 juta pengikut kini diuruskan pihak pengurusan, Laudya Cynthia Bella nekad tinggalkan dunia seni	63.5k	2406
7. Noki k-clique lebih suka berlakon, sanggup kuruskan badan... hairan ada orang kata sama macam Fad Bocey	32.5k	1542
8. "Sepatutnya dia disanjung" - Mahathir sedih hilang sahabat baik, doa Daim diberi kebaikan di akhirat	57.2k	483
9. Siti Nurhaliza penyanyi wanita ketiga terima Anugerah Biduan Negara 2024	338	21
10. Kurang menyerlah walau bergelar Hero Remaja, Alif Muhaimin tak cemburu rakan seangkatan lebih berjaya	403	20
11. Hanis Zalikha tiada lagi kaitan dengan pekerja pecah amanah, harap majikan lain tidak berdepan pengkhianatan sama	11.5k	239
12. "Aku takkan lupa muka kau!" - Aaron Aziz berang pekerja paling dipercayai tergamak 'songlap' duit bisnes isteri	6054	171
13. Shuib anggap kes mahkamah dugaan kecil perniagaan, kehilangan isteri tercinta itu lebih berat.	1123	35
14. Mantap betul vokal Nadeera kali ni, memang all out betul	15.1k	440
15. Kasihan Siti Khadijah, kena marah diherdik sampai menangis	334	11
16. Tak boleh kawal gemuruh, Tajul takut nak menyanyi live sampai hilang keyakinan	2198	14
17. Diana Danielle reda terima keputusan cerai, dekatkan diri dengan Allah.. "waktu sujud itulah saya luah"	191	3
18. Gagal 'all out' di SFMM39, masalah vokal jadi penghalang... Khai Bahar harap peminat tak marah	2306	91
19. Comel reaksi Siti Nurhaliza terima berita dapat gelaran Biduanita Negara, pengurus dedah 4 hari simpan rahsia	25.2k	447
20. Pengacara Indonesia dipeluk Lisa, pengalaman paling indah sepanjang hidupnya	18.2k	220
21. Isteri Shuib taja perbelanjaan umrah keluarga, bukan guna duit syarikat... Tampil buat penjelasan elak fitnah berleluasa	1012	4
22. Tak sabar nak beli barangan bayi, Nabila Razali bakal timang anak lelaki	477	11

As presented in Table 3, the celebrity-focused headline “*Peminat tak dapat terima hakikat, Rihanna beri bayangan bersara sebagai penyanyi*” received the highest number of likes on *TikTok*, totalling 86.23k, followed by “*Instagram 37 juta pengikut kini diuruskan pihak pengurusan, Laudya Cynthia Bella nekad tinggalkan dunia seni*” with 63.5k likes, and “*Sepatutnya dia disanjung*” - Mahathir sedih hilang sahabat baik, doa Daim diberi kebaikan di akhirat” with 57.2k likes.

In terms of shares, the headline “*Instagram 37 juta pengikut kini diuruskan pihak pengurusan, Laudya Cynthia Bella nekad tinggalkan dunia seni*” had the highest engagement on *TikTok*, accumulating 2,406 shares, followed by “*Noki K-Clique lebih suka berlakon, sanggup kuruskan badan... hairan ada orang kata sama macam Fad Bocey*” with 1,542 shares, and “*Peminat tak dapat terima hakikat, Rihanna beri bayangan bersara sebagai penyanyi*” with 723 shares.

Table 4: Intriguing Headlines Engagement Metrics

Headlines	Likes	Shares
1. Sisi gelap Hat Yai... Staf hotel didakwa suka ugut pelancong Malaysia, mahu panggil polis hanya sebab cadar kotor	11.3k	1299
2. Tetamu kenduri pelahap! Pengusaha ‘dessert table’ terkejut diserbu sebelum sempat susun... Siap cekau makanan dalam kotak	10k	663
3. Gempar mayat wanita ditemukan, 3 tahun anak simpan dalam peti sejuk	67.1k	3654
4. “Kehidupan sekarang sejujurnya saya tenang dan lebih bahagia”- Fazura	33.7k	2585
5. Bisnes teruk, penyewa biar bil tertunggak! Anggap ‘owner’ kejam sebab tak bagi muka... Kunci meter air, panggil TNB cabut fuis	1541	12
6. Banyak syarikat tolak permintaan, hajat bawa anak OKU naik parasailing tertunai di Langkawi... Orang baik siap belanja jet ski ‘ride’	14.2k	150
7. Penjual donat susu minta pengikut lupakan tagline ‘berayaq’, mahu anjur program solat subuh berjemaah pula	61.7k	2919
8. Kontena jatuh dari treler, hempap pemandu wanita di simpang lampu isyarat	174.3k	30k
9. ‘Ingkar larangan tidur terlentang, remaja hadir kem jati diri nyaris ‘dijemput’ ajal... Dada terasa berat - “Masa tu terpampang wajah abah, ibu”	67.1k	1705
10. Tekanan punya fasal, pengarah ‘Squid Game’ hilang 9 batang gigi ketika penggambaran	4034	357
11. 23 tahun tak jamah nasi, nampak macam ulat... Pemuda dedah abang puncanya! Tangan pernah diikat, dipaksa makan akhirnya muntah	12k	335
12. Malu anak pakai tudung nampak leher, bapa hantar mesej ‘makan dalam’... Kalau masih degil, suruh cuba letak jari dekat api	27.2k	1300
13. Lelaki minta jaga aurat... Mengaku seksa tengok adik ipar seksi, lebih cun banding isteri - “Bloodline dia memang cita rasa aku”	9438	741

14. “Budak mentah, tak ada adab!” - Wakil syarikat bengang Gen Z ‘lenggang kangkung’ datang temu duga, tak bawa dokumen lengkap	3172	63
15. Banyak lagu ‘Gen Z’ gagal ke AJL39, tiada daya saing tinggi punca terkandas	34.2k	224
16. Individu hantar mesej ‘done’ bayar, kongsi foto resit siap sunting.... Peniaga rasa pelik dapat notifikasi transaksi 1 sen!	225	3
17. “Aku seret kau dekat jalan...” - Bengang anak disamakan macam haiwan, Syifa Melvin tak berlembut jika jumpa pelaku	88.3k	1012
18. Duda pujaan jujur mengaku diri kaki ketum, wanita tak jadi nikah walau hati dah sayang - “Dia kata herba, otak saya fikir dadah”	2612	411
19. Individu anggap generasi hari ini mengada-ngada! Mak ayah dah sedia semua mash ‘claim’ depresi, sikit-sikit ‘anxiety’	3487	219
20. Satu tak cukup, 2 hari kemudian datang angkut lagi... Pencuri bonsai kena cekup - “Taste tinggi tapi rembat orang punya”	1491	57

As shown in Table 4, the intriguing headline “*Kontena jatuh dari treler, hempap pemandu wanita di simpang lampu isyarat*” received the highest number of likes on *TikTok*, totalling 174.3k, followed by “*Aku seret kau dekat jalan...*” - *Bengang anak disamakan macam haiwan, Syifa Melvin tak berlembut jika jumpa pelaku*” with 88.3k likes, and “*Gempap mayat wanita ditemukan, 3 tahun anak simpan dalam peti sejuk*” and “*Ingkar larangan tidur terlentang, remaja hadir kem jati diri nyaris ‘dijemput’ ajal... Dada terasa berat - ‘Masa tu terpampang wajah abah, ibu’*”, both recording 67.1k likes.

In terms of shares, the headline “*Gempap mayat wanita ditemukan, 3 tahun anak simpan dalam peti sejuk*” registered the highest engagement on *TikTok* with 3,654 shares, followed by “*Penjual donat susu minta pengikut lupakan tagline ‘berayaq’, mahu anjur program solat subuh berjemaah pula*” with 2,919 shares, and “*“Kehidupan sekarang sejujurnya saya tenang dan lebih bahagia” - Fazura*” with 2,585 shares.

Table 5: Emotive Headlines Engagement Metrics

Headlines	Likes	Shares
1. Bapa bankrap meninggal tanpa sempat langkai pinjaman lebih 50K... Anak buntu ‘dikejar’ syarikat pengutip hutang	356	16
2. Guru muda sukarela nak mufliskan diri, dah tak tahan tanggung hutang... Gaji bersih tinggal tak sampai RM500 sebulan	863	10
3. Anak ada masalah testis, bapa berkeras nak berubat kampung! Isteri pula takut suami cop derhaka jika teruskan pembedahan	994	10
4. Wanita gempal berjaya kurus lepas dihina, puas hati kini penghina pula stres sebab gemuk - “Badan dia makin kepam, mengembang”	189	10
5. “Berdosa rupanya jika kita miskin” - Bisnes lingkup, ibu tunggal anak 5 dibuang keluarga sendiri... Majlis makan-makan pun tak jemput	9538	305
6. Suami kantoi curang lagi, wanita nekad cerai selepas bersalin... Remuk hati dapat tahu penyondol beri nama anak	1.4k	3977

7. “Sebab kahwin dengan kau aku jadi macam ni!” - Suami ‘kaki mesin’ salahkan isteri, hidup merana diburu hutang... Kereta pun kena tarik	8411	671
8. Main ramai-ramai, tak lama kemudian ditinggalkan seorang! Papa anggap pakaikan anak baju ‘I have autism’ silap besar	3057	26
9. Selalu belanja keluarga suami, tapi tak selesa mentua suka tanya gaji, bonus! Tak pernah beritahu sesiapa walau famili sendiri	1691	65
10. Hari jadi bini sendiri lupa, birthday kekasih lama gigih ucap walau terlewat! Sia-sia isteri padam nombor di handphone, rupanya suami hafal	31.8k	6777
11. Anak baru kahwin serba salah dengan suami... Ibu suka berkemban, tak pakai coli di rumah! Susah nak tegur sebab dah selesa, terbiasa	97.2k	7445
12. Sebiji burger diminta belah 4, wanita hamil kira syiling sebelum bayar...Paling sedih mengaku tak cukup RM1	47.5k	1353
13. Tiada duit nak kahwin, wanita terkejut tunang minta tanggung kos dulu... Beri alasan rezeki biasanya bertambah lepas nikah	3947	504
14. Wanita mengaku salah ‘double park’ halang laluan, cari individu pecahkan cermin kereta nak tuntutan kos ‘repair’	6039	105
15. “Kalau tak ada duit, blah” - Pengasas produk angkuh herdik pelanggan B40! Jumlah tontonan sesi ‘live’ jatuh merudum	46.8k	772
16. Lama rehat sebab kemalangan, suami selesa tak kerja walau dah pulih! Sedap makan seorang duit sumbangan, tak peduli anak bini	500	10
17. Anak tak boleh harap, senyap-senyap kebas lebih RM100,000 duit pencen bapa! Silap besar bagi ‘pegang’ kad bank	29k	1820
18. Tak pandai membaca tapi hebat berniaga, lelaki OKU jual dodol dah mampu beli Lamborghini	123.8k	6534
19. Wanita rela hati serah barang kemas dipakai dakwa dipukau, pelaku tenang buat jenayah! Lebih 24 jam baru sedar emas hilang	2099	340

As shown in Table 5, the emotive headline “*Tak pandai membaca tapi hebat berniaga, lelaki OKU jual dodol dah mampu beli Lamborghini*” received the highest number of likes on *TikTok*, totalling 123.8k, followed by “*Anak baru kahwin serba salah dengan suami... Ibu suka berkemban, tak pakai coli di rumah! Susah nak tegur sebab dah selesa, terbiasa*” with 97.2k likes, and “*Sebiji burger diminta belah 4, wanita hamil kira syiling sebelum bayar... Paling sedih mengaku tak cukup RM1*” with 47.5k likes.

In terms of shares, the headline “*Anak baru kahwin serba salah dengan suami... Ibu suka berkemban, tak pakai coli di rumah! Susah nak tegur sebab dah selesa, terbiasa*” garnered the most engagement on *TikTok*, totalling 7,445 shares, followed by “*Hari jadi bini sendiri lupa, birthday kekasih lama gigih ucap walau terlewat! Sia-sia isteri padam nombor di handphone, rupanya suami hafal*” with 6,777 shares, and “*Tak pandai membaca tapi hebat berniaga, lelaki OKU jual dodol dah mampu beli Lamborghini*” with 6,534 shares.

Discussion

The engagement metrics from Tables 3, 4, and 5 highlight the effectiveness of celebrity-focused and emotive headlines in driving social media interaction on *TikTok*.

Celebrity-focused headlines demonstrate varying audience engagement patterns. Stories featuring global icons, such as Rihanna's potential retirement — "*Peminat tak dapat terima hakikat, Rihanna beri bayangan bersara sebagai penyanyi*" — garnered the highest number of likes (86.23k), indicating that emotionally charged topics involving international figures resonate strongly with audiences. In contrast, local celebrity news, such as Laudya Cynthia Bella's career transition, generated a higher number of shares (2,406), suggesting that narratives centred on personal life changes drive greater audience interaction. Similarly, Mahathir's emotional remarks about Daim received 57.2k likes, underscoring the appeal of content featuring influential public figures.

Intriguing headlines emphasise how dramatic events captivate audiences, such as the headline about a container accident, which garnered 174.3k likes. Emotional intensity, like Syifa Melvin's anger over an insult, also led to 88.3k likes. Sensational stories, such as the discovery of a woman's body in a freezer, received 3,654 shares, indicating that shocking events encourage further sharing. Other headlines, such as Fazura's personal transformation (2,585 shares), also resonated with audiences, driving social sharing.

Emotive headlines highlight success and personal struggle stories that engage audiences emotionally. The headline "*Tak pandai membaca tapi hebat berniaga, lelaki OKU jual dodol dah mampu beli Lamborghini*" received 123.8k likes, showcasing the appeal of overcoming adversity. Relatable family struggles, like the headline about a woman's discomfort with her mother's habits, also attracted significant engagement (97.2k likes). Financial hardships, such as the story of a pregnant woman counting coins to pay for a burger, garnered 47.5k likes.

In terms of shares, the family conflict headline led with 7,445 shares, suggesting that emotionally charged, relatable content drives higher sharing. The headline about betrayal in personal relationships (6,777 shares) also resonated deeply with audiences. Overall, these findings demonstrate that emotionally engaging and sensational stories, particularly those involving well-known figures or personal struggles, significantly drive social media interaction.

The engagement metrics align with key insights from the literature on audience behaviour and the impact of sensational or emotionally charged headlines. Much like the findings of Bazaco et al. (2019), which underscore the effectiveness of celebrity-driven content in attracting readers, the data reveals how headlines featuring globally recognised figures like Rihanna and local celebrities like Laudya Cynthia Bella generate significant engagement. This mirrors Lischka and Garz's (2021) research, which suggests that audience behaviour heavily influences platform algorithms, promoting content that aligns with user preferences for high-profile or emotionally appealing stories.

However, while these findings demonstrate that such content successfully captures attention, they also raise concerns highlighted in the literature about the potential trade-off between engagement and credibility. Hurst (2016) and Munger et al. (2020) caution that while sensational headlines are effective at drawing clicks, they can diminish the perceived trustworthiness of the source, particularly when they resemble clickbait. The emotional appeal

of the headlines analysed in the data, especially those involving personal struggles or sensational stories, aligns with the “information gap” strategy discussed by Bazaco et al. (2019), where incomplete or dramatic information prompts users to engage with the content. Yet, as the literature suggests, this approach risks undermining the credibility of the source in the long term.

Moreover, the strong engagement with emotionally intense content, as shown in the data, mirrors the concerns of Carr et al. (2014), who discuss how media skepticism influences readers’ trust. While sensational and emotional headlines may generate considerable engagement, they also contribute to the erosion of trust, especially when readers feel manipulated by exaggerated or misleading content. These dynamic calls attention to the delicate balance between attracting readers and maintaining credibility.

Lastly, the issue of incongruent headlines, as examined by Carcioppolo et al. (2022), is also relevant. The high engagement rates with sensational and emotionally charged content in the data reflect the growing challenge of ensuring headline accuracy. While such headlines may drive immediate engagement, they risk misleading readers and eroding public trust in the media. This highlights the need for careful consideration of the ethical implications of using sensational or clickbait-like headlines in pursuit of engagement.

Conclusion

The study reveals three primary types of headlines used by *mStar* on *TikTok*, namely celebrity-focused, intriguing, and emotive headlines. Of these, celebrity-focused headlines make up the largest proportion on *TikTok*, followed by intriguing and emotive headlines.

The engagement metrics indicate that headlines with emotional or sensational appeal, particularly those centred on personal stories, shocking events, or controversial statements, drive high levels of likes and shares on *TikTok*. These types of content, which provoke strong emotional responses or curiosity, are notably successful in attracting engagement on *TikTok*.

Overall, the data suggests that emotive headlines — whether they focus on overcoming adversity, personal relationships, or financial challenges — tend to generate substantial engagement, particularly through likes and shares. Content that resonates with the audience’s emotions, inspires empathy, or mirrors personal experiences is particularly effective in fostering greater interaction on *TikTok*.

While emotionally charged or sensational headlines effectively boost audience engagement, they also present a challenge to journalistic credibility, as highlighted in the literature. Content creators must navigate a delicate balance between attracting readers and preserving trustworthiness in the highly competitive digital media environment. To achieve this, it is essential to assess how audiences perceive the impact of clickbait on the credibility and trustworthiness of journalism in the digital era. This aspect warrants further investigation and could serve as a valuable direction for future research.

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