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Exploring Clickbait on YouTube: Typologies, Engagement, and Content Moderation

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Abstract. Clickbait is commonly applied on YouTube to capture users' interest; however, it is impossible to estimate clickbait efficiency solely through clicks because there are other components of user engagement such as likes, comments, shares, watch time, viewer retention, and many others. This research paper aims to investigate how different types of clickbait impact user engagement on YouTube and whether the effect is influenced by content category. Systematic literature review was performed to analyze existing studies devoted to clickbait, online engagement, headlines features, video content. It focuses on three main types of clickbait: Curiosity Gap, Emotional Clickbait and Exaggeration Clickbait. It became clear from the review that these kinds of clickbait have different impacts on user engagement. So, Curiosity Gap clickbait can promote users to click on videos through generating an information gap; Emotional Clickbait – to engage users due to provoking emotions; Exaggeration Clickbait – to attract the users initially, but later demotivate them from engaging deeply since their expectations will not be fulfilled. Moreover, it became evident that the effect is influenced by content category. For instance, entertainment and lifestyle videos may react positively to emotional and exaggerated clickbait; educational and technological – more credibly and accurately. In general, it seems that clickbait can be useful in attracting user attention, but it is not always influential regarding deep engagement.

Keywords: Clickbait, YouTube, User Engagement

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

With the rapid development of social media, YouTube has become an important platform for users to obtain information, watch videos and engage in interactions. Users' attention has gradually become a competitive resource between digital content producers. As one of the most important global online video platforms, the content producers need to attract the users' attention through title, cover image and other information cues and further maintain its viewership and interaction. Therefore, clickbait

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has gradually become a common strategy for attracting attention in the dissemination of digital content.

Clickbait usually relies on curiosity gaps, emotional appeals, and exaggeration to attract clicks. However, the dissemination effect of the video is not only reflected in the action of clicking, but also likes, comments, viewing duration and completion rate can reflect the degree of users' participation in the content. Therefore, whether clickbait can truly stimulate user interaction rather than merely increase clicks needs to be further investigated.

1.2. Definition of clickbait

Clickbait was initially mainly applied to news websites and online media, with the development of social media and online video platforms, the application scope of clickbait has gradually expanded to video platforms such as YouTube. Although there are certain differences in the definition of clickbait in current research, it is generally believed that creating information gaps and stimulating users' curiosity are its core mechanisms.

Based on existing research, this study classifies clickbait into three main types: Curiosity Gap, Emotional Clickbait and Exaggeration Clickbait.

1.3. Research motivation and research gaps

Although the existing studies have thoroughly discussed the definition of clickbait, its linguistic features and its impact on click behavior. However, there are still several areas where the research is lacking.

- Most of the existing studies focus on click-through rates, but ignoring deep interaction indicators such as likes, comments, and viewing duration.
- Most existing studies treat clickbait as a single entity, lacking detailed comparisons of different types (curiosity, emotion, exaggeration) of effects.
- There is a lack of systematic studies of moderating effect on content categories.
- The cover image, as a visual key that coexists with the title, often has its own interactive effect overlooked.

1.4. Structure of the paper

This paper is divided into seven sections. The first section is the introduction, which presents the research background, the definition of clickbait, and the research gap. The second section describes the methods for literature search and screening. The third section outlines the types of clickbait and the interaction indicators of YouTube users. The fourth section analyzes the impact of clickbait on user interaction. The fifth section discusses the moderating effect of content categories. The sixth section summarizes the research findings and proposes future research directions. The seventh section is the conclusion.

2. Literature review methodology

This research employs a systematic literature review approach, involving a systematic search, screening, classification, and comprehensive analysis of recent studies related to clickbait, YouTube user interaction and the influence of content categories. Unlike traditional descriptive reviews, this study employs a clear search strategy and literature screening criteria to summarize and compare the existing study, which can help us recognize the main consensus, controversies and research gaps in

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existing studies, and provide a theoretical foundation for the establishment of the subsequent research framework.

2.1. Literature search strategy

Our study mainly conducted literature searches through the Web of Science, Google Scholar and other academic databases, and based on the research question, set up multiple sets of keyword combinations for searching. The keywords contain "Clickbait", "YouTube", "User Engagement", "Video Views", "Click-through rate", "Curiosity Gap", "Emotional Clickbait", "Exaggeration" and "Content Category".

This study adopts a keyword-combination search method to improve the comprehensiveness of literature retrieval for future research, such as "Clickbait" AND "YouTube", "Clickbait" AND "User Engagement", "Clickbait" AND "Video Views", "Clickbait" AND "Curiosity Gap" and "Clickbait" AND "Content Category". These keyword combinations were selected to investigate different aspects of the research questions. For example, "Clickbait" AND "Content Category" was used to explore whether the effects of Clickbait differ across different content categories, while "Clickbait" AND "User Engagement" was used to examine the relationship between clickbait and user interaction. On this basis, adjusting the keyword combination according to different research topics, covering the definition of clickbait, title language characteristics, user engagement, the effect of video dissemination, content categories and other research direction.

The research results are initially evaluated based on the titles and abstracts to determine their relevance to the research topic of this study. Then, read the full texts of the relevant literature that meet the initial criteria. The inclusion criteria were that the studies were written in English, were published within the specified time range, and were relevant to clickbait, YouTube, user engagement, or content categories. The exclusion criteria included studies that were not directly related to the research topic and duplicate studies. For classic works with high theoretical value or frequently cited in subsequent studies, even if they were published earlier than the main time range, they will still be retained to ensure a comprehensive review of the development of clickbait and the theoretical foundation.

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

In order to ensure the quality of the literature and the consistency of the research topic, this study has established clear inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature.

First, in terms of the time frame, our study mainly concentrates on the research published recently within the last seven years to ensure that the review can reflect the latest developments of clickbait in the social media and online video platform environment.

Second, in terms of the type of literature, this study mainly includes peer-reviewed academic journal papers and important academic conference papers. Research contents need to have a direct connection with at least one of the core issues in Clickbait, YouTube, user interaction or the effectiveness of digital media dissemination.

Third, in terms of exclusion criteria, this study excluded the following types of literature: First, the researches do not have direct connection with clickbait or user communication behavior; Second, only discussing technical issues such as clickbait automatic identification and machine learning classification, without involving research on user behavior or dissemination effects; Third, news reports, blogs, business websites and other non-academic sources; Fourth, repeated publications or

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highly repetitive content in the literature; Fifth, literature from which the complete text cannot be obtained, thus making it impossible to conduct an analysis of the acting techniques and conclusion.

2.3. Literature screening and analysis process

The literature screening for this study was divided into three main parts. The first stage involved a preliminary search using preset keywords and the deletion of duplicate documents. In the second stage, based in the titles and abstracts, relevant studies related to clickbait, YouTube users interaction, title types and content categories are selected. In the third stage, the full texts were read to further determine whether the literature meets the inclusion criteria.

3. Taxonomy of clickbait and engagement metrics

3.1. Taxonomy of clickbait

Based on existing studies, clickbait is not a single title strategy, it can be classified into different types based on its main mechanism for attracting users' attention. This study classifies clickbait into three main types: Curiosity Gap, Emotional Clickbait and Exaggeration Clickbait.

3.1.1. Curiosity gap

Curiosity Gap is more common type of the clickbait, its core lies in deliberately concealing key information to create an information gap. Titles usually do not provide complete information. Instead, they arouse users' curiosity through suspense, incomplete statements or unanswered questions, thereby encouraging them to click or watch the video.

3.1.2. Emotional clickbait

Emotional Clickbait mainly attracts attention through stimulating user's emotion reaction. Titles may use strong positive or negative emotion words, such as surprise, anger, fear or excitement. This will cause a strong emotional stimulation for the users and further generate their desire to click or watch the video.

3.1.3. Exaggeration clickbait

Exaggeration Clickbait attracts users' attention mainly by exaggerating facts, using sensational expressions or amplifying the significance of events.

Therefore, three types of clickbait mainly rely on creating information gaps, stimulating emotions, and exaggerating expressions to attract users' attention. Classifying these types can help us further compare whether different clickbait strategies will result in different user interaction effects.

3.2. YouTube user engagement metrics

The effectiveness of clickbait cannot be measured solely by the number of clicks. For YouTube, users interaction is a multi-dimensional concept. It can be understood from two aspects: basic interaction and deep participation. Earlier studies have shown that title features can affect various aspects of user engagement with short-video platforms [1].

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The basic interactions mainly include likes, comments and shares. These metrics indicate the extent to which users engage with the content post-viewing. To be specific, likes can reflect users' basic feedback, comments can reflect the degree of users' participation in discussion and sharing indicates the users' willingness to further disseminate the content.

Besides the basic interaction, watch time and retention rate can further reflect users' continuous participation with the video content. Clicking can only indicate that the user has accessed the video, but the duration of viewing and the retention rate can reflect whether the users actually watch continuously. Therefore, if clickbait can increase the rate of clicking, but users leave the video immediately after entering, its actual dissemination effect may differ from simply increasing the click rate.

These user behaviors may also be related to the YouTube's recommendation mechanism. The duration of viewing, retention rate and interaction behaviors, such as likes and comments can provide signals of content performance in the platform and may further influence the range of content dissemination. Therefore, only focusing on the click-through rate may not fully reflect the actual dissemination effect of clickbait.

4. The impact of clickbait on user engagement

The first few are clickbait titles and the rest are not. It will explore the various effects of clickbait types and also examine the combined effect of titles and thumbnails in different ways.

4.1. Clickbait vs. non-clickbait: a contested relationship

The effect of clickbait on people's interest in a video is not yet clear. The first is that clickbait is good according to some people. For example, some linguistic features (such as odd punctuation and particular words) have drawn considerable attention on Facebook [2]. According to the information-gap theory, clickbait may also create a sense of knowledge deficiency in the reader and thus trigger their curiosity, leading them to click and learn more [3].

Some scholars have not recommended the above way. They believe that although a deceptive or exaggerated headline can increase clicks temporarily, it will harm the long-term reputation of the publication and lose readers' trust [4]. Therefore, to prevent this, YouTube has started to reduce the weight given to watch time and audience retention in favour of click-through rates in its recommendation algorithm. If a title is clicked but no good content is presented within the first 30 seconds, and users leave early, then the algorithm will reduce the video's recommendation priority. The above paradox shows that the effect of clickbait depends on which aspect of "engagement" is being considered. The former are good; the latter are not.

4.2. Differential effects of clickbait types

Based on the previous studies, we have classified the three main types of clickbait according to how they affect users.

Curiosity Gap is an anaphora that intentionally omits some information to arouse readers' curiosity [5]. Create a lack of information to make people feel curious and anxious about missing out. It is not very good at promoting interactive behaviour, such as comments and shares. Once the users believe that the content does not meet their expectations set by the headline, they will lose interest in participating.

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Another type of clickbait is to use emotional words to grab people's attention and move them. Negative words in news headlines can increase clicks, and each additional negative word increases the click rate by 2.3% [6]. Similarly, the linguistic features of the headlines have also been shown to affect people's behaviour [7]. Viewers of videos are more likely to click on titles that make them feel good [8]. Title sentiment and title length were found to have an interaction effect [9]. Therefore, it can be concluded that title sentiment does not independently affect video sharing. Based on the above results, it can be concluded that emotional clickbait has different effects on different platforms and types of content for different users.

The third kind of clickbait is to make exaggerated statements about the content, such as "unbelievable" or "you won't believe it". This way of doing things usually draws public attention in entertainment circles, but when people seek information, they are often let down because the content does not meet their expectations.

4.3. The multimodal interaction of thumbnail and title

Most of the previous research on clickbait has focused on text-based titles and has paid less attention to video thumbnails. According to a recent study of more than 16,000 YouTube videos, thumbnails with strong emotions, both positive and negative, can increase views by 18.3%, but strong emotions in the titles have actually damaged performance [8]. The same study also found that the more aligned the meaning of the thumbnail and title is, the higher the view count; thus, on YouTube, titles and thumbnails work together to attract clicks and affect user behaviour.

According to the analysis of 16,215 YouTube thumbnails, those with strong emotional expressions are more likely to be clicked, and these emotions can be either positive or negative [8]. Highly emotional titles are not always good for people. It can be seen that visual information is usually processed more rapidly and directly affects people's emotions and other actions.

YouTube creators can also use visual aids to show emotions and emotional states, add all sorts of attention-grabbing symbols such as exclamation marks, ellipses and emojis, etc., to increase the impact of their videos [10]. The thumbnails can be used to draw people's attention and thus increase clicks.

Therefore, one cannot understand the reasons for clickbait by studying only its titles. Future research can add more details about thumbnails, such as emotions, faces, colours, text, etc., to understand what users are interested in.

5. The moderating role of content categories

The Degree of Clickbait Differs Among Different Content Types. People in different areas have various reasons and hopes, so they will respond to clickbait differently.

5.1. Different effects of clickbait across content categories

Clickbait is generally more popular in entertainment and lifestyle content because people are looking for fun and emotion. It is not that people want fun; in fact, studies have shown that some users are simply more open to emotional language and curiosity gaps. Therefore, the effect of a headline varies by category, and they should not be handled uniformly.

However, the same methods are not suitable for education and technology content. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), such content generally has a high cognitive load, and people are more likely to process the information carefully; they are less likely to be swayed by

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simple peripheral cues, such as emotional words or exaggerated expressions. Therefore, the sensationalised headline will not attract the attention of the audience and may even cause them to lose faith in the news. Therefore, one of the reasons people continue to view the material is because they trust it.

5.2. Comparative synthesis: content category as a boundary condition

In short, different content categories affect how clickable something is by altering people's motives and expectations of trust. Different situations lead people to be more or less influenced by emotions in their consumption of news headlines. Therefore, the success of clickbait also depends on whether it meets the expectations and information demands of the audience at that time.

6. Discussion and future research agenda

According to the literature in this paper, the effectiveness of clickbait is not measurable, either from the positive or the negative side. Though the click bait might attract traffic, that is only part of the process to engaging a user. A title which successfully triggers an action by the user does not necessarily mean that the user will stay long on the website, react positively or interact more. Even more important, the various types of clickbait seem to operate in various ways and their impact depends on the type of content and measures of engagement used. This is the reason why some previous studies have come up with contradictory findings.

6.1. Theoretical contributions

Clickbait with curiosity is the first pattern that is observed in the literature: it works best when there is a reason to want to learn more. The clickbait headlines tend to leave out some part of information or employ forward-reference to prompt the audience to move on and discover the answer [5]. A similar strategy is used in the titles of YouTube videos, where the use of language such as queries, missing information and attention grabbers is evident [11]. Generally speaking, online headlines are also a reflection of how headline tactics have adapted to the various online settings [12]. In this sense, the effectiveness of clickbait can be attributed to curiosity, in the instant of deciding to click on the video

However, this definition is no longer relevant when post-click engagement is considered. Clickbait is associated with various types of engagement on social media, not just clicks [2]. The previous research on digital headlines also indicated that the attributes of the digital headline influence how it catches the interest of readers [13]. This is key because unlike the above, the title can get the attention, but can't hold it. Should the user click on a link based on some expectation of the content of the video and then fail to get it, the curiosity gap which was supposed to drive the user's interest might not produce any engagement. Clickbait's effect will consequently be largely dependent on the definition of engagement.

Emotional clickbait is another type of emotional appeal. Research on the language of headlines shows that different words can evoke different responses from the public; thus, it can be inferred that people are not only reacting to the content in the headline but also to how that content is presented. Research on Social Networking Services has also found that visuals can help to attract users [14]. The situation on YouTube is even more complex because only the title is not displayed. There is a connection between the sentiment in the title and the emotional characteristics of the thumbnail

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related to video views [8]. Therefore, a user decides whether to watch a video based on both text and pictures.

Collectively,all of these perspectives could offer an explanation for the inconsistency of clickbait effects that have been found in previous research. Instead of asking whether clickbait does work or not, it would be more useful to ask what type of clickbait was applied, what was measured as its effect, and what users' expectations were from this content. Curiosity can be a good approach to attract people's attention, while emotions and visuals can affect the effect somehow. But, again, effects will be different for different content.

6.2. Practical implications

The difference between capturing the viewer's attention and retaining it is especially relevant for content creators. In the short term, an emotionally or curiosity-driven title may be successful if it raises clicks. But relying on clicks as a measure of success will push the creators to make more exaggerated claims. If the video does not deliver what the title and the thumbnail promise, the user will not stay there long or will be reluctant to give credit to the same creator again. The practical utility of clickbait thus lies in the possibility of turning attention created before the click into engagement after the click. The right approach for a creator here would be not to strive for making the title as appealing as possible, but to create enough curiosity or emotional involvement without raising expectations that are not going to be fulfilled by the video.

The appropriate balance may also vary depending on different categories of content. An individual who is viewing an entertainment video may be ready to put up with suspense or exaggeration as part of the process; however, when an individual is looking for education-related or technology-related information, he or she will expect the title to reflect the content in a straightforward manner. In other words, a title that would work for one audience may turn out to be counterproductive for another one. The combination of titles and thumbnails should also be taken into account since they create expectations before the viewing process[[8]. This implies that for platforms, the identification of clickbait through the use of certain words and title structures may miss the point as far as clickbait is concerned. A better indicator may be the connection between the promises of the title/thumbnail and user behavior after clicking on the video.

6.3. Future research agenda

This interpretation will also affect what future research should consider measuring. In case clickbait has varying effects before and after clicking the link, then future research that is focused on measures such as clicks and views can only measure half of the equation. Future research needs to link these first measures to those that measure engagement and retention in particular, such as watch time. Large-scale YouTube datasets will allow this to happen and will also give the researcher an opportunity to control for variables such as channel size, video length, posting time, and others that might influence video engagement independently. The length and number of words in the title must also be taken into account because they could affect the number of views on the video irrespective of whether clickbait techniques have been used [15]. The reason for big data in future research should not just be statistical power, but rather the separation of the effect of title strategy from other variables.

In the future, research will also need to consider whether a person's choice to watch something is due to the title, thumbnail or expectations of content. Although the previous studies have shown that both text and visuals can improve the performance of a video [8], it is still unknown which

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combinations are more effective for different types of content. For example, an emotional title and an emotional thumbnail may be suitable for entertaining videos but lack credibility in educational videos.

Finally, behavioral evidence alone will not be able to explain why users have different responses to the same strategy. Comparisons across cultures and platforms, as well as the use of experimental or survey methods, may reveal differences in the expectations and perceptions of credibility among users. Instead of persisting in trying to find the general answer to whether clickbait can increase engagement, future research should concentrate on the conditions under which it is effective. The important question is not whether clickbait works but rather what kind of clickbait works for what kind of engagement and content.

7. Conclusion

The current review has addressed the influence of clickbait on user engagement on YouTube and considered three main kinds of clickbait such as curiosity gap, emotional clickbait, and exaggeration. Generally, the impact of clickbait on user engagement is highly contingent upon the type of clickbait, the form of engagement, and the content category.Although certain strategies might help attract user attention and clicks, the influence of clickbait on engagement is quite different. Another important aspect discussed in the paper is the importance of the content category, as users might react to clickbait differently depending on whether it is related to entertainment/lifestyle or education/technology. It is also important to keep in mind that titles cannot be considered without thumbnails.

The theoretical contribution of this review to the existing body of literature is in the creation of a more holistic framework for clickbait. Instead of thinking about clickbait as one form of engagement, the review draws attention to the difference between curiosity-based, emotional, and exaggeration clickbait. The more important theoretical contribution of the review is the acknowledgment of content categories as a boundary condition in this relationship. It means that the efficiency of clickbait depends not only on the characteristics of the title but also on the form of engagement and expectations regarding different kinds of content.

From a practical standpoint, the content author needs to strike a balance between attracting attention and staying credible and engaging. The title and thumbnail of the video should raise the curiosity of the viewer without raising false expectations that cannot be met by the video itself. As for the platform, clickbait detection could also take into consideration the link between the titles, thumbnails, and what happens after the user clicks on them, rather than just focusing on textual features. A primary limitation of this study is its reliance on qualitative synthesis without meta-analytical quantification or primary empirical data.

Author contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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