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Disappointed and Dissatisfied – the Impact of Clickbait Headlines on Public Perceptions of Credibility of Media in Croatia

ABSTRACT

The existing literature devoted to the area of clickbait lays emphasis mostly on content analysis as used by the authors to explore the basic features of published media texts. The market background of clickbait production conditioned by the need to collect clicks and, consequently, to increase online monetization, greatly influences the editing and design of headings, headlines, sub-headlines and sub-headings as media texts. From a narratological point of view, clickbait is a peritext that entices readers instead of informing them. Rhetorically, it does so by announcement and allusion. If a clickbait is successful, it encourages readers to imagine that clicking on a given hyperlink is likely to enable them to bridge the information gap. However, as clickbait leads to uninteresting and worthless content, the users feel betrayed and disappointed. This is exactly what can have an impact on the perception of media credibility. In this paper, we present the results of the first Croatian representative research study (N=1,009) that investigates public attitudes about the reception of clickbait content and places special emphasis on researching satisfaction and disappointment, i.e., the readers' experience of the content of published headlines that have elements of clickbait, as well as the possible impact of clickbait on media credibility.

KEY WORDS

Clickbait. Audience Attitudes. Credibility. Croatian Media. Survey. Emotional and Linguistic Techniques.

1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to research the public perception of headlines that can be characterized as clickbait and to determine to what extent these types of headlines are noticed in the media, whether they can be recognized and how readers feel when they discover that a headline was actually a clickbait. In addition, it will explore whether clickbait entices readers to click on hyperlinks and whether this practice affects their perception of media quality.

Apart from the importance of credibility of media content and the connection between market and editorial principles based on clickbait, we will explain the paratextual nature of headlines in general and the rhetorical effects of clickbait in particular. Headlines are invariably supposed to attract readers by indicating the content, without revealing it at the same time. Yet, clickbait is characterized by a number of unfair practices. Readers form their own expectations about the content of the text on the basis of the headline itself. Consequently, a failure to meet these expectations may cause disappointment, which can subsequently be reflected in a reader's perception of the entire medium. The curiosity that encourages the reader to click on the article, in the hope of crossing the information gap, results in a sense of betrayal.

Since the two fundamental features of headlines in online media are indicating the topic of an article and targeting the reader's attention to the article, this paper will try to determine whether the reader is disappointed and loses confidence in the media if clickbait is used as the headline, i.e., if behind the headline there is an article whose content does not correspond to what the headline suggests.

In the first part of the paper, the theoretical framework and features of headlines and clickbait, that is, the specifics of headlines that attract the audience to the content, will be explained. The basic hypothesis is that clickbait exploits the curiosity and encourages emotional engagement of the reader in order to make the reader click on this kind of hyperlink. Such an experience leaves the reader with a new spectrum of emotions, such as distrust and disappointment. Therefore, the central part of our paper addresses the perspective of the reader who is viewed as a sort of "victim" of clickbait in the media space.

Nowadays, clickbait is almost inevitable due to the nature of business models of media companies, whose profit is highly dependent on the number of readers, that is, the number of clicks on hyperlinks on their media channels. In this view, it is important to observe, research and understand the position and behaviour of readers who are exposed to clickbait. More specifically, the business success or failure of a media outlet is based on the reader's reaction (click), but also on the seconds spent on a given text. By using clickbait, the media falsely create a perception of higher value for lower quality information, with the aim of maintaining and encouraging greater readership. Therefore, it is important to explore what happens when the audience does not receive complete information, when they receive information that does not correspond to what is announced in the headline, often being an irrelevant piece of information or false information.

The empirical research is based on a representative survey in which we examined the extent to which readers autonomously identify clickbait headlines; how they perceive them and whether they are willing to click on them; whether they get disappointed after reading the content concealed behind this kind of headlines, and whether clickbait headlines affect their perception of media credibility. The research will also provide results that will indicate how often, in specific types of media, the audience comes across news and information that, in their view, misrepresent reality or are false. Furthermore, the research will show how often the audience that is informed via Internet portals on a daily basis recognizes clickbait headlines, in contrast to the audience that is informed on Internet portals less frequently. Finally, the results of a survey on the feelings experienced by the audience after consuming the content 'hidden' behind clickbait headlines will be presented.

2 Theoretical Frame

Previous research on the presence of clickbait headlines in the media focused primarily on the content analysis¹, evaluation and categorization², to a lesser extent on more detailed linguistic analysis³, but also on researching the relationship between clickbait and news credibility. In this paper, our starting point is the question as to how paratextuality and rhetoric of clickbait, while in the service of media content monetization, will influence the assessment of media credibility by users and consumers of media content.

Contemporary research on credibility is based on three main approaches, namely (1) research on the credibility of media content, (2) research on the audience's perception of media credibility, and (3) research on media workers' perception of media credibility. This research is based on another approach that is closely related to trust in the media and has its roots in the uses and gratifications theory⁴. While the correct use of stylistic figures and linguistic techniques can potentially improve the quality and access to reporting, linguistic techniques in the service of monetization can also have a negative impact on the perception and understanding of media credibility.

Headlines that particularly lure the reader are referred to as clickbait headlines, and are created because contemporary media "rely heavily on the revenues generated from the clicks made by their readers", and due to considerable competition media, "often come up with catchy headlines accompanying the article links, which lure the readers to click on the link"⁵; it is also noticed that stories with clickbait headlines are "of lower quality and lower credibility."⁶ Beck et al. offered a definition of clickbait as a kind of headline on portals that "leads the reader to open a hyperlink to uninteresting and unworthy content", and the way it does so is by arousing "curiosity by concealing true information about that content."⁷

A headline is a part of a media text, but its position is specific as it is the first and possibly the only part of the text that is exposed to the audience. Paratextual is any element "associated with but distinct from the main body of a text"⁸, and the role of a headline in journalistic practice is to be a bridge between the reader and the news story. More accurately, the reader in question is only a potential reader, because the headline is often the only part of the text that is read at all. The importance of headlines is also noticeable in a definition given by Ciboci et al. in which

¹ See: BAZACO, A. et al.: Clickbait as a Strategy of Viral Journalism: Conceptualisation and Methods. In *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 2019, No. 74, p. 94-115. Available at: <<https://www.revistalatinacs.org/074paper/1323/06en.html>>.

² See: ALVES, L. et al.: Click Bait: You Won't Believe What Happens Next. In *Fronteiras: Journal of Social, Technological and Environmental Science*, 2016, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 196-213.

³ See: MOLEK-KOZAKOWSKA, K.: Towards a Pragma-linguistic Framework for the Study of Sensationalism in News Headlines. In *Discourse & Communication*, 2013, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 173-197; CHEN, Y. et al.: Misleading Online Content: Recognizing Clickbait as "False News". In ABOULENIEN, M. et al. (eds.): *Proceedings of the 2015 ACM on Workshop on Multimodal Deception Detection*. Washington, USA : Association for Computing Machinery New York NY United States, 2015, p. 15-19.

⁴ FISHER, C.: The Trouble with 'Trust' in News Media. In *Communication Research and Practice*, 2016, Vol. 2, No. 4, p. 452.

⁵ CHAKRABORTY, A. et al.: Stop Clickbait: Detecting and Preventing Clickbaits in Online News Media. In ROKNE, J. et al. (eds.): *Proceedings of the IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining*. Davis, CA, USA : IEEE Press, 2016, p. 9.

⁶ MOLYNEUX, L., CODDINGTON, M.: Aggregation, Clickbait and Their Effect on Perceptions of Journalistic Credibility and Quality. In *Journalism Practice*, 2020, Vol. 14, No. 4, p. 429.

⁷ BECK, B. et al.: Clickbait/mamilica: Deset Načina Manipulacije Kontekstom. In JURIŠIĆ, J., HRNJIĆ KUDUZOVIĆ, Z. (eds.): *Medijska agenda 2020 – 2030. Zbornik radova 10. regionalne znanstvene konferencije Vjerodostojnost medija*. Zagreb : Fakultet političkih znanosti Sveučilišta u Zagrebu and Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung, 2021, p. 90.

⁸ *Oxford Language*. [online]. [2022-09-10]. Available at: <https://www.google.com/search?q=paratext+meaning>>.

it is claimed that the front pages represent the most important part of a newspaper “because the headlines mostly influence the reader’s decision to buy the newspaper”⁹, and the same can be concluded for web portals. The role of a headline is, therefore, twofold - to “concisely, interestingly and intelligently draw attention to the main idea of the following article”, but also to “attract the reader’s attention.”¹⁰

The problem of informing without being comprehensive, and of luring without disclosing was noticed in classical rhetoric, where means of arousing interest of interlocutors are described. Linguistic techniques have become the very centre of clickbait headlines. One way to entice attention without explication is called preterition, which is a figure of style by “which one affirms to pass over in silence something which one nevertheless speaks about”¹¹; it is also called apophasis, which refers to “raising of an issue by claiming not to mention it.”¹² Preterition generally claims that one “will not talk about a person, phenomenon or topic” just to induce interest, and then “present some, often all, information.”¹³ Clickbait is the exact opposite – it claims it will present relevant information, yet it fails to do so.

Another classical figure that uses uncertainty is aposiopesis, which is “the device of suddenly breaking off in speech.”¹⁴ It is marked by “abrupt interruption of statements, at the very moment when the sentence needs to be completed and the main thought expressed”¹⁵; that is precisely the “modus operandi” of clickbait. A subtype of aposiopesis is reticence, which also abruptly interrupts the statement and deliberately silences the thought, but still “encourages the recipient to guess what is left unsaid”¹⁶; the refusal to complete the statement may be interpreted as a “form of creating tension.”¹⁷ Clickbait, like the preterition, hides key information. Nevertheless, in contrast, it just announces that some amazing and shocking detail will follow. Although clickbait acts differently, what the two devices have in common is attracting attention, using “discursive formulas that are well known to all members of the language community.”¹⁸ Aposiopesis and reticence, as well as clickbait, create tension. Yet, clickbait has a huge defect compared to aposiopesis because “it is left to the interlocutor or the reader to assume on the basis of the context what has been silenced and to complete the statement.”¹⁹ In case of clickbait, everything is clear after one click on the hyperlink.

Elevating the expectations, yet without fulfilling them, may lead to disappointment, the state or emotion of being “defeated in expectation or hope.”²⁰ Hence, news headlines, due to their brevity, incorporate “density of contained information” and they “often appeal to a reader’s emotions.”²¹ Emotions are crucial for headlines because their task is to “break the

⁹ CIBOCI, L. et al.: Djeca u Dnevnim Novinama: Analiza Izvještavanja o Djeci u 2010. In CIBOCI, L., KANIŽAJ, I., LABAŠ, D. (eds): *Djeca Medija. Od Marginalizacije do Senzacije*. Zagreb : Matica Hrvatska, 2011, p. 134.

¹⁰ HUDEČEK, L., MIHALJEVIĆ, M.: *Jezik Medija – Publicistički Funkcionalni Stil*. Zagreb : Hrvatska sveučilišna naklada, 2009, p. 188.

¹¹ *Etudes Littéraires*. [online]. [2022-09-10]. Available at: <<https://www.etudes-litteraires.com/figures-de-style/preterition.php>>.

¹² *Merriam-Webster*. [online]. [2022-09-10]. Available at: <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apophasis>>.

¹³ BAGIĆ, K.: *Rječnik stilskih figura*. Zagreb : Školska knjiga, 2012, p. 262.

¹⁴ *Aposiopesis*. [online]. [2022-09-10]. Available at: <<https://www.google.com/search?q=aposiopesis>>.

¹⁵ BAGIĆ, K.: *Rječnik stilskih figura*. Zagreb : Školska knjiga, 2012, p. 61.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁰ *Merriam-Webster*. [online]. [2022-09-10]. Available at: <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disillusion>>.

²¹ BOSTAN, L. et al.: GoodNewsEveryone: A Corpus of News Headlines Annotated with Emotions, Semantic Roles, and Reader Perception. In CALZOLARI, N., BÉCHET, F., BLACHE, P. et al. (eds.): *Proceedings of the 12th Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation Conference*. Marseille, France : European Language Resources Association, 2020, p. 1554.

chronic readers' inattention", and that is why it is necessary to "activate receivers' feelings."²² One of the most common feelings is that of "uncertainty and fear" released "in the presence of sensationalized half-truths."²³ However, other emotions may also be analysed, e.g., "joy, sadness, anger, fear, trust, disgust, anticipation and surprise."²⁴

Surprise may be also negative, and trust may turn into distrust. Curiosity is defined by Loewenstein as an urge to bridge the „information gap“ that stretches between "what one knows and what one wants to know"²⁵, taking into account that existing knowledge is relatively objective, unlike desired knowledge which is highly subjective. Curiosity "arises when one's informational reference point in a particular domain becomes elevated above one's current level of knowledge"²⁶. Without knowing exactly what it is that one wants to know, the reader is in danger of being lured into a trap of clickbait, and some of the typical media strategies are to conceal the place or the time of the event and to mislead the reader of the true identity of the participants in the event in the headline, using polysemy, annomination, metaphorization, hyperbolizing and even plain lie.²⁷ The reader is encouraged "to construct new conceptual files based on the terms used in the headline" and is driven "to click on the associated link with the expectation that the article will contain relevant information with which he can enhance his conceptual files", but finds out there is no "reward with cognitive effects."²⁸

3 Methodology

The empirical part of the research of this study was carried out as part of the project "Journalism Research Lab: Innovative Storytelling Practices to Engage New Audiences"²⁹ which is carried out at the Faculty of Political Science of Zagreb University. In December 2020, as part of the project, a survey was conducted on a representative sample of 1,009 respondents. The survey examined media habits of the audience in Croatia, the level of their trust in the media, the public's attitudes towards the journalistic profession, as well as the perception of media freedom in Croatia. Moreover, the respondents' expectations from media content, their attitudes towards truthfulness of information and towards fake news, and the reasons for news avoidance were examined.

One set of questions in the aforementioned survey examined the attitudes towards clickbait headlines. The results obtained by means of this group of questions are presented and analysed in this study. They provide the answer to the research question: *What feelings and reactions do clickbait headlines evoke in readers?*

²² WAINBERG, J. A.: Headlines, Emotions and Utopia. In *Intercom Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação*, 2015, Vol. 38, No. 1, p. 195.

²³ ASLAM, F. et al.: Sentiments and Emotions Evoked by News Headlines of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak. In *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, 2022, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 7.

²⁴ BOSTAN, L. et al.: GoodNewsEveryone: A Corpus of News Headlines Annotated with Emotions, Semantic Roles, and Reader Perception. In CALZOLARI, N., BÉCHET, F., BLACHE, P. et al. (eds.): *Proceedings of the 12th Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation Conference*. Marseille, France : European Language Resources Association, 2020, p. 1554.

²⁵ LOEWENSTEIN, G.: The Psychology of Curiosity: A Review and Reinterpretation. In *Psychological Bulletin*, 1994, Vol. 116, No. 1, p. 87.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁷ See: BECK, B. et al.: Clickbait/mamilica: Deset Načina Manipulacije Kontekstom. In JURISIĆ, J., HRNJIĆ KUDUZOVIC, Z. (eds.): *Medijska agenda 2020 – 2030. Zbornik radova 10. regionalne znanstvene konferencije Vjerodostojnost medija*. Zagreb : Fakultet političkih znanosti Sveučilišta u Zagrebu and Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung, 2021, p. 90.

²⁸ SCOTT, K.: You Won't Believe What's in this Paper! Clickbait, Relevance and the Curiosity Gap. In *Journal of Pragmatics*, 2021, Vol. 175, p. 53.

²⁹ The project "Journalism Research Lab: Innovative Storytelling Practices to Engage New Audiences" (JOURLAB) is funded by The Croatian Science Foundation, IP-2019-04-6331, led by Professor Tena Perišin.

In order to elicit answers to the research question, respondents were shown eight examples³⁰ of clickbait headlines to ensure that they were able to identify the types of headlines they were being questioned about. Subsequently, they had to answer the questions related to them, i.e., determine to what extent the following statements were applicable to them:

- I often notice these types of headlines in the media.
- I can recognize when the headline of an article is actually a clickbait headline.
- I am displeased when I realize that a headline is actually a clickbait headline.
- The use of clickbait headlines makes the medium less credible.
- The use of clickbait headlines deceives the reader.
- Clickbait headlines encourage me to click on an article.
- When I click on a clickbait headline, I am usually disappointed, because I realize that it was not the content that had been announced.

The aim of this research is to determine the audience's attitudes towards clickbait headlines and to investigate the main characteristics of their reactions to the content of clickbait headlines.

4 Results

4.1 Getting Informed via Internet Portals

The results of the research from which this study derives show that the majority of respondents are informed via Internet portals on a daily basis or several times a week,³¹ which is important in this context, since recent analyses of the content of the Croatian media³² show that clickbait headlines do not appear at all or almost at all in printed publications. In reality, their use is a common practice of online newsrooms, and the results of this survey show that 48.1% of citizens are informed through Internet portals. 14% of citizens do it often, that is, several times a week, and 9.7% occasionally, that is, several times a month. 5.1% of the respondents answered that they get information through Internet portals rarely, that is, several times a year, while 23% answered that they never do. At this point, it should be emphasised that, out of the 232 people who stated that they never get information through Internet portals, 166 of them (71.5%) are over 60 years old.

The survey³³ also examined how often the audience comes across news and information that they believe misrepresent reality or are even false – in specific types of the media – in newspapers, on the radio, on the public service (HRT), on commercial television (Nova TV,

³⁰ "Pogledajte kako su ovom paru ukrali auto tek nekoliko sekundi nakon parkiranja" (Eng. "Look how this couple's car was stolen seconds after parking"); "Preokret kakvom se nitko nije nadao – Pep Guardioala dao Lionelu Messiju savjet koji je iznenadio sve" (Eng. "A twist no one expected – Pep Guardiola gave Lionel Messi a tip that surprised everyone"); "Njemačka upozorava: Ne putujte u ovo hrvatsko odredište" (Eng. "Germany warns: Do not travel to this Croatian destination"); "Odani pas dva mjeseca čekao da se vlasnici vrate po njega i onda se dogodilo ovo" (Eng. "The loyal dog waits two months for the owners to come back for him and then this happens"); "Kuhar: Nećete vjerovati koje jelo kraljica nikada nije željela probati" (Eng. "Chef: You won't believe what dish the queen never wanted to try"); "U centru Zagreba osvanuli ogromni crveni križevi, evo o čemu se radi" (Eng. "Huge red crosses have appeared in the centre of Zagreb, this is what it's all about"); "Stavio je fotku svog psa na Twitter, a onda je o njemu otkrio nešto neočekivano" (Eng. "He puts a photo of his dog on Twitter, and then he discovers something unexpected about him"); "Severina slavi poseban dan: Objavila novu fotku, a svi su odmah komentirali jednu stvar" (Eng. "Severina celebrates a special day: She publishes a new photo, and everyone immediately comments on one thing").

³¹ *Hrvatska zaklada za znanost*. [online]. [2022-09-10]. Available at: <<https://hrzz.hr/wp-content/uploads/Jourlab-Sto-publika-zeli-Anketa.pdf>>.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*.

RTL and others), on Internet portals and social networks. When the results are compared, it can be concluded that the audience most often comes across this type of content among the content of Internet portals and social networks. On the other hand, the respondents believe that the most accurate news and the least amount of fake news can be listened to on the radio or read in newspapers.

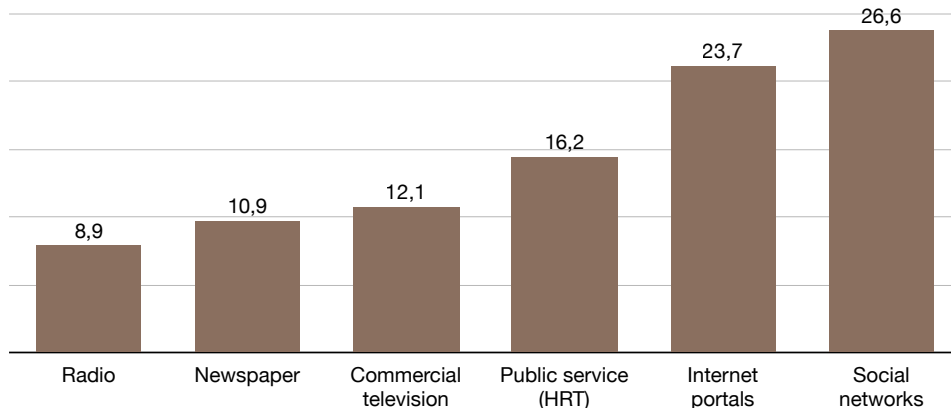


FIGURE 1: *In which medium do respondents come across news that they believe misrepresents reality or is even wrong? (n=1,009)*

Source: own processing, 2022.

Although the results show that the majority of the respondents get their information on Internet portals, almost a quarter of them (23.7%) admit that it is on these same portals that they come across news every day that they believe misrepresent reality or are even false. Other 18.5% of the respondents claim that they find such news on Internet portals at least once a week, 17.3% several times a month, 8.9% several times a year, and only 4.8% believe that they never come across wrong information on portals³⁴.

4.2 Attitudes Towards Clickbait Headlines

After the respondents were shown examples of clickbait headlines from the Croatian media as part of the survey, the majority of them said that they often notice this type of headline in the media (63.9%). It should also be mentioned that approximately one-fifth of the respondents did not recognize, or could not evaluate, the examples shown, which coincides with the figure of 23% of the respondents who never use Internet portals for information.

This is confirmed by a detailed analysis, in which only the answers of those respondents who use Internet portals for information on a daily basis or several times a week were analysed. These results, in fact, show that this is an audience that almost constantly comes across clickbait headlines. Moreover, only 2.1% of those who get information on portals every day and 1.4% of those who do so several times a week claim that they never notice clickbait headlines.

³⁴ Hrvatska zaklada za znanost. [online]. [2022-09-10]. Available at: <<https://hrzz.hr/wp-content/uploads/Jourlab-Sto-publika-zeli-Anketa.pdf>>.

	I often notice these types of headlines in the media					
	Does not apply at all	Mostly does not apply	Neither applies, nor disapplies	Mostly does not apply	Entirely applies	I cannot judge
I get informed through Internet portals on a daily basis N=485	2.1%	6.4%	9.9%	34.4%	44.3%	2.9%
I often (several times a week) get informed through Internet portals N=141	1.4%	6.4%	21.3%	36.2%	31.9%	2.8%

TABLE 1: How often clickbait headlines are noticed by respondents who get information through Internet portals on a daily basis or often

Source: own processing, 2022.

Furthermore, those who get informed via Internet portals on a daily basis claim that, in as many as 74.5% of cases, they think they can recognize when the headline of an article is actually clickbait. This also applies in 59.6% of cases to those who consume news via portals several times a week, and even in 58.1% of cases to those who only occasionally get information via Internet portals. And what does this mean for readers and their relationship with the media?

The central part of the clickbait questionnaire was focused on, among other things, the reaction of the audience to the consumption of content with a clickbait headline. Thus, as many as 72.6% of the respondents claim that it applies to them entirely or mostly and that they are dissatisfied when they realize that a headline is actually a clickbait. Only 2.3% of the respondents disagree with the statement that clickbait headlines do not cause them dissatisfaction.

It has also been shown that, in addition to dissatisfaction, readers also feel a great deal of disappointment when they click on an article with a clickbait headline and when they realize that they are not presented with the content as announced. This is how 66.5% of readers feel (either entirely or mostly), while only 3% of readers do not associate the feeling of disappointment with clickbait headlines.

Furthermore, as many as 74.8% of the respondents believe that the use of clickbait makes the media less credible, and even more, that is, 77.8% of readers completely or mostly believe that the media use clickbait to actually mislead readers. It is also important to note the fact that out of the total number of those who completely agree that the use of clickbait headlines makes the media less credible, almost half are young people aged 18 to 29 and those who fall into the age group of 30 to 39.

To what extent does the statement “Clickbait headlines make me click on the article” apply to you? (N=1,009)					
Does not apply at all	Mostly does not apply	Neither applies nor disapplies	Mostly applies	Entirely applies	I cannot judge
10.3%	10.7%	20.1%	26.6%	18%	14.3%

TABLE 2: Do clickbait headlines encourage the audience to click on the article?

Source: own processing, 2022.

Given that the desire for “clicks” is mentioned in the literature as one of the reasons for the use of clickbait headlines by the media, it is interesting to see the answers to the questions about whether clickbait headlines fulfil this purpose. At the same time, the answers are quite divided, so a fifth of all respondents claim that such headlines will not attract them at all in most cases. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents still admit that generally they will click on clickbait articles.

5 Discussion

When a reader clicks on a clickbait headline hoping to cross an information gap, and finds that he or she has been led astray, a “significant gap between clicks and user satisfaction” arises as a result of the fact that “the user finds the actual content of the clicked item disappointing.”³⁵ Crossing the information gap is connected with the expectation of gaining new cognition of certain matter but clickbait headlines “trick the readers into clicking” and “don’t live up to the expectation of the readers”, which means they “leave them disappointed.”³⁶ Following the research by Wang et al., as well by Chakraborty et al., we have introduced the representative research from the Croatian perspective and thus confirmed that being exposed to clickbait headlines can lead to disappointment and dissatisfaction. The paradox consists in the fact that, while the usage of preterition, aposiopesis, reticence, emotions, attention, polysemy, annomination, metaphorization and hyperbolizing in contemporary literature can lead to a writer’s excellence, our research suggests that the use of these figures in journalism for production of clickbait headlines can have serious side effects for media credibility. This has been confirmed by our research as 72.6% of the respondents point out that they are completely or mostly dissatisfied when they realize that a headline is actually clickbait. Along with the feeling of dissatisfaction, most of the respondents claim that they also experience a feeling of disappointment.

Among other things, the empirical research presented in this study showed that the majority of citizens are informed through Internet portals. On the other hand, the conducted survey showed that citizens believe that the news and information that they think misrepresent reality or that are even false can be found precisely on Internet portals and social networks. Therefore, they have the least confidence in these two types of media. The result of the research is also indicative of the fact that the majority of surveyed citizens notice clickbait headlines in the media, that is, they know how to clearly recognize them. This applies particularly to those who get informed via Internet portals on a daily basis.

The results of the research indicated that 74.8% of the respondents believe that the use of clickbait headlines makes the media less credible, and as many as 77.8% of readers completely or mostly believe that the media use clickbait to deceive readers. Deception is obviously a card played by clickbait creators, yet this approach has never contributed to the quality and professionalism of work in the history of news journalism. On the contrary, it seems that it is an approach that causes immeasurable damage to journalism as a public good.

Based upon the findings of our research we see a need for a long-term public opinion research on the attitudes towards clickbait headlines in media. At the same time, it is necessary to constantly monitor and evaluate new media practices and investigate to what extent new ways of presenting media content, such as the use of clickbait, encourage the placement of trivial, manipulative, or even false content in the media. Here, we have to emphasize the importance of empowering critical thinking among the audience, but also their media literacy skills and competences in order to be able to recognize and to understand these types of media content. Kanižaj and Lechpammer even note that in one of the most cited definitions of media literacy, the one proposed by Patricia Aufderheide, “critical autonomy in relationship to all media” is noted as fundamental objective of media literacy³⁷.

³⁵ WANG, W. et al.: Clicks can be Cheating: Counterfactual Recommendation for Mitigating Clickbait Issue. In DIAZ, F., SHAH, CH., SUEL, T. et al. (eds.): *Proceedings of the 44th International ACM SIGIR Conference on Research and Development in Information Retrieval*. New York, NY, United States : Association for Computing Machinery, 2022, p. 1288.

³⁶ CHAKRABORTY, A. et al.: Stop Clickbait: Detecting and Preventing Clickbaits in Online News Media. In ROKNE, J. et al. (eds.): *Proceedings of the IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining*. Davis, CA, USA : IEEE Press, 2016, p. 9.

³⁷ KANIŽAJ, I., LECHPAMMER, S.: The Role of Organisations of Journalists in Promoting Media Literacy – Building Credibility and Trust. In *Media Literacy and Academic Research*, 2019, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 27.

It is evident that a large part of the audience consciously recognizes clickbait headlines, but an equally large part of the audience admits that they are ready to click on them notwithstanding. There is an obvious disproportion in the behaviour of the audience who, although aware of exposure to such content, continues to consume it anyway. What is more, the audience feels and can clearly define their own disappointment due to the disproportion between the headline and the content, just as a previous research, which described the emotions felt by consumers, such as “*fear, joy, anger, disgust, sadness and surprise*”,³⁸ suggested.

6 Conclusion

The specificity of clickbait headlines, as explained in this paper, is that they influence curiosity and interest in certain content that is concealed behind the headline, so that the audience clicks on the hyperlink to reach content that does not have the value presented in the headline itself, or the content does not correspond to what has been announced in the headline, or sometimes it is entirely false. By emotionally conditioning the reader to click on a hyperlink, stimulating curiosity and expectations in the reader before clicking on a certain hyperlink, after seeing the content that does not match the expectations, the medium causes a big change in the reader on an emotional level.

In this study we have provided evidence and arguments that this also affects the readers' attitude towards the credibility of the media. Furthermore, we researched the correlation between readers' emotional reactions and their exposure to clickbait headlines. Our research also emphasized a new role of linguistic techniques when used in the media by journalists and editors as a new method to attract audiences in relation to increasing commercialization of the media content. The limitation of this research paper is the fact that it did not focus on a psychological perspective in relation to emotional reactions. We believe that a broader interdisciplinary holistic approach could provide a better insight into the reasons as well as psychologically more elaborate explanations of the behaviour of the public that consumes clickbait headlines on a daily basis. This study provided a detailed insight into the Croatian context. Yet, we believe that our research model could be replicated for comparative research on a global scale. Moreover, our research has opened some new questions.

Is curiosity created by the media through the use of clickbait headlines strong enough to overcome the feeling of disappointment and mistrust? Or maybe the systematic clickbait bombardment has lowered the audience's expectations to the point that they no longer expect high-quality media content, and the continuation of that trend only feeds a further pattern of behaviour that puts both the audience and journalism as a profession in great danger? The answers to these questions should definitely be sought in future research.

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³⁸ BURGET, R. et al.: Recognition of Emotions in Czech Newspaper Headlines. In *Radioengineering*, 2011, Vol. 20, No. 1, p. 39.

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