

# English Clickbait Language Features Which Attract Thai Tertiary EFL Learners

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Article information	Abstract
<p><b>Article history:</b>  Received: 6 Sep 2023  Accepted: 7 Feb 2025  Available online: 17 Feb 2025</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b>  Clickbait  Clickbait headlines  Linguistic features  Thai tertiary EFL learners</p>	<p><i>This study explored how likely its Thai participants were to choose to read an article with a clickbait headline, together with how the reasons given for choosing clickbait headlines correspond to the linguistic features found in the headlines. News headlines were presented to 18 participants to rate which news headline they would choose. Then, the rationales behind the selection were elicited using an interview. The results revealed that the majority of the participants preferred non-clickbait headlines because they consider the relevancy of the headlines to themselves as the major factor, followed by the linguistic features of the headline, which marked education as not relevant to choosing to read a news headline. Among the headlines selected, numbers and unanswered questions play a vital role in influencing people to choose non-academic headlines. Numbers make the headline easier to follow and look reliable, while unanswered questions prompt the reader to discover the truth. All in all, clickbait is not as 'clickbaity' when personal relevance and preference affect headline selection. Here, personal relevance includes background, interest, and age, whereas personal preference includes entertaining content, use of neutral words, non-question type headlines, and use of formal words used.</i></p>

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the internet has been a critical part of communication because it is faster and easier to connect with. People have been turning to social media to receive and share personal information about their lives as well as public information such as news reports. Facebook is one of the most popular social media platforms around the world, with 2,853 million users, followed by YouTube and WhatsApp (Smith & Anderson, 2018; Woodward, 2023). For people aged 16-64, the average time spent on social media is 2 hours and 24 minutes a day (Woodward, 2023). The numbers in Thailand are even higher, with the average exposure to social media for Thai people being 3 hours per day (Viriyaavejakul, 2019).

However, despite its convenience, social media have an impact on emotions, decision-making, and academic performance. The information received has not been verified as fact, and since

it could have been written by anyone, the reliability of the information is in question. Studies show that information received from friends' recommendations and comments on social media influences and manipulates one's thoughts (Luo et al., 2020; Turcotte et al., 2015). In addition, social media such as Facebook and X (formerly branded as Twitter) have been blamed for the spread of fake news in 2016 (Zimmer et al., 2019a; 2019b). The term "fake news" is frequently used to describe news that has been fabricated, distorted, is full of opinions, is misinformed, is incomplete, or is misleading or contains falsehoods. Fake news is circulated as a meme or a false story aimed at catching people's attention with an interesting headline (DiResta et al., 2019). As a result, fake news causes confusion and doubt, can be harmful to health, influences politics and country governance potentially leading to violence and conflict, diminishes the true power of the people and their right to truth and justice, and causes misunderstandings, making it more difficult to see the truth.

To attract a large number of readers to information, the headline used must attract the readers into clicking on the story. When used maliciously, i.e., purely to drive up reads of untruthful stories, this type of headline is known as "clickbait". It is created to advertise, arouse interest, misinform, and create income opportunities. The creator receives money based on the number of clicks, which makes clickbait commercial. The motivation of making money from clickbait has heightened it. As a result, clickbait news has become more common and attention grabbing.

According to Newman et al. (2021), 82% of Thai people have access to the internet, and 91% of them access news through social media. However, 61% of them have trouble distinguishing between factual and fake news on the internet (Newman et al., 2021). The lack of critical thinking is one of the biggest issues for Thai students, as they were taught to be passive learners (Mongkhondao, 2015; Thomas, 2020). Therefore, they tend to believe printed material without searching for facts.

This study aims to investigate the linguistic features of clickbait headlines as suggested by Bazaco et al. (2019), Chakraborty et al. (2016), Chen et al. (2015), Guerini and Staiano (2015), and Molek-Kozakowska (2013).

### **Research questions:**

1. How likely are participants to choose to read an article with a clickbait headline?
2. Do the reasons given for choosing clickbait headlines correspond to the linguistic features found in the headlines?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Clickbait headlines**

Since fake news articles are intended to be widely disseminated, they frequently use clickbait headlines to attract more clicks and generate advertising revenue (Lazer et al., 2018). Clickbait

headlines are generally used for soft news such as entertainment that are used to attract a large number of clicks for commercial purposes. One study showed that the number of clicks was not influenced by the topic of the headline, but merely by word choices, which increased the readers' curiosity (Lee et al., 2019). To increase the number of clicks, several linguistic features are used in the headlines, such as emotionally provoking words or sensational words (Bednarek, 2006; Bednarek & Caple, 2017), anaphora or the technique of substituting words to avoid revealing the real topic, presuppositions, use of questions, negative words, quotes, signal words, pronouns, and numbers (Lee et al., 2019), forward references which are used to trigger presuppositions such as pronouns, adverbs, definite articles, ellipsis of obligatory arguments, imperatives with implicit deictic reference, interrogatives, and general nouns with deictic reference (Blom & Hansen, 2015; Karaca, 2019), and plot organization including organizing the story in a different order or the use of reversal narrative to enhance readers' curiosity. According to Bonyadi and Samuel (2013), existential presupposition was commonly observed, and it stimulated curiosity through negative words. Meanwhile, the use of lexical presupposition could be both positive and negative for reader attraction.

### **Differences between clickbait and non-clickbait headlines**

The difference between clickbait and non-clickbait is the language feature and sentence structure. A non-clickbait headline is factual and simple, and the tone is neutral. The pattern is formal with a shorter length. A clickbait headline is generally misleading and provides false news. The headline could be verbal or non-verbal, such as using a meme or a picture to attract attention. According to Chakraborty et al. (2016) and Horne and Adali (2017), the clickbait headline has a longer length than non clickbait headline. The length of word used for clickbait headline is also shorter. For example, a clickbait headline would shorten the function words, such as 'you're', 'we'd', and 'they're' Chakraborty et al. (2016). The words used are eye-catching, promising, internet slang, and stop words. The clickbait sentence is more complex when compared with a non-clickbait sentence. It does not have a formal punctuation pattern. Moreover, clickbait headlines contain a higher proportion of possessive nouns, adverbs, determiners, and verbs, as well as the use of personal or possessive pronouns, whereas non-clickbait headlines use participles and are written in the third person third person (Coste & Bufnea, 2021).

### **Clickbait framework**

Our framework for analyzing clickbait headlines was modified from Bazaco et al. (2019), Chakraborty et al. (2016), Chen et al. (2015), Guerini and Staiano (2015), and Molek-Kozakowska (2013) as shown in Table 2. Bazaco's study of clickbait variables was adopted as the foundation. The study used content analysis to examine how headlines attract readers' attention and the characteristics of variables associated with this effect. The results showed that factors that attract people to click on soft news headlines include incomplete information, bait headlines, hyperbole, and pre-eminence. These headlines were repeatedly shared through viral messages to increase readers' curiosity and expectations.

## Research on clickbait headlines

The study about clickbait perception and preference is novel in the education field. As an addition to the field, Molina et al. (2021) have conducted three studies on clickbait headline preference and the characteristics that made people choose to read the article. The study adopted different approaches covering real-time choosing, uncontrolled, and controlled headlines. Clickbait has been categorized into demonstrative adjectives, lists, modals, questions, and “wh” words such as what, why, and who, positive superlatives, and negative superlatives.

In the first approach, participants were asked to choose a headline from the eight provided headlines, i.e., seven clickbait headlines and one non-clickbait headline. The result revealed that participants prefer the non-clickbait headline as it arouses more curiosity and looks more reliable. Among the clickbait headlines, list was the most popular option that people wanted to click on, followed by “wh” words, demonstrative adjectives, positive superlatives, negative superlatives, questions, and modals.

In the second approach, the author modified one of the headlines to fit all the clickbait criteria. Participants were introduced to seven modified headlines and one original headline and asked to choose the headline that attracted them most. The results revealed that participants preferred non-clickbait headlines. Among clickbait headlines “Wh” received the most clicks, followed by negative superlatives, modals, lists, demonstrative adjectives, questions, and positive superlatives.

In the third approach, headlines collected from both reliable and unreliable sources were screened. These screened headlines were introduced to participants through actual social media. In contrast to Studies 1 and 2, the four models revealed that clickbait using demonstrative adjectives, lists, and “wh” words received more clicks than the non-clickbait headline.

The engagement depends on the topic of the headline, the user's experience, media literacy campaigns, importance and relevancy to the user, and knowledge gap, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Factors influencing decision-making to click or not to click on a headline (Kormelink & Meijer, 2018)**

<b>Cognitive (Thinking)</b>	1. Trends
	2. Personal relevance
	3. Importance, i.e., the news is something they ought to know
	4. Geographical proximity, i.e., users sees the news as concerning their immediate surroundings
	5. Cultural proximity, i.e., the user recognizes a kinship with the news
	6. Bombshell, i.e., unexpected and surprising news
	7. Predictability of the outcome, i.e., the news is obvious, and the reader has already heard the news
	8. Follow up with the story that the reader has been following
	9. Rings a bell to the users
	10. More detail on a particular topic

<b>Cognitive (Thinking)</b>	11. Engagement in conversation, i.e., the users expect to bring up the news in conversation
	12. Own opinion, i.e., the user wants to see how a topic they have an opinion about is discussed in the news
	13. News redundancy, i.e., the news repeats itself too often
	14. New perspective, i.e., the headline offers a different perspective on the topic
	15. Particular perspective, i.e., the users want to witness the news event
	16. Factual preference, i.e., the user expects facts rather than opinions
	17. Comprehensive update, i.e., the user expects the whole story and not an isolated update
	18. Informational completeness, i.e., complete information in the headline
	19. Association gap, i.e., the user cannot connect the headline to the topic
<b>Affective (Emotion)</b>	1. Visual appeal
	2. Sad news
	3. Lighthearted news
	4. Bemusement which makes the users feel excitedly puzzled by the headline
	5. The users instantly dismiss the pettiness of the headline
	6. Categorical welcome/rejection. The user feels either enthusiasm or aversion towards the topic of the news
	7. Gleeeful annoyance, i.e., the user is delightfully enraged by the news
<b>Pragmatic</b>	1. Disruption, i.e., clicking will interrupt a smooth user experience
	2. Data heaviness, i.e., clicking will consume too much data
	3. Clicking does not fit in the user's schedule

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The participants were categorized according to their education levels, i.e., six undergraduates, six masters, and six PhD students from universities in Thailand, Taiwan, and USA. They were aged between 27 and 42, indicating that they were millennials or the first digital native generation. This generation grew up with communication technology, and they were the early social media users.

### Research instruments

The research tools consisted of four sets of questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview, with the latter being an important qualitative element not included in most previous studies.

### Questionnaires

Each set of questionnaires consisted of 12 headlines, 6 of which were clickbait from snopes.com and the other 6 non-clickbait selected from credible sources such as the BBC and CNN (Au et al., 2020; Horne & Adali, 2017). Therefore, a total of 48 headlines were presented to the 18 participants. They were selected based on the modified frameworks as shown in Table 2. The criteria for selecting clickbait headlines comprised:

- 1) False information was identified as verified by snopes.com.
- 2) The headline possesses clickbait features using the modified clickbait framework referred to in Table 2, i.e.,

- 2.1) It does not reveal full information to make people explore more.
- 2.2) The sentence was exaggerating, used exaggerating words, and, for example, used negative or unexpected words.
- 2.3) The sentence has a narrative tone.
- 2.4) The sentence attracts attention using slang, hyperbolic words, and informal punctuation.
- 2.5) There is use of celebrity names, strong words that provoke action and to attract attention, and the use of different topics in the same sentence.
- 2.6) The sentence emphasizes positive or negative emotions.

The participants were asked to rate the top three headlines for all four sets of questionnaires (12 headlines in total). Each clickbait headline represents each of the six variables. The selected clickbait headlines were analyzed for various clickbait aspects and validated by the two external validators to avoid subjective judgment.

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

The interview lasted approximately 30-40 minutes long. Initially, all the participants rated the aforementioned 12 headlines that they would click on and were asked to explain why they made those choices. They were allowed the first 10 minutes to go through all the headlines, and it took time for them to choose and rank which ones they were most interested in. Therefore, the time for each actual interview conducted was 15-20 minutes. The main reasons for selecting the headlines were recorded.

### **Data analysis**

First of all, the type of headlines that people would click on were collected and analyzed quantitatively. This shows the source of news, the number of people who fall for clickbait, and the type of linguistic features in percentage. The interview scripts were coded to form themes based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, referred to in Table 3. In the last stage, all identified themes were merged into three categories based on their relevance.

A qualitative analysis was conducted using thematic analysis in order to find themes for why the participants chose to click or not click on various clickbait headlines. This type of analysis is flexible and has been widely used for qualitative analytic methods as it is suitable for anyone who wishes to conduct qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Selected headlines contain various variables, such as incomplete information, appeals expressions, repetition and serialization, exaggeration, soft news, and striking elements. A comprehensive literature review was then conducted to identify additional clickbait variables. Based on this literature review, themes were established, and clickbait variables were categorized according to these themes. The results of this process are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Modified clickbait framework used in this study**

Clickbait variables	Characteristics	Example headline
Absence of most relevant data	Unresolved pronouns (personal + demonstrative)	<u>He loves Beatles, menthol cigs...</u>
	Deictic words that refer to people, places, things in the article	<u>Here's What Happens When You Put A Few Little Kids...</u>
	Deixis with adverb	Were gang initiates <u>really</u> planning to kill 30 or more women on Halloween 2008?
	Unanswered questions	<u>Do seatbelts cause more deaths than save lives?</u>
	Enumeration and lists	<u>10 Ways</u> You Never Knew You Were Using the Toilet Wrong.
Evaluation (Exaggeration and apparent description)	Negative-charged labels	<u>Greedy</u> bankers to face prison...
	Unexpectedness	These 12 <u>impossible</u> pet rescue stories will melt your heart!
	Recurrent, negative	Now RB boss to get <u>another</u> 8m bonus ...
	Importance	<u>Top</u> 10 ugliest female celebrities
	Superlative, hyperbole, overblown figures	<u>Millions</u> face winter fuel bills
Narrative	Necessity or urgency	The <u>must</u> see technology that is changing the way you listen.
	Climax—(complication)—resolution/coda	[Paramedics left aspiring model] [to die at a party] <u>[after he downed 14 shots of vodka telling him to 'sleep it off']</u>
Striking element	Hyperbolic words (umbrella for "evaluation" above)	2022's <u>best</u> TV shows you can't miss on Netflix, HBO, Disney plus and more
	Internet slang	Did JK Rowling Tweet if 'American <u>Birds</u> ' Kept 'Legs Closed' Maybe They Wouldn't Need Abortions?
	Informal punctuation	<u>Joe Biden has no shame. First, he poops his pants when meeting the Pope, then Farts loudly in front of Camilla at C26 Summit!! !! Whats next Joe</u>
	Common bait phrases	50 random facts <u>you won't believe</u> are true
	Personal pronouns and common words as subjects	What <u>you</u> don't know about custom designing a home
	Determiners (reference people or things in the article)	<u>These</u> journalists are facing huge threats and injustice for pursuing the truth.
Non-academic	Use of numbers	Woman loses <u>155</u> pounds by cutting out these <u>4</u> foods
	Activity words to inspire action	<u>You need to start doing (example) instead of (example)</u>
	Celebrity names	<u>Kim Kardashian and Kanye West are splitting up</u>
	Disparate topics	<u>This Is The Most Inspiring Yet Depressing Yet Hilarious Yet Horrifying Yet Heartwarming Grad Speech</u>
Emotion	Emotional valence (positive, negative)	Did "God <u>bless</u> the USA" composer Lee Greenwood flee to Canada to avoid Vietnam war draft?
	Arousal (e.g., anger is denoted by high arousal while sadness by low arousal)	White House just gave Conway the boot, <u>prepare to be infuriated.</u>
	Control (e.g., inspiration vs fear)	Hillary Clinton <u>attacks</u> women who didn't vote for her



The clickbait headlines defined in this study led to articles with false information that used attractive headlines to captivate readers. According to the examples shown in Table 2, a clickbait headline is a sentence, and it can therefore possess more than one criterion. Because a headline could be characterized by more than one variable, each headline was categorized according to its type, referring to the modified framework of clickbait variables. Next, in the variable box we filled in all the headlines that clearly demonstrated the clickbait variable. After that, we looked for any second characteristic of the headline and categorized it accordingly. Additionally, the selected clickbait headlines were sent to two external verifiers to cross-check if they fell under the criteria specified. Then, the verified headlines were used for the research

Table 3 has been used as a reference to determine the theme of why people choose to read a particular headline. The interview conducted was transcribed and coded to find the theme relevant to the factor for selecting a headline. In the initial coding, 18 themes emerged. As a result, the author reviewed the themes and grouped them based on their relationship with one another. For example, interest, age, background and the overall context of the news headline were grouped as “relevance”. The source of information and the picture presented in the news were grouped as “reliability”. Other factors such as use of numbers, words used, internet slang, etc. were grouped as linguistic features. Moreover, the linguistic features were categorized according to Table 2 to show the type of headline that people would select and which linguistic feature played a major role in headline selection based on the interview.

**Table 3**  
**Phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)**

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking the themes’s work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic “map” of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, together with a final analysis of selected extracts, relating the analysis back to the research questions and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

## Procedure

This study adopted a mixed methodology that combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative approach is used to study the type of clickbait headline that people of different education levels are likely to choose and share. Next, a qualitative approach was used to study the rationale behind choosing the headline and determine if the reasons correspond to the language feature that classifies the headline as clickbait.



Firstly, a comprehensive literature review of the clickbait criteria was conducted based on the framework of Bazaco et al. (2019), with the addition of several other sources, namely Chakraborty et al. (2016), Chen et al. (2015), Guerini and Staiano (2015), and Molek-Kozakowska (2013) to adapt or add variables and form a more comprehensible framework, as shown in Table 2.

Secondly, questionnaires with validated headlines were distributed to all participants using Google Form. The questionnaire was administered before setting up the semi-structured interview for an in-depth analysis of why people chose a particular headline.

Lastly, selected headlines were quantified by the percentage of people who preferred reading clickbait. In addition, data collected from the interview was coded to find the factors that made people choose to read the headline and to determine the theme for headline selection.

## RESULTS

Table 4 shows some of the results of the questionnaire, covering the sources of news received, the time spent on social media in a day, and the likelihood of sharing a post after reading it.

**Table 4**  
**Source of news and time spent on social media**

	Number of people	Percentage (%)
<b>Source of news</b>		
Social media	16	88.9
Television	1	5.6
Website	1	5.6
<b>Time spent on social media</b>		
More than 5 hours	4	22.2
3-5 hours	9	50.0
1-2 hours	4	22.2
I don't use social media	1	5.6

While not tested for statistical significance, Table 4 suggests that social media is the main platform for receiving news in Thailand. The result is similar to the study conducted by Newman et al. (2021), which suggested that 91% of Thai people access news through social media, preferably Facebook and Line, as Thais are known to be one of the top social media users in the world. The majority of participants spend 3–5 hours on social media daily, which tallies with the average of 3 hours spent on social media by Thai people (Viriyaavejakul, 2019). However, the study shows that a subject no longer used social media because it was perceived as a time-consuming platform.

### Clickbait and non-clickbait headline selection

This subsection answers RQ1: “How likely are participants to choose to read an article with a clickbait headline?” Each participant rated the top three headlines that they were most

interested in reading for all four sets of questionnaires. Table 5 shows the result of the headline selection for both clickbait and non-clickbait headline.

**Table 5**  
**Number of clickbait and non-clickbait headlines selected by the participants**

Name	Clickbait Headlines (N = 24)	Non-Clickbait Headlines (N = 24)
U4	10	2
M5	8	4
P2	8	4
M4	7	5
P6	6	6
M2	5	7
M6	5	7
U5	4	8
P4	4	8
U1	3	9
U2	3	9
M1	3	9
M3	3	9
P3	3	9
U3	2	10
U6	2	10
P5	2	10
P1	1	11
<b>Number</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>63</b>

According to Table 5, the majority of the participants did not fall for clickbait headlines as they did not want to read an article with a clickbait headline. The result is consistent with the study conducted by Molina et al. (2021) because non-clickbait headlines elicited more curiosity and credibility.

Since our research focused on the linguistic features of clickbait headlines that attract readers' attention, the 24 clickbait headlines were investigated further regarding the features that attract readers. Table 6 shows the clickbait headlines in the questionnaire and the number of people selecting the headlines. Since all the participants were given the same set of questionnaires, the number of headlines selected could be higher than the actual number of participants.

**Table 6**  
**Clickbait headlines**

No.	Clickbait Headlines	Frequency (N = 18)	Clickbait Variable
1	A.2. 10 Things you need to do before buying a house	11	Evaluation
2	C.2. Do seatbelts cause more deaths than save lives?	9	Evaluation
3	C.6. Does the 5 second rule really work? Is it true that dropped food remains germ free if picked up off the floor within five seconds?	7	Non-academic
4	D.4. 10 Ways You Never Knew You Were Using the Toilet Wrong	7	Striking element

No.	Clickbait Headlines	Frequency (N = 18)	Clickbait Variable
5	A.4. 50 random facts you won't believe are true	6	Striking element
6	D.6. "Are you awake yet?"	5	Emotion
7	A.1. Does the average women swallow 6 pounds of lipstick during her lifetime?	4	Absence of most relevant data
8	B.2. Does video show Charles' security with fake arms and hands?	4	Evaluation
9	C.1. Will your fingernails and hair keep growing after death?	4	Absence of most relevant data
10	D.3. Did a 2-year old in Virginia die after getting COVID-19 vaccination?	4	Absence of most relevant data
11	B.1. Does chocolate milk contain cow's blood? ... The real colour of cow milk	3	Absence of most relevant data
12	B.3. Did 69 people die after drinking crocodile bile poison beer?	2	Narrative
13	B.4. Workers spot giant snakes, you won't believe what they found inside!	2	Striking element
14	B.5. Did WHO study conclude that natural blondes are likely to be extinct within 200 years?	2	Non-academic
15	C.3. Was a man charged \$70K after exploiting a door dash glitch?	2	Narrative
16	D.5. Are 90% of US marriages between high school sweethearts?	2	Non-academic
17	A.6. Joe Biden has no shame. First, he poops his pants when meeting the Pope, then farts loudly in front of Camilla at C26 Summit!! !! What's next, Joe?	1	Emotion
18	B.6. Did JK Rowling Tweet if 'American Birds' Kept 'Legs Closed' Maybe They Wouldn't Need Abortions?	1	Emotion
19	C.7. Golf: Gentlemen only, ladies forbidden?	1	Emotion
20	D.1. Does photo show garlic flavoured Coca-Cola?	1	Absence of most relevant data
21	D.2. Milk bones contain a toxic preservative	1	Evaluation
22	A.3. Does photo show Jackie Kennedy reaching for help after JFK's assassination?	0	Narrative
23	A.5. Does Pic Show Albert Einstein Playing an Electric Guitar?	0	Non-academic
24	C.4. Snickers are officially caving and removing the world-renowned dick vein from the candy bar	0	Striking element

Table 6 shows that numbers 1 to 5 were the top 5 most selected among the clickbait headlines, while numbers 22 to 24 were not selected by any participants. The data could be elicited according to the proximity of the information to the participants, gender, and background preference. First, considering numbers 22 to 24, the context of the headline is internationally known by names used which were non-Thai. In number 24, it includes the word "world-renowned", which indicates that the scope is beyond Thailand. These participants were not familiar with the names and were uncertain of the use of the information. Meanwhile, numbers 1 to 5 used general context such as buying a house, the use of a seatbelt, random facts, the use of a toilet, and the hygiene of food after dropping it on the floor for 5 seconds. It could be observed that people selected these headlines that are relevant to them based on their usage and the knowledge they could gain.

In the elaboration of choosing the headline based on proximity and relevance to the topic, gender was one of the factors when selecting the headline. All the participants who selected number 7 were all female because the headline was about lipstick consumption, which is directly related to women as they apply lipstick in their daily life. Similarly, number 6 was all selected by participants with science backgrounds whose curriculum involved laboratory classes. The headline intended to arouse emotion by using a question. The question without any context increased their curiosity and prompted them to find out.

Table 7 shows the number of clickbait headlines selected, which is 79 times out of the 21 represented clickbait headlines, which accounts for 37%. Out of 37% of clickbait headlines, evaluation headlines were the most selected followed by a striking element, absence of most relevant data, non-academic, emotion, and narrative, in descending order.

**Table 7**  
**Clickbait headlines selected based on educational level**

Clickbait Variable	Education Level			Number of Clickbait Headline Selected	
	Undergraduate	Master	PhD	N = 79	Percentage (%)
Evaluation	8	10	7	25	32
Striking element	3	7	5	15	19
Absence of most relevant data	4	5	3	12	15
Non-academic	2	4	5	11	14
Narrative	3	2	3	8	10
Emotion	4	3	1	8	10
<b>Total</b>	24	31	24	79	100

While not tested to determine whether or not the statistics reflect the general population, the most selected evaluation headlines were headlines A2 and C2. Although headlines A2 and C2 are categorized as evaluations, they also possess other clickbait aspects. For example, A2 and C2 could also be considered being absent of most relevant data. In addition, A2 also possesses non-academic aspects. These two headlines elicited curiosity by leaving a gap in things that happen in daily life. People selected the headline because it gave the feeling that it must be known, and it used comparative words to make people judge and explore the headline to find out the truth.

#### *A.2. 10 Things you need to do before buying a house*

Observing headline A2, the number was used to sequence the writing in the form of a list, and the word “need” was used to make the headline sound like it must be read. The word used is the main factor that categorizes this headline into evaluation, referring to Table 2. It was not mainly considered an absence of most relevant data and non-academic because the content emphasizes the “need to do”, so the use of numbers and the writing format are not the main focus of the headline.

### *C.2. Do seatbelts cause more deaths than save lives?*

Headline number C2 uses the comparative term “more”, which shows that not wearing a seatbelt assures a better chance of survival. Moreover, the headline is in a question format, which intrigues people into asking questions and finding out the truth by clicking. According to Table 2, the use of comparative and superlative words such as “more” and “most” is categorized as evaluation.

Following the evaluation-type headline, the striking element was the second most highly selected headline, i.e., headline numbers D4 and A4. In the striking element, common bait phrases and personal pronouns were used.

### *D.4. 10 Ways You Never Knew You Were Using the Toilet Wrong*

#### *A.4. 50 random facts you won't believe are true*

The headlines used the terms “You never knew”, and “You won't believe”. These phrases are considered “common bait phrases”, which are the major clickbait features observed online. It is considered a striking element because the term is exaggerated and challenging, which makes people curious as the word used has created expectations for people to learn what they have never learned before.

The two most selected headlines categorized as the absence of the most relevant data are headline numbers A1 and C1. This type of headline is generally in question format, and it urges people into clicking it by not providing the information, so people would click to find out the information by themselves.

### *A.1. Does the Average women swallow 6 pounds of lipstick during her lifetime?*

#### *C.1. Will your fingernails and hair keep growing after death?*

Consider headline numbers C6 and B5, which were categorized as non-academic. Both the headline and the number were in question format, and it used the number to represent its statistics which is one of the characteristic of non-academic statements, as shown below:

### *C.6. Does the 5 second rule really work? Is it true that dropped food remains germ free if picked up off the floor within five seconds?*

#### *B.5. Did WHO study conclude that natural blondes are likely to be extinct within 200 years?*

Next, narrative criteria explain the sequence in the headline. The term generally used is “after”, as it shows the sequence and what has happened, as shown in headline numbers B3 and C3 below;

### *B.3. Did 69 people die after drinking crocodile bile poison beer?*

#### *C.3. Was a man charged \$70K after exploiting a door dash glitch?*

Both headlines were questions and use numbers, which means they contain more than one

aspect of clickbait criteria. However, they explain the sequence and what has happened by using after to explain the consequence. Therefore, they are categorized as narrative.

The least selected clickbait type is emotion. Unlike other variables, which were cognitive, this criterion aims to arouse the reader's feelings after reading the headline and uses emotion as the tool for reading the headline. For example, headline number D6 is as follows:

*D.6. "Are you awake yet?"*

The headline is an intriguing question that immediately demands attention. The words used are awake, which is a verb, and yet, i.e., an adverb. The verb "awake" activates a sense of action, prompting readers to consider their current state of consciousness. Moreover, when it uses an adverb "yet", it adds a sense of urgency and time, emphasizing that the moment of awareness is expected to have occurred by now. By implying a period of waiting or anticipation up until the present moment, it subtly evokes emotion, such as impatience or curiosity. Combining the use of verbs and adverbs creates a compelling psychological prompt encouraging readers to reflect on their current status, which draw them into clicking the message.

According to Table 7, students with a master's degree prefer reading clickbait headlines than those at the PhD and undergraduate levels. The level of clickbait selected for both undergraduate and PhD programs is equal. The result is the opposite of the study conducted by *Munger et al. (2020)*, who considered education as one of the factors explaining why people prefer clickbait headlines, as observed by lower preference for clickbait in the more educated participants. However, this research shows that education does not affect the preference for clickbait as it depends on individual's interest, trend and background.

Considering a language perspective, numbers 1 to 5 were highly selected because they use strong words such as "need to know", "really", "more deaths than saved lives", "you never knew", and "you won't believe are true", whereas numbers 22 to 24 use simple words.

Next, the use of numbers and lists was observed in the highly selected headline, except for numbers 2 and 3. The number increased the reliability of the data, and the list made it easier to read the article, so the readers did not have to spare a lot of time. Moreover, it could be observed that people select headlines that do not fully tell the information, as they prefer to find out the gap by reading the article and checking if what they have known is true or not. For example, numbers 2, 3, 4, and 5 presented the headline as something they were familiar with, but in a way, people did not think they had the information.

To sum up, the majority of the participants selected non-clickbait headlines, indicating that they are unlikely to choose to read an article with a clickbait headline.

## **Interview**

This subsection answers RQ2: "Do the reasons given for choosing clickbait headlines correspond to the linguistic features found in the headlines?" As a qualitative element strengthening and

explicating previous studies, all the participants were interviewed based on the selected headline in order to determine what theme they considered when choosing to read a news headline. Using theme analysis, similar types of theme were grouped together, as shown in Table 8. For example, the theme of reliability consists of the source of the information and the picture. Participants said in the interview that they also looked at the picture to ensure that the news was credible.

**Table 8**  
**Theme analysis**

Theme	Frequency (People)	Frequency (Headline)	Percentage (% People)	Percentage (% Headline)
<b>(a) Relevance (Interest, trend and personal life, age, participant background, overall context)</b>	15	24	83.3	50.0
<b>(b) Linguistic feature</b>	13	16	72.2	33.3
(a) Non-academic*	9	8	50.0	16.67
(b) Striking element*	6	5	33.3	10.42
(c) Evaluation (Exaggeration and apparent description)*	8	4	22.2	8.33
(d) Narrative*	4	4	22.2	8.33
(e) Absence of most relevant data*	3	4	16.7	8.33
(f) Emotion*	2	2	11.1	4.17
<b>(c) Reliability (Source of information, picture)</b>	5	11	27.8	22.9
<b>Total</b>	18	48		

\* Represents the subgroup data of linguistic feature where people could select more than one category; therefore, the number in each group is higher than the overall linguistic feature which removed all the repetitive names and headlines.

While not tested for statistical significance, similar to Kormelink and Meijer (2018), and Molina et al. (2021), the result reveals that the main reason for reading a headline is its relevance to their lives, as shown in Table 8. Then participants consider the linguistic feature of the headline as a factor in clicking on the news. The least attractive factor is the reliability of the information.

Our analysis of the interview data provided evidence of the rationales underlying the selection of headlines. Based on the interviews, the reasons for selecting clickbait headlines revealed are enumeration and lists, necessity or urgency, personal interest, trend, background, relevance, superlative, hyperbole, overblown figures, unanswered questions, and use of numbers. Considering the interviews, the most popular reasons for selecting a clickbait headline were personal interest, trend, current issue, background, and relevancy of the topic to the participant, as shown in the excerpts below.

*It is interesting and will be most beneficial to my life because I use lipstick every day. I want to know the amount of lipstick in calculation, want to know the impact and effect on health.*

*Moreover, I like to read something that is fact based and something that I have the background knowledge. (M3)*



*It is related to my age because I'm at the early path of my career and I tend to work hard to achieve success, so the headline made me want to know how to be successful. (P4)*

*At the beginning of the pandemic, I might have read it as the priority because I want to know about how it will affect my life. Now that it is common, I don't take this headline as the priority. (M5)*

*I have heard about 5 second rule since I was a kid. The content is the random fact that everyone knows. It is merely based on the background knowledge. I want to know if it is real or if there is any other thing. (U4, M1, M6, P2, P5, P6)*

For example, consider headline number C6 from the excerpt above. The 5-second rule is a general fact that everyone has heard about. When it is reshaped in the form of a question, it challenges the knowledge that people believe. The challenge increased the curiosity level of people as it left an unknown gap as to whether the content was true or not, which is the rationale for clicking this headline. The result aligns with *Kormelink and Meijer (2018)*, which shows that people click on what they can relate to and offer a new perspective on what they already knew.

Next, the unanswered question aroused people's curiosity, which made them select headline number C2 as shown below:

*I would like to know if the statistic is real or not. (U1, U4)*

*The author is trying to present the concept which challenge the normal concept. Therefore, I want to know the author opinion and the content of what he wants to present. (M5)*

*The question has aroused my curiosity. I expect statistic, scientific paper to show the answer. (P6)*

C2 was clicked because it possessed the criteria of superlative, hyperbole, and overblown figures as shown below:

*The word "more" has urged me into clicking it because it is a comparative word which made me want to know which will be better. (P4)*

*"More" is a part of why I chose the headline, and it made me think if what we are doing is correct. (U6)*

The order of arrangement plays an important role in selecting a headline. Enumeration and list was one of the categories in the evaluation that was chosen because it is easy to read and follow because it is straight and concise, as shown in the excerpt below:

*Personally, I don't like to read long thing. I don't like essay. I love to read in bullet point, concise and easy. (M2, U3)*

*The text is easier to follow in bullet points. (P2, P6, U5)*

*I love when there is a category such as a number or ranking because it is easier to read. (U5)*

Moreover, the word used shows necessity or urgency, which encouraged participants to click the headline because they felt the need to do so. For example, the word “need” is a strong word when used in the headline. It was categorized under evaluation. Below are the opinions of the participants when they selected the headline:

*The word need made the term seem important, so I felt the need to click on it. (M2, U3)*

The use of numbers, which was categorized as non-academic, affects the choice of headline because it makes the headline clear and practical, particularly for participants with an engineering background. However, if the number is too high in the enumeration and lists a headline, participants will ignore the headline due to too much information.

*My background is engineering, so I like to have the numerical value in the headline as it is easier to catch up and memorize and it seems practical. (P2)*

On the other hand, some participants did not choose the clickbait headline because they exposed themselves to the original news regularly and could identify the unreliability. These participants prefer a headline with a neutral word used, a simplified sentence that provides sufficient information, and a non-question type headline, as shown in the excerpt below:

*I don't like to read the type of headline which is in question and use dodgy words such as 10 ways to. I prefer neutral headline which used formal word. (P1)*

*I like to read something in affirmative sentence so the detail is given at the headline and I don't like to read anything long and complex. (M5)*

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Most of the participants did not choose to read the clickbait headline because they did not find it relevant to their lives, which is consistent with the studies by Molina, et al. (2021) and Kormelink and Meijer (2018). The factor affecting the choice of selection is not based on education, as the author assumed, because they chose the headline based on their curiosity, their background, the content value that is knowledge for future use and entertainment purposes.

The main factors affecting the choice of headline selection are relevancy, linguistic features, and reliability. The relevant factors include the trend, current situation, and age of the participants. Participants of working age are likely to choose headlines related to their work and life, such as boosting productivity, employer needs, keys to success, buying a house, and traveling news. According to the interview, language plays a part in choosing to read the headline. Among the

linguistic features, the unanswered question and choice of word used trigger participants into finding out the truth, and the number and bullet points make it easier to read and follow up with the reading.

Firstly, the relevance of the headline to participants is the major factor in clicking a headline which is in consistency with a study from Molina et al. (2021) and Kormelink and Meijer (2018). The major reason based on the number of participants for selecting the headline is interest, trend, and personal life, followed by the age of the participants as some headlines could be useful at a particular age, the background of the participants, and the overall context of the headline. The similarity between this study and Kormelink and Meijer (2018) is the rationale for clicking a headline, which is the importance of the news in relation to the users' daily lives and something that they have heard before, so they would confirm the fact by reading it. The rationale for not clicking the headline is the associate gap because they could not connect the headline to the topic. It could be observed that participants did not like to read headlines, which are beyond their personal context, as they prefer to read for entertainment, to confirm, and to add up what they already knew.

Secondly, two main instruments were administered to determine the type of clickbait headline that people chose to click on. These comprised a questionnaire, the results of which are shown in Table 7, and interviews, which generated additional insights, as shown in Table 8. Without factoring in these insights about the participants, the questionnaire indicates that the types of most frequently selected clickbait are evaluation, followed by a striking element, the absence of most relevant data, and non-academic, narrative, and emotion. However, the interview revealed that non-academic linguistic features were the major factor, followed by a striking element, evaluation (exaggeration and apparent description) and narrative, which were of the same frequency, followed by the absence of most relevant data and emotion.

The results of this research are consistent with a study conducted by Molina et al. (2021). Both studies presented lists as one of the top characteristics in selecting a headline. Participants selected headlines because of the use of numbers, which made it easier for the reader to read the news, followed by bullet points, a common bait word, a comparative headline, narrative writing, words used, a question headline, the language sequence of the headline, emotion, a celebrity name, informal punctuation, and internet slang. However, the result slightly differed from the previous study in term of definition of the clickbait characteristics. For instance, "wh" words are functional words such as what, which, where, when, who, whose, whom, why, whether, and how, but they do not ask the actual question. In this study, it was covered by the scope of the determiner, which is under striking element, and the absence of most relevant data due to the use of the functional word. Similarly, demonstrative adjectives are covered by the absence of most relevant data in this study because Molina et al. (2021) defined them as entities being referred to, which matches the definition of unresolved pronouns in this study, which could be noticed by the term "this is". This study covered modal in the definition of evaluation, as Molina et al. (2021) defined it as an auxiliary verb that expresses possibility, suggestion, or obligation, such as the words "could" and "must". Although the result aligns with the previous study, some headlines are more engaging than others. The difference in definition and scope brings about a difference in terms of which type of clickbait is more engaging and which people would prefer.

In terms of reliability, the results revealed that people selected a headline by considering both the source of information and the picture to determine its credibility. Moreover, participants' backgrounds and preferences determine the type of headline they read. For example, some participants prefer news with reliable sources sorted through non-question type headlines, predictable headlines, and comprehensible headlines. Lifestyle also plays a part, as one participant read English news every morning and teaches critical thinking. Therefore, he could spot reliable headlines. Similarly, another participant read for leisure, and it happened that she had already read all the headlines on Twitter. The exposure equipped her with the ability to distinguish reliable headlines from non-reliable headlines. In addition, individual habits, such as observing the sentence and words used, as well as estimating the possibility of the topic, the length of the article estimated by the headline, and the benefit of the headline, were considered factors in selecting the headline.

Since all participants were of the first digital native generation, it was believed that they could easily fall for clickbait, as clickbait emerged during this era. The result shows the opposite of what was believed, which could be due to the awareness program raised, the disappointing feeling after clicking a clickbait headline, the amount of internet exposure, awareness of the consequence, and preventive measures built-in into social media. For example, Facebook has installed a system that minimizes clickbait posts.

The results of this study can be used to develop teaching materials, such as creative writing and to raise awareness of the clickbait headline by familiarizing the readers with different type of headlines using clickbait variables. The study modified the clickbait framework to make it more comprehensive and cover more aspects. Moreover, it shows the type of word and structure used by clickbait headlines as well as the rationale behind headline selection. At the management level, this research could be used to raise awareness of clickbait headlines so students are aware of the type of words used and the credibility of the headline. As a teacher, the clickbait variable could be used to develop material to attract students' attention for reading class as well as teach students how to write to attract readers. Since the research used an in-depth interview, the results obtained are insightful. However, there are limitations, such as the number of participants which is too small to represent the whole Thai population. Moreover, there is a possibility that participants knew the topic in advance, so they avoided choosing the clickbait headline for their personal purposes. As a recommendation for future study, the research could be improved by a natural setting which involves linking the headline on an actual social media platform with the use of eye-tracking and related software to determine what kind of headline readers actually click on.

## **CONCLUSION**

Social media is the major source of news for Thai people. The participants in this study spent more time on social media than the average Thai person, which is 3 hours a day. The results show that most participants do not fall for clickbait, and education does not affect the headline selection as they choose the headline based on its relevance to themselves, the current trend, their background, and their interests. Following personal relevance, linguistic features such as

the use of a number, a bullet point, and a common bait are the top three factors for headline selection. Other linguistic features that elicited curiosity include unanswered questions and the word “more”, which urged participants to find out the truth. The word “need”, which is a strong word, makes people feel that they could have missed something important if they did not click on the headline. Enumeration and lists made the headline and the article easy to read and follow up on because they were concise. However, participants stated that the number used in the enumeration and list headlines should not be too large; otherwise, it will be ignored by the participants. Lastly, reliability is the least important factor that people considered while selecting the headline.

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