



INFLUENCE OF POP-UP NEWS HEADLINES IN INTERNET-ENABLED DEVICES ON THE READERSHIP OF THE STORIES AMONG YOUTHS IN OWERRI METROPOLIS, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This research examined the influence of pop-up news headlines on the readership of the stories that they introduce among youths in Owerri metropolis. The objectives were to, among others, examine whether pop-up news headlines influence the readership of the stories among youths in Owerri metropolis, and identify what factor that is most responsible for determining the influence of pop-up news headlines on the readership of the stories among youths in Owerri metropolis. The uses and gratification theory was used to anchor the study, and the survey design was adopted. Data were gathered from 380 young users of internet-enabled devices in the Owerri metropolis. Findings indicate that pop-up news headlines are a common feature in online news distribution, as 100% of the respondents admitted to having seen pop-up news headlines on their internet-enabled devices; while pop-up news headlines influence readership of the stories among a majority (53%) of the young people, the said influence is limited as a result of several factors. Based on the findings, it was recommended that, among others, news organisations can increase the influence of the pop-up news headlines by introducing cash or point tokens for those who read the stories.

Keywords: cash or point tokens; internet-enabled devices; news readership; pop-up news headlines; uses and gratifications.

Introduction

Researchers have noted that there is a worldwide enchantment with the internet and web-based information distribution and consumption (Dadaczynski et al., 2021; Anyanwu et al., 2017). The internet is currently one of the most effective means of communication with the potential to reach everyone on the globe with various media offerings, and it has variously changed the way news is distributed and consumed (Ejem & Nwokeocha, 2023). As a result, newspapers have been forced to integrate with the web and now approximately 80% of newspaper publishers have integrated web and print operations (Patel 2010). Even so in Nigeria, newspapers have gone to the internet as a means of increasing readership, reaching out to the outside world, and ultimately as a way of not being left out of the information advantages which the internet has brought to the print industry globally (Anyanwu et al., 2017).

The new media context has made news organisations, popular as well as quality newspapers, become unprecedentedly competitive and be pressured to increase audience attention, possibly influencing quality papers to emphasise the pragmatic function of attracting audiences by employing more sensational headlines (Lee, 2020). Specifically, headlines have not only been adopted by these news organisations to offer readers a quick and exact understanding of issues or events by summarising the content of news stories but also as a means to get people to read the main body of the news. It has been shown that headlines incite the desire to read the article. Research conducted by Scacco and Muddiman (2019) confirmed that the header has a large effect on news readership.

The strategy adopted by news organisations in the online environment is the use of pop-up news headlines on internet-enabled devices such as mobile phones, iPad, pods, and laptops. The pop-up is a new window that suddenly appears on the screen of the device, displaying the headline of a story, or entire webpage. Pop-ups can be a tool for microtargeting and expanding the reach of the main content (Jeganathan & Szymkowiak, 2020).

Existing research works have confirmed that these pop-up headlines intend to show the users the main content – including promoted posts, to draw their attention, and interest and get them to action, i.e. click on the link and read the article. The ultimate intent is to capture a good number of readers. According to Zickuhr (2011), the age group that is more exposed to pop-up headlines is the one that uses technological devices, which are youths.

However, while this is a common experience for users of internet-enabled devices to be exposed to the pop-up headlines of online news stories on their devices, it is yet to be empirically seen if those pop-up news headlines affect their readership and engagement with the stories. Therefore, this research focuses on ascertaining the influence of pop-up news headlines on the readership of the stories that they introduce, among youths in Owerri metropolis.

Objective of the research

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Find out the incidence of pop-up news headlines among young users in Owerri metropolis;
2. examine whether pop-up news headlines influence readership of the stories among youths in Owerri metropolis; and
3. identify what factor that is most responsible for determining the influence of pop-up news headlines on the readership of the stories among youths in Owerri metropolis.

Literature Review

The internet and news distribution

The Internet and World Wide Web have changed the world and this has not exempted the mass media since the Internet and World Wide Web are at the centre of virtually all media convergence. Modern communication is hinged on the use of ever-evolving information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Nsude et al., 2023). For instance, in the rapidly changing operation of web versions of their hard copy, more people with access to networked computers turn to the Internet for news.

The use of the Internet in communication has revolutionized the whole business of mass communication; though, no new medium can send the old one packing but advancement in technology has definitely and will continue to alter the functions of each medium. Hence, the use of the Internet through its dynamism and interactivity is rapidly changing the media industry and the practices of mass communication. Online news media distinguish themselves from traditional media in several ways: they are interactive; they offer convenience, which embodies easy access, searchable features, and the ability to cross-reference through hyperlinking; and they provide multimedia features. According to King (1999), interactivity reflects two essentially unrelated characteristics of online media:

Another useful application of the Internet to the field of journalism is the World Wide Web (WWW). The World Wide Web was designed originally as an interactive world of shared information through which people could communicate with each other and with machines. Since its inception in 1989, it has grown initially as a medium for the broadcast of read-only material from heavily loaded corporate servers to the mass of Internet-connected consumers. The web is simply defined as the universe of global network-accessible information (Khurana, 2018). It is an abstract space with which people interact, and it is currently chiefly populated by interlinked pages of text, images, and animations, with occasional sounds, three-dimensional worlds, and videos. Its existence marks the end of an era of frustrating and debilitating incompatibilities between computer systems (Berners-Lee, 2019).

The commercial potential in the system has driven a rapid pace of development of new features making the maintenance of the global interoperability which the web brought a continuous task for all concerned (Berners-Lee, 1997). Journalists easily surf the net for interesting topics and build on them while Internet users access the news easily anywhere in the world as long as they are connected (Giomelakis & Veglis, 2015). These online news stories are accessed using internet-enabled devices. The term internet-enabled device will be used in this paper to convey this ubiquitous ICT more broadly than a mobile “phone”. They refer to a range of devices;

feature phones, smartphones as well as phablets. While mobile news consumption has recently gained popularity, the situation was remarkably different only a few years ago (Van Damme et al., 2020). Recent findings provide evidence that mobile media have gained significant usage everywhere in everyday life. With the rise of mobile app ecosystems, the uptake of the internet as a means of news distribution and consumption has grown faster than news (Ohme, 2020).

News Headlines

A headline is the title of a newspaper story, printed in large letters at the top of the story, especially on the front page. To get readers interested, headlines matter. Three components to keep in mind when building your headline are readability, "findability," and sentiment. Headlines contain essential words that convey the subject of a story and what the story is about (Sulaymonova, 2021).

In various bodies of literature, the headline of a newspaper article has primarily been given two distinct functions. The first is to summarize the article it belongs to, and it can do so by either being an abstract of the full article or by highlighting the main point of that article (Lee, 2022; Hindman, 2015). Dor (2003) calls headlines relevance optimizers, based on the relevance theory of Sperber and Wilson (1986). Tran et al. (2015) note that headlines are designed to optimize the relevance of their stories for their readers. They argue that headlines require a balance between being short and clear and being an information-rich summary of the article. An optimum between those two goals has to be found.

The second function of a headline is a more pragmatic one (Kuiken et al., 2017). It is the function to attract the attention of the readers and to provoke them to read the article (Nasibu, 2021). Ifantidou (2009) showed that readers preferred creative headlines, even if that makes a headline longer, more confusing, or less informative; he states that "readers seem to value headlines for what they are, i.e. under informative, creative, yet autonomous texts." (p. 717).

On the internet, there is much more competition between news sources for the readers' attention (Chen, et al., 2015). As more and more readers of news articles come from social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter (Mitchell & Page 2015), the need for a good headline that delivers the most clicks grows. This often leads to a vague headline that induces curiosity, which is then used to lure readers into clicking on the headline. This phenomenon is known as clickbait.

Headline Pop-Up as Clickbait

Generally, a popup is an overlay box that appears when a person browses a website on a mobile or other internet-enabled device. It can ask for certain information from your visitors (such as their email address or phone number) for you to send personalised marketing messages to, or simply point or guide them to another part of the site where they can access the full content of the subject of the pop-up. Pop-ups have also been referred to in some literature as a form of clickbait (Blom & Hansen, 2015). Clickbait might be best considered as an umbrella term, used to describe many different techniques, all with the common goal of attracting attention and invoking curiosity to get the reader to click on a headline. But in the context of pop-ups, clickbait is a form of content designed to gather clicks on news pages or other search engine pages (Bazaco et al., 2019). With clickbait, companies attempt to generate traffic on their blogs or websites, often relying on sensationalist headlines to attract attention. The headline is the most critical component in a piece of clickbait content.

Serving as an online tabloid version of traditional news, a clickbait headline provides soft-news content that generally provokes readers' curiosity and then postpones revealing the content of the story. Typically, clickbait headlines are created by a forward-referring narrative writing strategy that exploits a curiosity gap (Pengnate et al., 2021; Scott, 2021) where the headlines provide referencing cues to generate curiosity, which subsequently compels readers to read the full stories by clicking on the link embedded in the headlines to fill the curiosity gap. However, since the true goal is to generate web page views, instead of providing verifiable information, clickbait headlines usually do not live up to the expectation of the readers (Pengnate et al., 2021).

According to the marketing and journalism literature, few studies have examined clickbait headlines and their consequences. For example, Chen et al. (2015) examined methods to detect clickbait and provided potential cues for recognising both textual and non-textual clickbait. Blom and Hansen (2015) reported that the forward-referring writing technique can be used to create effective news headlines; however, using such a technique to create clickbait headlines

is typically problematic, since the headlines are often considered misleading and deceptive (Chen et al., 2011). In addition, Chakraborty et al. (2016) have provided an approach based on text mining to automatically detect clickbait headlines.

Simplification, spectacularisation, negativity, and provoking content are characteristics that are often related to clickbait (Blom & Hansen 2015; Rowe 2011; Tenenboim & Cohen 2015). Another stylistic feature that is used in many clickbait headlines is forward referencing (Blom & Hansen 2015), which is referring to something that is mentioned in the article. Often signal words like “this,” “why” or “what” are used for forward referencing. The use of questions (Lai & Farbrot 2014; Tenenboim & Cohen 2015) and numbers (Safran 2013) have also been linked to clickbait headlines.

On the internet, it is much easier to track user interaction and behaviour (Atterer, et al., 2006) than with physical newspapers. The role of these metrics for online journalism is significant, as they have become determining factors in news production. Decisions are less based on instinct and more on actual data (Anderson 2011; MacGregor 2007). Lee and Lewis (2012) have shown a statistically significant influence of these data on the decisions that editors make. Headline writing is influenced by the availability of more data as well. Both Dick (2011) and Tandoc (2014) have shown that in attempting to attract more readers to their stories, editors, and journalists have been changing the way they write headlines for their articles, by using words, phrases, and stylistic techniques that are known to perform well and attract more clicks

Other Tactics to Enhance News Readership

Print media thrive on readership, and media houses count on readers to keep their sites running. A good media house cannot emerge without the resurgent action of its readers. Variety and the consequent competitiveness helped by the internet makes it necessary for these media houses to adopt suitable ways to attract and retain more readers. For this reason, various media houses have adopted several audience-based tactics. Since the primary objective is to win and retain these customers, the news content, which is the primary product that these media houses are selling, becomes only a small part of the overall methods used to win readers (Valentine 2011).

In terms of other tactics used to enhance news readership, Bowman and Willis (2003, p. 7) pointed out how MSNBC.com, CNN, *Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal* offered their readers “certain degrees of personalization on their sites’ front pages.” Personalization means that readers can customize the portals to satisfy some of their tastes. Also, another phenomenon of online activity is what Erdelez (1995) referred to as *information encountering*. This is the ability of the internet to get readers to the news without them intending to. This thrives upon the opportunistic reading habits and emotional responses of the readers. Tewksbury *et al.* (2001) argued that due to the prevalence of news online, many people come by news items without necessarily setting out to find the news. Along the same line, Nguyen (2008) agrees that the structure of online media has facilitated unintended encounters with news and its reading.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratification Theory

This theory was propounded by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumer, and Michael Gurevitch in 1974. The theory holds the assumption that the media audiences are goal-oriented and attempted to achieve their goals through the media source. According to Menon (2022), the theory explains how individuals use media to their advantage more than the media uses them. The receiver determines what is going to be absorbed from all the options and attractions available, and does not allow the media to influence him otherwise. The theory also postulates that each individual has several needs which could be the need to be informed, prestige, etc.

Therefore, the used and gratification theory helps to explain the functional use of pop-up headlines, inferring that while people may not selectively expose themselves to pop-up headlines as they are sometimes intrusive, they selectively decide what to do with the pop-up headlines: whether to read the rest of the story or not.

Research Methodology

Design

The research design adopted for this study was the survey. The survey research method was adopted for this because the study deals with people, their feelings, opinions, and attitude in a realistic setting. Wimmer and Dominick (2011), say that the method is most suitable for the collection of a large amount of data with relative ease.

Population and Sample Size

The population of the study includes youths in Owerri metropolis, whose exact number is not known. As the exact number of the population is not known, the Cochran formula was used to determine the sample size of 384.

The formula is as follows:

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

Where:

- e is the desired level of precision (i.e., the margin of error).
- p is the (estimated) proportion of the population which has the attribute in question.
- q is $1 - p$.
- z-value is found in a Z table.

To calculate that:

$$n = \frac{1.96^2(0.5)(0.5)}{0.05^2}$$

$$n = \frac{3.8416(0.25)}{0.05^2}$$

$$n = \frac{3.8416(0.25)}{0.0025}$$

$$n = \frac{0.9604}{0.0025}$$

$$n = 384$$

Sampling Procedure

A cluster sampling technique was adopted for this study. The justification for the use of cluster sampling technique is that Owerri metropolis is geographically dispersed, consisting of three local government areas, Owerri West, Owerri North and Owerri Municipal. The researchers selected the following thickly populated areas from the metropolis as follows: Owerri Municipal - Wetheral Road, Okigwe Road and Douglas Road; Owerri West – Port Harcourt Road, Umuguma Road and Naze Junction Axis; and Owerri North – Orié Uratta Axis, Emekuku Road Axis and Egbu Axis.

Research Instrument

The instrument used for this study was the questionnaire. The questionnaire was made of 12 multiple choice questions – 4 questions about the demographic characteristics of the respondents, and 8 questions that border on the research objectives.

To ascertain the validity of the research instrument, the researcher did construct validity: by first submitting the questionnaire to an expert who accessed the questionnaire copy, made the necessary correction, and recommended it for the study.

To ascertain the reliability of the research instrument, a pilot study was conducted on the resident of Orji. The result of the pilot study also yielded a reliable co-efficient of 0.9 using Spearman’s Rank Order of Correction Co-efficient.

Data gathered through personally administered questionnaire were analyzed in Tables using frequency counts and simple percentages.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The raw data gathered from 380 (validly returned instruments; 99% of total distributed instruments) respondents through the research instrument are analysed under this sub-heading for clearer and better understanding. The data are presented and analysed using frequency score and simple percentage as follows.

Table 1: Response on whether respondents have seen pop-up news headlines.

Option	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	380	100
No	0	0
Total	390	100

It was not surprising to learn that all the respondents have seen pop-up news headlines since the researcher purposively studied only internet-enabled devices.

Table 2: Responses on the regularity of exposure to pop-up news headlines.

Option	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Very regularly	180	48
Fairly regularly	123	32
Occasionally	77	20
Total	380	100

Just as with Table 1, it was expected that many(48%) of the respondents very regularly see pop-up news headlines on their internet-enabled devices. This infers that pop-up news headlines on their internet-enabled devices are very common.

Table 3: Respondents on whether pop-up news headlines influence readership of the stories

Option	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	203	53
No	177	47
Total	380	100

The data analysis in Table 3 is delicately poised. While the majority (53%) said pop-up news headlines influence their readership of the stories; a very sizable percentage (47%) insisted that pop-up news headlines do not influence their readership of the stories. It can then be inferred that while pop-up news headlines influence their readership of the stories, the said influence is limited.

Table 4: Response on factors in the pop-up news headlines that is most responsible for determining the influence of readership

Option	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Relevance of the story to the reader	156	42
Availability of data	108	28
Perception of whether the pop-up headline is intrusive or not	30	8
Fear of hidden motive for the pop-up (such as phishing, hacking, etc.)	70	18
Currency of the story	16	4
Others	0	
Total	390	100

There are a lot of interesting inferences to be drawn from the data in Table 4: first, the story has to be relevant (42%) to persuade the user to read it; then, it was inferred that many of respondents are spurred by economic reasons – they avoid certain stories not because they are not relevant but because they might not have enough data to read them; then, there is a significant proportion (18%) of the users who are scared on hidden motive or costs of reading the stories (such as phishing, hacking, etc.).

Discussion of Findings

Findings from this study confirmed that pop-up news headlines are a common feature in online news distribution, as all the respondents admitted to having seen pop-up news headlines on their internet-enabled devices. However, the regularity of exposure is not the same among all the users with only 48% of the respondents seeing the pop-up news headlines on their internet-enabled devices on a 'very regular' basis. The implication is that exposure to pop-up news headlines on their internet-enabled devices is very common but not what is experienced every time. They support the finding that pop-up news headlines are a common feature in online news distribution, the technological determinism idea of McLuhan (1962) comes very handy: as the medium changes so does society's way of communicating. When new systems of technology are developed, the culture or society is immediately changed to reflect the senses needed to use the new technology.

The implication of the data in Table 3 is that while pop-up news headlines influence young people's readership of the stories in Owerri metropolis, the said influence is limited. The data reveals that while the majority (53%) said pop-up news headlines influence their readership of the stories; a very sizable percentage (47%) insisted that pop-up news headlines do not influence their readership of the stories. This resonates with the use and gratification theory that implies that while the audience might not control what impulse they receive from the media, they are very active in selecting the content to be exposed to. In the case of the stories that are introduced by the headline, they are active in deciding whether to read the rest of them or not.

Individual users of the media have their predispositions, and those guide them in making media choices (Ibekwe et al., 2020). For instance, for the youths in Owerri metropolis to read the stories that the pop-up headlines introduce, the story has to be relevant (42%) to persuade the user to read it; many (28%) respondents are spurred by economic reasons. Implication of the data from the study is that the audience avoid certain stories for economic reasons and not because those stories lack relevance or interest to them. More so, there is a prevalent fear among owners of internet-enabled mobile device that some news stories that accompany the pop-up headlines might contain hidden motives or costs of reading the stories (such as phishing, hacking, etc.). These are interesting perspectives in the sense that a previous study has rather underpinned readership of news mostly on psychological factors such as interest and motivation and have often ignored economic (lack of financial means) and emotional (fear) factors (Ibekwe et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be established that to confirm that pop-up news headlines are a common feature in online news distribution which implies that exposure to pop-up news headlines on their internet-enabled devices is very common but not what is experienced every time but while pop-up news headlines influence young people's readership of the stories in Owerri metropolis, the said influence is limited by certain factors such as the story's relevance, economic reasons and the fear of hidden motive or costs of reading the stories (such as phishing, hacking, etc.).

The conclusion that is drawn based on the theory is that the audience does not actively control some of the impulses they receive from the media since some of them are intrusive, but they are very active in selecting the content to be exposed to.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations are made:

1. Since pop-up news headlines are a common feature in online news distribution, those who find them intrusive can use pop-up blockers on their devices to reduce the intrusion of these headlines.

2. Since the influence of pop-up news headlines people's readership of the stories in Owerri metropolis is limited, news organisations can increase their influence by introducing cash or point tokens for those who read the stories.
3. Because of the large fear of phishing, hacking, etc. by the respondents, news organisations should refrain from asking for personal information from the readers.

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