

NEWS HEADLINE CONFIGURATION AND NEWSPAPER SELECTION IN UYO URBAN, NIGERIA

¹Godspower Udoh, ²Nsikan Senam, & ³Kubiat Ebekut
Faculty of Communication and Media Studies University of Uyo, Nigeria

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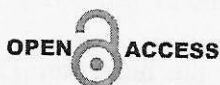
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ABSTRACT

This article examined the extent to which news headline configuration constitutes a factor in newspaper selection by readers in Uyo Urban of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. Specifically, the study aimed to: examine the influence of headline deck on the readers' selection of newspapers; ascertain the role of headline grammar in newspaper selection among readers; examine the influence of headline sentence structure on readers' selection of newspapers; and find out whether headline font sizes play a role in respondents' newspaper selection. The survey method was adopted in the study and the population comprised all the newspaper readers in Uyo, Nigeria, numbering 472,534 people. The sample size was 383 and the questionnaire was the research instrument. Findings showed that the readers: selected newspapers whose news headlines were arranged in one or two-deck formation; were attracted to newspapers whose headlines obeyed the rules of concord; selected newspapers whose headlines were set in the subject-predicate structure; and were attracted to headlines with conspicuous font sizes. It was therefore recommended that editors should always be mindful of grammatical, editorial and stylistic issues while casting newspaper headlines.

Keywords:- Headlines, Configuration, News, Structure, Format, Deck, Grammar.

INTRDUCTION

The influence of headline configuration on newspaper selection and retention has been an interesting subject matter in the newspaper industry. This is because of the role that headlines play in either attracting or repelling readers to and from newspapers.

Apart from amplifying, simplifying, summarizing, intensifying, interpreting and describing a news story, headlines set the tone and provide the moods for news stories. That is why, and in line with the theory of selectivity, it is possible for readers to prefer some stories to another while they are confronted with news from variety of sources and angle. Headlines are so influential because they do not only precede news and other stories, but they also determine the readership quality of a newspaper. In other words, the quality and configuration of headlines plays a part in the quality of readers attracted to a newspaper. That is why some newspapers are bestsellers in one community but are worst sellers in other communities.

That is why some newspapers are bestsellers in one community but are worst sellers in other communities. However, while many readers may decide to patronise a particular newspaper because of their well configured headlines, there are cases where some readers patronize a newspaper for other reasons. Such reasons may include the editorial policy and the philosophy of the newspaper. For instance, many readers, observably, patronise newspapers that are not pro-government. That is why privately-owned newspapers tend to attract more readership in Nigeria than government owned or government sponsored news tabloids. In this case, the structure or configuration of the headlines carried by such privately owned newspapers may not contribute to patronage or readership.

However, a headline is generally seen as a display typeface that gives the introduction or the summary of texts running under, beside or near it. Because it is visible, a headline may possess the natural function of magnets by attracting readers. Therefore, news stories generally run according to the directive or tone of the headline.

THE PROBLEM

Naturally, the first thing that attracts a newspaper reader to a page is the headline. This is because headlines act as a window to the news which, naturally, is written in a more detailed structure. Accordingly, for a news story to be fully appreciated, the headline is usually presented in a style, structure and configuration that command the serious attention of the reader. For the headline to perform this commanding function, there are certain features that is usually seen in those headlines. According to Udoh (2015), the features of configuration include the deck, syntax and grammar, sentence structure, length, font size and punctuation. While to some readers, an application of any of these features is a pre-condition to attract them to select and retain a newspaper, application of all these features and more may not positively influence other readers to select and retain a newspaper. That means that there are readers who read newspaper headlines and consequently patronize such newspapers simply because of the love they have for the newspapers.

In this study, it is yet to be unraveled whether the features of newspaper headline configuration listed above influence the decisions of the respondents to select and retain newspapers. In other words, it is unclear the extent to which headline configuration such as: the

deck, syntax and grammar, sentence structure, font size and punctuation influence Uyo Urban newspaper readers' selection and retention.

THE OBJECTIVES

The study sought to:

- examine the influence of headline deck on the respondents' selection of newspapers;
- ascertain the role of headline grammar in newspaper selection among respondents;
- examine the influence of headline sentence structure on respondents' selection of newspapers;
- find out whether headline font sizes play a role in respondents' newspaper selection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Different print media and allied scholars and researchers have provided their individual and collective views, opinions and definitions of the term, newspaper, news, headline, and such other concepts related to this study. According to Edegoh, Ezeh and Samson (2015), newspaper, in its print and electronic version, is, no doubt, one of the most widely-read periodicals available and accessible to all, on a daily basis. Like other scholars, they affirm that newspapers are useful for education, information, recreation, relaxation and entertainment. However, Anaeto, Anaeto and Tejumaiye (2009) define newspaper as a medium of mass communication and an unbound publication issued at regular intervals and containing a variety of materials, usually printed on newsprint. According to them, it is a "paper" containing "news"

According to a popular research body, the Pew Research Centre, readership refers to the percentage of people who read or expose themselves to newspaper or magazine contents on a regular basis, such as daily, weekly, etc. To the Centre, readership statistics are important because they can be useful in governmental planning and policy making, in research, in documentation, and in a number of other diverse ways. The difference in the readership pattern, habit and preferences by readers can be attributed to their education, income, age, sex, race, occupation, religion, political interest and ethnicity. A reader's profile research will therefore unravel whether a particular newspaper is read by people of high income bracket, or high educational attainment. Education boosts readership pattern of newspaper and newspaper is a medium that attracts only the literate class. The more there are educated people in a locality, the greater the number of people who would read newspapers. But unfortunately, and as noted by many scholars, a majority of Nigerians are not educated and may not understand the English Language used by Nigerian newspapers. However, in a similar observation, Udoh (2015) is of the view that the in terms of attitudes, actions, interest and emotions, nearly everyone reads a newspaper everyday in developed countries like the United States of America and Britain. But to him, in Nigeria and most African countries, readership is drastically low because of the high rate of illiteracy. He maintains that illiteracy is still prevalent among women and the elderly in rural communities and amongst members of poor households, especially in developing countries.

Be that as it may, the UNESCO yearly report states that the vast majority of the 771 million adults who lack minimal literacy skills live in three regions of South and West Asia, East Asia and the Pacific and the Sub-Saharan Africa. According to the report, three quarters of the world illiteracy population live in just twelve countries namely India, China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Egypt, Brazil, Iran, Morocco and the Democratic Republic of Congo, in that order of dominance. Again, according to the same report, the lack of reading skills drastically limits the expansion of a person's overall capacities and abilities. To it, if a reader then should possess a good literacy level and an equal reading ability, any written material such as newspaper which interest him could prove utilisation to him. But conversely, if he has poor reading ability, the written material will be poorly utilised. In other words, those who are illiterate would not understand the information in the newspaper; let alone having the need to read the newspapers in the first instance.

Besides readership, headlines are usually adjusted to a certain space provided to run a particular news story. While some headlines are written in caps and low; they are also usually skeletonized to save space and made to convey a sense of urgency without wasting words. In terms of tense, headlines, according to Udoh (2015), are usually written in the present tense so as to make the news story current and timely. He adds that headlines must be written to attract more readers and this is done through the way it is displayed on a newspaper, as they also give personality, character and quality to the newspaper.

In their contribution, Udoh and Akpabio (2017) believe that a headline is aesthetic if it written few words and limited number of decks. In fact to them, since the essence of a headline is the contraction and capturing of the essence of the news, it is important that it is written in its shortest possible structure as many headline readers are in transit. They advise that when casting a headline, the editors must remember that their readers, who are usually in transit, may not have the time and patience to read lengthy sentences presented as headlines. In other words, headline readers hardly find the required instant satisfaction and enjoyment in lengthy headlines. Therefore, in order to help the reader in finding enjoyment and satisfaction in a news headline, the editor must make the headline as brief as possible. Bbut they contend that brevity does not imply straight jacket shortness of all headlines.

Writing from the point of view of what headline does to readers, Kronrod and Engel (2001) state that today, there is broad consensus regarding the dual and competing functionality of headlines, which are to inform and to persuade. According to these researchers, on the one hand, the headline should supply the reader with the main information contained in the news item; and on the other hand, the headline is the opening and the most important part of the item and it is supposed not only to inform the reader, but also to draw them into reading the whole news story.

Also, regarding headline functionality, two sets of literature, Dor (2003) and Gattani (2005) present separate but complementary analyses which may be summed up in terms of

macro and micro functionality of headlines. For Dor (2003) headlines are the negotiators between stories and readers and have four functions, which are: to summarise, to highlight, to attract and to select. But Gattani (2005) identifies three broad macro headline functions. To him, the macro functions are: the informative headline which gives a good idea about the topic of the news story; the indicative headline which addresses what happened in the news story and finally, the eye-catcher headlines which do not inform about the content of the news story but are designed to entice people to read the story. Similarly, Ecker, Lewandowsky, Chang and Pillai (2014) headlines play a substantial role in news communication. To them, a headline, among other things, serves to summarise the main idea of an article, it permits consumers to scan a large number of news items to get an abbreviated news update or to choose which articles to read, and it serves to grab attention and maximise interest.

However, Udoh (2015) is prescriptive in his view of news headlines. To him, a good news headline must be accurate in fact, tone, scope and focus; must emphasise the main theme or the lead of the story; must be clear, succinct, and must be grammatically easy to read and understand. He sees newspaper headlines as a business strategy that gives rise to quick sales of newspapers in a newsstand. He adds that a headline should be built round an active verb; reduce word wastage to save space and contribute to a sense of urgency; written in the present tense to convey immediacy; and adjusted to a predetermined space and typographical style.

In their study, Ecker, Lewandowsky, Chang, and Pillai (2014) ascertained the influence of subtle misinformation in newspaper using two structurally-similar experiments. Findings of the study showed that misleading headlines can lead to misconceptions and misinformed behavioural intentions. The practical implications of the findings of the study is that news consumers must be (made) aware that editors can strategically use headlines to effectively sway public opinion and influence individuals' behaviour. Similarly, Serdali, Ashirbekova, Isaeva, and Adieva (2016). carried out a study to ascertain the possibility of using headings in newspapers as a functional mechanism to influence readers, with corresponding goals and tasks. Findings of the study showed that the informational content of newspaper headings has a dual function. On one hand, it is an architectonic structure that defines and affects the informational content of the entire newspaper. On the other hand, it forms an individual conceptual load and determines the perceptual level of understanding of the information by the readers.

Theoretically, this study draws inspiration from the Selectivity Theory propounded by Klapper in 1960. The major assumption of this theory is that media audience (headline readers) selectively expose themselves to the media channels (headlines) they want. Therefore, selective exposure demonstrates the fact that people tend to expose themselves to messages that are consistent with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. Similarly, selective retention is the idea that people tend to remember best and longest those messages that are most meaningful to them; while selective perception is the idea that people will alter the meaning of messages so they become consistent with preexisting attitudes and beliefs.

STUDY DESIGN

The research design adopted for this study was the survey method as it gave the respondents unhindered freedom to express themselves on the subject matter. For Senam (2020), when people's opinion, attitude or reaction is the concern of the research, then the best research design to use is the survey. Thus the use of the survey in this study was apt. The population of the study covered all the residents of Uyo Urban. According to National Population Commission, Uyo Office, the total projected population of Uyo Urban as at 2021 is 472,534. This therefore constituted the population of this study. The researcher adopted Philip Meyer's recommendation of 383 to represent the population since the total population falls within the range of between 100,000 and 500,000. Meyer recommends that for a population within this range, 383 as the sample size is representative enough. Therefore 383 respondents make up the sample size of the study.

To this end, copies of the questionnaire were purposively administered on the adult and educated respondents in Uyo Urban, on the singular condition that they expose themselves to newspapers, or at least read newspaper headlines regularly. The respondents were drawn from offices and locations such as the Idongesit Nkanga Secretariat, along IBB Way; the Uyo Local Government Secretariat; the Federal Secretariat along Abak Road; the University of Uyo community; and the free newspapers readers at Ibom Plaza.

The copies of the questionnaire were purposively administered to the respondents – given to newspaper readers only. This means that when the researcher set out to administer the instrument, any adult who met the purpose of the study were given the questionnaire to fill and return.

PRESENTATION OF DATA, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study sought to: examine the influence of headline deck on the respondents' selection of newspapers; ascertain the role of headline grammar in newspaper selection among respondents; examine the influence of headline sentence structure on respondents' selection of newspapers; and find out if headline font sizes play a role in respondents' newspaper selection. Three hundred and eighty-three copies of the questionnaire were administered on the respondents. Out of these, 364 copies were successfully retrieved and seven copies were not fit for the analysis. Therefore, 357 copies, representing 93% of the sampled population were used for the analysis and presented in tables which address the research objectives as follows:-

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: A newspaper with headlines that contain few decks attract me most

Responses	No. of Respondents	Percentages
Very true	357	100
True	-	-
Sometimes	-	-
Not sure	-	-
Total	357	100

All the respondents unanimously agreed that newspapers with economically crafted headlines are very attractive to them.

Table 2: I am usually discouraged from selecting a newspaper that contain headlines that frequently disobey the rule of concord

Frequency	No. of Respondents	Percentages
Very true	311	87
True	46	13
Sometimes	-	-
Not sure	-	-
Total	357	100

Majority of the respondents (87%) said ungrammatical headlines usually discourage them from selecting a newspaper.

Table 3: I usually understand headline written in subject-predicate structure more than headlines with complex structures

Frequency	No. of Respondents	Percentages
Very true	312	87
True	45	13
Sometimes	-	-
Not sure	-	-
Total	357	100

Majority of the respondents (87%) said they understand headlines better when such headlines are written in simple sentence, subject predicate structure.

Table 4: The bolder and bigger the headline font size, the more I select a newspaper

Frequency	No. of Respondents	Percentages
Very true	357	100
True	-	-
Sometimes	-	-
Not sure	-	-
Total	357	100

All the respondents said they understand headlines cast in bigger and bolder font sizes

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

For a fruitful discussion, the research questions used for the study were used as a guide as they precede each discussion

Does the number of headline decks influence newspaper selection by respondents?

Sub-editors, who, by their envisaged neutral position in the newspaper business, are professionally saddled with the responsibility of writing news headlines, have the options of writing headlines in straight lines, usually, above each story. Each line of the headline is technically called a deck. So, each headline may be written as single, double and multiple decks. According to Udoh (2015), this is to allow the sub-editors the latitude to cast fair headlines, using the appropriate number of words; and since they were not a party to the coverage and subsequent writing of the news story, they have the liberty to structure the headlines according to their understanding of the story and, often, according to the mood of the event reported.

In Table 1, the respondents were required to describe the relationship between the number of decks carried by a particular headline and the interest or attraction generated by that headline. The response was overwhelmingly that the fewer the number of decks contained in a particular headline; the more attractive such a headline would be to the reader, hence, massive selection of a newspaper. In fact, all the 357 respondents said they would select a newspaper that is very economical with words and by extension, economical with decks in each headline presentation

Apart from affirming the theory of selectivity, the decision of the respondents pick economy of words and decks as a factor in their selection of newspaper headlines upholds the position of Udoh and Akpabio (2017) on headline aesthetics. In this position, the researchers believed that a headline is aesthetic (attracts more attention) if it is written in few words and limited number of decks. In fact to him, since the essence of a headline is the contraction and capturing of the essence of the news, it is important that it is written in its shortest possible structure. What this implies is that when casting a headline, sub-editors must remember that their readers are usually in transit and as such may not have the time and patience to read lengthy sentences presented as headlines. In other words, readers hardly find the required satisfaction and enjoyment in lengthy headlines. So, to help the reader in finding enjoyment and satisfaction in a news headline, the editor must make the headline as brief as possible. Again, to Udoh and Akpabio (2017), brevity here does not imply straight jacket shortness of headline. It does not mean giving each news headline the same number of words. Rather, it means that the editor should build the headline around key words found in the uppermost part (lead) of the story. If one of the rules of news lead writing is that it should not be overloaded, then one wonders how wrong it will be for the headline drawn from the same lead should be too wordy. In all, brevity demands removal of superfluous words from a headline. For example, it is better to write: *Buhari, ministers, service chiefs arrive Uyo today*; rather than: *Buhari, and ministers as well as service chiefs arrive Uyo today*.

Does headline grammar play a role in newspaper selection among respondents?

Udoh (2014) stresses the need for news reporters to understand fully the grammar of the language with which they write their stories (including headlines) so as not to repel some grammar-minded readers. To demonstrate this, the author lists and explains the major rules of grammar which a serious-minded news reporter must adhere to. Again, to him, news reporters, news editors and sub-editors have no excuse not to ensure that readers learn many things from

them, particularly, grammar. To him also, newspapers remain one source of good grammar, but unfortunately, many newspapers tend not to recognize this very important role, recalling that in those days, parents who were eager to improve their children's grammar usually bought newspapers for their children to read.

Similarly, in his discussion of the concept of syntaesthetics, Udoh and Akpabio (2017) posit that the beauty of a news headline to be fully appreciated, such a headline should be written in such a way that it does not violate the common rules of grammar - syntax. According to them, since news headlines communicate better when written as a sentence, it follows that news headlines follow the known sentence rules. Also, according to Udoh and Obot, (2013), any violation to this textual aesthetic expectation, on account of journalism, renders a headline meaningless, unreasonable and un-aesthetic in the eye of a reader who can appreciate good grammar. This means that, whether it is broadcast or print, the correctness of the grammar of a headline is a factor in the beauty of that headline.

Table 2 supports the above analogies as most of the respondents agreed that grammar is one feature of a headline that attracts them to newspapers. For instance, 311 (87%) respondents said they read and enjoy headlines that are grammatically correct more than those that pay no attention to correct grammar.

Does headline sentence structure have role in respondents' selection of newspapers?

The structure of a sentence refers to the arrangement of sentence components (words, phrases and clauses) in such a way to determine the function and shape of the sentence. In other words, a sentence is quickly or slowly appreciated depending on whether it is written in simple, compound, complex and compound complex structures. Although Udoh (2015) and Udoh and Obot (2013) frown at complex sentence headlines, but rather recommends subject-predicate (simple sentence) news headline structure; in general headline writing, the writer is at liberty to apply any of the above-listed sentence structures. In other words, sub-editors have the liberty to cast their news headlines in a simple subject- predicate pattern – e.g. *Buhari inaugurates 10 water projects*. The same editor could make the same headline complex by saying: *Buhari, who is angry for projects, inaugurates 10 projects*. The editor could, in the same manner, apply any other sentence structure to communicate meaning, but this depends on the impact he wants to create with the chosen structure.

In this study, the respondents were given an opportunity to say the headline sentence structure that mostly appeals to them to the extent of making them select certain newspapers over the rest. In the third Table, 312 respondents (87%) overwhelmingly opted for headlines that are cast in simple (subject-predicate) sentences. A simple sentence or headline is a headline that contains one subject (Buhari) and one predicate (inaugurates 10 water projects). This means that most of the respondents chose headlines that are specific about who does what and nothing more, at a time.

Does headline font size play a role in the way readers select a newspapers?

Like news stories, newspaper headlines, be they for news, features and ancillary contents, are cast in different font sizes. There are big headlines, small and average ones. According to Udoh (2015), the font size of a news story or headline is determined by the importance attached to the story or the headline by the editor behind them. In other words, the font size worn by the letters of a particular headline is determined by the value given to such a headline by the editor of the

newspaper. This means that the letters or characters of a more valued headline, like the titles of a book, are usually cast in a font sizes that are superior to other competing titles, display matters or headlines. This is because in art appreciation, people are usually more attracted to artworks that are bigger than those that are smaller than normal. But was that the position of the respondents to this study?

Findings in Table 4 indicate that the bigger the font size of a news headline, the more attractive such a headline will be to the reader. For instance all the respondents agreed that they are attracted to the biggest headline on a newspaper page. Therefore, the question as to whether headline font sizes play a role in respondents' newspaper selection is answered in the affirmative..

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The findings showed that the respondents tended to select newspapers whose news headlines were arranged in one or two-deck formation and were attracted to newspapers whose headlines obeyed the rules of concord. Also, the respondents tended to select newspapers whose headlines were set in subject-predicate (simple sentence) structure; and were attracted to newspapers whose headlines were set in conspicuous font sizes. Therefore, it is concluded that news headline configuration, which, in the context of this study, covers the number of decks, grammatical rules, sentence structure and font sizes, is a strong factor in newspaper selection among newspaper readers in Uyo Urban of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria.

Accordingly, it is recommended that newspaper editors should be mindful of the fact that their readers are aware of the importance and role of newspaper headline configuration, particularly, headline structure, grammar, size, and even content; hence, the need for such editors to cast headlines that would attract and retain readership.

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