



Unravelling clickbait news as viral journalism in Malaysia: Its phenomenon and impacts

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ABSTRACT

Clickbait has been widely employed by news journalists as a strategy of viral journalism aimed at grabbing attention and generating high click-through rates. It is common for news journalists to imitate the tactics used by media influencers. However, the true cost of this practice remains unknown, especially in the context of journalism as a professional field, because clickbait is often associated with sensationalised headlines aimed at enticing readers. This research aims to examine the prevalence of clickbait practices as a form of viral journalism among journalists in Malaysia and investigate their impact on the media landscape. A qualitative approach was employed, involving interviews with 10 experienced journalists. The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis. Several themes emerged from the analysis: 1) Technological adaptation, 2) Shifts in Writing Style, 3) News Organisation's Sustainability, and 4) Catering to Reader Demands. The findings reveal that journalists could not afford to ignore the trend as they would be unable to compete in the news market. It also shows that clickbait news is predominantly focused on soft news topics, amidst changing technology and reader interests. The study also reveals themes related to 1) Blurring boundaries between sensationalism and media ethics, and 2) News credibility and future news sense. The clickbait phenomenon has forced mainstream news outlets to pivot away from hard news coverage to maintain relevance. The emphasis on clickbait and entertainment-driven news may overshadow the importance of hard news, which typically covers significant events that provide a deeper understanding of the country's current affairs. Nonetheless, some journalists emphasise the potential risks of excessive sensationalism, which can lead to misleading information as well as undermine the professionalism and credibility of journalism. This study underscores the importance of striking a balance between practising media ethics in writing and reporting news while remaining highly competitive in the online environment.

Keywords: **Clickbait, viral journalism, online news, sensationalism**

INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving landscape of journalism, media outlets play a pivotal role in shaping societal discourse and educating the public. However, recent trends in newsroom centrality and technocentrism have led to a shift in journalistic practices, raising critical questions about the integrity and credibility of news content.

In mid-June 2023, a scandal involving the sexual harassment of Taiwanese host Mickey Huang sparked a widespread uproar on social media platforms. Media outlets, fuelled by the urgency to shed light on this matter, devoted extensive coverage to the issue. Some presented the unfolding story in a serialised format, akin to drama series spanning numerous episodes. This style of reporting with gradual disclose technique elicited criticism from readers who yearned for the media to transcend the realm of mere “influencers” and embrace their distinct role in society for educating the public (Lopez-Garcia et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2020), as well as serving as a surveillance entity of the environment.

This phenomenon, often referred to as “viral journalism” or “viral news”, has been coined by scholars since 2000, raising concerns about boosting news success in a competitive environment (Chowanda et al., 2023; Denisova, 2023). This approach often involves sensationalised headlines and practices aimed at grabbing attention and maximising advertisement revenue by attracting high website traffic (Pengnate et al., 2021). Nevertheless, it poses challenges to journalistic integrity and adapting to digital news market demands.

In today’s digital era, the financial stability of digital media heavily relies on digital advertising, which is tied to website traffic and social media engagement. With an overflow of information bombarding readers daily, news organisations must compete for attention by adapting their strategies, incorporating memes, GIFs, and entertaining videos. This adaptation is essential for survival amid declining newspaper readership and subscriptions, forcing news outlets to cater to digital market demands. This development was highlighted by Bilqis and Thohiriyah (2020), who suggested that less popular media sources may turn to clickbait strategies due to their limited visibility on search engines. This underscores the importance of meeting audience demands in the digital age for media survival.

However, amidst this ever-changing landscape, expectations of journalists as the fourth estate and people’s watchdog to monitor the government remain true. Research by Newman et al. (2021, p. 4–5) indicates that the coronavirus pandemic has reminded “*at least parts of the public of the importance and value of trustworthy news from independent news organization*”. Denisova (2023) concluded that media in the United Kingdom deployed a range of inventive engaging tactics, but most of the journalists interviewed rejected virality as a long-term strategy, as exploiting viral techniques may result in reputational damage and alienate loyal readers. A balance between competitiveness and professionalism in journalism is seen as significant. According to Bazaco et al. (2019), there has been a lack of research on clickbait, which is critically needed to analyse its evolution and monitor its impact on news quality. Therefore, in the context of the Malaysian news landscape, this research aims to explore the prevalence of the viral journalism phenomenon, also known as clickbait, and seeks to investigate the impacts of viral journalism strategies.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

RO1: To explore the prevalence of the clickbait and viral journalism phenomenon within the Malaysian news landscape.

RO2: To investigate the impacts of viral journalism strategies on the Malaysian news landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Viral journalism phenomenon

Viral journalism refers to the rapid dissemination of media information to large audiences through network platforms. Denisova (2023) highlighted that viral journalism's fundamental value lies in sharing captivating and pertinent information that appeals to diverse audience segments. In today's digital realm, where attention spans are shorter, opinions are often formed based on headlines rather than full stories. News exposure occurs randomly through social media making it a significant platform in shaping people's interactions with journalism. Social media with its models of virality, not only influences the types of stories that gain popularity, but also affects how people understand stories and facts through the adoption of new storytelling tools and technologies to create mobile news content that is both interactive and captivating (Mohd Nor, 2022; Pavlik, 2021), emphasising that it pushes journalists to exhibit creativity in news sourcing, information gathering, writing, and publication, all while upholding credibility. This challenge becomes particularly vital during times of crisis when the demand for news escalates.

However, concerns are rising over the algorithmic curation of social media, which often rewards news based on likes, views, or the number of web page visits, indirectly fostering a media environment that caters to this dynamic (Lischka & Garz, 2021). The proliferation of clickbait on online platforms undermines the reliability and credibility of shared information. Users are increasingly exposed to sensationalised and inaccurate content, raising concerns about trust in online sources and their influence on decision-making. Clickbait, characterised by sensationalist headlines (Untari et al., 2023) and false information to drive clicks, is increasingly utilised by media to boost online engagement (Ahmad Azam et al., 2024).

However, it raises concerns about the reliability and credibility of online news sources and influence on information dissemination. While clickbaiting benefits news media, it often includes false information, rendering headlines and content irrelevant, which is detrimental to readers (Bilqiis & Thohiriyah, 2020). According to Scott (2023), clickbait headlines blur the line between relevant and irrelevant content by enticing readers with engaging language and visuals.

In a study of news practice, Vultee et al. (2022) discovered that the presence of clickbait headlines is influenced by the level of editing in a story, which affect how people remember the story's details and overall message. Stories with less editing are more likely to rely on clickbait headline, as they help readers retain more information about the story. This is acceded by Lischka and Garz (2021) who suggested that media users are no longer "passive-watcher", and contemporary readers actively seek creativity in news presented on social media, not just as the quickest indicator of breaking events but also due to the abundance of choices across various dimensions further indicating adapting to new economic models that prioritise individual story or headline performance while downplaying the traditional measures of quality and reach (Molyneux & Coddington, 2020). Consequently, the challenge lies in effectively, powerfully, innovatively, and creatively presenting stories to continuously engage with the media users. Nevertheless, the downside and fact are that most online newspapers are interested in publishing gossip, scandals, and clickbait news, which increase page views and the possibility of getting advertisements (Sharma, 2024).

In studying the news media in Indonesia, Muslikhin and Mulyana (2021) made an interesting discovery regarding the practice of *Tribunnews.com*, one of the renowned cyber news outlets in the country. The scholars found that *Tribunnews.com* has implemented the principles of *McJournalism*, a concept derived from *McDonaldisation* that specifically pertains to the strategic approach of making news content go viral and this involves employing various techniques, such as exaggeration, teasing, inflammatory language, specific formatting, captivating graphics, bait-and-switch tactics, and ambiguity while using bombastic and provocative headlines, as well as incorporating lengthy headlines and captivating photos in news distribution. However, it is worth noting that this study focused on Indonesia, whereas most Malaysian studies focus on quantitative surveys probing Malaysian perceptions of clickbait news (Oon, 2023), delving into analysing news articles (Aslam et al., 2020) and reviewing journal articles (Ahmad Azam et al., 2024). The Malaysian context remains relatively unexplored in terms of journalistic or media practitioners' perspectives on the clickbait phenomenon.

Malia and Teh (2020) underscored the importance of traditional journalism embracing new storytelling methods to navigate the evolving landscape, as the rise of citizen journalism poses challenges to the sustainability of traditional journalism. Citizen journalism often poses a threat to commercial impact and undermines the recognition of journalists' hard work. Consequently, journalists find themselves compelled to prioritise new reporting trends driven by popularity and public opinion and express the need to adapt their news writing style to be more open and responsive to the freer media environment. Employing enticing headlines and adopting specific angles that cater to reader demand becomes crucial in this context.

Hamzah and Esa (2020) reinforced in their study that journalists must embrace new technologies to thrive in the news industry. They emphasised the importance of journalists having a mindset that is open to collaboration and accepting the technological changes brought about by advancements. The scholars also emphasised the readiness of news institutions to encourage journalists to adopt new technologies, such as Twitter, to bridge the technological gap among journalists. The study found that some journalists and news institutions are not prepared to adopt new technology, suggesting the need for crucial steps to improve journalism practices, to keep up with the changing news ecosystem.

Nevertheless, the most concerning aspect is that this kind of news practice often employs sensational and occasionally misleading headlines, leading to the proliferation of fake news and misinformation. This is evident in the study on the popularity of social media content conducted by Saquete et al. (2022), which indicates that messages with high-negative polarity and strong emotional impact, particularly emotions heightened by the coronavirus pandemic such as fear, sadness, anger, and surprise, are more likely to go viral in social media. This scenario is alarming as it encourages the creation of news or content that capitalises on highly sensationalised content for the sake of attention-grabbing. The model shown in Figure 1, adapted from Bazaco et al. (2019), explains the elements of clickbait journalism, which include the presentation of incomplete information, appeals expression, repetition, and serialisation as well as exaggeration. Besides, such content typically falls under the category of soft news and is enhanced with striking audio-visual elements.

A. PRESENTATION VARIABLES	1. Incomplete information	• Absence of the most relevant data • Unanswered questions • Use of enumeration and lists • Deliberate ambiguity
	2. Appeals expressions	• Vocative • Imperative • Singularisation of reader
	3. Repetition and serialisation	• Thematic reiteration • Reiteration of frames • Dosage of data in successive deliveries
	4. Exaggeration	• Hyperboles • Comparisons of superiority and superlatives • Neologism formed with prefix “super” • Intensifying adjectivisation
B. CONTENT VARIABLES	5. Soft news	• Soft or sensational content • Personal, emotional, episodic or anecdotal representation frames
	6. Striking audio-visual elements	• Shocking and/or odd photos and videos • Use of funny memes • Image manipulation

Figure 1. Analytical model for the defining variables of clickbait (Bazaco et al., 2019)

Foresee the “Viral Journalism” practice

The accelerated growth of clickbait and viral journalism, has presented a challenge to journalists causing severe ethical dilemmas including the decline in contextual reporting where stories often lack necessary depth and context, prioritising brevity, shareability, and accelerated news cycle which require journalists’ quick response over nuanced reporting. This inadvertently has led to intense competition among news organisations, as viral content often generates significant traffic and revenue. Concurrently, viral journalism has also caused the erosion of gatekeeping whereby the democratisation of news through viral journalism has challenged the traditional gatekeeping role of journalists and editors, allowing unverified or misleading information to spread rapidly and the quest for virality has resulted in an increased reliance on clickbait headlines and sensationalist content, potentially compromising journalistic integrity.

Monitoring the impact of clickbait strategy as viral journalism is essential to safeguard the quality of news and professionalism within the field. This was pertinently pointed out by Molyneuz and Coddington (2020) that exaggerated or sensationalised headlines hurt the perceived credibility and quality of journalism, who then suggested that when clickbait headlines are overused, they are viewed as less reliable compared to those used sparingly. As a result, the practice of writing clickbait headlines may be judged as less credible than approaches that employ them sparingly.

Adeline and Ahmad (2022) pointed out that the news media industry will continue to be shaped by technological advancements, particularly algorithms, and further emphasised the need to establish a media ecosystem centred on standards-based journalism, as this aspect is often overlooked in the realm of social media. To maintain competitiveness and relevance in the market, journalism practitioners must prioritise accuracy and correctness in the production of news content.

In a study by Lamichhane and Shrestha (2020, p.15), almost all online news media outlets completely depend upon the revenues generated from the clicks made by their readers, and due to the presence of numerous such outlets, they need to compete with each other for reader attention. Therefore, to attract the readers to click on an article and subsequently visit the media site, the outlets often come up with catchy headlines

accompanying the article links, which lure the readers to click on the link. Such headlines are known as Clickbait and while these baits may trick the readers into clicking, in the long run, clickbait usually does not live up to the expectations of the readers and leaves them disappointed.

In a study on media consumption in Malaysia, Pengnate et al. (2021) found that curiosity drives Malaysians' intention to read news stories, but low-quality information reduces the inclination to share news. Oon (2023) suggested that prolonged exposure to sensationalism could negatively impact perceptions of the entire media industry, with 71.33% of Malaysians surveyed agreeing that sensational news affects their perception of journalism and the industry. However, these studies focused solely on the general public, overlooking journalists' perspectives. A study focusing on journalistic methodologies for reporting on digital news sites in Malaysia revealed data journalism as a viable method for combating fake news (Mior Kamarulbaid et al., 2022). Understanding these broader issues within the journalism industry is essential for addressing the prevalence of clickbait alongside fake news or misinformation.

METHODS

This qualitative research focused on analysing the clickbait phenomenon in Malaysian news by interviewing 10 experienced journalists, each with a minimum of four years' experience in online news writing. As noted by Hennink and Kaiser (2022), saturation point can be achieved in a narrow range of interviews, specifically between 9 to 17 interviews, particularly in studies with relatively homogenous study populations and narrowly defined objectives. Furthermore, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) emphasised the importance of providing evidence-based recommendations for sample size, with appropriate considerations. In this research, all interviewed journalists were regarded as experts, possessing knowledge and experience in the subject matter. Therefore, the sample size of 10 was considered sufficient.

To ensure the validity of the interview process, a pre-test of the interview questions was carried out, followed by the amendment of the interview questions. The snowball sampling technique was used to search for these journalists.

Before each interview, journalists were briefed and a consent form was signed in order to ensure that the interview process is accountable and that the identity of the journalists is kept confidential. The duration of the interview ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour. Interview conversations were recorded using a voice recorder. Subsequently, the collected data was transcribed into text and it was analysed using the six steps of thematic analysis, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). The steps include: 1) familiarising with the data, 2) generating codes, 3) generating themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6) producing the report.

Table 1. Details of study sample

Respondent	Position	Years of Experience
Respondent 1	Investigative journalist, editor and executive producer	15
Respondent 2	Independent & freelance journalist	10
Respondent 3	Mainstream newspaper journalist – English	13
Respondent 4	Mainstream newspaper journalist - English	5
Respondent 5	Mainstream newspaper journalist – English	8
Respondent 6	Mainstream newspaper journalist – Chinese	9

Table 1. (con't)

Respondent	Position	Years of Experience
Respondent 7	Mainstream newspaper journalist – Malay	5
Respondent 8	Mainstream newspaper journalist - Malay	4
Respondent 9	Mainstream TV news journalist	7
Respondent 10	Mainstream newspaper journalist, Asst. News Desk Editor-English	23

FINDINGS

Research objective 1

The findings for research objective one revealed four main themes: clickbait phenomenon, changing writing styles, sustainability of news organisations and catering to reader demands.

In the first theme, respondents stated that the **clickbait phenomenon** takes place in tabloid news and mainstream news outlets as well, in order to attract and engage readers. Most respondents perceived the increase in producing clickbait news as a result of the demands in the digital era. This was evident when trivial news generated more engagement compared to serious news. Increase in engagement correlates to increase in news website visibility and attracts advertisers.

We used to have tabloid, Harian Metro. This tabloid, demography is mainly majority. So, the stories that you get out, whack, crazy stories... You remembered this kind of nonsense headline like “Bakar Anak Gemuk” (Translation: Burn the Fat Child), but see they achieved what they wanted to achieve, which is sensationalized the story. Story fact is there, the quote is all there. It’s just sensationalized in a way that it sounds like, wow, why would he do that? The thing is we have tabloid and we have even Utusan Malaysia. Kind of like, they call themselves mainstream, but some of the news and headlines are damn tabloid.
(Respondent 1)

In the second theme, respondents noted a **change in writing styles** as part of their effort to adapt to technological changes in the industry. Respondents shared how news writing style had to change from length, formal news to simple and direct news with much focus on speed. Respondent 8 noted that “*If the writing style is lengthy and formal readers tend to ignore or just the title and scroll away to the next title as they find it boring and lazy to read.*” Respondent 9 supported the theme and affirmed that current readers want news to be interactive and engaging.

News has now become optimised for mobile device consumption. This meant shorter news articles, conversational writing styles and attention-grabbing headlines. Such a shift shows adoption of a more clickbait writing style and has become unavoidable due to technological advancements and the dynamic nature of the information environment. Another senior journalist stated that this shift to viral journalism raised audience expectation.

The pressure to produce viral content may lead journalists to prioritize clickbait and engaging narratives over important but less shareable stories affecting access to diverse news.
(Respondent 10)

In the third theme, the **sustainability of news organisations** in the digital era was raised. This is a crucial aspect as traditional news production face pressures to meet societal demands through various forms of media automation and increase audience engagement in order to remain as a player in the world of the news media. Respondents shared that their companies were struggling to survive.

My company uses clickbait headings nowadays. As I do know my company is struggling with retaining readers as they are holding to be authentic, clear news and not sensational. As they want to grab someone's attention quickly, but I don't recommend them to do that. But as a journalist, I appreciate them doing so to try to survive in the market. (Respondent 5)

Use of clickbait strategies as a survival mechanism is not new as Respondent 6 pointed how this was already used in the past for business survival. Linking it to yellow journalism and sensationalised news, the respondent shared that their company have been using these strategies for over a decade primarily because of a lower educated target audience. In discussions of news organisation sustainability, the respondents echoed that it was impossible for journalists to be democracy's fourth estate without any public support. The respondents rightly pointed out that the main focus should centre on whether sufficient financial support by the public for serious and formal journalism is given, not on whether journalists prioritise clickbait stories. News organisations are after all, a business entity.

The final theme that emerged was journalists **catering to readers' demands and sense of news**. The interplay of clickbait strategies, changing writing styles, social media virality and shrinking newspaper readerships results in a transformed target reader. Respondents posited that the transformed reader's interest focuses on sensational clickbait news, thus contributing to its prevalence and the media continuously catering to their demands. This would also include mainstream media organisations catering to demands for yellow journalism. Respondent 4 said, "*It is something unavoidable, in often times as journalists we look for things that are sensational because the readers are interested in looking at people having fight, conflicts readers want to read things that are over the top.*"

Respondent 7 supported this observation stating that the "*the content providers are racing to make a profit.*" Current generation of readers only read the news headline but not the entire article. Such readers would then react and reshare posts without fully understanding the news' context. Consequently, such practices lead to journalists producing more sensational headlines to generate traffic. Respondents also noted that such pandering to clickbait news could also lead to breaking ethical boundaries when it comes to accuracy and objectivity. It is a daily struggle for newsrooms to get higher "hits" and exclusive stories.

Research objective 2

The findings for the second research objective revealed three major negative impacts: blurring the boundaries of sensationalism and media ethics, news credibility and future news sense.

In the first major negative impact, **the boundaries of news sensationalism and media ethics could become blurred**. Respondents noted that the drive to focus on clickbait journalism and sensationalism could be unethical if it involves misleading or offensive contents. Respondent 5 noted that creating such misleading content could potentially damage both the company's reputation and the journalist's professional standing.

Respondents also emphasised the importance of upholding reader's trust when writing clickbait headline. Respondent 1 noted that it was crucial to note that clickbait

does not necessitate being misleading or false. Journalist should primarily prioritise the accuracy, fairness, balance, and objectivity of news content, and only then consider ways of making it more engaging and attention-grabbing. The importance of upholding public trust was emphasised. Respondent 2 offered an example of how clickbait word choices can be misleading and unintentionally spread false information.

There was a shootout in 1 Utama, five o'clock in the evening. People finished work (it is very crowded), but the first line that opened in the story was, in a quiet evening, and I'm like, that's already misinformation. It's five o'clock in the evening? Make it make sense. Don't put it your own words...reporter especially in a main newsroom, ensure that your story is factually right. Headline must be balanced. It's cannot be sensationalized, but print media and online media is very different. So online media will probably have to work harder in improving choice of words.

(Respondent 2)

On the other hand, one of the respondents pointed out that certain news companies prioritise practical skills over media ethics. Video training courses are considered crucial to survive in the profession. In the broader context of the field of journalism, this makes sense when obtaining a certificate in journalism is not compulsory.

Actually, when you go to the newspaper office, no one will talk to you about ethics; usually, it depends on whether you have finished the assignment on time. Ethics are all up to you.

(Respondent 6)

As the need to adapt to the clickbait strategy for survival is inevitable, the discussion should not revolve around whether to embrace it or not. Rather, the emphasis should be on determining the extent to which clickbait news are acceptable, while also evaluating their long-term effects on the media landscape.

The second impact of viral journalism that respondents highlighted was the **detrimental impact on the reputation and credibility of news organisations**. This is due to the previously mentioned potential for clickbait to mislead or overpromise, leading readers to lose trust in both the journalists and the news company. Consequently, this can significantly harm the news company's standing.

Clickbait headlines often uses emotional triggers, such as fear, outrage, or curiosity, to entice readers to click on the article... While clickbait can generate a lot of clicks and attention, it actually damages the credibility of the news agencies and undermines trust in journalism.

(Respondent 8)

Similarly, a respondent also noted that clickbait, designed to entice readers to click and read, has the potential to undermine the credibility of the journalism field as a whole.

There is a degree on how much is lie and how much is truth. You should always be much truth. Every media has their own integrity, their responsibility to the people and if you lie too many times, there is no credibility, so you risk losing your credibility and your reader.

(Respondent 3)

The third impact of viral journalism was the **continuous shaping of Malaysian's news sense to focus on viral content more than hard, serious news**. Respondent 1 emphasised

that the fundamental role of journalists being the fourth estate in a democracy needs to be prioritised. Even if most of the major news organisations are focusing on serious news, other media companies focusing on clickbait news can still ultimately impact the entire field of journalism. This should not be underestimated because readers' attentions can be diverted away from critical issues. Moreover, this trend of viral journalism and clickbait strategies may perpetuate reader ignorance of important news and contribute to a gradual disinterest in substantive and hard news stories.

Furthermore, the respondent also highlighted the prevailing situation where social media platforms tend to reward viral contents, which often comprise of sensational and non-serious news. This situation hinders journalist from effectively fulfilling their crucial role as the fourth state. The respondent strongly criticised the readers for supporting this trend, as it contributes to the slow death of the media. This, in turn, will undoubtedly impact future generations' understanding and awareness of the broader political and social environment in the country.

The way social media works, because of the algorithms, it rewards certain type of behaviour, it rewards, algorithms reward people that post very emotional, very angry kind of, you know, um, yeah, there was a study, which I'm sure you've seen that fake, like inaccurate information, travels faster than accurate information. Because people want to say, oh wow. I found this really cool information ... Um, so because of social media, these traditional structures, this role of media fourth of estate has to be degraded... It almost doesn't exist anymore.

(Respondent 1)

On the other hand, another respondent stressed the importance of the government's involvement in educating the public about media literacy skills, empowering them to critically analyse news content. The prevalence of clickbait news cannot be solely attributed to the media; its remedy requires a collective effort involving all parties, including the public. The media can effectively fulfil their role only when there is an improvement in the expectations of the public. Merely blaming the media will not lead to meaningful improvements.

I believe the government can incorporate media literacy qualities into moral education, starting from primary school, considering our daily exposure to media. We cannot solely blame the media. If readers demand different content, then the media should provide different perspectives. If the content consistently promotes yellow journalism, it indicates a lack of quality in readers. XXX news media is known for yellow journalism... Sometimes, if you understand their behind-the-scenes operations, you will understand why they act the way they do. We should not always criticize and judge them. Based on the Users and Gratification theory, they provide what the market demands. If the quality of readers improves, then they no longer desire such low-quality news. After all, it reflects an issue in our education or lifestyle. Why do readers want such things?

(Respondent 6)

Other than that, a respondent addressed the importance of prioritising language comprehension in news article to enhance Malaysia's overall news sense. This is particularly crucial as clickbait stories often neglect the proper use of language. The journalist emphasised the significant role of well-crafted articles in teaching and improving English language skills, which in turn contributes to fostering a more informed and literate society.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of viral journalism and its utilisation of clickbait. The research findings indicate three key factors contributing to the viral journalism phenomenon.

First and foremost, the ever-evolving technologies compel journalists and news organisations to adapt, resulting in a shift from traditional platforms to online platforms. This transition is crucial for their sustainability in the current market, as failure to make this shift means being unable to keep up. Since the news media wants to attract as many readers as possible, news outlets will focus on the news headlines that generate attention and excitement (Bilqiis & Thohiriyah, 2020). This includes incorporating elements like surprise, emotive language while catering to the demand for amusing content in popular culture (Untari et al., 2023), emojis, and multiple question marks (Haim et al., 2021). A study by Rahmatika and Hidayanto (2020) indicated that employing clickbait significantly influences readers' interest, particularly among Generation Z, as high as 55.2%. Additionally, research by Hastuti et al. (2023) demonstrated that clickbait headlines strongly impact reading interest. As a result, it has become essential for content to be easily accessible to search engines and other social media platforms in order to survive and thrive in today's digital landscape.

Secondly, it is crucial to align with the “modern appetite” of the audience, borrowing from McLuhan's notion that “the medium is the message”. Hence, the internet medium plays a defining role in influencing how messages are received by audiences. Consequently, in the realm of cyber media, certain standardisation has emerged, such as breaking news into multiple pages, presenting news in a uniform manner, and employing attention-grabbing clickbait headlines. Therefore, the responsibility for clickbait lies not solely with news organisations but also with the audience's preferences, which are typically driven by personal relevance, as highlighted by Rahmatika and Prianto (2022). Hence, this implies that clickbait aligns with current market demands.

Another crucial consideration pertains to the sustainability of news organisations. The ongoing technological revolution and evolving landscape which prioritises personal engagement, instead of passive receiver has empowered everyone to share information anytime and anywhere (Fakhrurroji et al., 2023). Online media operates on several fundamental principles which includes the relationship between the audience and the mass media context, where the media is traditionally the primary source of information. However, in the networked context of online media, traditional boundaries and centralised control structures have dissolved, allowing both information providers and audience equal opportunities to create content. Additionally, the clickbait phenomenon can be viewed through the lens of interactivity, which explains why clickbait is widely adopted in the social media environment. Therefore, clickbait serves more as a tool for capturing attention rather than providing substantial information. Consequently, traditional news production faced pressure to meet societal demands through various forms of media automation and increase audience engagement in order to remain as a player in the world of the news media. This scenario has shaped the news environment towards prioritising attracting readers or generating clicks, rather than fostering a deep understanding or staying updated with their surroundings.

When addressing the second objective of the research purpose, which is to evaluate the long-term impact and sustainability of the “viral journalism” phenomenon, some journalists admitted that they have limited control over its prevalence among their colleagues in the field, even as they recognise potential negative consequences. Some of

them stressed the importance of responsibly employing clickbait strategies within defined boundaries to avoid excessive sensationalism, which can erode trust among loyal readers. As discussed by Wanda et al. (2021), clickbait headlines can negatively impact perceptions of the reliability and quality of professional journalism practices. Some concerns that arise include readers' ability to discern the correct emphasis of news stories using clickbait strategies and apply the information to real-world issues (Carcioppolo et al., 2022) and the curiosity that prompts readers to click on the page to fill the information gap, potentially leading to a sense of betrayal (Kanižaj et al., 2022). Trust in the media hinges on the entirety of the news content (Rahmatika & Prisanto, 2022), whereas clickbait, with its sensational elements, reflects a broader issue of declining trust in journalism. Readers' disappointment stems from perceiving clickbait as a deliberate manipulation tactic rather than a genuine effort to provide credible information, significantly diminishing the credibility of news articles.

This trend of viral journalism and clickbait strategies may perpetuate reader ignorance of important news and contribute to a gradual disinterest in substantive and hard news stories. Pengnate et al. (2021) observed that the clickbait technique is seen as having lower information quality than regular news headlines while Rodrigo-Gines et al. (2024) highlighted that media bias may arise when certain types of news are prioritised, influencing readers' perceptions of newsworthiness or importance. This may explain the significant worldwide decline in news consumption in recent years (Rosney & Sillito, 2023), presenting a global issue that the entire journalism industry must address in order to improve the information environment. The decline of local journalism is particularly worrisome, as it can have detrimental effects on democracy and the prospects of future generations. Additionally, if the audience continues to support the consumption of "clickbait news", it will further shape the journalism field in a negative manner, making it increasingly challenging to distinguish credible news from false information.

CONCLUSION

The widespread adoption of clickbait practices among Malaysian news journalists raises concerns about the ethical standards within the profession. Sensationalised headlines aimed solely at garnering clicks may compromise the integrity of journalism by prioritising engagement over accuracy and truthfulness. The prevalence of clickbait in Malaysian journalism indicates a significant shift in the media landscape towards entertainment-driven content. This shift may undermine the traditional role of journalism in providing objective and informative coverage of important events, potentially leading to a dilution of public discourse. Journalists feel compelled to employ clickbait tactics to remain competitive in the saturated online news market. The fear of losing audience engagement to more sensationalised outlets drives mainstream news organisations to prioritise soft news topics over hard news, ultimately affecting the quality and depth of reporting.

The dominance of clickbait and entertainment-driven news threatens to overshadow the importance of hard news coverage, which is crucial for providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of current affairs. This loss of focus on hard news topics may contribute to a shallow understanding of complex issues among the public. Excessive sensationalism in clickbait practices poses a significant risk of disseminating misleading information, which can erode public trust in journalism as a credible source of news. Maintaining journalistic professionalism and credibility becomes increasingly challenging in an environment where clickbait tactics are prevalent. The study emphasises the importance of striking a balance between remaining competitive in the online

environment and upholding ethical standards in journalism. Journalists must navigate the tension between attracting readers through engaging content and maintaining the integrity of their reporting through responsible and accurate storytelling. These considerations are not limited to the Malaysian context but apply to the entire global journalism industry.

In essence, this research underscores the complex interplay between clickbait practices, journalistic ethics, and the evolving media landscape, highlighting the need for reflection and adaptation within the profession to ensure the continued relevance and credibility of journalism in Malaysia. It provides insight into the underlying factors contributing to the clickbait phenomenon from the viewpoint of media practitioners. As some journalists acknowledge the significant influence of readers in shaping trends in the digital era, where clickbait practices are a means of survival, catering to market demands, future research could explore the long-term impacts to the journalism industry from various perspectives, encompassing insights from the public, scholars, and comparisons with other Southeast Asian journalism sectors. Such comparisons could shed light on potential reasons for the decline in formal and hard news consumption and strategies for fostering support for reading and subscribing to formal news outlets, along with envisaging the future path of the journalism industry in Malaysia.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We declare that we have no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest that could have influenced the conduct or reporting of this research.

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