



**A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF CLICKBAIT NEWS HEADLINES ON MALAYSIAN  
ALTERNATIVE ONLINE NEWS PORTALS**

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2024

## **APPROVAL SHEET**

This research paper attached hereto, entitled “A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF CLICKBAIT NEWS HEADLINES ON MALAYSIAN ALTERNATIVE ONLINE NEWS PORTALS prepared and submitted” by “CHEN JIA YEE” in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the “Bachelor of Arts (Hons) English Language” is hereby accepted.

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## ABSTRACT

The expanding realm of online media has provided fertile ground for the proliferation of clickbait techniques within the Malaysian media landscape. This paper is an investigation into the mechanics of clickbait headlines on Malaysian alternative news portals: World of Buzz, SAYS, and Free Malaysia Today using Biyani et al. (2016) and Pujahari and Sisodia (2020)'s Clickbait Categorization Framework. 30 clickbait headlines from articles published between January 2019 and December 2023 were selected, compiled, and semantically analyzed to identify recurring and prevalent patterns of linguistic features. The research findings reported that all headlines exhibit traits of multiple types simultaneously, and that "Teasing and Ambiguous" are the most common pairing identified. All other identified combined categories also originate from this foundational combination. It was also found that clickbait headlines are more prevalent in soft news compared to hard news. Moreover, findings conclude that the five main features of clickbait headlines, as deduced from this research, include (1) the use of the direct address technique, (2) integration of listicles, (3) dependance on emotional appeal, (4) utilization of rhetorical questions and (5) the application of capitalization. The implications of this study underscore the dynamic composition of clickbait headlines by local journalists, revealing both differences and similarities in writing styles between them and those from foreign countries. This enhances comprehension regarding the linguistic features used and the semantic relationship among these features in aiding the writers to convey the intended message and to entice readers to engage with the full article.


**Keywords:** Clickbait headlines, Clickbaits, Clickbait techniques, Malaysian media, Online news portals, World of Buzz, SAYS, Free Malaysia Today

## DECLARATION

I declare that the material contained in this paper is the end result of my own work and that due acknowledgement has been given in the bibliography and references to All sources be they printed, electronic or personal.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Research Background

As the popularity, availability, and demand for new media services surge with the advancement of technology, there has been a drastic change in the distribution and consumption of news in Malaysia (Ahmad & Buyong, 2017, as cited in Nawang et al., 2020). One of the major changes includes the shift of Malaysians' news-reading preferences from traditional media to various types of online media, particularly, online news portal and social media (Nain, 2018, as cited in Nawang et al., 2020). The majority of Malaysians, especially the younger generation, now prefer the Internet as their main source of news, in contrast to mainstream media, which has traditionally offered comprehensive news reportage and coverage (Freeman, 2013, as cited in Nawang et al., 2020).

The transition from traditional print media to online news is further corroborated by the Digital News Report 2023 by Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, which disclosed that 89 percent of Malaysians prefer online news sites and social media as their primary sources for the latest worldwide happenings (Newman et al., 2023). The preference for printed newspapers has seen a significant decline since 2017, with the following annual percentages: 45% in 2017, 41% in 2018, 37% in 2019, 30% in 2020, 24% in 2021, and 17% in 2022 (Newman et al., 2023). Some of the contributing factors to this trend include the perception that social media offers more up-to-date, engaging, and easily digestible content. Additionally, the alignment of national and vernacular language newspapers with specific political interests and ownership plays a role in affecting trust (Newman et al., 2023).

The internet user count in Malaysia stood at 33.03 million as of the start of 2023, with an associated internet penetration of 96.8 percent (Kemp, 2023). With the government's support for the expansion of new media technologies, there is a noticeable growth in alternative media,

accompanied by an enhancement in its status (Alivi et al., 2018). Malaysian alternative media like *Free Malaysia Today* and *Malaysiakini* are defined by their democratic nature, openness, and operation within a non-hierarchical structure, closely aligned with social movements; as opposed to mainstream media, which has always been seen as a government mouthpiece (Ahmad, 2022; Alivi et al., 2018). In response to the political monopoly observed in mainstream media, alternative media - managed by independent enterprises, civil society organizations, or individual actors such as social activists and political opponents - is on the rise in Malaysia particularly across online platforms like social media and online news networks (Abbott & Givens, 2015; Smeltzer, 2008, as cited in Selvanathan & Lickel, 2021).

These alternative media sources are often perceived as government watchdogs that offer a platform for critical distinctive and unconventional viewpoints, many of which are less likely to be expressed in mainstream media (Ahmad, 2022; Selvanathan & Lickel, 2021). For this reason, a previous study concluded that Malaysians now favor new media as their primary source of information and news compared to traditional media such as television, radio, and printed newspaper (Mustaffa et al., 2010, as cited in Alivia et al., 2018). Nevertheless, this upsurge has also presented increased opportunities and autonomy for alternative media to employ journalistic techniques such as clickbait headlines to attract clicks and engagement, especially since government control is more challenging for them.

The expanding realm of online media has provided fertile ground for the proliferation of clickbait technique in news headlines. Zhu (2012, as cited in Lun, 2021) pointed out that, in addition to the absence of social responsibility among editors and reporters, the growing prevalence of clickbait strategies also stems from increased competition in the media market. With the ever-growing array of independent online news options, news editors often resort to employing the 'baity' feature of clickbait headlines to attract the attention of readers before they scroll away amidst the overwhelming amount of news available online.

A news headline serves as the make-or-break factor; should it not instantly grab the reader's eye; they are unlikely to delve into the full content. Zhou (2021) also asserted that in cases where different media outlets are reporting on the same news event, it is highly unlikely that readers will click on an article that merely summarizes everything, especially if they have already gleaned an understanding of the situation by glancing through the headline. Nonetheless, the widespread recognition of a clickbait headline is closely tied to its negative effects. Not only is it perceived by the public as 'false advertisement,' but many also contend that it violates journalistic ethics and standards, which mandate truthfulness, fairness, and objectivity, by fabricating and exaggerating news (Zhou, 2021). In the long run, this habit is likely to impact the credibility of local media as readers gradually become frustrated and disappointed with what newsmen present. Such a practice undermines the purpose of readers seeking the latest news promptly, without having to wait for the next day's newspaper, as clickbait headlines ultimately waste more of their time.

## **1.2 Statement of Problem**

The examination of clickbait and its headlines as a sensationalistic practice has persisted as a subject of research over the years. While ample studies had been done to study clickbait news headlines, the majority focused on either examining their impact on user responses and source credibility or developing machine learning techniques and models for accurate clickbait headline detection (Scott, 2021). These angles have been extensively researched, with a plethora of studies available in this research field. Instances of research focus include:

(1) both positive and negative impacts of clickbait headlines (Hurst, 2016; Molyneux & Coddington, 2020),

(2) the disruption of information consumption on a personal, communal, and societal scale (Pengnate et al., 2021; Munger et al., 2020; Kaushal & Vemuri, 2021; Molyneux & Coddington, 2020; Wanda et al; 2021),

(3) the different deep learning models in detecting clickbait headlines and other similar research angles (Bourgonje et al., 2017; Geçkil et al., 2018; Shu et al., 2018; Potthast et al., 2016; Agrawal, 2016; Zuhroh & Rakhmawati, 2019; Jain et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, there is a significant lack of studies conducted to examine the mechanics of clickbait headlines, particularly within the context of Malaysian digital media. With the advancement of technology and rapid globalization, the public can readily obtain firsthand news from the Internet, without having to rely on physical copies of newspapers. It is now a norm to access the most up-to-date news through social media and web pages of various Malaysian news portals of both mainstream and alternative media. As a consequence of the proliferation of online information, journalists often resort to using clickbait headlines to boost readership by persuading readers to click on links they might not otherwise click. With numerous news sites reporting on the same issues, employing clickbait headlines becomes one of their strategies for cultivating a larger readership base, with the aim of capturing the public's preference over other media companies (Pengnate et al., 2021). The insufficient attention given to this aspect in studies may potentially result in readers having a limited awareness of the linguistic mechanics involved in crafting clickbait headlines. This includes the use of language or linguistic features to entice engagement and arouse curiosity.

Furthermore, little to no research has been undertaken on clickbait headlines in Malaysian media landscape, particularly when using news headlines from non-mainstream news sites as data. Instead, previous scholars in clickbait studies sourced their data from various social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit through

accounts like *r/SavedYouAClick*, *@HuffPoSpoilers* (Twitter), and *StopClickbait* (Facebook) (Kemmm, 2022; Jain et al., 2021; Bazaco et al., 2019; Zuhroh & Rakhmawati, 2019; Naeem et al., 2020), as well as foreign news sites from countries such as Indonesia, Denmark, China and the United States (Setiawati, 2022; Blom & Hansen, 2014; Lun, 2021; Mormol, 2019; Chakraborty et al., 2016). Some instances of these news sites include BuzzFeed, TMZ, E!Online, Upworthy, ViralNova, Scoopwhoop, ViralStories (Bronakowski et al., 2023; Scott 2021; Chakraborty et al., 2016). In addition, foreign established news sources like Huffington Post, New York Times, CBS, Associated Press and Forbes were also heavily utilized as sources of data in research studies on clickbait headlines (Biyani et al., 2016). However, the issue with these data is that it may not be directly applicable to the Malaysian context, even though they do offer an in-depth perspective within this research angle. This is because journalistic styles may vary across countries and regions, influenced by local reading preferences and cultural backgrounds. Setiawati (2022) also suggested in her study that the focus of future clickbait studies should not be solely on the form of the headlines, but also on the semantic elements, as her study was limited to the structural analysis of English clickbait headlines in Indonesian online news media.

Taking the limited studies into account, this study is an attempt to fill in the gap and aims to shed light on the linguistic features of clickbait headlines on Malaysian online news portals and their semantic relationships, providing insights into the use of clickbait headlines in Malaysian online news media. The intention is to encourage responsible media consumption, to improve local readers' media literacy and to empower news consumers to make informed decisions about what they choose to read and believe.

### **1.3 Research Objectives**

1.3.1 To identify the clickbait headlines on Malaysian alternative online news portals - World of Buzz, SAYS, and Free Malaysia Today

- 1.3.2 To identify the linguistic features of clickbait headlines on Malaysian alternative online news portals - World of Buzz, SAYS, and Free Malaysia Today
- 1.3.3 To analyze the semantic relationship between the linguistic elements in conveying the intended message

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

- 1.4.1 What are the clickbait headlines on Malaysian alternative online news portals - World of Buzz, SAYS, and Free Malaysia Today?
- 1.4.2 What are the linguistic features of clickbait headlines published on Malaysian alternative online news portals - World of Buzz, SAYS, and Free Malaysia Today?
- 1.4.3 What is the semantic relationship between the linguistic elements in conveying the intended message?

#### **1.5 Significance of Study**

The insufficiency of research dedicated to the investigation of clickbait headlines in Malaysian media is apparent, and it is indisputable that Malaysian media cannot be equated with that of foreign nations. The distinctive character of Malaysia's news media is molded by factors such as cultural diversity, audience preferences, reading habits, media ownership, and notably, the language proficiency of the audience. These elements collectively set the local news media apart from that of other countries.

In practical domains, this study will offer insight into the application of clickbait in news headlines by local alternative media. As discussed earlier in *1.1 Research Background*, while alternative media on digital platforms such as social media and online news portals has been well-received by many locals, this widespread acceptance has indirectly intensified the competition among numerous local media agencies. Consequently, newsmen have been



‘forced’ to adopt the clickbait technique when crafting news articles, a practice that has certainly put news consumers in a negative light.

That being said, this study could help Malaysians by enhancing their media literacy, promoting responsible media consumption, and empowering news consumers to make informed decisions about what they choose to read and believe. Now that Malaysians show a greater preference for online alternative media and tend to view them as trusted, independent news sources, understanding how clickbait headlines work can reduce readers' recurring dissatisfaction and frustration when they encounter an article that does not meet their expectations (Alves et al.,2016). Ultimately, they will be able to distinguish between credible information and sensationalized content. This, in return, will save them from investing time in sensationalized news, allowing them to devote that time to exploring other, more accurate news articles.

Besides, investigating the use of clickbait headlines by Malaysian alternative media outlets also serves as a reminder for fellow Malaysians. Despite the relatively lower or near-zero government control and censorship over Malaysian alternative media, it is important to note that the content posted may not be entirely trustworthy. At some point, they do reflect the interests of marginalized communities and function as agents of change within the Malaysian media landscape (Ahmad, 2022; Alivi et al., 2018). Still, it is crucial to recognize that they operate independently, with the maximization of profit being their primary interest. With this thought in mind, readers will hopefully be more discerning in selecting what to read and trust, thus avoiding falling victim to fake and exaggerated news.

Moreover, comprehending the mechanics of clickbait empowers local journalists to make informed decisions in upholding ethical journalism standards when creating news content for the public. While they might not have a choice in deciding on behalf of the company, as the

company's profits should always be prioritized, journalists should understand that their influence and power are granted by readers who rely on them solely for accurate information – this being the primary purpose for readers to read up news. So, at the end of the day, journalists should be conscious of their responsibilities and strive to keep information as accurate as possible. By steering clear of sensationalism, prioritizing accuracy, and fairness in news reporting, and fostering a commitment to quality journalism, they play a crucial role in safeguarding the reputation of news outlets and preserving the public's trust.

Ultimately, the significance of this research angle lies in the escalating influence and contemporary nature of the clickbait phenomenon. A research done by Stanford University in 2018 concluded that clickbait is slowly establishing a prominence on well-established news portals (Bronakowski et al., 2023). If this phenomenon eventually becomes a norm or a common journalistic practice, it is only putting the readers' rights and interests at risk, compromising their access to accurate and unembellished information. This also implies that readers cannot entirely trust any source of information, even those from reputable sources. The concept of clickbait remains pertinent in today's context, and its increasing prevalence is anticipated. Thus, examining the mechanics of clickbait headlines in the Malaysian media landscape is undoubtedly beneficial.

## **1.6 Definition of Key Terms**

### **1. Clickbait news headlines**

Clickbait news headlines are news headlines that are intentionally written in a catchy, provocative, sensational, suspenseful, and ambiguous way with exaggerated information to attract the clicks of readers (Setiawati, 2022; Orasa et al., 2017; Zhou, 2021; Qiao, 2015, as cited in Lun, 2021). Media outlets commonly employ these headlines to monetize their landing pages through the accumulation of clicks (Pujahari & Sisodia, 2020; Biyani et al., 2016). Generally, clickbait headlines fulfill two primary criteria: (1) they contain misleading article

contents, and (2) they capitalize on readers' 'curiosity gap' by withholding complete information about the article's contents (Bronakowski et al., 2023). Some examples of such headlines include “They Said She Had Cancer. What Happens Next Will Blow Your Mind.”, “Which Real Housewife Are You Based On Your Birth Month” and “This Rugby Fan’s Super-Excited Reaction To Meeting Shane Williams Will Make You Grin Like A Fool” (Chakraborty et al., 2016, p. 9).

## 2. Malaysian alternative online news portals

Among a vast variety of English language news portals in Malaysia, *The Star Online* ranked as the most frequently visited online news portal at 76%, with *Malaysiakini* following at 65%, and *The Malay Mail Online* at 38% (Chu, 2019). In 2023, *New Straits Times*, *The Star*, *The Sun*, and *The Malay Mail* stand firm as the mainstream English press in Malaysia, being the people’s choice of English-language daily (“Malaysia Media Guide”, 2023). These mainstream news outlets produce physical printed newspapers and at the same time provide digital news updates through their official news portals. In contrast to these media, this study primarily focuses on the alternative media, and Malaysian alternative online news portals in this case essentially refer to online news sites that do not fall within the “mainstream media” category. These online news sites (1) do not print physical newspapers and (2) only publish their news articles online. For instance, *Malaysiakini*, *Malaysia Chronicle* and *The Rakyat Post*. Thus, this study sampled three Malaysian non-mainstream online news portals: *World of Buzz*, *SAYS* and *Free Malaysia Today*.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Yellow Journalism

Yellow journalism, also known as yellow press, is a form of journalism that heavily relies on sensationalism and exaggeration of news to boost circulation and attract more readers (Collins, n.d.; Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). Some also refer to it as a variation of newspaper writing characterized by sensationalism and exaggeration, designed to attract readers mainly through its enticing news headlines (Mormol, 2019). The information disseminated is usually unreliable and lacks quality, a result of shallow research, fabricated stories and interviews and an account of only one side of the story (Alves, 2016).

In the 19th century, yellow press served as a means to boost newspaper circulation; in the 21st century, its notion has expanded to encompass digital media as well (Mehta, 2021). In the current landscape, it can be interpreted as an outcome of journalism's transformation into a profit-centric industry, characterized by the utilization of "clickbait." Now, this term also refers to sensationalized or exaggerated headlines often employed in print media to boost readership and enhance financial gains (Mehta, 2021).

As a matter of fact, yellow press too can be understood as the predecessor of the now clickbait techniques (Zhou, 2021). The rapid technological advancements have fostered the widespread practice of yellow journalism in contemporary news landscape, leading to the spawning of fake news. Victoria et al. (2015, as cited in Naeem et al., 2020) divided fake news into three categories: (1) clickbait, which operates on a financial gain model which generates revenue with each click; (2) satire, intentionally done by the writer to entertain with the hope of getting recognized for it; and (3) journalistic deception, the most critical kind of fake news that often goes unnoticed. After all, the term 'fake' in fake news represents a blend of fabricated

and exaggerated information, even if this fabrication and exaggeration result in the story being portrayed differently from the actual reality.

Yellow journalism thrived in the new technological landscape, adapting, and prospering rather than succumbing to it. It takes full advantages of the Internet to promote prompt publication, wide circulation and limited verification of contents posted (Alves et al., 2016, as cited in Mormol, 2019). Under such technologically advanced environment, media practitioners have the capability to report on the same issue simultaneously. This privilege has indirectly intensified the competition in the news media industry, pressuring newswriters to use diverse writing techniques like clickbait, listicles, and buzzwords to maximize the click-through rate of articles.

## **2.2 Definitions of Clickbait**

Despite differing scholarly definitions of clickbait or clickbait headlines, certain similarities persist. There is a significant segment of scholars who understand the term as referring to news headlines that involve exaggerated, sensationalized, luring and misleading information (Naeem et al., 2020; Biyani et al., 2016; Mormol, 2019). Naeem et al. (2020) explained that this is made possible, especially with the inclusion of non-significant incidents and the usage of hyperbole. These headlines intend to captivate viewers, entice them to click on the links, and retain them in the webpage for as long as possible (Scott, 2021; Orosa et al., 2017; Chakraborty et al., 2016; Bronakowski et al., 2023).

Another notable characteristic pointed out is the shared deceptive and false nature. Orosa et al. (2017) highlighted that clickbait headlines do not conform to the stereotypical journalistic standards. Unlike traditional journalistic headlines, which prioritize their role as informants, clickbait headlines revolve around marketing and spreading news to maximize profits (Orosa et al., 2017; Pujahari & Sisodia, 2020). Foremost, its application ensures

increased page views and click-through rates, making it a favorite among contemporary journalists (Alves et al., 2016).

Notwithstanding, Jain et al. (2021) attempted to redefine clickbait by suggesting that it should be looked at and focused on from a different angle. Generally, it is believed that clickbait headlines involve a mismatch between the headline and the actual content underneath. Scholarly consensus, however, suggested that its definition should emphasize the strategically and intentionally left ‘curiosity gap’ (Jain et al., 2021). In other words, clickbait headlines should be understood as news headlines that offer insufficient information - enough to arouse the reader’s curiosity but not enough to satisfy it. Biyani et al. (2016) accentuated a similar insight, stating that clickbaits do not necessarily pertain to spam or fraudulent pages; rather, they could be genuine pages delivering low quality content with misleading headlines.

### **2.3 Clickbait in the Digital Age**

Given that yellow journalism originated in the United States, with its initial appearance in the late 19th century on the New York Journal and New York World (Zhou, 2021), it is understandable that the concept of clickbait headlines has since become a norm in Western countries. Its application can be found in an extensive coverage of media, from daily social media applications like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Reddit to widely recognized contemporary news sites like BuzzFeed, Upworthy and ViralNova (Kemmm, 2022; Jain et al., 2021; Bazaco et al., 2019; Chakraborty et al., 2016; Bronakowski et al., 2023; Scott, 2021). The mentioned news sites are specifically known for their high publication of clickbait articles (Chakraborty et al., 2016).

The fate of an article often rests on its headline, and in the competitive media environment of Western countries, the click-through rate speaks for itself. According to Scott (2021), Upworthy’s cofounder interprets a good social media headline as one that is neither too

vague, so that people still care, nor too specific, allowing for the curiosity gap that encourages users to click and find out more. In his case, careful construction and repeated experimentations have to be done to formulate successful headlines that can maximize reader engagement and clicks. This is particularly crucial to ensure that Upworthy's publications stand out amid intense competition among other media companies in New York. Online curators' obsession over clickbait headlines can be rationalized with their desire to create contents with the potential for viral circulation, which in return bring profits to the company (Scott, 2021).

Nevertheless, amidst the apparent success of clickbaits in driving user engagement and profitability, it is essential to acknowledge the criticism they face for their associated adverse effects. This editorial technique is identified as a threat to quality journalism and a violation to the journalistic codes of conduct (Jung et al., 2022; Naeem et al., 2020). According to Jung et al. (2022), the primary objective of media consumption is to stay informed about factual world events. Yet, trust is eroded when the news landscape is clogged up with unnecessary suspense and exaggerated low-quality content (Naeem et al., 2020). Readers anticipate quickly grasping the latest happenings with just a glance at news headlines. But clickbait headlines exploit their curiosity, leading to an extended time spent on news sites and ultimately defeating their initial expectation of accessing the latest news in the shortest timespan. In more egregious instances, clickbait could be used to phish for personal information, or, even worse, to host malware (Bronakowski et al., 2023).

Despite these unfavourable impacts, more high-prestige news portals are resorting to tabloidization to pique readers' curiosity by introducing new soft news sections and highlighting commercialization and tabloidization when formulating headlines (Jung et al., 2022). Research in 2018 by Stanford University also highlighted how clickbait is gaining popularity among reputable journalism sites (Bronakowski et al., 2023). In short, clickbait

headlines remain relevant in today's setting, even gaining prominence as they diffuse into mainstream media, otherwise known as traditional media.

## **2.4 Clickbait in the Malaysian Media Landscape**

The Malaysian online news ecosystem is dynamic and multifaceted, with numerous news outlets catering to a broad spectrum of audience, encompassing a wide range of language diversity among readers. Examples of prominent Malaysian news sites include *The Star* and *New Straits Times* in English, *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro* in Malay, and *China Press* and *Sin Chew* in Mandarin, with *Tamil Nesan* serving the Tamil-speaking community (MyCen News, n.d.). According to Alivi et al. (2018), past research has clearly indicated that the public now favour new media over traditional media as the former deliver news through various writing styles that specifically cater to the younger generation.

Unlike print media, online news portals in Malaysia do not require a license or permit needed for publishing news online (Nawang et al., 2020). In contrast, local print media are all bound by the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984, which mandates the possession of valid printing licenses and publication permits for both publishing and printing (Nawang et al., 2020). For this, the exemption of online news portals and similar digital publications from legislative control has granted proprietors the freedom to publish online freely with different editorial styles, including the use of clickbait in crafting headlines. In this context, Malaysian online news portals exploit readers' trust and interest without concern for potential suspension due to violations of media law.

In terms of consumer perception, the findings in Oon (2023)'s study revealed that approximately 88 out of her 150 respondents (58.67%) had admitted to enjoying reading sensational news published locally. This indirectly demonstrates the effectiveness of clickbait headlines in the Malaysian media landscape, indicating that local readers have become



accustomed to this type of news and are starting to develop a liking for it. However, the penetration of clickbait news headlines and their associated news has also tarnished the public perception of the Malaysian news industry, with 71.33% of respondents jointly expressing an unfavorable view of journalism and the local industry due to sensational news (Oon, 2023).

The Malaysian government's stance on fake news is evident through the enactment of various legislative measures, including Anti-Fake News Act 2018, the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 and the Penal Code (Sukumaran et al., 2023; Yatid, 2019). Additionally, the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA) is specifically directed at regulating the published media sector. The enforcement of such legislation results from the acknowledgment of the growing challenges associated with the deliberate spread of fake news and its potential impact on public perception of the local media industry. Although Anti-Fake News Act 2018 remained in force for a mere two years (Sukumaran et al., 2023), the credibility and authenticity of news within the Malaysian media landscape are governed by the mentioned statutes to prevent the dissemination of false information to the greatest extent possible, regardless of techniques or mediums employed.

While clickbait techniques are at times utilized in the spreading of misinformation, readers bear the sole responsibility of identifying sensational news with exaggerated information. The government, in its content supervision role, primarily focuses on preventing the spread of fake news, without intervening in cases of exaggerated news. With that said, readers themselves ought to enhance their digital literacy to effectively discern news articles featuring clickbait headlines and dramatized contents.

## **2.5 Clickbait in Language Use**

In terms of language use, Molek-Kozakowska (2013, as cited in Biyani et al., 2016) pointed out that in the Psychology and Pragmatic field, research focusing on the discourse

structure of news headlines study concepts akin to those associated with clickbaits. These include the concepts of sensationalism, enticement, dramatization, and emotionalism. Certain linguistic features, linguistic devices, and sentence patterns play pivotal roles in constructing ‘baity’ clickbait headlines.

In the most recent study on the linguistic and typological features of clickbait headlines or titles, Kemm (2022) concluded twelve features that are indicative of clickbait. The findings suggested that a majority of the typological and linguistic features linked to clickbait in online news headlines also serve as indicators of clickbait in YouTube video titles (Kemm, 2022). As stated by Scott (2021, as cited in Kemm, 2022), the language traits of clickbait headlines seldom stand alone, as the combination of several techniques in one headline amplifies the overall clickbait effect. A table of the identified features, examples and purpose is as follows:

**Table 1**

Linguistic and Typological Features of Clickbait Headlines according to Kemm (2022)

<b>Features</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
Personal Pronouns	I, you, he, she, we, they	To create an information gap. The use of the unresolved pronoun “she” or “he” creates ambiguity, leaving readers wondering who “she” or “he” is.
Demonstrative Pronouns	This, that, these, those	To heighten the information gap and to intensify reader curiosity.
Superlative Adjectives	The tallest, the smallest	The associated extremes contribute to exaggeration.
Intensifiers	Very, extremely, absolutely, terribly	To amplify the information gap created.
Forward-reference	“Why You Should Unsubscribe This YouTuber”	To create anticipation and information-gap.
Emotional Appeal	“Why Everyone in China Hates Me...”	Prioritization of emotional appeal over informative content in the title can generate more clicks.

Hyperbole and Strong Lexical Units	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Danger (warning)</li> <li>• Death (kill, massacre)</li> <li>• Violence (rape, assault)</li> <li>• Sexuality (sexy, nude)</li> <li>• Profanity</li> <li>• Others (free, new)</li> </ul>	To create exaggeration that is beyond necessity.
Numerals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listicles (articles purely about lists or rankings)</li> <li>• Monetary amounts</li> <li>• Proper nouns (iPhone 12)</li> <li>• Acronyms (3D, 4K)</li> <li>• Technical terms (240p)</li> </ul>	The use of number attracts readers' attention and contributes to creating an information gap.
Capitalization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acronyms (DIY, ATM)</li> <li>• Proper nouns (FIFA, NASA)</li> </ul>	Diversified typography or a mixture of upper-and-lower-case can effectively compel readers to take notice of the headline.
Punctuation and Symbols	Asterisk (*), exclamation mark (!), ellipsis (...)	To draw attention and to make these symbols stand out among a string of words.
Modals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will (implying strong certainty)</li> <li>• Need (implying strong necessity)</li> </ul>	Act as supporting device.
Familiar Vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stop words (a, an, the, is)</li> <li>• Words overrepresented in a single context ('update' and 'model' in an article about electronics)</li> </ul>	Readers exhibit a preference for semantically familiar vocabulary in news headlines.

Similarly, in reference to Chakraborty et al. (2016)'s research on developing a browser extension to detect and prevent clickbaits in online news media, the team presented several semantic and syntactic elements that occur more frequently in clickbait headlines than in traditional, non-clickbait headlines. The findings were derived from an analysis of a combination of 15,000 clickbait and non-clickbait headlines. In the research, they did a brief comparative analysis between clickbaits and non-clickbaits collected from a corpus of Wikinews articles and a few popular alternative news sites like *BuzzFeed*, *Upworthy*, *ViralNova*,

*Scoopwhoop* and *ViralStories*. The table below displays the identified linguistic features, associated explanation, and examples:

**Table 2**

Common Linguistic Features of Clickbait Headlines according to Chakraborty et al. (2016)

<b>Sentence Structure</b>	
<b>Features</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Length of headlines	Longer than conventional non-clickbait headlines
Length of words	More words, with shorter average word length
Length of syntactic dependencies	Longer than non-clickbaits
<b>Word Choice &amp; Common Phrases</b>	
<b>Features</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Stop Words	A, an, the, is
Hyperbolic Words (carry ‘very positive’ sentiments)	Awe-inspiring, breathtaking, gut-wrenching, soul-stirring
Internet Slangs	WOW, LMAO, OMG, AMA
Common Bait Phrases	“Will Blow Your Mind”, “You Won’t Believe”
Punctuation Patterns	!?, ..., ***, !!!, -
<b>Grammatical Elements</b>	
<b>Features</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Subjects	Clickbait headlines contain one of the 20 most commonly occurring subject words. - EG: I, you, dog, everyone, girls, guys, he, here, it, kids, men, mom, one, parent, photos, reasons, she, something, that, they
Determiners	Overuse of determiners when referring to certain people or things in the article. - EG: their, my, which, these
Possessives	Overuse of first and second-person pronouns to address readers. - EG: I, We, You

Lun (2021), on the other hand, did an analysis on the linguistic features and sentence structures associated with ‘clickbait’ with data collected from eight Chinese news sources: *Toutiao*, *Baidu News*, *Sina News*, *Netease News*, *Sohu News*, *Phoenix News*, *Tencent News* and *People’s Daily WeChat Public Account*. Based on her discoveries, she determined that clickbait

headlines often feature six types of word choices and four types of sentence structures. A table of the identified word choices, sentence structures and example of news headlines is provided below:

**Table 3**

Frequent Word Choices and Sentence Structures in Clickbait Headlines according to Lun (2021)

<b>Choice of Words</b>	
<b>Features</b>	<b>Example of news headline</b>
Celebrity Names	“Inventory: How rich is <i>Liu Tao</i> , and how many luxury cars does she own!”
Suspenseful Words	“ <i>Revealing the truth</i> about XXX’s <i>death</i> .”
Violent or Pornographic Words	“The female lawyer was cut off by her husband’s <i>domestic violence</i> , and her mother’s <i>skull was broken</i> .”
Exaggerated Words	“Shocked! The man <i>drank 11 tons of liquor</i> and was sent to the hospital...”
<b>Choice of Sentence Patterns</b>	
<b>Features</b>	<b>Example of news headline</b>
Exclamatory Sentence	“Thirty-nine cardiologists are vegetarian! They said: Too many patients have been in contact!”
Ellipsis	“The truck carrying peaches rolls over, but passerby...”
Interrogative Sentence	“Has XXX gotten plastic surgery?”
Rhetorical Question Sentence	“Do you dare to sit like this when you eat out? The scene captured by surveillance is so scary.”

Based on the reviews above, a similarity can be observed from different researchers’ findings on what constitutes clickbait headlines, whether for news or for media in general. There seems to be a recurring formula or agreed-upon combination of lexis and sentence structure that can elicit the clickbait effect one wishes to express on their news headlines to attract the attention of readers. For example, all 3 researchers deduced that ellipsis, or the punctuation mark “...” is one of the common features found in clickbait headlines. Thus, it can be hypothesized that clickbait headlines construction features a certain integration of

linguistic features to amplify the exaggeration intended, and the role of language in generating user interest and engagement is undebatable.

## **2.6 Theoretical Approach**

Research studies on clickbait headlines from a linguistic or pragmatic angle has been limited (Scott, 2021). As thorough investigations have probed into the different dimensions of clickbait headlines, contemporary researchers find a comparatively weaker foundation to explore the linguistic nuances of clickbait headlines. For instance, past studies have extensively covered the efficacy of clickbait, user engagement, and identification models, as previously discussed in *Section 1.2 Statement of Problem* of this study. Nonetheless, several prominent researchers have significantly bolstered the exploration of clickbait headlines linguistically.

When researching past studies on clickbait headlines with a linguistic focus, a number of academicians have referenced the research conducted by Biyani et al. (2016) (Kemmm, 2022; Jung et al., 2022; Pujahari & Sisodia, 2020; Bronakowski et al., 2023; Mormol, 2019; Scott, 2021; Zuhroh & Rakhmawati, 2019). Setiawati (2022) even utilized the exact categorization framework to conduct her syntactic analysis on clickbait headlines in the online news media in Indonesia. This extensive referencing highlights the significance of Biyani et al. (2016)'s research within the scholarly discourse on clickbait news headlines.

Biyani et al. (2016) had identified eight frequent types of clickbait headlines: exaggeration, teasing, inflammatory, formatting, graphic, bait-and-switch, ambiguous, and wrong. In this study, all eight types of clickbait headlines are adopted as part of the framework in identifying clickbait headlines in Malaysian online media and analysing the linguistic elements semantically. While Biyani et al. (2016)'s findings were considered comprehensive, Pujahari and Sisodia (2020) concluded from their experimental results that merely one categorization technique is insufficient in combating clickbait articles. From there, they

proposed an extension of Biyani et al. (2016)'s categorization by adding in three more domains: incomplete, heading cloning, and URL redirection. Taking inclusiveness into consideration, the current study will be adopting a combination of both Biyani et al. (2016)'s and Pujahari and Sisodia (2020)'s categorization of clickbait headlines, incorporating a total of eleven types of clickbait headlines to categorize the data collected and further analyze the linguistic elements from there.

Moreover, the contributions of Chakraborty et al. (2016) and Blom and Hansen (2014) have also provided substantial insights, serving as a cornerstone in the field and frequently referenced in various related research directions. Chakraborty et al. (2016)'s findings on semantic and syntactic nuances that are frequently found in clickbait headlines, and Blom and Hansen (2014)'s highlight on the concept of 'forward-reference' as a conventional journalistic technique in the new media landscape remain relevant in today's media terrain. Thus, their discoveries, together with Biyani et al. (2016)'s and Pujahari and Sisodia (2020)'s, will be adopted in data collection and data analysis when compiling and analyzing clickbait news headlines from *World of Buzz*, *SAYS*, and *Free Malaysia Today*.

Guided by these frameworks, the present study aims to identify the category each identified clickbait headline falls into and the linguistic features of these headlines. It also further investigates the semantic relationship between the linguistic elements to understand the role of language in generating user interest and engagement and eliciting the 'baity' effect in headlines.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Research Design

The present qualitative study employs a content analysis approach to further study the identified clickbait news headlines. This scrutiny involves an exploration of word selection, underlying connotations, emotional triggers, and the intended purposes of linguistic elements. Qualitative content analysis is recognized for its appropriateness in dissecting a dataset and comprehending the messages it conveys (Elo et al, 2014). It also serves as a methodical and unbiased approach for characterizing and measuring various phenomena (Elo et al, 2014). In the context of analyzing clickbait news headlines in Malaysian alternative online news portals, the utilization of content analysis is justifiable. This method, when considering all its facets, can provide valuable insights into the nature of such news headlines within the local media landscape. It allows for the exploration of cultural nuances, evolution of local journalistic styles, and, most importantly, the strategic use of language to elicit a clickbait effect, capturing the attentions of news consumers.

To collect clickbait news headlines from local online news portals, this study will be using a purposive sampling method. *World of Buzz*, *SAYS*, and *Free Malaysia Today*, the three chosen online news portals, are the sources of data for this study. The unit of analysis specifically comprises 'news headlines' that exhibit exaggeration, allure, enticement, or provocation, regardless of the type of news. In this research paper, data will be extracted from news articles posted on three non-mainstream online news platforms. The selection of the three abovementioned news sites were influenced by their substantial circulation and readership, a crucial consideration in the present age of social media. As of November 2023, both *World of Buzz*'s and *SAYS*' social media platforms collectively reached an audience of 1.8 million followers. With more than 22 million page views and 10.7 million monthly video views from



Malaysians, *World of Buzz*'s official portal continues to engage a significant number of audiences each month (Advertising.my, n.d.). *Free Malaysia Today*, on the other hand, too has a copious number of followers – 2.4 million across all social media platforms. *Free Malaysia Today*'s extensive reader base is also affirmed by a 55% brand trust score and the 5 to 8 million monthly visitors it consistently attracts (Hadi, 2021; “The Star still most trusted brand among M'sian English news portals”, 2023). In the month of October 2023, they accumulated a total of 9.5 million of visits across both desktop site and mobile app (similarweb, n.d.). Notably, they are known to be an independent, bilingual news portal operating for 14 years, so their influence among the local news community is indispensable (Ahmad, 2020).

These statistics demonstrate the reach, influence, and online presence of *World of Buzz*, *SAYS*, and *Free Malaysia Today* as online news portals that are well-received by Malaysians. They play a pivotal role in delivering up-to-the-minute news to the local community, serving as a vital bridge between breaking news and the residents to keep them well-informed.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

A total of 30 news articles from three non-mainstream online news portals: *World of Buzz*, *SAYS*, and *Free Malaysia Today* published from January 2019 till December 2023 will be chosen and compiled as the data for this study. From the 30 headlines, 10 headlines from each news site will be collected, and within each of these sets, 2 headlines will be gathered from each year during the five-year period. Collecting data over a five-year period ensures the inclusion of a diverse range of topics, subjects, and clickbait strategies. Whenever relevant, it also allows for comparisons of the evolution or consistency in clickbait practices over the years.

*World of Buzz* and *SAYS* maintain separate digital news archive for each year which serve as repositories for past news articles to be accessed and retrieved by users. For instance, by searching “*World of Buzz Archives 'Year'*” in the Google search engine, news articles from

the specific year will be readily accessible and can be retrieved, and the same goes for *SAYS*. On the contrary, as the digital repository of *Free Malaysia Today* appears incomplete and unmaintained, the retrieval of past news publications will be accomplished by searching “*Free Malaysia Today ‘Year’ News*” in the Google search engine.

Among all the search results prompted, the data collection will be conducted by following a few guidelines established by pioneers in this research field who have identified key characteristics of a 'clickbait headline'. These guidelines will direct the data collection process in identifying and accessing whether a news headlines on the news portal qualifies as a 'clickbait headline' or not. The table below illustrates key characteristic of a clickbait headlines deduced by previous key scholars in clickbait studies. In addition to the table below, the three tables provided in *2.5 Clickbait in Language Use* - Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3 will also be referenced and utilized in identifying clickbait news headlines.

No.	Scholar	Characteristics	Description	Example
1.	Chakraborty et al., 2016	Overuse of determiner and contraction	-	<p><b>1. Determiners</b></p> <p>(a) <u>Articles</u> - a, an, the</p> <p>(b) <u>Demonstratives</u> - this, that, these, those</p> <p>(c) <u>Possessives</u> - my, your, his, her, its, our, their</p> <p>(d) <u>Quantifiers</u> - many, much, more, most, some</p> <p><b>2. Contractions</b></p> <p>(a) He will → He'll (b) She has not → She hasn't (c) They did not → They didn't</p>
		A great word count but shorter average word length	Clickbait headlines typically have an extensive word count, but the individual words are often short and to the point.	-
		Stop words occur more frequently	Stop words are words that are often excluded from analysis because of its high frequency of appearance but carry little significance in the overall understanding of text (Hao & Hao, 2008).	“and”, “the”, “of”, “is”
2.	Blom & Hansen, 2014	The use of forward-referencing	Points forward to the later part (a referent that has yet	Can be identified by the presence of: <b>1. Demonstrative Pronouns</b>

			to be introduced) in a sentence or text.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This, that, these, those</li> <li><b>2. Personal Pronouns</b></li> <li>- I, you, he, she, it, we, they</li> <li><b>3. Superlative Adverbs</b></li> <li>- -est, ely</li> <li><b>4. Definite Articles</b></li> <li>- the</li> </ul>
3.	Biyani et al., 2016	More likely to begin with 5W1H words	-	5W <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- what</li> <li>- why</li> <li>- when</li> <li>- who</li> <li>- which</li> </ul> 1H <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- how</li> </ul>
		High frequency of occurrence of certain keywords	-	“reason”, “why”, “just”, “this” and “one”

Table 4: Compiled Characteristics of Clickbait Headlines

### 3.3 Conceptual Framework

To address the three research questions, a content analysis will be conducted on the 30 clickbait news headlines collected from *World of Buzz*, *SAYS*, and *Free Malaysia Today*, adopting the clickbait categorization frameworks proposed by Biyani et al. (2016) and Pujahari and Sisodia (2020). The model presented by Pujahari and Sisodia (2020) extends the categorization of clickbait headlines outlined by Biyani et al. (2016) by introducing three additional categories on top of the eight types proposed by Biyani et al. The proposal for this addition proved beneficial, supported by Pujahari and Sisodia's study, which concluded that relying solely on one categorization technique is insufficient to effectively combat clickbait

articles (Pujahari and Sisodia, 2020). For this reason, this study will be employing a combination of both categorization frameworks to analyze the collected data, aiming to draw more conclusive and comprehensive research conclusions. Table 5 shows the combination of categorization framework and Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of this study.

<b>Type</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
Exaggeration	Title exaggerating the content on the landing page.	Cringeworthy tattoos that will destroy your faith in humanity.
Teasing	Omission of details from title to build suspense: teasing.	New twist in Panthers star’s trial could end his season.
Inflammatory	Either phrasing or use of inappropriate/ vulgar words.	Putin Punched at G20 Summit.
Formatting	Overuse of capitalization/ punctuation, particularly ALL CAPS or exclamation points.	EXCLUSIVE: Top-Secret Method allowed a mother to break the world record: 12kg in 4 weeks!
Graphic	Subject matter that is salacious or disturbing or unbelievable.	Donatelle Versace plastic surgery overload: Waxy face resembles melting candle.
Bait-and-switch	The thing promised/ implied from the title is not on the landing page: it requires additional clicks or just missing.	Beers Americans No Longer Drink
Ambiguous	Title unclear or confusing to spur curiosity.	Hands on: Samsung’s iPhone 5 is absolutely beautiful.
Wrong	Just plain incorrect article: factually wrong.	Scientist Confesses: “Global Warming a \$22 Billion Scam”.
Incomplete	The title is incomplete in conveying the message.	“Click here, and you will get ...”
Heading Cloning	Copying of actual headline for different content.	Headlines have a different structure but same text as normal headlines.
URL Redirection	The headline lands on a false page than promised.	Invalid URLs having false domain information (e.g. <a href="http://xyz.by/">http://xyz.by/</a> )

Table 5: 11 Types of Clickbait and Their Examples  
(Biyani et al., 2016; Pujahari & Sisodia, 2020)

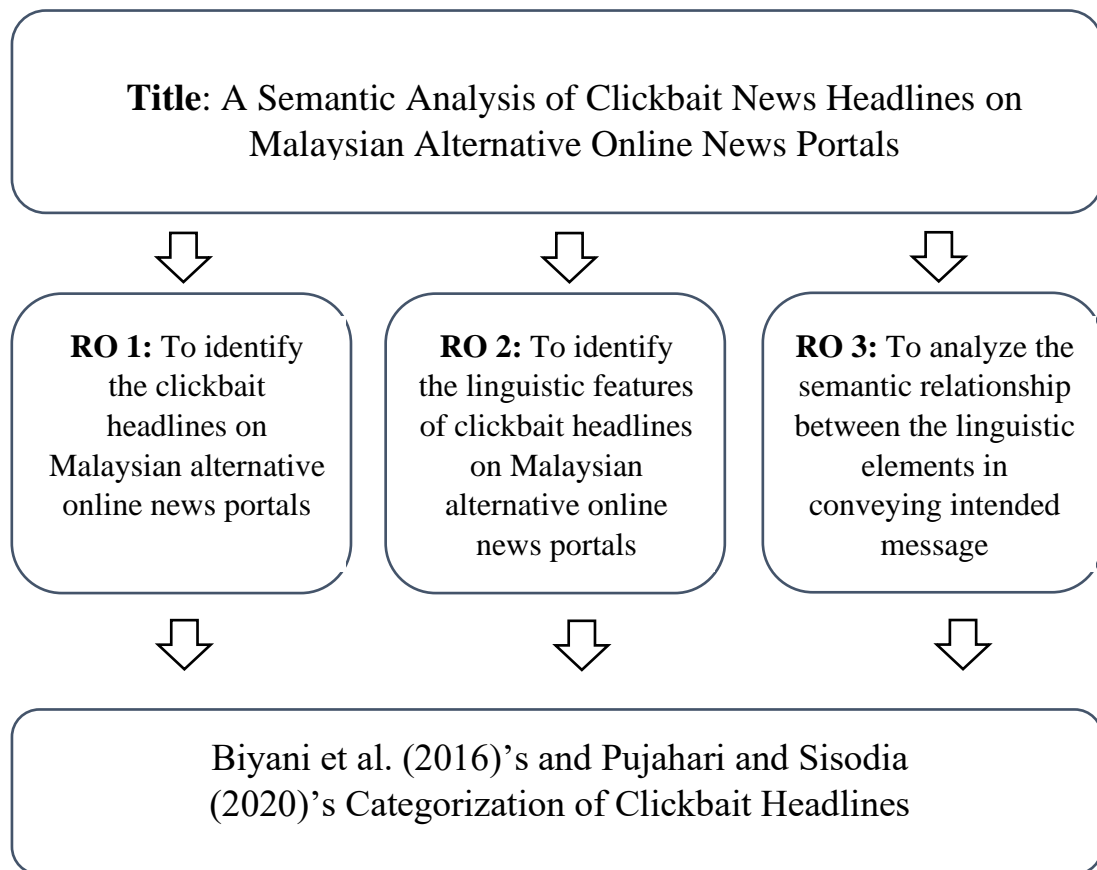


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of this Study

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The 30 clickbait headlines collected from *World of Buzz*, *SAYS*, and *Free Malaysia Today* will be analyzed using content analysis with reference to Biyani et al's (2016) and Pujahari and Sisodia (2020)'s Categorization of Clickbait Headlines framework. Firstly, patterns or frequencies of parts of speech will be identified in each clickbait headline. This is to investigate whether there exists a recurrence or utilization of certain parts of speech previously highlighted by scholars. Besides, it was to also unveil any linguistic patterns or strategies known to induce the clickbait effect in clickbait headlines.

Secondly, to understand the function each headline carries, the type of it has to first be determined. The elements used in clickbait headlines define the headline, encompassing its

function and the intended message a journalist was trying to convey. To ascertain the type of clickbait headline to which each belongs, the linguistic elements, format, style, tone, and contents of the headline will be investigated. The 8 types of clickbait headlines put forward by Biyani et al.'s (2016) and Pujahari and Sisodia's (2020) are Exaggeration, Teasing, Inflammatory, Formatting, Graphic, Bait-and-switch, Ambiguous, Wrong, Incomplete, Heading Cloning and URL Redirection. From there, the collected data will be tabulated and categorized according to different domains: nature/ types of news (soft/hard), topic covered, source and type of clickbait. If applicable, a table categorizing the headlines based on their linguistic elements will also be created. This includes identifying and highlighting any repetitive linguistic features that may be present across the collected data.

Last but not least, after confirming the type of clickbait headline, a more detailed analysis will be carried out to dissect each headline in terms of the qualifications of a 'clickbait headline', the semantic relationship between words and the synergistic impact of linguistic elements. An overlap of concepts is expected, as they are all perceived to collaborate in shaping a headline into a clickbait, working collectively to achieve the clickbait effect. To put it concisely, this semantic analysis seeks to uncover the strategies employed by Malaysian alternative online news sites in utilizing clickbait headlines to attract readers. The focus is on understanding the tailoring of these headlines and identifying the linguistic elements that contribute to their engaging effect.

### 3.5 Steps in Conducting Research

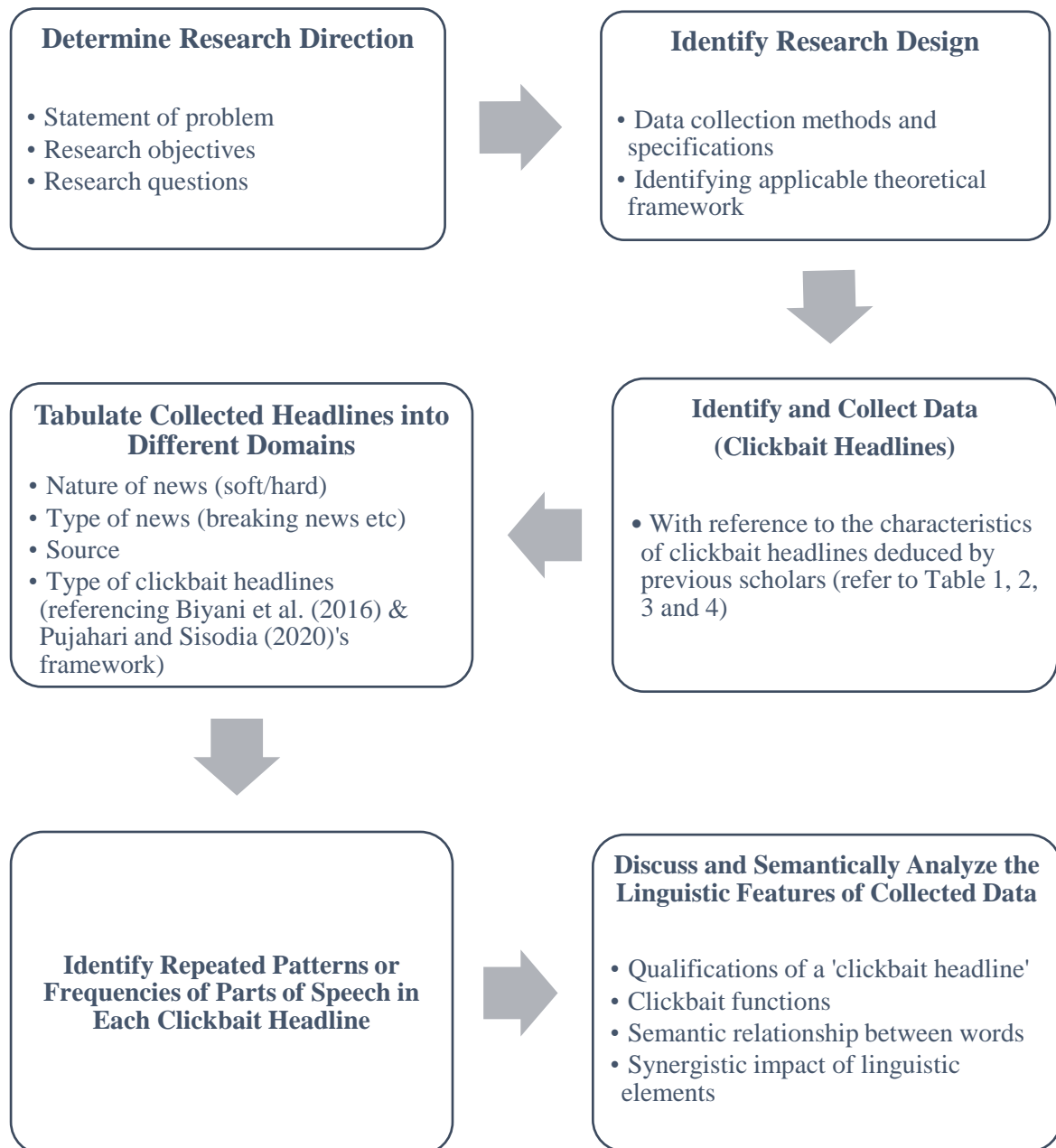


Figure 2: Procedure of This Study



## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings and analysis of clickbait news headlines collected from the three aforementioned online news sites: *World of Buzz*, *SAYS* and *Free Malaysia Today*. The collected headlines were tabulated and categorized based on several attributes, including year, headline, news genre, nature of news, target audience and type of clickbait headline.

Nature of news, or simply type of news, is dichotomous: hard news or soft news. According to Limor and Mann (1997, as cited in Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky, 2010), the former pertains to news stories that require urgent coverage due to its significance and transient nature, addressing matters related to politics, economics, and society. Failure to report news stories on these topics promptly affects the readership of news portals, as readers turn to alternatives that offer more timely coverage. Soft news, on the other hand, is characterized by news stories that carry sensationalistic elements, serving a purpose primarily for those targeted at and/or interested in a specific event (Limor & Mann, 1997, as cited in Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010; Patterson, 2000, as cited in Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010). This also implies that such news stories can be reported at any point in time, rendering them less urgent.

By exploring news stories more extensively, they can then be further segmented into various genres, such as breaking news, social stories, lifestyle, entertainment, people, culture, opinion and so forth. These news sub-categories enable readers to conveniently catch up on topics of their interest in one sitting.

## 4.1 Data Highlights

### 4.1.1 News Site 1: World of Buzz (WOB)

This section encompasses 10 clickbait headlines identified and compiled from *World of Buzz*'s news articles spanning January 2019 to December 2023, with a selection of two headlines for each year within the five-year period.

**Table 6: WOB 2019 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
1.	2019	Living the Broke Life? Here's How M'sians Can Win a Share of RM1.7Mil in CASH This 2019!	Social Stories	Soft	General Public	Teasing, Ambiguous, Graphic, Formatting
2.		Netizens CRINGE At Najib's Rempit-wannabe Rap Music Video "Bukan Biashe Biashe"	Social Stories	Soft	General Public	Teasing, Formatting

Both headlines collected from World of Buzz published in the year 2019 are social stories targeted at general audiences. **Headline 1** belongs to a combination of three types of clickbait headlines following the classification of clickbait headlines proposed by Biyani et al. (2016) and Pujahari and Sisodia (2020): "Formatting", "Teasing", and "Graphic". Biyani et al. (2016) define "Formatting" as the application of capitalization like ALL CAPS and punctuations like exclamation points. The fully capitalized CASH and exclamation mark at the end of the headline are proven examples of it being a formatting headline. It is believed that the choice to write the noun 'cash' in uppercase was intentional, aiming to attract the readers' attention as diversified typography is more likely to attract readers and make the headline stand out amidst a multitude of words on a webpage. Besides, the fully capitalized CASH emphasizes the prize payment method, underscoring that winners would bring home RM1.7 million in

physical banknotes rather than other forms like checks or bank transfers. This undoubtedly made the headline more captivating, leaving readers eager to find out how one could claim such a substantial cash sum. The cash amount, on the other hand, took on graphical characteristics, intensifying reader curiosity by presenting the unbelievable scenario of someone giving away such a considerable sum in cash. The concept appears ‘unbelievable’ because the general public may not have seen RM1.7 million in cash in their lifetime, let alone discovering that it is actually being given away. Yet, the writer chose to tease the readers by leaving out further information after announcing such a staggering giveaway for the public to escape their “broke life”. The resulting information gap therefore prompts readers to click on the link for more details.

Meanwhile, **Headline 2** is categorized as a composite of two clickbait headline types: “Formatting” and “Teasing”. A fully capitalized CRINGE in the headline was employed to heighten the discomfort experienced by netizens to the fullest extent after watching the said music video. Adding weight to this was the creator behind the music video, a familiar figure to fellow Malaysians – former Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak. The all-caps CRINGE intrigued news readers, prompting them to wonder how uncomfortable and bad the music video could be to elicit such a strong reaction. The combination of a prominent local figure (Najib) and a negative feeling or reaction (cringe) creates a contrast, heightening the overall curiosity. People might want to find out if the public was overreacting or if the music video is genuinely farcical. However, as a teasing headline, details are purposely omitted in Headline 2, creating an information gap that builds suspense so that readers are tempted to click on the link to satisfy that curiosity of theirs.

**Table 7: WOB 2020 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
-----	------	----------	------------	----------------	-----------------	----------------------------

3.	2020	Kanye West Announces He Will Be Running For President of America Over Twitter	News	Hard	Pop Culture News Consumers/ Political Observers	Teasing, Ambiguous
4.		Here's What You Need to Know About the Shooting Massacre in Korat Thailand	Social Stories	Hard	General Public	Teasing, Ambiguous

**Headline 3** is both a “Teasing” and an “Ambiguous” headline. The news may captivate individuals who have an interest in pop culture or celebrity-related information. For pop culture enthusiasts, the renowned rapper, singer, songwriter, who also happens to be the former spouse of Kim Kardashian, is a recognizable presence. It could come as a complete shock to fans that Kanye West is joining the presidential campaign, as it was not something anyone would have anticipated. At the same time, his political aspirations might be equally surprising to political observers who closely follow the political developments of the United States of America. They could be taken aback by the fact that a celebrity is declaring his candidacy for president and may be intrigued by the veracity of the news. Another notable characteristic of the headline that made it more engaging is the active voice employed, where the subject (Kanye West) performs an action (announces he will be running for President of America over Twitter). The use of an active tone elevated the overall vibrancy and emotional captivation because he himself was declaring the news, rather than it being announced by someone else, such as an official presidential representative or his management agency. The personal involvement adds a direct dimension to the information, making the public doubt the authenticity of the news. Despite that, the headline remained ambiguous and lacked sufficient details, spurring curiosity that compels readers to click and read the full article for more information.

Likewise, **Headline 4** delivers a “Teasing” and “Ambiguous” message. It utilizes a direct address technique, employing the personal pronoun ‘you’ to establish a direct and conversational connection between the writer and the reader. This imparts a feeling that the

article is tailored specifically for an individual reader – ‘you’. This technique effectively captures the attention of readers as they scroll through the news site, prompting them to pause and discover what the writer has to tell them or share. Besides, the informative tone clearly indicates the intention of keeping readers informed about the essential details of a significant event, specifically a shooting massacre in this context. The entire headline conveys a sense that all necessary information is readily available and organized, and readers simply need to accept the provided information without additional efforts needed. Moreover, and most importantly, the action verb ‘need’ serves as a supporting device that emphasizes urgency and the importance of immediate awareness. This suggests that the information is important, and readers should be informed about it without delay. All of these elements combined can entice those who may not have heard of the massacre but are now interested in learning more, while also catering to those already informed, who seek in-depth updates and details on the incident. However, the ambiguity and teasing lie in the headline as it effectively captivates readers but lacks sufficient details to provide a comprehensive understanding of the incident.

**Table 8: WOB 2021 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
5.	2021	Local Media Receives Massive Backlash for Using Very Inappropriate Headline	News	Hard	General Public	Teasing, Ambiguous
6.		DIY Home Repairs: 6 Things Most M’sians Didn’t Know They Can Fix at Home Without the Pros	Tech	Soft	Budget-Conscious Individuals/ Homeowners	Teasing, Ambiguous, Formatting

There are a few characteristics in **Headline 5** that make it qualify as a “Teasing” and “Ambiguous” headline. At first glance, readers may pose several questions and experience confusion: Who exactly is the phrase ‘local media’ referring to? To what extent does the massiveness apply? And to what degree does the inappropriateness reach, leading to the use of

the intensifier ‘very’? The vagueness of the headline was amplified with the use of an intensifier, heightening the information gap, and leaving readers eager to find out who the local media is and what kind of headline construction led to such immense backlash. The writer capitalized on readers’ curiosity by intentionally leaving these information out, pushing them to go ahead with reading the full article.

**Headline 6**, on the other hand, is a listicle with a list of things many Malaysians were unaware could be fixed without professional help. Instead of spelling out the number, the numeral ‘6’ is an effective technique for drawing the attention of readers by making it stand out among a whole page of alphabets. Corresponded with the numeral, the acronym DIY – representing ‘Do It Yourself’ – contributes to a “Formatting type of headline. It serves a similar function, rendering the capitalization more noticeable through a mixture of upper and lower case in a headline. Furthermore, the headline is both teasing and ambiguous because it deliberately omits information about the mentioned ‘6 things’, prompting readers to click to find out. As readers come across the headline, curiosity may prompt self-reflection, leading them to question themselves, “Let me see if I really did not know how to fix these on my own”. At some point, it can also be understood as the writer purposely playing with the public’s competitive drive, knowing that readers would be eager to prove themselves that they already knew how to fix those 6 things at home.

**Table 9: WOB 2022 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
7.	2022	“If you look at price tags when shopping, you’re probably poor,” Claims Sales Associate	Lifestyle	Soft	General Public	Ambiguous, Teasing
8.		Malaysia Ranked 2nd Country In The World For Racial Discrimination, But There’s More!	Lifestyle	Soft	General Public	Teasing, Ambiguous, Formatting

On first impression, **Headline 7** employs emotional appeal by leveraging feelings of outrage. It is highly likely that one would feel angered simply by reading the headline since “looking at price tags when shopping” is a common pre-purchase habit for basically everyone.

It is a routine that individuals go through before deciding whether they want to make a purchase. So, suggesting that someone is probably poor just because of that habit appears to be ridiculous, irrational, and unreasonable. Moreover, the declarative sentence, where the opinion of the sales associate was directly quoted, made the headline even more emotionally intriguing. It differentiated the writer from the original speaker of the statement, clarifying that it was the sales associate that made such stereotypical statement. This, in return, is an efficacious tactic in enticing the readers so that they would be yearning to find out the real identify of the subject (sales associate), further clarifications on the statement (how looking at tags is associated with one's financial behaviour), and the reason behind making such a judgmental remark. Still, all these details could only be found if readers click on the headline to read the full article.

Targeting fellow Malaysians, **Headline 8** deliberately omits necessary details about the exclamatory statement made. From a local's perspective, discovering that their own country ranks second globally for racial discrimination is embarrassing enough, especially considering Malaysia's reputation for cultural and racial diversity. To exacerbate the situation, the writer added in the phrase "but there's more" to indicate that there is additional information to be shared. This choice adds a sense of anticipation and suspense, implying that the forthcoming information might not be positive, as suggested by the nature of the preceding sentence. This then encourages readers to delve into the full article to find out more other besides the fact that Malaysia ranks second for racial discrimination. On top of that, readers may also be interested in verifying the factual accuracy of the discovery, asking questions such as: What is the finding based on? Who initiated the study? Is it true? What other countries are on the ranking?

**Table 10: WOB 2023 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
9.		India Man Becomes World's Richest	Social Stories	Soft	General Public	Teasing, Ambiguous

	2023	Beggar With Net Worth of RM4.2 Mil, Refuses to Stop Begging				
10.		“I’d literally cry!” M’sian Girlfriends Share Their Ultimate Dream Gifts & We 100% Relate	Lifestyle	Soft	General Public/ Couples/ Gift Shoppers	Teasing, Ambiguous

There is an apparent paradox in **Headline 9** that makes it attention-grabbing. The superlative phrase ‘world’s richest’ typically implies immense wealth and affluence, indicating individuals or entities with the highest financial resources globally. On the other hand, ‘beggar’ conveys a state of extreme poverty, referring to one that relies on assistance or charity to meet basic needs. In this sense, the combination of the terms ‘world’s richest’ and ‘beggar’ presents a stark contrast, creating an unbelievable element or feeling that confuses people as to how a beggar could be the world’s richest. On top of that, the use of a superlative adjective ‘richest’ contributes to exaggeration and emphasizes the extreme degree of an individual’s wealth, to capture readers’ attention. In a general sense, the most enticing aspect is the phrase ‘refuses to stop begging’, which arouses readers’ curiosity about why the beggar insists on begging even when he is already the world’s richest. Readers may be interested in reading the full article to find out: Who exactly is the beggar? How did he accumulate so much money? Did he truly become the world’s richest just by begging? And why does he refuse to stop begging? All these doubts cannot be answered solely by reading the headline, adding an element of teasing and ambiguity.

The exclamation statement ‘I’d literally cry!’ in **Headline 10** is emotionally charged to grab the attention of readers as they come across the headline. The sentence suggests a strong emotional appeal, enticing readers to click and find out why the writer would feel so strongly. Besides, the expression ‘We 100% Relate’ establishes a connection between the writer and the reader by suggesting that the content is one that is related to the audience and underscoring the



high degree of relevance at 100%. This is used to encourage clicks from individuals who want to see if their experiences align with those being shared, especially when a sense of inclusiveness is fostered. When headlines intend to connect readers, they play with their sense of belonging, often followed by an urge to discover whether what is being shared is indeed relatable and empathetic. Moreover, the lack of comprehensive details in the headline, combined with the posting time of the article, creates a situation where readers feel compelled to read the full article to get full details. Specific details, such as examples of the specific dream gifts and the reasons prompting such intense emotional reactions, remain unsaid. Given that the article is posted during the Christmas season, it heightens its allure as this timing could prove advantageous for individuals seeking recommendations on the perfect ‘ultimate dream gifts’ to surprise their significant others during the festive period. Taking all of these into account, readers may find themselves pondering questions like: Who are the girlfriends who shared? Who does the term “we” refer to? What precisely constitute the ultimate dream gifts? Ultimately, these queries serve as the impetus for them to delve into the full article.

#### 4.1.2 News Site 2: SAYS

This section encompasses 10 clickbait headlines identified and compiled from *SAYS* news articles spanning January 2019 to December 2023, with a selection of two headlines for each year within the five-year period.

**Table 11: SAYS 2019 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
11.	2019	This Is Why You Should ALWAYS Rinse Your Toothbrush Before Using It	Fun	Soft	General Public	Ambiguous, Teasing, Formatting
12.		Malaysian Uni Draws Backlash For Telling Women "What Not To	News	Hard	General Public	Ambiguous, Teasing, Graphic

		Do" To Avoid Sexual Harassment				
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**Headline 11** is an imperative sentence advising readers to always rinse their toothbrush before using it. The fully capitalized adverb ‘always’ gives the headline a diversified typography at first glance. However, it carries a more significant function in this case – highlighting the importance and emphasizing a strong necessity for rinsing the toothbrush before using it. It conveys a sense of insistence, implying that the advice is crucial and should be a habitual practice. The capitalization draws attention to the word, besides emphasizing the significance of following the suggestion. Generally speaking, the action of rinsing one’s toothbrush before using it may not be a common practice for some people, and this can be attributed to various reasons. Without any context, the headline may come off as baffling, especially since it emphasizes that it should be a routine practice. Readers may wonder if there are any scientific, health or hygienic reasons behind the suggestion. Most importantly, the modal verb ‘should’ is specifically used to indicate suggestions, recommendations, and obligations. Although not as strong and forceful as ‘must’, ‘should’ still imparts a sense of obligation, prompting readers to feel a compulsion or commitment to do as advised. Still, the headline leaves readers hanging by not clarifying the statement, unless they read the full article to find out why such advice is given.

First of all, information is apparently incomplete in **Headline 12** as it provides only a partial view of the situation and lacks details such as the exact name of the university, the context of the backlash and the university’s actual advice or instruction. This lack of clarity is believed to be strategically designed to encourage clicks from readers to acquire more information about the whole situation to bridge their curiosity gap. Besides, the headline is emotional triggering as it addresses the sensitive and emotional topic of sexual harassment in our country. Given the sensitivity surrounding this issue, encountering related content is likely

to trigger heightened attention from readers and elicit a response during their reading. Also, a university advising women on ‘what not to do’ to avoid sexual harassment is provocative by nature and the provocation is intensified by the implication that external entities are dictating what women should and should not do, thereby touching upon societal concerns and controversies related to victim-blaming. Victim-blaming is a sensitive and contentious issue where the victim of a crime or wrongdoing is, inappropriately, held partially at fault, diverting blame from the offender. In that case, the university’s advice to its female students suggests the possibility of them getting sexually harassed due to certain behaviours or actions. The advice therefore implies that, to avoid sexual insults, women should refrain from engaging in specific activities. This angle shifts some responsibility onto the potential victims rather than solely placing blame on the perpetrator, perpetuating the problematic notion that women bear some fault for the occurrence of the offense. Combined with the information gap, it catalyses and provokes emotions, prompting readers to delve into the full article to learn more about the issue.

**Table 12: SAYS 2020 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
13.	2020	Malaysian Retail Workers Reveal The Most WTF Thing They've Seen Their Customers Do	Fun	Soft	General Public/ Retail Workers	Ambiguous, Teasing, Formatting
14.		10 Annoying Things 'Bananas' Have To Put Up With Because They're "Not Chinese Enough"	Fun	Soft	General Public	Teasing, Ambiguous

**Headline 13** features the acronym ‘WTF’, which stands for What The F\*\*\*, a colloquial and internet slang term used to express a strong sense of frustration, incredulity, or

surprise, depending on the context. The capitalization of the acronym contributes to a varied typographic style, making the headline more easily noticeable compared to one with all words in lower case. Analysing it from a broader standpoint, the headline revolves around local retail employees revealing the most outrageous actions taken by customers. To accentuate the absurdity of the behaviour, the superlative adjective ‘the most’ is employed. It communicates to the readers that this disclosure is not just an ordinary account where retail employees describe a typical customer. Instead, it goes beyond imagination to the extent that the workers themselves label it as the most ridiculous behaviour over the course of their entire career. That being said, the article may be relevant to two groups of people: retail workers and shoppers/customers. Local retail workers might find it intriguing to read on to discover whether the experiences are truly as absurd as described, or they may even relate to having encountered situations that are more challenging than those shared. On the other hand, it may be of interest to other shoppers and customers to find out if they have ever engaged in similar behaviours as those described. All these would only become apparent once they click on the headline and proceed to read the entire article.

**Headline 14** is another listicle about 10 challenges ‘Bananas’ face just because they are “not Chinese enough”. Literally speaking, bananas refer to those who are “yellow on the outside but white in the inside”, just like a banana. Figuratively, it is used to describe Asians, who have physical characteristics or ethnic backgrounds associated with an ethnicity (usually Chinese) but are rather “Westernized” and do not act, behave, and speak like an “actual Chinese”. Among the numerous criteria that define someone as ‘Chinese,’ a particularly essential requirement is a proficiency in the Mandarin language. In the case of ‘bananas,’ individuals often exhibit a lower level of literacy in Mandarin or may have no knowledge of the language whatsoever. It is crucial to note that Malaysia, with its vibrant cultural and racial mix, is also home to a substantial population commonly known as ‘bananas’. These

demographics deviate from their supposed ‘origin’, making them the topic of discussion among people. Thus, the headline aims to resonate with the community, implying an understanding and sympathy for their situation as minorities in society. This connection is expressed through the use of linguistic devices like adjective ‘annoying’ and the phrase ‘put up with’. They both carry negative connotations, thereby emphasizing the essence of the headline in highlighting how the writer understands the frustration of being labelled a ‘banana’ due to having to endure numerous negative comments. After piquing the interest of potential readers with content they can relate to, intentionally leaving out the 10 things ‘bananas’ have to bear with creates a curiosity gap, prompting readers to explore further for the details.

**Table 13: SAYS 2021 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
15.	2021	[VIDEO] We Asked Vin Diesel To Send His M'sian Fans A Message But He Gave Something Better	Entertainment	Soft	General Public/ Fans of Van Diesel	Teasing, Ambiguous, Formatting
16.		If You Score 8/8 In This Social Media Trends Quiz, You Need To Touch Grass	Entertainment	Soft	General Public/ Social Media Enthusiasts	Ambiguous, Teasing

The noun ‘VIDEO’ that is fully capitalized in brackets in **Headline 15** is the first element that makes the headline stand out among the rest. The use of brackets and capitalization draws attention to the video format, providing readers a departure from traditional articles to engage with the content by watching an interview video featuring Vin Diesel, the renowned Hollywood actor. Using celebrity names in news headlines has proven to be a common strategy for captivating readers, as individuals are often drawn to Entertainment news. This posting specifically caters to the fans of Vin Diesel as he has prepared something for them. Moreover,

the phrase ‘but he gave something better’ introduces a twist and surprise by suggesting that instead of a mere message, Vin Diesel prepared something unexpected that he was sure that fans will appreciate. This is on top of the fact that he sent Malaysian fans a message. Fans would surely be lured to uncover what their admired figure has prepared for them, and non-fans’ curiosity would also be aroused to want to find out exactly what Vin Diesel was giving his fans. Overall, the headline combines elements of curiosity, celebrity involvement (Vin Diesel), and the promise and teaser of something better than initially anticipated, creating interest, and encouraging readers to watch the video and read the full article.

At first sight, one might assume that **Headline 16** is just another enjoyable quiz article. Yet, there is an apparent wordplay in it that makes it particularly eye-catching. The phrase ‘touch grass’ is a colloquial expression used to encourage or urge someone who has spent excessive time on digital devices to take a break from screentime and go outdoors to enjoy the nature. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that some may be unfamiliar with this phrase and might interpret it literally, leading to confusion about why someone would need to physically touch grass for getting a perfect score on a social media trends quiz. The wordplay here is effective in the sense that in either way, it can seize the attention of readers whether they are acquainted with the phrase or seeing it for the first time. For those who recognize the phrase, they might be tempted to take the quiz to prove their social media savvy or to test their knowledge of current social media trends. Conversely, readers who take ‘touch grass’ literally might be enticed to find out the purpose for doing so. In short, ‘touch grass’ carries additional advantages beyond being a playful way of incorporating current Internet slang into a quiz headline. The headline is both ambiguous and teasing as it requires readers to read the full article to view the full quiz questions, take the quiz and see if they need to ‘touch some grass’.

**Table 14: SAYS 2022 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
17.	2022	10 Asian Horror Films On Netflix That Will Keep You Awake For The Rest Of Your Life	Entertainment	Soft	General Public/ Horror Movie Lovers	Exaggeration, Ambiguous, Teasing
18.		Win A 3-Bedroom Condo, The Latest Smartphones, And More In This Simple Contest	Lifestyle	Soft	General Public	Ambiguous, Teasing

**Headline 17** is a listicle recommending 10 Asian horror films on Netflix. The writer extensively exaggerates the headline by portraying the suggested horror films as so frightening that viewers will be unable to fall asleep since then. This is a clear-cut overstatement that is deliberately used to magnify the terror of the horror films to illustrate just how truly scary they are. It can be understood as the writer's technique to make their recommendation credible and trustworthy, aiming to persuade readers to check out the article and discover the recommended films. From a different stance, the headline also manipulates readers' emotions and curiosity because the writer understands the psychological factors driving their desire to read the full article, tapping into FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) and curiosity. To elaborate, horror film enthusiasts may be captivated by the description of the suggested horror films, feeling compelled to check if they have seen any of the recommendations. This inclination is driven by FOMO, as they worry about not being up to date with the latest trends and fear being not "qualified" enough to claim horror movies as their favourite genre, particularly if they have not heard of any films that promise to "keep them awake for the rest of their lives". On the other hand, those who are not big fans of horror films may still find themselves fascinated and intrigued by the headline, prompting them to check out what these films are about, even if they do not intend to watch any of them. In short, the headline is effective in capturing the attention

of readers and enticing them to click on it for the full article. With information deliberately left out, readers can only find out the complete list of recommendations within the article itself.

The verb ‘win’ is put as the very first word in **Headline 18**, believed to be a strategy for capturing readers’ attention as they scroll through the site. While people tend to glance through a headline before deciding if they want to read the whole thing, some may even only glance through the first few words to see what it is roughly about. For this, journalists try to make headlines as concise as possible, while still providing enough details to lure readers into reading more. For this reason, placing ‘win’ as the very first word can effectively draw in the readers’ focus as it is usually tempting to find out that there is something to be won.

Subsequently, the deliberate placement of the phrase ‘a 3-bedroom condo’ before ‘the latest smartphones’ is considered a strategic move. In comparison, a condominium undoubtedly holds significantly greater value than a smartphone, and the prospect of winning one is undeniably alluring. From a reader’s perspective, arranging the prizes to be won in an ascending order based on their monetary value can easily captivate them from the very beginning, leading them to believe they stand a chance to own something highly valuable. On top of that, extra descriptions like ‘3-bedroom’, ‘latest’ and ‘simple’ are incorporated to make the contest sounds more irresistible. These adjectives lend substance to their respective subjects— a 3-bedroom condo sounds more vividly appealing than simply ‘condo’ and the latest smartphones are more highly anticipated than their generic counterparts. Similarly, the simplicity of the contest is underscored through the phrase “this simple contest” to dissuade readers from scrolling away, even if they are attracted by the prizes, as some might be reluctant to join contests due to the perceived complexity of the entry process. Holistically, the descriptions serve as vivid depictions of the subject matter, enhancing their appeal.



Last but not least, there is also a use of forward-referencing where the writer uses the demonstrative pronoun ‘this’ to point forward to a referent that has yet to be introduced in the headline to create anticipation and information-gap. Although it mentions a ‘simple contest’, detail elaboration of the contest such as the organizer and entry requirements are omitted. This therefore adds to the teasing and ambiguity characteristic of the headline.

**Table 15: SAYS 2023 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
19.	2023	“I Didn’t Have A Choice” - Restaurateur Claims He Regrets Slaughtering & Serving Cat Meat	News	Hard	General Public	Ambiguous, Teasing, Graphic
20.		Did You Know Petai Ice Cream Is A Thing? This TikTok Will Show You How To Make It	Makan	Soft	General Public/ Food Enthusiasts	Teasing, Ambiguous

**Headline 19** uses a quoted declarative sentence to capture the attention of readers, generating confusion regarding the individual and the specific choice in question. At first, readers might sympathize with the speaker and feel concern about whether he or she is being constrained. However, their sympathy takes a turn when they realize that the speaker is implying being “forced” to slaughter and serve cat meat. At this point, it is not the emotion of regret that draws attention, but the controversial act of slaughtering and serving cat meat. Readers, taken aback by the revelation, would promptly click on the news to check if they are familiar with the restaurant or have dined there before, as cat meat is not an ordinary type of meat one would typically consume. Furthermore, the subject – a restaurateur – is also an element that provokes emotions and stirs controversy because it is unexpected that a restaurant owner would engage in such a heinous act, going as far as to serve it to customers. This catalyst continues to perplex readers, heightening their eagerness to delve further into the details.

Expanding on a previous assertion regarding the quoted declarative sentence, its usage could be one that draws a line between the writer and the speaker (the restaurateur), clarifying that it is indeed a claim made by the speaker. This is to amplify the overall emotional resonance so that readers can fully immerse themselves in the public’s perspective, leaving them more furious and confused about the owner’s behavior. All these collectively drive them to read the full article to discover more details such as the reasons behind such action, the events that led to the owner feeling regret and clarifications on why the owner asserted having no choice.

**Headline 20** opens with a rhetorical question, prompting readers to contemplate their awareness of the existence of petai ice cream. Instead of seeking responses, the question is designed to make a point and engage the readers' curiosity, leaving them intrigued about the reality of petai ice cream. Generally, petai ice cream is considered exotic, being neither a conventional nor a common ice cream flavour. Petai itself is already a type of vegetable that is controversial; petai lovers will thoroughly enjoy it, while those who are not fond of it will strongly dislike it. The pairing of petai and ice cream is unexpected, and it is not something people would normally picture together as a dessert. Thus, people might click on it either to learn more about the unique combination or discover how to make it at home by referring to the visual cooking guide provided.

#### 4.1.3 News Site 3: Free Malaysia Today (FMT)

This section encompasses 10 clickbait headlines identified and compiled from *Free Malaysia Today*’s news articles spanning January 2019 to December 2023, with a selection of two headlines for each year within the five-year period.

**Table 16: FMT 2019 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
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21.	2019	7 bad habits of Malaysian train commuters	Leisure	Soft	General Public	Teasing, Ambiguous
22.		Does marriage lead to true happiness?	Leisure	Soft	General Public / Couples	Ambiguous, Teasing

As a listicle, the combination of numerals and letters in **Headline 21** sets it apart from the majority of news headlines on a news website, which typically consists only of letters. This guarantees that readers' attention is grabbed. Besides, the term 'bad habits' could possibly evoke negative emotions and spark curiosity regarding the specific behaviours being referenced by the writer. One main drive for them to read on is to see if they are guilty of any 'bad behaviours' themselves. The topic of commuter behaviour is also relatable to many, particularly those in Malaysia who regularly commute using trains, increasing the likelihood of engagement and clicks. The writer is fully aware of the article's high relevance, hence the short and concise headline intended to prompt readers to check out the full article.

**Headline 22** is an interrogative sentence that poses a thought-provoking question that stimulates contemplation and incites curiosity. Marriage is a significant life milestone for many, rendering the topic personally meaningful and likely to attract attention from those who are married, considering marriage, or interested in relationships. Upon reading the headline, one might already have an answer in mind, yet still feel compelled to read the full article to confirm if it corresponds with their expectations and provides the answers they seek. Furthermore, the question could also be interpreted as suggesting that the writer disagrees with the notion that marriage guarantees true happiness, thereby elucidating their points in the article.

**Table 17: FMT 2020 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
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23.	2020	An Emergency that tolls the death knell for Vision 2020	Highlight	Soft	General Public	Teasing, Ambiguous
24.		There is no 'new normal', we were not normal to begin with	Opinion	Soft	General Public	Ambiguous, Teasing

**Headline 23** grabs attention by creating a sense of drama and urgency with words like 'emergency' and 'tolls the death knell'. Vision 2020 is no stranger to Malaysians, and though some may have anticipated its failure to materialize, there might be a lot of factors that lead to its unfulfillment. Attributing the failure of Vision 2020 to just one single emergency adds weight to the emotional appeal of fear and concern about a significant vision being threatened. The promise of revelation hidden behind the headline encourages readers to check out the article to uncover the one reason that impacts Vision 2020, by promising valuable insights and truths that only the writer knows. Like most clickbait headlines, this one carries the same style of vagueness by providing just enough information to spark curiosity but leaving out specifics, prompting readers to click for clarifications and details, especially since the issue is a subject of interest for many Malaysians.

**Headline 24** is a declarative sentence, expressing the writer's stance on a certain matter, in this case the concept of the 'new normal'. Some readers may approach the statement 'we were not normal to begin with' with skepticism, pondering on the validity and reasonings behind the assertion. For some, it may resonate with their beliefs or experiences, while for the others, it may be unusual and illogical as it raises questions about the writer's authority to pass judgement on what is considered normal, and leaves ambiguity regarding the writer's definition of 'not normal'. This would in return drive them to seek for clarifications and validations from the article. Moreover, the headline can be interpreted as a promise of insight, where it is implied that the article will offer unique insights and perspectives that critique the conventional wisdom. Readers are likely to click in to gain a deeper understanding of the topic and see what

the writer has to say. Most importantly, the headline leaves readers hanging by making a claim that the public’s understanding of normalcy is flawed with no further explanations, creating a sense of mystery and intrigue. Consequently, readers are compelled to click in to discover the reasoning behind the assertion and learn more about the point being presented.

**Table 18: FMT 2021 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
25.	2021	The Indian problem – what are its roots?	Opinion	Soft	General Public/ Social Activists	Ambiguous, Teasing
26.		Stop whining. Nobody forced you to be a politician	Opinion	Soft	General Public/ Supporters and voters	Ambiguous, Teasing

The phrase ‘the Indian problem’ in **Headline 25** may come off as offensive and disparaging to some, especially the Indian community. It suggests that an issue exists because of a race, contributing to the negative connotation associated with the term ‘the Indian problem’. Besides, the sensationalized noun ‘problem’ itself is provocative and stigmatizing by nature, which immediately grabs attention and provokes curiosity about the subject matter. By posing the question “what are its roots”, readers are inclined to believe that there might be deeper causes or origins to this purported issue. It also leaves readers intrigued and eager to discover more because this statement can be interpreted that the writer possess comprehensive knowledge about the problem and its underlying causes. As a whole, the curiosity-driven approach embodied in the imperative-style headline is a hallmark of clickbait that effectively drives clicks and engagement, appealing not only to Indian readers but also to broader audience, particularly considering Malaysia’s status as a multiracial and multicultural nation. Given the sensitivity surrounding racial topics, news headlines like these might be sensitive and controversial when not handled appropriately.

**Headline 26** employs a direct address where the writer appears to be speaking directly to someone, likely a politician or someone involved in politics. The provocative language delivered through the use of the phrase “stop whining” is confrontational and attention-grabbing. When first reading it, it is obvious that the writer expresses a disapproval towards someone’s tendency to whine, a behaviour commonly deemed as undesirable. The justification for the disapproval can be found in the latter part of the headline through the writer’s satirical remark on the subject’s voluntary decision to enter politics, rather than being compelled to do so. As a whole, this headline taps into common sentiments and exploits the innate curiosity and nosiness of humans in wanting to know about dramas and conflicts involving other people, especially public figures like politicians. It is likely to resonate with readers who may already have criticisms or dissatisfactions about certain politicians, urging them to find out who exactly is the write referring to in that case. Overall, the straightforward and blunt nature of the headline is attention-grabbing and engaging, prompting readers to click to learn more about the context and reasoning behind the assertion.

**Table 19: FMT 2022 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
27.		Netizens give free rides on RapidKL the thumbs down	Nation	Soft	General Public/ Regular Commuters	Ambiguous, Teasing, Formatting
28.	2022	Hands up if you’re Malay and ashamed by recent events	Opinion	Soft	General Public/ Malay Community Members	Ambiguous, Teasing

There is an intriguing contrast in **Headline 27** that makes it enticing. The phrase ‘free rides’ is generally associated with a positive response as it is supposedly a benefit and privilege for commuters. This is because the adjective ‘free’ traditionally carries a positive connotation

that implies that no payment is needed for a product or a service, so common sense speaking who would not love that. However, the headline presents a contrast by stating that the netizens are expressing disapproval with a ‘thumbs down’ – a metaphorical expression indicating a negative reaction. Presenting a headline with a twist in the second half is a way to catch readers by surprise, particularly when readers believe they have a clear expectation of what is to unfold, only to discover that the outcome is not as anticipated. This way adds a layer of complexity that confuses readers, leading them to be intrigued to find out the reasons behind the twist.

**Headline 28** is an open call or an invitation for the Malay community to express their feelings of shame on some recent events. The ambiguity lies in the expression ‘some recent events’, and the use of the adjective ‘ashamed’ intensified the curiosity created. Given that ‘ashamed’ is associated with negative implications, when put together in a context with ‘some recent events’, it leads to pondering as to what events are the writer referring to and what transpired to cause a feeling of shame within the Malaya community. Moreover, the target audience of this news headline is rigidly specified and obvious, targeting at the Malay community, by capturing their attention through the figurative expression – ‘hands up’, which serves as a call for acknowledgment and identification. Consequently, Malay readers are more likely to be allured to seek further details about the incident, as it directly involves their community. The sense of belonging will intensify their desire to stay informed about everything occurring within their community.

**Table 20: FMT 2023 Clickbait Headlines**

No.	Year	Headline	News Genre	Nature of News	Target Audience	Type of Clickbait Headline
29.	2023	He’s uncovering KL’s hidden histories one mystery at a time	Leisure	Hard	General Public/ History Enthusiasts/ Mystery Enthusiasts	Ambiguous, Teasing, Formatting

30.		Unbelievable RM10 chicken banana leaf rice in Puchong	Leisure	Soft	General Public/ Food lovers/ Budget-Conscious Individuals	Teasing, Ambiguous
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In **Headline 29**, an information gap and a sense of anticipation are crafted through the use of forward-reference, with the primary subject being the singular third-person pronoun ‘he’. With this, readers are left in the dark about the true identity of the subject until they delve into the full article, heightening the entice. Besides, the use of words like ‘uncovering’, ‘hidden stories’ and ‘mystery’ are intriguing language that fosters a sense of curiosity and mystery. This stimulation appeals to the innate human curiosity, particularly towards uncovering previously undisclosed and mysterious subjects. Furthermore, the phrase ‘one mystery at a time’ suggest the gradual and ongoing process of uncovering the mentioned hidden histories. Every mystery revealed contributed to the overarching narrative, creating anticipation and motivating readers to stay engaged as the story unfolds.

**Headline 30** starts with a hyperbolic and a common bait term – unbelievable. It accentuates the remarkably low price of chicken banana leaf rice in Puchong. The strategic pairing of the adjective with the dish’s price aims to capture readers’ attention, implying that the offer is hard to believe and impossible to miss out on. On first glance, readers might land their eyes on the numerals first, sparking curiosity about what is sold at only RM10. Generally, this headline conveys excitement about a budget-friendly option for a national cuisine, enticing potential customers with the idea of getting a satisfying meal in Selangor at an unbelievably low price. The writer is acutely aware that the food expenses in Selangor are high, making it relatively uncommon to find a serving of chicken banana leaf rice priced at only RM10, hence the deliberate emphasis on the affordability. From the readers’ perspective, they might be



intrigued to read on to verify the accuracy of the presented offer, and to find out if there are any underlying reasons for the restaurateur to be selling the dish at such an affordable price.

## 4.2 Summary of Findings

### 4.2.1 Dominant Types of Clickbait Headlines

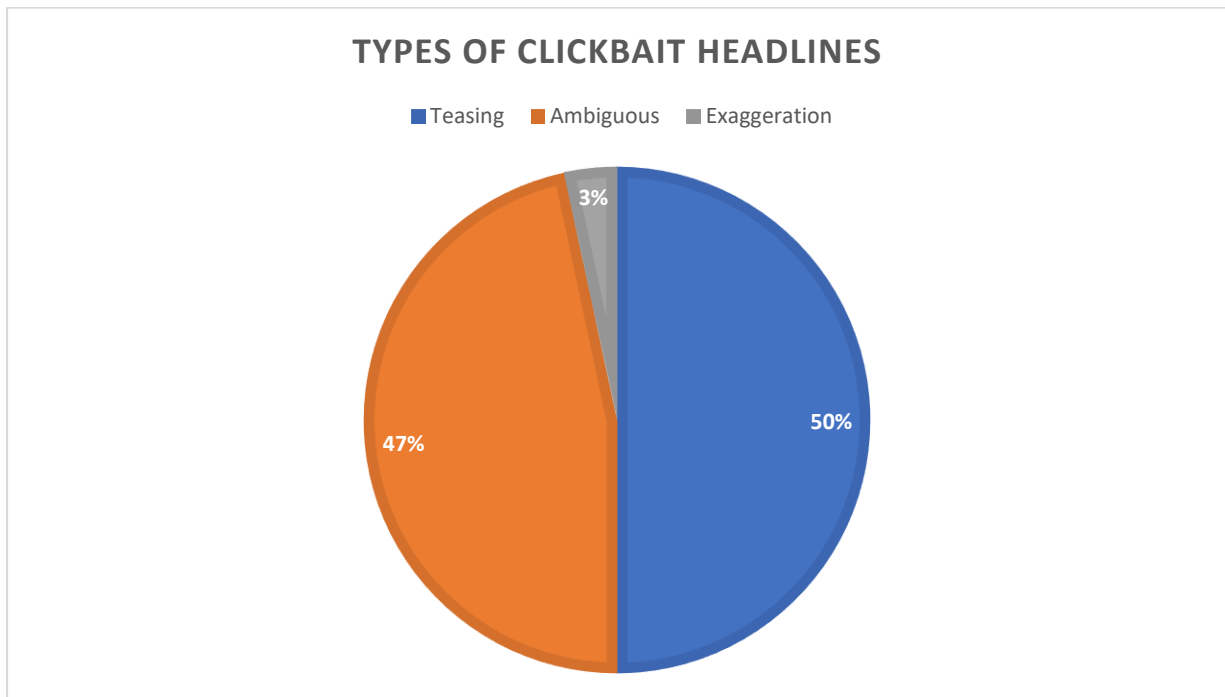


Figure 3: Dominant Types of Clickbait Headlines Identified in the 30 Headlines Collected

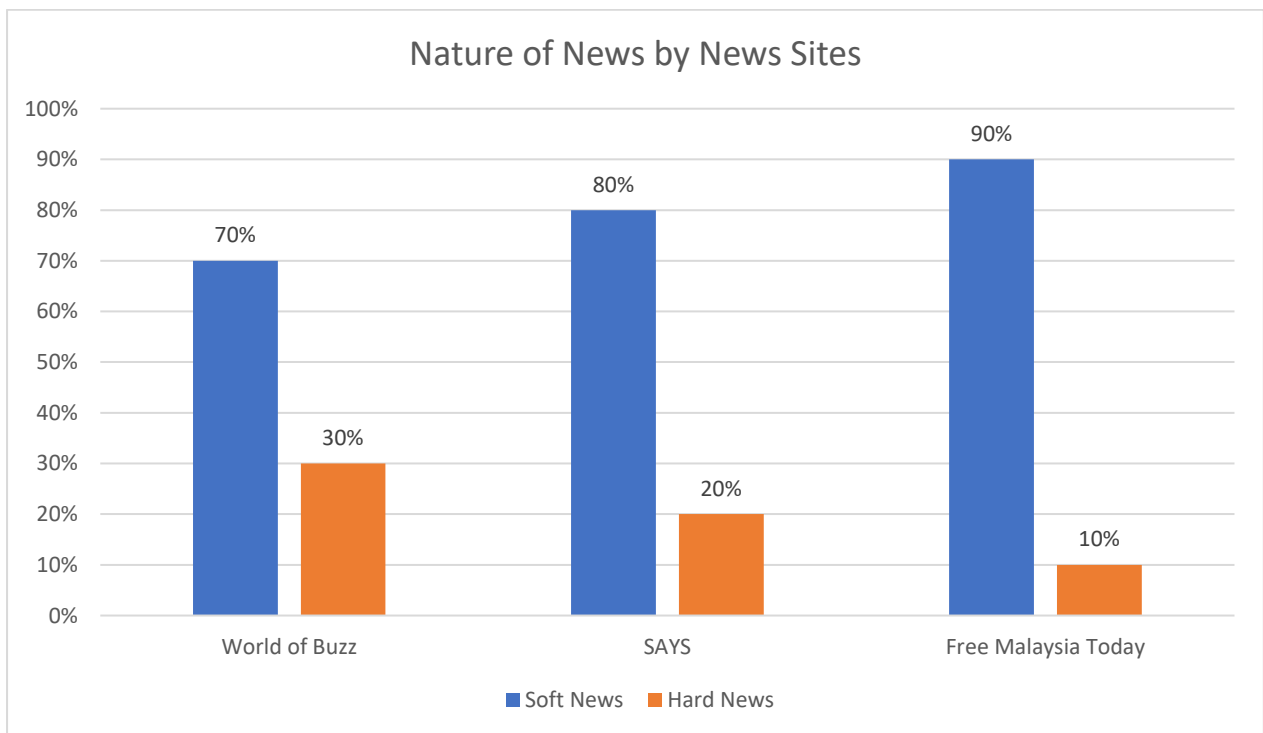
As previously mentioned, this study adopted a combination of categorization frameworks proposed by Biyani et al. (2016) and Pujahari and Sisodia (2020), incorporating the 11 types of clickbait headlines to label the collected data. Despite the 11 types, the findings of this study reveal that most clickbait headlines fall under the category of ‘Teasing’ (50%), followed by the category ‘Ambiguous’ (47%). Only 3% of the sampled headlines, which is equivalent to 1 out of the 30, is categorized as ‘Exaggeration’. However, this statistic is calculated based on the predominant characteristic of each headline. In other words, a headline may exhibit traits of multiple categories, such as Exaggeration and Teasing, but if Teasing is more prominent than Exaggeration, the headline is classified under the Teasing category.

#### 4.2.2 News Genre Categorized by News Site

**Table 21**

The News Nature of the 30 Collected Headlines

Nature of News	World of Buzz (n)=10 %	SAYS (n)=10 %	Free Malaysia Today (n)=10 %	TOTAL (n)= 30 %
Soft News	70 (7)	80 (8)	90 (9)	80 (24)
Hard News	30 (3)	20 (2)	10 (1)	20 (6)



**Figure 4: The News Nature Categorized by News Site**

In terms of the news genre, 80% or 24 out of the 30 headlines are soft news and only 6 headlines (20%) are hard news. Soft news are news articles intended for casual reading, have less newsworthiness, and do not demand immediate publication (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010). Examples include human-interest stories, opinion pieces and entertainment news. Hard news, on the other hand, comprises news contents that includes breaking news, political issues and sports coverage of significant events that require immediate notification. Therefore, based

on the data presented in Table 21 and Figure 4, it can be inferred that clickbait tactics are more prevalent in soft news articles when compared to hard news articles.

#### 4.2.3 Combined Category Distribution Across News Sites

**Table 22**

Combined Category Distribution Across News Sites

<b>Combined Categories</b>	<b>World of Buzz (n)=10 %</b>	<b>SAYS (n)=10 %</b>	<b>Free Malaysia Today (n)=10 %</b>	<b>TOTAL (n)=30 %</b>
Teasing & Ambiguous (TA)	60 (6)	40 (4)	80 (8)	60.00 (18)
Teasing & Ambiguous & Formatting (TAF)	20 (2)	30 (3)	20 (2)	23.33 (7)
Teasing & Ambiguous & Exaggeration (TAE)	0 (0)	10 (1)	0 (0)	3.33 (1)
Teasing & Ambiguous & Graphic (TAG)	0 (0)	20 (2)	0 (0)	6.66 (2)
Teasing & Ambiguous & Graphic & Formatting (TAGF)	10 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3.33 (1)
Teasing & Formatting (TF)	10 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3.33 (1)

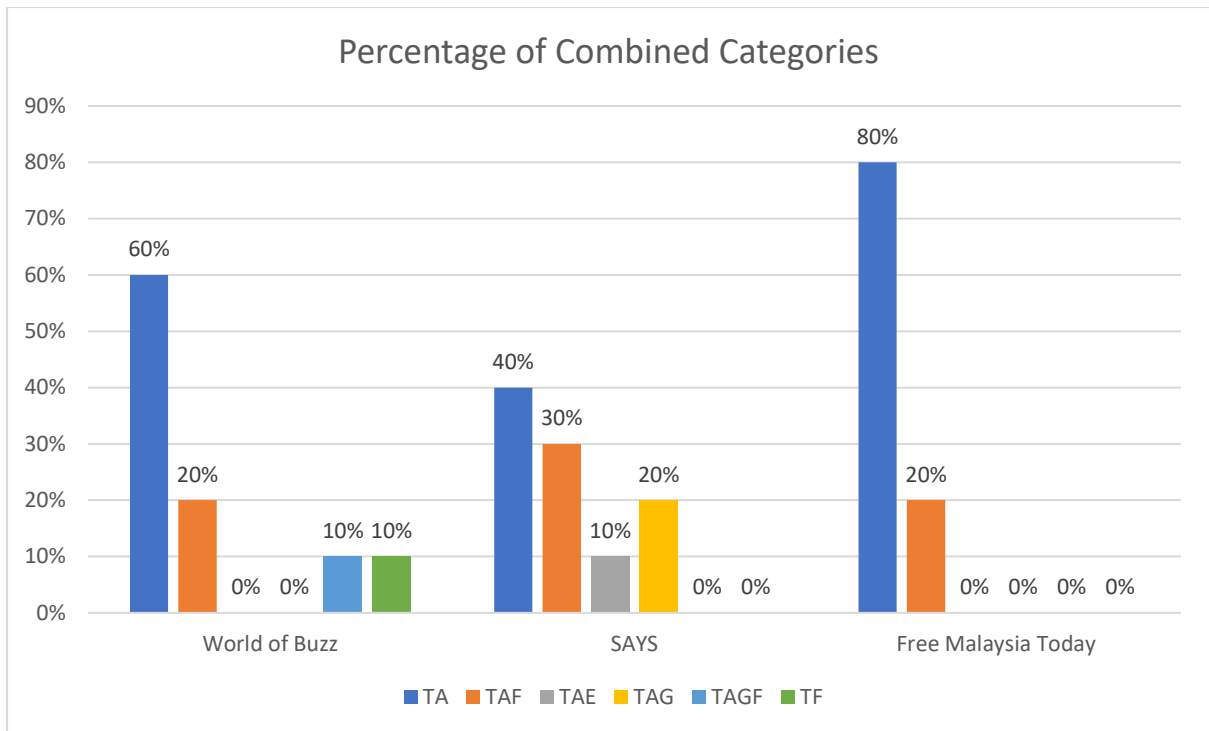


Figure 5: The Percentage of Combined Category Distribution Across News Sites

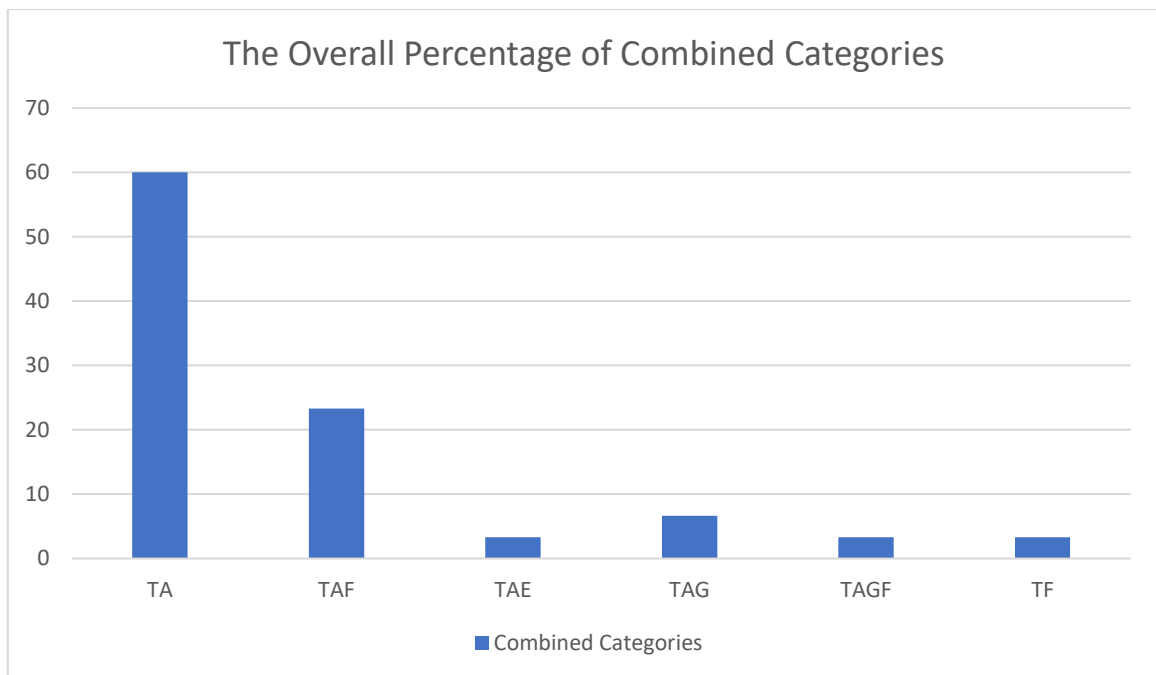


Figure 6: The Overall Percentage of Combined Categories

As illustrated in Table 22, Figure 5 and Figure 6, there are six different fixed sets of combinations, each encompassing all 30 collected headlines:

- (1) Teasing and Ambiguous (TA),
- (2) Teasing, Ambiguous and Formatting (TAF),
- (3) Teasing, Ambiguous and Exaggeration (TAE),
- (4) Teasing, Ambiguous and Graphic (TAG),
- (5) Teasing, Ambiguous, Graphic, and Formatting (TAGF), and
- (6) Teasing and Formatting (TF)

It was observed that all headlines simultaneously exhibit characteristics of multiple types. Instead of neatly fitting into a single category, these headlines incorporate features from several types, suggesting an intricate and multifaceted approach to engaging and enticing readers. According to the data, 18 headlines fall under the category of TA (60%), 7 headlines under TAF (23.33%), two headlines under TAG (6.665), and one headline each under TAE, TAGF, and TF (3.33%). Besides, another observed trend is that Teasing and Ambiguous consistently appear together as a pair, with only one instance where they do not co-occur. This implies that Teasing and Ambiguous have the most significant influence on shaping a clickbait headline.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### **5.1 Discussion**

#### **5.1.1 Dominant Clickbait Categories**

The present study demonstrated how the Malaysian alternative online news portals utilize clickbait strategies to craft headlines to boost readership. Based on the data presented in Section 4.2.1, it can be inferred that “Teasing” and “Ambiguous” stand out as the dominant types of clickbait headlines favoured by local alternative news sites. Biyani et al. (2016) characterize “Teasing” as news headlines deliberately omitting details to create suspense, while “Ambiguous” refers to headlines that are unclear or confusing, aiming to pique curiosity. When considered thoroughly, it becomes evident that “Teasing” and “Ambiguous” share certain inherent characteristics that render them somewhat alike. Both types are provocative by nature and capitalize on readers’ curiosity. Journalists often tantalize readers by providing some hints or suggestions on a subject matter without revealing all the details upfront. However, these hints are inherently ambiguous, shrouded in uncertainty. This leaves readers pondering whether the headline should be taken literally or figuratively, whether it is entirely factual or tinged with exaggeration, and whether it is meant as humorous sarcasm or a serious matter. That being said, “Teasing” and “Ambiguous” make a powerful and reasonable combination when crafting clickbait headlines. Their shared traits of playfulness, provocation, and leaving room for interpretation are effective in arousing curiosity and enticing readers to delve deeper into the content. This way, media company’s readership is guaranteed, reader engagement is sustained, traffic is driven, and the bottom line is bolstered, ultimately leading to a potential increase in revenue.

### **5.1.2 Clickbait Usage in Soft and Hard News**

Despite employing a purposive sampling method during data collection, a general prevalence of clickbait headlines within soft news articles that are characterized by their casual and leisurely nature, is observed. This statement is backed up by findings from Section 4.2.2, where 80% of the collected data fall under the soft news category, and only 20% of them are categorized as ‘hard news’. One possible explanation for this is the journalists’ adherence to fundamental ethical standards in serious news reporting, demonstrating a commitment to treating hard news topics with gravity and respect. Unlike soft news, which serves entertainment purposes, hard news often covers topics that concern a major population, touching on subjects such as social issues, political developments, crime and justice, the economy and so on. These topics typically require less effort to ensure readership, as they are the primary reasons people read up news. Thus, there is little to no need for clickbait techniques to be used when crafting news headlines. The aim is to keep them as short, concise, and straightforward as possible so that readers can obtain basic information about the reported issue simply by reading them.

On the contrary, soft news demand greater effort since there is no uniformity in the new contents to be shared. Therefore, it is entirely up to the news media company and the journalists to ensure the dynamism and compelling nature of their content varieties, as well as the engagement of their writing styles. These factors set each news site apart and serve as their unique selling points, attracting readers to choose one news portal over others for leisure and entertainment reading. Even if a news portal boasts a diverse range of dynamic soft news genres such as Technology, Health, and Cooking, it does not automatically ensure high readership, as algorithms and sift traffic can be unpredictable and beyond human control. This is where journalistic techniques, such as employing the clickbait strategy, become significant. Clickbait tactics can effectively capture the attention of readers, compelling them to lay their eyes on the

headlines and thereby achieving the vital initial step in sustaining reader engagement: attracting their attention and making them stay on the site.

### **5.1.3 Theoretical Contribution to Biyani et al. (2016) and Pujahari and Sisodia (2020)'s Categorization Framework**

This research analysis yields additional findings that merit emphasis, contributing to the categorization framework proposed by Biyani et al. (2016) and Pujahari and Sisodia (2020). Biyani et al. (2016) formalized the concept of clickbait by delineating eight common types of clickbait, a framework later expanded upon by Pujahari and Sisodia (2020) with the inclusion of three additional types. Both frameworks offer clear definitions for each type of clickbait, underscoring their distinctions. However, the study outcomes imply that all headlines demonstrate traits of multiple types concurrently. Instead of fitting neatly into one type, each collected data (headline) tend to blend elements from more than one category, highlighting a nuanced and multifaceted strategy used to enhance reader engagement. To put it another way, Malaysian alternative online news sites have a propensity to utilize a combination of several clickbait types when crafting headlines, with the most common being “Teasing + Ambiguous”. The possibility of this was not highlighted in either scholar’s research study. Nevertheless, this implication does not deny the significance of both scholars' research efforts in conceptualizing clickbait headlines, which has facilitated further studies on clickbait since then. Instead, it simply indicates an observed trend in the Malaysian media landscape, as evidenced by the three alternative online news portals: *World of Buzz*, *SAYS* and *Free Malaysia Today*.

### **5.1.4 Analytical Comparison of Previous Scholarly Findings**

In addition to that, several other new insights emerged from this study, which slightly diverge from those proposed by previous scholars. Blom and Hansen (2014) are among the early pioneers in clickbait research, highlighting the use of forward-referencing in crafting



clickbait headlines to lure readers into clicking and reading on the full article. However, this does not seem to be prevalent in Malaysian new media landscape, as the emphasis on an accurate subject has become the fundamental criterion. For instance, out of the 30 headlines collected, only two headlines – “He’s uncovering KL’s hidden histories one mystery at a time” by *Free Malaysia Today* and “Win A 3-Bedroom Condo, The Latest Smartphones, And More In This Simple Contest” by *SAYS* - practise forward-reference. As for the other headlines, an accurate subject is present, such as Malaysian Uni (instead of ‘they’) from Headline 12, restaurateur (instead of ‘he’) from Headline 19, netizens (instead of ‘they’) from Headline 27, Indian men (instead of ‘he’) from Headline 9 and so on.

Moreover, Biyani et al. (2016) also proposed another characteristic of clickbait headlines: they are more likely to begin with 5W1H words. Yet, following the analysis of this study, it becomes evident that this characteristic was not observed to the point of being non-existent. This observation was also consistently noted during the data collection process as very few headlines exhibited this trait. One plausible explanation for this could be the writing style preferred by local journalists, which may not favour this particular style. Another significant reason for this could be the less widespread acceptance of this particular headline writing style within the local media landscape. This is because when beginning a headline with 5W1H words (where, who, when, why, what, and how), they typically take the form of questions. This approach is indeed effective in attracting attention and prompting interest, but they would leave readers hanging, which could seem unconventional. Clickbait headlines are of similar traits, but they typically provide some basic information instead of solely posing a question about an incident. For example, “*Man Under Arrest After Setting House on Fire*” undeniably follows a more conventional and acceptable style compared to “*Why Is The Man Under Arrest?*”. Thus, this could explain why this style cannot be found on local media news sites, unlike on foreign

news sites like Forbes and New York Times, as utilized by Biyani et al. (2016), which led to their findings that clickbait headlines tend to start with 5W1H words.

In contrast to the variations noted, there are still similarities noted. This study confirms a key characteristic of clickbait headlines as identified by Chakraborty et al. (2016), which is the overuse of determiner and contraction. Based on the findings, determiners and contractions are readily identifiable in headlines, as illustrated by several examples such as:

- *Here's* What You Need to Know About *the* Shooting Massacre in Korat Thailand (from Headline 4)
- DIY Home Repairs: 6 Things *Most* M'sians *Didn't* Know They Can Fix at Home Without *the* Pros (from Headline 6)
- "If you look at price tags when shopping, *you're* probably poor," Claims Sales Associate (from Headline 8)
- Malaysian Retail Workers Reveal *The* Most WTF Thing *They've* Seen *Their* Customers Do (from Headline 13)
- 10 Annoying Things 'Bananas' Have To Put Up With Because *They're* "Not Chinese Enough" (from Headline 14)

This trend may be attributed to several possible reasons. The first is the informal and conversational tone that writers generally try to create to appeal to readers. This would lead them perceiving the article as a relaxed, casual read, thus making it more appealing and less intimidating. Most importantly, contractions and determiners help in saving space as headlines typically have space constraints. This enables the headline to remain short and succinct, yet still allow the writer to effectively convey the intended message.

### 5.1.5 Contribution to the Study of Malaysian Clickbait News Headlines

This sub-section will explain the contribution of this research to the study of clickbait headlines within the Malaysian new media landscape by highlighting some key typological features of clickbait headlines on local alternative online news sites: *World of Buzz*, *SAYS* and *Free Malaysia Today*. As a whole, the present study reveals that local journalists habitually employ attention-grabbing techniques at the outset of articles to first entice readers and captivate their interest before incentivizing them to delve deeper into the content. This finding aligns with what is proposed by Biyani et al. (2016), where the ultimate goal of such headlines is to entice users to click on the page, be intrigued to read on, and thereby increase readership and maximize the monetization of contents. To put it another way, the key element of clickbait headlines resides in their attention-grabbing and enticing qualities, typically accomplished through a blend of linguistic features.

The utilization of the direct address technique, exemplified by the incorporation of the second-person personal pronoun ‘you’, is one of the first notable features of clickbait headlines. When news headlines incorporate ‘you’, from a reader’s perspective, readers may perceive it as the writer directly addressing them as the sole listener. This sense of exclusivity can lead to a more personalized and engaging reader experience. It enhances their connection with the content by making them feel valued and appreciated that the writer is trying to convey something for the reader’s own good, demonstrating the writer’s consideration for the reader’s interest and benefit. This point is bolstered by the abundance of examples found in the collected data, such as:

- “Here’s What You Need to Know About the Shooting Massacre in Korat Thailand”  
(from Headline 4),

- “This Is Why You Should ALWAYS Rinse Your Toothbrush Before Using It” (from Headline 11),
- “If You Score 8/8 In This Social Media Trends Quiz, You Need To Touch Grass” (from Headline 16),
- “10 Asian Horror Films On Netflix That Will Keep You Awake For The Rest Of Your Life” (from Headline 17) and more.

Besides, listicles are another common style of clickbait headlines, which concisely outline the article’s content but tempt readers to explore lists or rankings related to specific topics of interest. Besides the use of numerals that can make the headlines stand out, listicles are effective in the sense that they notify readers about the topic of discussion without divulging specific details. This encourages readers to read on just so they can find out the complete lists or rankings. This implication is consistent with the findings of Kemm (2022), which underscore the effectiveness of listicles as a clickbait tactic, achieved through the use of numerals and intentionally left information gaps. Examples of listicles from the present study are:

- “DIY Home Repairs: 6 Things Most M’sians Didn’t Know They Can Fix at Home Without the Pros” (from Headline 6),
- “10 Annoying Things 'Bananas' Have To Put Up With Because They’re "Not Chinese Enough"” (from Headline 14),
- “10 Asian Horror Films On Netflix That Will Keep You Awake For The Rest Of Your Life” (from Headline 17) and
- “7 bad habits of Malaysian train commuters” (from Headline 21)

Moreover, the present study also indicates that local journalists lean towards using emotional appeal. Kemm (2022) characterizes this strategy as prioritizing emotional resonance to generate more clicks but ultimately sacrifices useful information. Emotional appeal, such as fear, curiosity, and outrage, becomes compelling when readers can personally relate to and

resonate with the news headline, irrespective of the method and manner. Upon the establishment of emotional resonance, readers immediately form a positive first impression of the headline, even prior to delving into the full article. This is attributed to readers' ability to empathize with the content or topic of discussion, which may be rooted in personal experiences, interests, or a genuine connection to the subject matter. With this, it compels readers to further engage with the article by reading the complete write-up to resonate with the content on a deeper level. Examples of collected headlines in this study that contain emotional appeal include:

- “If you look at price tags when shopping, you’re probably poor,” Claims Sales Associate” (*appeals to feelings of being offended and anger*),
- “Does marriage lead to true happiness?” (*evokes personal reflection and anxiety*),
- “An Emergency that tolls the death knell for Vision 2020” (*elicits fear and urgency*)
- “I’d literally cry!” M’sian Girlfriends Share Their Ultimate Dream Gifts & We 100% Relate” (*evokes empathy, anticipation, and excitement*).

Furthermore, headlines in the form of rhetorical questions have also been established as a prevalent characteristic of clickbait headlines through the findings of this study. This tactic is especially efficient in capturing readers' attention, attributed to its unconventional format (posed as a question) and its thought-provoking nature. Rhetorical question types of headlines have also been highlighted by Lun (2021) as one of the frequent sentence structures used in constructing clickbait headlines. The common application of this approach is largely owing to its ability in generating interest and fostering audience engagement. Readers often find themselves subconsciously responding to the questions posed within, as if the writer is directly addressing them. Some examples of such headlines collected as data for this study are:

- “Living the Broke Life?” (from Headline 1)
- “Did You Know Petai Ice Cream Is A Thing?” (from Headline 20)

- “Does marriage lead to true happiness?” (from Headline 22)
- “The Indian problem – what are its roots?” (from Headline 25)

Additionally, capitalization is also identified as a common practice in constructing clickbait headlines. As per Kemm (2022)’s findings, the use of varied typography, characterized by a combination of upper-and-lower case letters, can effectively draw the readers’ attention, particularly when surrounded by headlines primarily in lowercase. To illustrate, employing the abbreviation DIY rather than spelling out the full phrase “Do It Yourself” in a headline is both space-saving and attention-grabbing. This approach effectively meets the primary and pivotal characteristic of clickbait headlines: capturing the readers’ attention initially, thereby allowing journalists to integrate other techniques to retain their interest and ensure they are enticed to continue reading the entire headline. Besides, capitalizing certain words in a headline also indicates their significance as key words related to the topic of discussion. Capitalization serves as a signal to readers that these terms are important and warrant their attention. Examples of headlines that incorporated capitalization are as follows:

- “Living the Broke Life? Here’s How M’sians Can Win a Share of RM1.7Mil in CASH This 2019!” (from Headline 1)
- “DIY Home Repairs: 6 Things Most M’sians Didn’t Know They Can Fix at Home Without the Pros” (from Headline 6)
- “This Is Why You Should ALWAYS Rinse Your Toothbrush Before Using It “(from Headline 11)
- “Malaysian Retail Workers Reveal The Most WTF Thing They've Seen Their Customers Do” (from Headline 13)
- “[VIDEO] We Asked Vin Diesel To Send His M'sian Fans A Message But He Gave Something Better” (from Headline 15)

In short, this study's findings align closely with those of previous scholars such as Kemm (2022), Chakraborty et al. (2016), and Lun (2021). These scholars identified common typological features of clickbait headlines, including sentence structures like rhetorical questions, the use of emotional appeal, listicles, and direct address techniques. Nonetheless, there are still some deviations between the present study and those of other pioneers, with one significant one being the categorization or labelling of clickbait headlines. The present study shows that it is challenging to assign each headline to a single “type” because there often lies a combination of multiple features and elements, which amplify the “baity” features. Thus, it is more sensible not to strictly categorize them under one type. Most importantly, the composition of a news headlines heavily depends on the writer’s choice and amalgamation of features to convey various meanings and fulfil different objectives.

## **5.2 Limitations and Recommendations**

Although efforts were made to mitigate potential drawbacks, this study is not without its limitations. First of all, the present study only source data from three Malaysian non-mainstream online news outlets, thus limiting the breadth of perspectives and insights that could have been identified. Future researchers who would like to further venture into clickbait studies in Malaysia can consider using other news outlets with growing popularity such as Malaysiakini, Malay Mail, The Borneo Post, and so on, as it is expected to yield more valuable insights that can better bolster the understanding of clickbait headlines within local new media landscape. Also, it is recommended for researchers to expand the scope of data sources to achieve more comprehensive findings.

Next, in the present study, exclusively relying on online news outlets as the data source inevitably limited the comprehensiveness of findings, for this approach fails to adequately capture the broader spectrum of clickbait practices in Malaysia. So, future studies on clickbait

headlines could extend to traditional media outlets for data sourcing. Despite the increasing prominence and appeal of new media, the significance and intricacies of traditional media must not be taken lightly. This is attributed to their enduring influence and long-standing status in Malaysian journalism, catering to generations of readers over the years. Although it has been previously noted that these news outlets are subject to the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984, which is anticipated to regulate the writing tone and style of journalists due to their government ownership, it cannot be definitely concluded that clickbait headlines are never or not utilized. For this, future researchers can venture into this direction to study whether traditional media outlets have implemented any changes or adaptations in response to the evolving landscape of journalism driven by readers' preferences.

Furthermore, clickbait headlines are examined semantically in this study. In addition to this approach, future studies could incorporate other qualitative methods such as conducting interviews or organizing focus groups involving local readers or journalists. This approach would facilitate a deeper understanding of local perceptions and insights regarding clickbait headlines to study it from a different angle. Through this lens, researchers could further study on the penetration, influence, and effects of clickbait headlines within the local media scene. Subsequently, a comparative analysis could be conducted to assess the prevalence of clickbait headlines over recent years and the present, aiming to examine the augmented frequency of such journalistic techniques.

Moreover, the sample size could be expanded since the present study only looked at 30 clickbait headlines, which may not adequately represent the diversity of clickbait headlines across various news sites throughout the different time periods. Future researchers could carry out similar clickbait studied on a larger scale to enhance the robustness of the study and improve the accuracy of data analysis.



Last but not least, this study utilizes a purposive sampling method to collect data, implying a heavy reliance on subjective judgement in selecting headlines for inclusion. Thus, future researchers are recommended to employ alternative sampling methods, such as stratified sampling. This method is characterized by its categorization of clickbait headlines into different strata based on specific characteristics, such as the types of news or the types of news site. Then, researchers can randomly select samples from each stratum, ensuring representation across various categories. This way can minimize any potential biasness during data collection that might affect the credibility of findings.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

The present study of clickbait headlines within the local new media landscape serves as a building block that lays the groundwork for further scholarly exploration into the evolving dynamics and prevalence of this journalistic practice. In conclusion, this research has shed light on the application of clickbait headlines by three up-and-coming online news sites: *World of Buzz*, *SAYS* and *Free Malaysia Today* by analysing the composition of each headline to identify possible recurring patterns and styles.

The objectives set forth at the beginning of this study were attained by identifying prominent linguistic features present in the 30 collected clickbait headlines, followed by an analysis of the semantic relationship among these linguistic elements. From the compilation of 30 clickbait headlines, it is evident that clickbait headlines are more prevalent in soft news as opposed to hard news. Besides, all headlines exhibit traits of multiple types simultaneously, diverging from the categorization framework proposed by Biyani et al. (2016) and Pujahari and Sisodia (2020), which assigns each headline to a single 'notion' category. However, this observation does not negate the utility of their conceptualization in aiding researchers' understanding of common clickbait headline types. Instead, it implies that most clickbait

headlines in the Malaysian context encompass a combination of different types. This supports the idea that various linguistic features are merged into a single headline, reflecting the writers' meticulous composition aimed at enhancing the "baity" quality.

With that said, the combination of "Teasing and Ambiguous" emerges as the most common pairing among clickbait headlines, with all other identified combined categories also originating from this foundational combination. In addition to that, the five main features of clickbait headlines, deduced from this research, are (1) the utilization of the direct address technique, (2) incorporation of listicles, (3) reliance on emotional appeal, (4) deployment of rhetorical questions and (5) the application of capitalization.

In terms of recommendations, it is suggested that future research endeavours may consider exploring Malaysian clickbait studies through the lens of traditional news outlets. Additionally, the integration of other qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups could also yield other meaningful findings that could better elucidate the clickbait phenomenon in Malaysia. Apart from that, expanding the sample size and employing alternative sampling methods like stratified sampling could also enhance the comprehensiveness, persuasiveness, and validity of findings.

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## Appendix

### Data Set (30 Clickbait Headlines)

#### News Site 1: World of Buzz

No.	Headlines	URL to Corresponding News Articles
1.	Living the Broke Life? Here's How M'sians Can Win a Share of RM1.7Mil in CASH This 2019!	<a href="https://worldofbuzz.com/living-the-broke-life-heres-how-msians-can-win-a-share-of-rm1-7mil-in-cash-this-2019/">https://worldofbuzz.com/living-the-broke-life-heres-how-msians-can-win-a-share-of-rm1-7mil-in-cash-this-2019/</a>
2.	Netizens CRINGE At Najib's Rempit-wannabe Rap Music Video "Bukan Biashe Biashe"	<a href="https://worldofbuzz.com/netizens-criinge-najibs-rempit-wannabe-rap-music-video-bukan-biashe-biashe/">https://worldofbuzz.com/netizens-criinge-najibs-rempit-wannabe-rap-music-video-bukan-biashe-biashe/</a>
3.	Kanye West Announces He Will Be Running For President of America Over Twitter	<a href="https://worldofbuzz.com/its-official-kanye-west-announces-he-will-be-running-for-president-of-america/?fbclid=IwAR373GYNnctTJHe63Za3K-9YnLbKkwmCXFraAmZSx0634rNxVauRgjNmhc">https://worldofbuzz.com/its-official-kanye-west-announces-he-will-be-running-for-president-of-america/?fbclid=IwAR373GYNnctTJHe63Za3K-9YnLbKkwmCXFraAmZSx0634rNxVauRgjNmhc</a>
4.	Here's What You Need to Know About the Shooting Massacre in Korat Thailand	<a href="https://worldofbuzz.com/update-death-toll-of-21-at-the-korat-shooting-massacre/">https://worldofbuzz.com/update-death-toll-of-21-at-the-korat-shooting-massacre/</a>
5.	Local Media Receives Massive Backlash for Using Very Inappropriate Headline	<a href="https://worldofbuzz.com/local-media-receives-massive-backlash-from-netizens-for-inappropriate-headline-describing-africans/?fbclid=IwAR3NmoiyVY_a1pXyyZL-6FfC5sDonzdAN30yFtnx_WKwSknW84UyWjb11Ak">https://worldofbuzz.com/local-media-receives-massive-backlash-from-netizens-for-inappropriate-headline-describing-africans/?fbclid=IwAR3NmoiyVY_a1pXyyZL-6FfC5sDonzdAN30yFtnx_WKwSknW84UyWjb11Ak</a>
6.	DIY Home Repairs: 6 Things Most M'sians Didn't Know They Can Fix at Home Without the Pros	<a href="https://worldofbuzz.com/diy-home-repairs-6-things-most-msians-didnt-know-they-can-fix-at-home-without-the-pros/">https://worldofbuzz.com/diy-home-repairs-6-things-most-msians-didnt-know-they-can-fix-at-home-without-the-pros/</a>
7.	"If you look at price tags when shopping, you're probably poor," Claims Sales Associate (2023)	<a href="https://worldofbuzz.com/if-you-look-at-price-tags-when-shopping-youre-probably-poor-says-sales-associate/">https://worldofbuzz.com/if-you-look-at-price-tags-when-shopping-youre-probably-poor-says-sales-associate/</a>
8.	Malaysia Ranked 2nd Country In The World For Racial Discrimination, But There's More! (2020)	<a href="https://worldofbuzz.com/malaysia-ranked-2nd-country-in-the-world-for-racial-discrimination-but-theres-more/">https://worldofbuzz.com/malaysia-ranked-2nd-country-in-the-world-for-racial-discrimination-but-theres-more/</a>
9.	India Man Becomes World's Richest Beggar With Net Worth of RM4.2 Mil, Refuses to Stop Begging	<a href="https://worldofbuzz.com/india-man-becomes-worlds-richest-beggar-with-net-worth-of-rm4-2-mil-refuses-to-stop-begging/?fbclid=IwAR1jBrfP6XwDHu-6u53ZireYFMa3U8xiYSaRcuGwLIfcgwb4EnkyvFBy694">https://worldofbuzz.com/india-man-becomes-worlds-richest-beggar-with-net-worth-of-rm4-2-mil-refuses-to-stop-begging/?fbclid=IwAR1jBrfP6XwDHu-6u53ZireYFMa3U8xiYSaRcuGwLIfcgwb4EnkyvFBy694</a>

10.	“I’d literally cry!” M’sian Girlfriends Share Their Ultimate Dream Gifts & We 100% Relate	<a href="https://worldofbuzz.com/id-literally-cry-msian-girlfriends-share-ultimate-dream-gifts-we-100-relate/">https://worldofbuzz.com/id-literally-cry-msian-girlfriends-share-ultimate-dream-gifts-we-100-relate/</a>
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### News Site 2: SAYS

No.	Headlines	URL to Corresponding News Articles
1.	This Is Why You Should ALWAYS Rinse Your Toothbrush Before Using It	<a href="https://says.com/my/fun/this-is-why-you-should-always-rinse-your-toothbrush-before-using-it-because-lizards">https://says.com/my/fun/this-is-why-you-should-always-rinse-your-toothbrush-before-using-it-because-lizards</a>
2.	Malaysian Uni Draws Backlash For Telling Women "What Not To Do" To Avoid Sexual Harassment	<a href="https://says.com/my/news/malaysian-uni-s-student-council-advises-women-on-how-to-dress-to-avoid-sexual-harassment">https://says.com/my/news/malaysian-uni-s-student-council-advises-women-on-how-to-dress-to-avoid-sexual-harassment</a>
3.	Malaysian Retail Workers Reveal The Most WTF Thing They've Seen Their Customers Do	<a href="https://says.com/my/fun/malaysian-retail-workers-reveal-the-most-wtf-thing-they-ve-seen-customers-do">https://says.com/my/fun/malaysian-retail-workers-reveal-the-most-wtf-thing-they-ve-seen-customers-do</a>
4.	10 Annoying Things 'Bananas' Have To Put Up With Because They’re "Not Chinese Enough"	<a href="https://says.com/my/fun/how-to-crush-a-chinese-bananas-soul">https://says.com/my/fun/how-to-crush-a-chinese-bananas-soul</a>
5.	[VIDEO] We Asked Vin Diesel To Send His M'sian Fans A Message But He Gave Something Better	<a href="https://says.com/my/entertainment/video-john-cena-shares-with-us-his-experience-on-the-fast-and-furious-9-set">https://says.com/my/entertainment/video-john-cena-shares-with-us-his-experience-on-the-fast-and-furious-9-set</a>
6.	If You Score 8/8 In This Social Media Trends Quiz, You Need To Touch Grass	<a href="https://exclusive.says.com/my/exclusive/how-addicted-are-you-to-the-internet/index.html">https://exclusive.says.com/my/exclusive/how-addicted-are-you-to-the-internet/index.html</a>
7.	10 Asian Horror Films On Netflix That Will Keep You Awake For The Rest Of Your Life	<a href="https://says.com/my/entertainment/asian-horror-movies-and-series-on-netflix">https://says.com/my/entertainment/asian-horror-movies-and-series-on-netflix</a>
8.	Win A 3-Bedroom Condo, The Latest Smartphones, And More In This Simple Contest	<a href="https://says.com/my/lifestyle/foodpanda-collect-pandas-get-rumah-contest">https://says.com/my/lifestyle/foodpanda-collect-pandas-get-rumah-contest</a>
9.	“I Didn’t Have A Choice” - Restaurateur Claims He Regrets Slaughtering & Serving Cat Meat	<a href="https://says.com/my/news/restaurant-owner-regrets-for-slaughtering-serving-cat-meat">https://says.com/my/news/restaurant-owner-regrets-for-slaughtering-serving-cat-meat</a>
10.	Did You Know Petai Ice Cream Is A Thing? This TikTok Will Show You How To Make It	<a href="https://says.com/my/makan/viral-tiktok-how-to-make-petai-ice-cream">https://says.com/my/makan/viral-tiktok-how-to-make-petai-ice-cream</a>

### News Site 3: Free Malaysia Today

No.	Headlines	URL to Corresponding News Articles
1.	7 bad habits of Malaysian train commuters	<a href="https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/leisure/2019/07/30/7-bad-habits-of-malaysian-train-commuters/">https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/leisure/2019/07/30/7-bad-habits-of-malaysian-train-commuters/</a>
2.	Does marriage lead to true happiness?	<a href="https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/leisure/2019/07/07/does-marriage-lead-to-true-happiness/">https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/leisure/2019/07/07/does-marriage-lead-to-true-happiness/</a>
3.	An Emergency that tolls the death knell for Vision 2020	<a href="https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/highlight/2020/10/25/an-emergency-that-tolls-the-death-knell-of-vision-2020/">https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/highlight/2020/10/25/an-emergency-that-tolls-the-death-knell-of-vision-2020/</a>
4.	There is no 'new normal', we were not normal to begin with	<a href="https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2020/08/30/there-is-no-new-normal-we-were-not-normal-to-begin-with/">https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2020/08/30/there-is-no-new-normal-we-were-not-normal-to-begin-with/</a>
5.	The Indian problem – what are its roots?	<a href="https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2021/07/20/the-indian-problem-what-are-its-roots/">https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2021/07/20/the-indian-problem-what-are-its-roots/</a>
6.	Stop whining. Nobody forced you to be a politician	<a href="https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2021/08/08/stop-whining-nobody-forced-you-to-be-a-politician/">https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2021/08/08/stop-whining-nobody-forced-you-to-be-a-politician/</a>
7.	Netizens give free rides on RapidKL the thumbs down	<a href="https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2022/06/16/netizens-give-free-rides-on-rapidkl-the-thumbs-down/">https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2022/06/16/netizens-give-free-rides-on-rapidkl-the-thumbs-down/</a>
8.	Hands up if you're Malay and ashamed by recent events	<a href="https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2022/08/29/hands-up-if-youre-malay-and-ashamed-by-recent-events/">https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2022/08/29/hands-up-if-youre-malay-and-ashamed-by-recent-events/</a>
9.	He's uncovering KL's hidden histories one mystery at a time	<a href="https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/leisure/2023/10/31/uncovering-kls-hidden-histories-one-mystery-at-a-time/">https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/leisure/2023/10/31/uncovering-kls-hidden-histories-one-mystery-at-a-time/</a>
10.	Unbelievable RM10 chicken banana leaf rice in Puchong	<a href="https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/leisure/2023/08/27/unbelievable-rm10-chicken-banana-leaf-rice-in-puchong/">https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/leisure/2023/08/27/unbelievable-rm10-chicken-banana-leaf-rice-in-puchong/</a>