

Journalistic Content in the Era of Clickbait and Sensationalism

Tık Tuzağı ve Sansasyonelizm Çağında Gazetecilik İçeriği

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Sabina IZZATLI VAGIF*

Keywords:

New media journalism, clickbait culture, sensationalism in media, algorithmic influence, online content, social media.

ABSTRACT

In today's digital landscape, journalism grapples with unique challenges, largely due to the rise of clickbait and sensationalism. This article delves into how these trends affect journalistic integrity, audience trust, and the way we consume media. By drawing on insights from media theory and communication studies, we examine the nature and impact of sensational content across different online platforms, considering both established and new media outlets. Our findings indicate that clickbait strategies, fueled by algorithms, often prioritize engagement at the expense of accuracy. This can lead to misleading stories that compromise the core principles of journalism. We also discuss how sensationalism can skew public discourse, shaping audience perceptions and eroding trust in news sources. To gather insights, we conducted an online survey via Google Forms, engaging a diverse group of 100 participants. This quantitative approach aimed to understand how individuals perceive clickbait and sensational headlines, allowing us to analyze their responses meaningfully. Moreover, we explore how social media algorithms magnify sensational content, creating a culture of shallow engagement. By proposing a framework for ethical reporting, we strive to balance captivating the audience and maintaining a commitment to informative, well-rounded content. Ultimately, we hope to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the future of journalism and its vital role in cultivating an informed public amid a fragmented media environment.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Yeni medya gazeteciliği, tık tuzağı kültürü, medyada sansasyonelizm, algoritmik etki, çevrimiçi içerik, sosyal medya.

ÖZET

Dijital çağda, gazetecilik, tıklama tuzağı ve sansasyonelliğin yaygın etkisi nedeniyle benzeri görülmemiş zorluklarla karşı karşıyadır. Bu makale, bu eğilimlerin gazetecilik bütünlüğü, izleyici güveni ve medya tüketimi üzerindeki etkisini eleştirel bir şekilde incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Medya teorisini ve iletişim çalışmalarını bütünleştiren teorik bir çerçeve kullanarak hem geleneksel hem de ortaya çıkan medyaya odaklanarak çeşitli çevrimiçi platformlardaki sansasyonel içeriğin özelliklerini ve sonuçlarını analiz ediyoruz. Araştırmamız, algoritmik teşviklerle yönlendirilen tıklama tuzağı taktiklerinin, doğruluktan çok etkileşimi önceliklendirdiğini ve genellikle gazeteciliğin temel değerlerini zayıflatan yanıltıcı anlatılarla sonuçlandığını ortaya koyuyor. Sansasyonelliğin kamu söylemi üzerindeki etkilerini tartışıyor, izleyici algılarını çarpıtma ve medya kaynaklarına olan güveni azaltma potansiyeline dikkat çekiyoruz. Bu çalışmada, 100 katılımcıdan oluşan çeşitli bir örneklemeden veri toplamak için Google Forms kullanılarak çevrimiçi bir anket uygulandı. Bu nicel yaklaşım, insanların tıklama tuzağı ve sansasyonel haber başlıklarını nasıl algıladıklarını araştırmayı amaçladı. Anketin tasarımı, katılımcıların yanıtlarının sağlam bir analizini sağlayarak ilgili içgörülerin toplanmasını kolaylaştırdı. Ayrıca, sosyal medya algoritmalarının yüzeysel etkileşim kültürüne katkıda bulunarak sansasyonel anlatıları güçlendirmedeki rolünü vurguluyoruz. Bu makale, etik raporlama için bir çerçeve önererek, izleyici etkileşimini bilgilendirici ve ayrıntılı içerik sağlama sorumluluğuyla dengelemeyi amaçlıyor. Sonuç olarak, gazeteciliğin geleceği ve giderek parçalanmış bir medya ortamında bilgili bir kamuoyunun oluşumunda oynadığı kritik rol hakkında devam eden diyaloga katkıda bulunmayı amaçlıyoruz.

* Baku State University, sabina.izzatli@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0003-0091-4905

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the media has faced significant challenges in attracting audiences on digital platforms, often amid a sea of subpar content. In an era dominated by digital media, the landscape of journalism has shifted dramatically, marked by the pervasive rise of clickbait and sensationalism. These phenomena, characterized by attention-grabbing headlines and emotionally charged content, have reshaped how news is produced, consumed, and understood. As audiences increasingly turn to social media and online platforms for information, traditional journalistic standards face unprecedented challenges. The allure of quick clicks often leads to a prioritization of engagement over accuracy, raising critical questions about the integrity and purpose of contemporary journalism.

This article explores the implications of clickbait and sensationalism on journalistic content, examining how these trends influence audience behavior, journalistic practices, and public discourse. By analyzing the motivations behind sensationalist tactics and their effects on news consumption, this study aims to illuminate the complexities of modern journalism. As the boundaries between information and entertainment blur, understanding these dynamics is essential for fostering a media landscape prioritizing informed citizenship and public trust. Ultimately, this examination seeks to identify pathways for reclaiming the core values of journalism in an increasingly commodified information environment.

The landscape of journalism has undergone significant transformation in the digital age, particularly with the rise of clickbait and sensationalism. This literature review synthesizes key themes and findings from various academic works that explore the implications of these trends on journalistic integrity, audience engagement, and the overall quality of news content.

The digital era has fundamentally transformed journalistic content, reshaping how news is produced, distributed, and consumed. With the advent of the internet and social media, traditional journalistic practices have been challenged and redefined, leading to both advantages and disadvantages in the field.

On the positive side, digital platforms have democratized access to information, allowing a broader range of voices to contribute to the news landscape. This shift has enabled independent journalists and citizen reporters to reach audiences directly, fostering diverse perspectives that enrich public discourse. Moreover, the rapid dissemination of news through social media facilitates real-time reporting, allowing journalists to provide timely updates during breaking events (Karlsson, 2016). Additionally, data-driven journalism has emerged,

leveraging analytics to create more engaging and personalized content tailored to audience interests.

However, these changes have also introduced significant challenges. The pressure to attract clicks and maintain audience engagement has led to the proliferation of sensationalist and clickbait headlines, often at the expense of journalistic integrity (Tandoc & Davidson, 2016). As media organizations compete for attention in a crowded digital space, there is a risk of prioritizing entertainment over accuracy, which can erode public trust in news sources. Furthermore, the reliance on algorithms for content distribution can create echo chambers, reinforcing existing beliefs and limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints (Pariser, 2011).

In this complex environment, understanding the balance between engaging content and ethical reporting is crucial. The ongoing evolution of journalistic practices in the digital age calls for a reevaluation of how news is crafted and delivered, emphasizing the importance of maintaining credibility while adapting to new media consumption behaviors.

2. THE RISE OF CLICKBAIT AND SENSATIONALISM

Headline writing has long been considered a skill but, in the digital age, a new word has become synonymous with online journalism-clickbait. Put simply, it is a headline which tempts the reader to click on the link to the story. But the name is used pejoratively to describe headlines that are sensationalized, turn out to be adverts, or are simply misleading. (Frampton, 2015).

Clickbait refers to sensationalized headlines or content designed to attract attention and encourage clicks, often prioritizing engagement over informative value. Early studies, such as those by Leavitt (2016), argue that clickbait undermines journalistic standards by prioritizing short-term audience engagement over substantive reporting. Sensationalism, defined as the exaggeration of news to provoke emotional responses, further complicates this dynamic. Research by Davis (2018) highlights how sensationalist content can distort public perception and contribute to misinformation.

The emergence of clickbait and sensationalism in contemporary media has transformed the landscape of news consumption, driven largely by the proliferation of digital platforms. Clickbait refers to misleading or exaggerated headlines designed to capture attention and entice users to click on content, often at the expense of accuracy and depth (Sullivan, 2016). This trend can be attributed to the competitive nature of online media, where news organizations vie for limited audience attention in a saturated market. As a result,

sensationalist techniques have become prevalent, as they promise immediate engagement and increased website traffic (Tandoc, 2014). On other research, it says that mainstream media, especially print media has been under pressure from falling sales and advertising revenue and increased competition (Palau-Sampio, 2016). Therefore, traditional media outlets also try to converge to new media and in this process, they believe to get more audience. However, new media convergence does not mean that you can mislead your audience to get more traffic. We have 3 seconds to get their attention, and it does not mean that we can exaggerate our news topic, and even write not related headlines.

Research indicates that the use of sensational headlines can significantly impact audience perception and behavior. A study by Lewandowsky et al. (2012) found that sensationalist framing can lead to heightened emotional responses, which may enhance the likelihood of sharing content on social media. Our survey results also show that people mainly get news from social media (Figure 1). That is why according to the survey, participants see clickbait headlines very often (Figure 2). Moreover, this kind of news mainly appears in social media outlets.

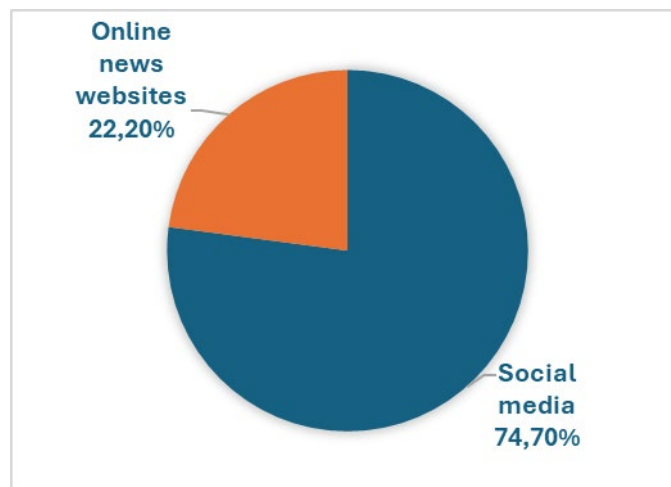


Fig.1. Survey participants get their news mainly from these outlets

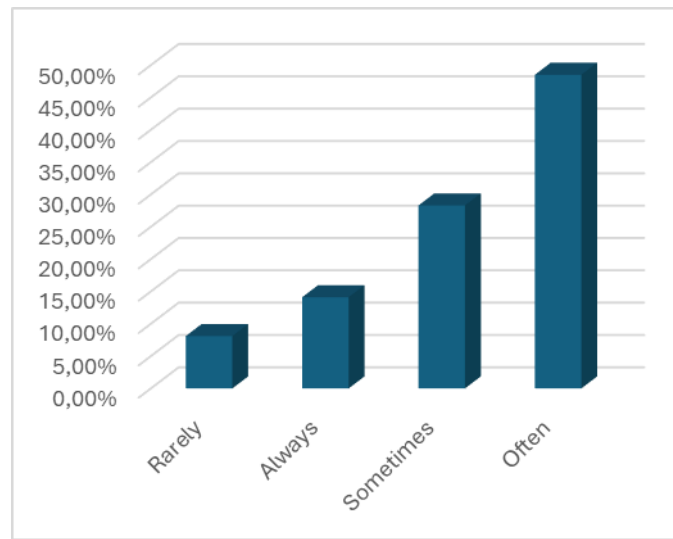


Fig.2. How often do participants see clickbait headlines

This amplification effect further perpetuates the cycle of sensationalism, as content that generates more engagement is prioritized by algorithms, reinforcing the trend. Furthermore, the reliance on sensationalist headlines has been linked to a decline in public trust in news media, as audiences become increasingly aware of the disparity between sensational headlines and substantive reporting.

While clickbait strategies might bring quick results, they carry significant long-term consequences for journalism and media integrity. Research has indicated that although sensationalism can attract initial clicks, it tends to push audiences away over time, as people increasingly seek trustworthy news sources (Leung & Lee, 2014). Journalists face the challenge of balancing engaging content with ethical reporting. By focusing on quality journalism and building audience trust, media organizations can develop loyal readerships that are more likely to engage with and support their work (McNair, 2017).

Moreover, the rise of clickbait and sensationalism presents a mixed bag for the media landscape. While these tactics can drive immediate audience engagement and increase traffic, they also threaten journalistic integrity and trust. As media professionals navigate this tricky terrain, a commitment to ethical reporting and producing high-quality content will be vital for maintaining credibility and fostering genuine connections with their audiences.

3. AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT AND CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

The shift toward clickbait has significantly altered audience consumption patterns. Scholars like Goyette (2019) have noted that audiences increasingly seek entertainment over

information, driven by algorithmic recommendations on social media platforms. This trend raises questions about the responsibilities of news organizations in balancing engagement with ethical reporting. In contrast, studies by Smith and Brown (2020) suggest that while sensationalist content may capture attention, it can also lead to audience fatigue and a distrust of media sources.

The integration of clickbait and sensationalism has prompted a reevaluation of journalistic practices. A study by Johnson et al. (2021) explores how news organizations are adapting their strategies to maintain relevance in a crowded digital marketplace. Findings indicate that some journalists employ sensationalist techniques as a means of survival, raising ethical concerns about the erosion of journalistic integrity. Conversely, the work of Miller (2022) advocates for a return to rigorous reporting standards, suggesting that a commitment to quality content could ultimately enhance audience loyalty.

The prevalence of clickbait and sensationalism poses significant implications for public discourse and democratic engagement. Research by Nguyen (2023) indicates that sensationalist media can exacerbate polarization, as emotionally charged content often reinforces existing biases. Furthermore, as noted by Thompson (2021), the decline of critical thinking among audiences raises alarms about the long-term effects of consuming primarily sensationalist content on civic engagement and informed citizenship.

In discussions about media and society, clickbait tactics are often criticized as unethical, as they tend to disappoint audiences who find that the content doesn't live up to its sensational promises. As a result, many journalists outright reject clickbait as a method for driving traffic. They are dedicated to upholding journalistic standards, such as those outlined by the Society of Professional Journalists (Cotter, 2012). Interestingly, initial studies have shown no significant impact of clickbait on how users perceive media (Molyneux, Coddington, 2020).

Critics frequently highlight that clickbait techniques often exploit emotional responses and curiosity. When a user clicks on a link, the site benefits financially from advertisers, even though the content is often low in quality and reliability (Hamblin, 2014; Smith, 2014). This tactic is particularly prevalent in advertising, where the pursuit of profit can overshadow corporate social responsibility. While these strategies have existed throughout history, they have become more pronounced in the digital era, characterized by a surge in media platforms. However, the underlying aim remains the same: to capture consumer attention through unconventional methods.

In journalism, the conflict surrounding clickbait arises from two opposing goals: delivering crucial news information and attracting readers' attention (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020; Andrew, 2007). Dor (2003) notes that this has led journalists to develop an implicit understanding of what makes a suitable headline—brief, clear, engaging, and focused on new developments and significant individuals, while also linking to past events and existing beliefs. Additional research in this area has shown that many clickbait-style headlines tend to amplify the tone of a news story, particularly when the subject matter is negative (Gondwe, 2020; Ecker and Lewandowsky, 2014).

4. FINDINGS

Media platforms often prioritize generating “clicks” over investigative journalism, focusing less on in-depth reporting.

One advantage of clickbait is its ability to increase traffic and engagement; headlines crafted to attract attention result in more clicks, page views, and shares, enhancing the visibility of news outlets or journalists. Additionally, higher traffic translates into increased ad revenue, as more visitors lead to greater ad impressions and income by directing users to advertisement-laden pages. Clickbait articles also have a strong potential for virality, appealing to emotions or curiosity, which increases the likelihood of rapid dissemination across social media. In a saturated digital landscape, clickbait can help articles stand out in news feeds or search results, effectively capturing reader attention compared to conventional headlines.

However, there are notable disadvantages. When readers find that the content does not meet the expectations set by the headline, they may feel frustrated and let down, leading to a loss of trust and credibility. Frequent use of clickbait can erode this trust over time. Furthermore, clickbait often overpromises, resulting in shallow or irrelevant content that diminishes the quality of journalism and undermines the value of the story. Readers misled by clickbait may become disillusioned, making them less likely to revisit the site or trust future articles, which can ultimately reduce long-term readership and brand loyalty. Lastly, the emphasis on sensationalism inherent in clickbait can detract from meaningful news coverage, leading journalists to shift their focus from accurate reporting to crafting exaggerated stories solely for clicks, thereby affecting the integrity of journalism.

In the conducted survey involving 100 participants, findings revealed that 75% primarily obtain news through social media platforms. Notably, 49% of respondents reported encountering clickbait headlines frequently, while 41% expressed a tendency to click on such

headlines when encountered (Figure 3). Furthermore, 39% of participants indicated that sensational headlines influence their perceptions of news sources. When asked about the relationship between news headlines and content, 47% stated that the two sometimes complement each other. Additionally, 41% of respondents attributed the use of clickbait and sensationalist headlines to the objective of increasing website traffic.

These results highlight significant trends in news consumption behaviors and the perceived effects of headline strategies on audience engagement. The demographic breakdown of participants revealed a diverse sample, with varying ages and backgrounds, which may influence the generalizability of the findings.

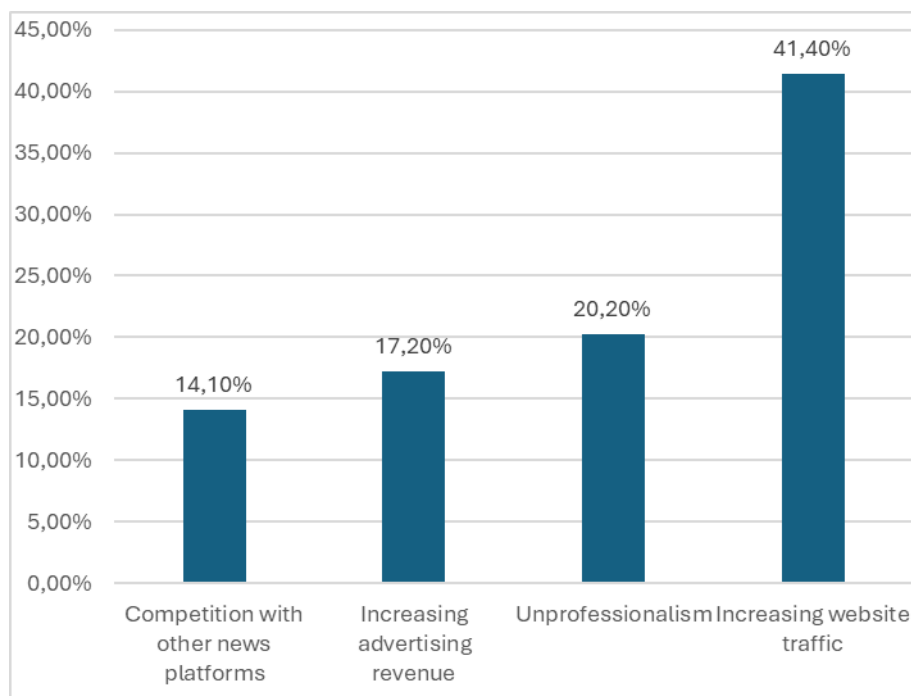


Fig.3. The reason for using clickbait and sensational headlines in the news

Furthermore, these results resonate with existing literature, suggesting a growing concern over the impact of sensationalism on public trust in news media (Tandoc, 2014). Media professionals should consider these findings as indicative of a need for a balanced approach that prioritizes accuracy while still engaging audiences.

Acknowledging the limitations of this study, such as the relatively small sample size and reliance on self-reported data, future research could explore the long-term effects of sensationalism on audience loyalty and trust in various media formats. This could provide valuable insights into how news organizations might adapt their strategies in an increasingly competitive digital landscape.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The literature reveals a complex interplay between clickbait, sensationalism, and journalistic content. While these practices may temporarily boost engagement, they risk undermining the core tenets of journalism and the public's trust in the media. Future research should focus on developing strategies that prioritize ethical reporting while navigating the demands of a rapidly evolving media landscape. By fostering a culture of accountability and critical engagement, journalism can better serve the public interest in an age defined by information overload.

In addition, the findings of this survey underscore the profound impact of clickbait and sensationalism on contemporary news consumption. With 75% of participants primarily relying on social media for news, it is evident that digital platforms play a pivotal role in shaping audience engagement. The prevalence of clickbait, as indicated by 49% of respondents who frequently encounter such headlines, highlights a critical concern regarding the quality and integrity of information. Furthermore, the fact that 41% of participants are inclined to click on sensational headlines reveals the effectiveness of these strategies in capturing attention, even as 39% express concern over their influence on trust in news sources. The nuanced perspectives on the relationship between headlines and content, with 47% suggesting occasional complementarity, suggest a complex dynamic that warrants further exploration. Overall, these insights emphasize the need for a reevaluation of journalistic practices in an era dominated by sensationalist tactics, advocating for a balance between engagement and the ethical responsibility of delivering accurate and meaningful news.

In this frame our main concern is that journalism may increasingly prioritize audience engagement metrics, leading to content that responds more to clicks and shares rather than traditional journalistic values. We have to improve media literacy, emphasizing the importance of educating audiences to critically evaluate sensationalist content and navigate the complexities of digital media.

We recommend that journalists operating in the New Media Age exercise caution when employing sensationalist and clickbait headlines. While these strategies may yield a short-term increase in website traffic, fostering audience trust is paramount for sustainable success. Media professionals need to prioritize the production of original, reliable news content, as this approach not only cultivates a loyal audience but also enhances the potential for increased subscriptions and stable revenue streams. By adhering to ethical journalism principles and

maintaining transparency, journalists can build enduring relationships with their audience, ultimately contributing to a healthier media landscape that values accuracy and integrity over mere click-through rates. Emphasizing quality over sensationalism will not only safeguard journalistic standards but also align with the audience's desire for trustworthy information.

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