

Clickbait Strategies and Influence on Consumer Trust and Behavior

Alaba Tobin-West Diamond

diamond.alaba@rsu.edu.ng

Faculty of Communication and Media Studies
Rivers State University, Port Harcourt

Stella. C. Enyindah PhD

Faculty of Communication and Media Studies
Rivers State University, Port Harcourt

Oyinkepreye Brisibe PhD

Faculty of Communication and Media Studies
Rivers State University, Port Harcourt

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of clickbait strategies on consumer trust and behaviour in Rivers State. Anchored on the Uses and Gratifications and Persuasion Theories, the study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised digitally active consumers across Rivers State who frequently engage with online advertisements. The total population of the study is 9,898,470, however, using the Krejcie and Morgan sample size determination table, 385 respondents were selected, while 378 valid questionnaires were retrieved for analysis. Purposive and simple random sampling techniques were employed to ensure representation of users across major digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire instrument and structured interview method. The administered questionnaire were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics while the structured interviews conducted were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The study found that clickbait advertising significantly undermines consumer trust and influences behaviour in Rivers State, leading to increased scepticism, emotional fatigue, and reduced willingness to engage with or purchase from online platforms. Clickbait strategies significantly increase engagement rates, they simultaneously erode consumer trust, create dissatisfaction, and foster scepticism towards digital content. The study concludes that clickbait advertising, though effective in generating short-term attention, has adverse long-term effects on consumer trust and ethical digital communication. The study recommends that online marketers and content creators should adopt transparent.

Keywords: Clickbait, Strategies, Influence, Consumer Trust, and Behaviour.

Introduction

In today's highly digitalised environment, advertising has become one of the most influential tools used by businesses and content creators to attract consumers. With the vast expansion of the internet and the exponential rise in social media usage, there has been a noticeable shift in advertising strategies, moving from traditional, fact-based promotional methods to more

emotionally manipulative approaches. One of the most pervasive and controversial developments in digital marketing is *clickbait advertising*. This technique involves the use of sensational, misleading, or exaggerated headlines and thumbnails to lure users into clicking on links, often leading to content that does not match the original promise. While the primary objective of clickbait is to increase website traffic and viewer engagement, its growing presence has raised serious concerns regarding its influence on consumer trust and behaviour, especially in digitally active regions like Rivers State, Nigeria.

The origins of clickbait can be traced back to early sensationalist journalism, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries, where newspaper headlines were crafted with dramatic flair to boost sales. Tabloid journalism, characterized by its emotionally charged and exaggerated headlines, set the stage for modern clickbait. With the advent of the internet and the emergence of the “attention economy,” where user attention is monetized, this strategy found new ground. Clickbait emerged as a dominant force during the early 2010s with the rise of content-sharing websites like BuzzFeed, Upworthy, and ViralNova. These platforms pioneered the use of curiosity gaps, strategically omitting key information in headlines to provoke readers into clicking links for more details (Blom & Hansen, 2015). For instance, headlines such as “You Won’t Believe What Happened Next” or “This One Trick Will Change Your Life Forever” are classic examples that drew millions of views, encouraging other media platforms to adopt similar techniques. Visual clickbait, in the form of misleading video thumbnails and manipulated images, has also gained prominence, especially on platforms like YouTube and Instagram. These developments signify a diversification of clickbait tactics beyond text-based strategies. Additionally, native advertising, branded content designed to look like editorial content, further blurs the line between genuine information and marketing. This evolution has made it increasingly difficult for users to distinguish between authentic content and manipulative advertising, thereby contributing to a growing sense of mistrust among consumers (Chen, Conroy, & Rubin, 2015).

The effects of clickbait in Rivers State reflect global concerns about trust and user behaviour. As more local businesses and influencers adopt digital marketing, there is a noticeable increase in the use of clickbait headlines and thumbnails in product promotions, social campaigns, and sponsored posts. This tactic, while potentially effective in the short term, may erode consumer trust over time. Eze and Nwachukwu (2021) conducted a study on Nigerian internet users and found that over 60% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with misleading online content, noting that repeated exposure to clickbait led to distrust of the associated brands and websites. This erosion of trust can influence not only purchase decisions but also user engagement and loyalty. In conclusion, clickbait advertising has evolved from a marginal content strategy into a central feature of digital marketing, driven by the attention economy and supported by advanced analytics. Its global influence is evident in rising engagement metrics, but so are its risks, particularly concerning consumer trust and behaviour. In Rivers State, where digital media consumption continues to grow, the unchecked spread of clickbait could undermine the integrity of the online ecosystem and reduce public confidence in legitimate digital platforms. This study therefore seeks to explore in depth how clickbait advertising affects consumer trust and behaviour within this context, providing insight into the broader challenges and opportunities of ethical digital marketing in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

What was initially envisioned as a more expedient means of connecting with consumers has devolved into a channel for online harassment and humiliation. Today, accessing a single page on most digital platforms, be it news websites, social media, or mobile applications, subjects users to a barrage of dozens, if not hundreds, of clickbait advertisements that flash

incessantly across their screens. These advertisements frequently masquerade as legitimate content, yet are predominantly crafted to deceive, distract, or manipulate users. Furthermore, these clickbait tactics no longer require a click to initiate their disruptive effects; they commence siphoning away your time, draining your battery, and consuming your data as soon as a consumer attempts to navigate to a desired page. These intrusive advertisements emerge, often ensnaring users and obstructing their progress.

What makes this trend particularly alarming is the fact that many of these clickbait ads are not just irritating or exaggerated; they are operated by scammers and fraudsters. Hidden behind enticing headlines and deceptive thumbnails are links that lead to phishing sites, dubious product sales, malware downloads, and fake investment schemes. In a state like Rivers, where digital engagement is growing rapidly, this form of digital exploitation presents serious risks. Consumers, especially those with limited digital literacy, are frequently lured into traps that result in financial loss, identity theft, or exposure to harmful content.

The researcher is deeply concerned about the growing influence of this phenomenon on consumer trust and behaviour. When users repeatedly encounter false promises and manipulative advertising, their trust in digital platforms diminishes. They begin to question the authenticity of even legitimate content, leading to hesitation, cynicism, and eventual disengagement from online services. Moreover, consumer behaviour is shaped by fear, impulsivity, or misinformation undermining rational decision-making and ethical commerce. The saturation of digital space with clickbait not only compromises the user experience but also threatens the credibility of online businesses and communication channels.

Objectives of the Study

The three objectives of the study were to:

- i. examine the predominant forms of clickbait advertising across major digital platforms in Rivers State.
- ii. identify the platforms prevalent with the predominant clickbait advertising.

Research Questions

- i. What are the predominant forms of clickbait advertising across major digital platforms in Rivers State?
- ii. Which digital platforms are most prevalent with the dominant forms of clickbait advertising in Rivers State?

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratification Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), is a foundational communication theory that examines how individuals actively seek out media to satisfy specific needs and desires. Originally developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), the theory shifts focus from what media does to people to what people do with media. UGT posits that media users are not passive consumers, but rather active agents who make conscious choices about the content they engage with, based on the gratifications they seek. These gratifications may include entertainment, information, social interaction, personal identity, and escapism. The theory challenges the notion that audiences are passive recipients of media messages and instead emphasises the audience's agency in making media choices that serve particular functions in their lives. Several key assumptions underlie this perspective.

Bhatiasevi (2023) conducted a study in which he applied the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to delve into the realm of social media adoption among adults and older adults in Thailand. Through his research, he unearthed several crucial gratifications that played a pivotal role in shaping individuals' interactions with social media platforms. These

gratifications included purposive value, self-discovery, entertainment, social enhancement, and maintaining interpersonal connectivity. For instance, when we consider purposive value, it becomes evident that adults are primarily motivated by goal-oriented usage of social media. This implies that individuals seek to fulfill specific objectives or tasks through their online interactions.

Persuasion Theory

The study also adopt the persuasion theory. The persuasion theory has evolved over decades of scholarly exploration and is primarily rooted in the work of several prominent figures who laid the foundation for understanding how communication influences human behaviour. Among the early and most influential proponents is Carl Hovland, a psychologist whose groundbreaking research at Yale University in the 1940s and 1950s laid the basis for modern persuasion studies. Hovland's work emphasized that communication is a deliberate effort by a source to influence the attitudes and beliefs of a receiver. His Yale Attitude Change Approach became a key framework in understanding how messages, sources, and audience characteristics work together to produce persuasive effects. Building on Hovland's foundation, scholars such as Richard Petty and John Cacioppo expanded the theory in the 1980s through their Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). This model introduced the idea that persuasion operates through two primary pathways: a central route involving careful scrutiny of the message's arguments, and a peripheral route driven by superficial cues such as the attractiveness or credibility of the communicator. Leon Festinger, another influential figure, contributed through his Cognitive Dissonance Theory, which highlights the psychological discomfort people experience when confronted with conflicting beliefs or information, a concept that is intimately tied to persuasion processes.

Review of Concepts

Advertising

The term advertising is derived from the Latin word *advertere*, which translates to 'to turn the minds towards.' Advertising is as ancient as civilization itself, serving as a pivotal means of communication for the exchange of goods and services within society. It is an essential promotional tool that possesses the capacity to create remarkable outcomes through eloquent language, effectively marketing products, services, and even ideas (Eisend 2010). In contemporary India, advertising has assumed significant importance, particularly in the context of intense market competition and rapid technological advancements, alongside evolving consumer preferences in fashion and taste. Today, in light of the shifting marketing landscape, advertising alone is no longer a sufficient medium of communication. It must be harmoniously integrated with other channels to establish a lasting impact on consumers. Consequently, the concept of integrated marketing communication is gaining considerable traction due to the challenge's advertisers encounter in crafting and executing their advertising messages (Eisend, Plagemann & Sollwedel, 2014).

Clickbait

Clickbait, a term commonly used in the digital realm, refers to content such as headlines or thumbnails that are strategically crafted to capture the attention of users and entice them to click on a link. This practice often involves the use of sensationalism or misleading information to attract clicks. Scholars have delved into the concept of clickbait from various angles, examining its linguistic nuances, psychological effects, and the broader implications it has on information consumption and journalistic ethics. Blom and Hansen (2015) have identified a key characteristic of clickbait headlines, noting that they often incorporate elements of forward-referencing and curiosity to lure users into clicking by withholding

crucial details. For instance, a clickbait headline might tease a shocking revelation without providing the full story, prompting users to click for more information.

Empirical Review

Lasi, Tarmidzi, Abdul Hamid, and Jantan (2023) conducted a study titled **The Use of Clickbait and Sensationalism in Online Marketing and Its Impact on Consumer Trust and Credibility**. Their work aimed to investigate how clickbait and sensationalist tactics in online marketing influence consumer trust and credibility. Drawing from theories on media sensationalism and consumer perception, they employed a content analysis methodology, focusing on a marketing campaign by a major retail brand in Malaysia. Their findings revealed that various clickbait and sensationalist tactics were employed, and these were largely perceived by consumers as misleading. As a result, consumer trust and credibility toward the brand diminished. The authors recommended that marketers exercise caution in employing clickbait strategies and instead prioritize ethical marketing practices to maintain trust and authenticity. Akinwale (2021) carried out a study entitled **The Use of Clickbait in News Reporting: A Study of Online Newspapers in Nigeria**. The research set out to examine how online newspapers in Nigeria utilize clickbait headlines and the implications of such strategies for reader engagement and trust. Underpinned by media effects theory and agenda-setting theory, the methodology involved a content analysis of headlines from major Nigerian online newspapers. The study discovered that a significant number of headlines employed clickbait techniques, which indeed boosted click-through rates. However, the findings also showed that this tactic fostered skepticism among readers concerning the credibility of these news sources. The recommendation was clear: news organizations should strive to balance the need for engaging headlines with journalistic integrity to uphold reader trust.'

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine clickbait advertising and consumer behaviour in Rivers State. The population of the study comprised all residents of Rivers State, Nigeria. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the estimated population of Rivers State was 9,898,470. Hence, the population of the study stood at 9,898,470. The sample for the study was obtained through SurveyMonkey. With a population totaling 9,898,470, a margin of error set at 5%, and a confidence level of 95%, SurveyMonkey indicated that an appropriate sample size was 385. Consequently, the sample size for the study was established at 385. The study adopted two streams of sampling techniques. Firstly, it employed the cluster sampling technique to group Rivers State into three clusters Rivers East, Rivers West, and Rivers South-East. The study leveraged both primary and secondary data sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Primary data were collected directly from respondents through a structured questionnaire, while secondary data were sourced from reputable materials, including academic journals, government reports, credible online databases, and industry analyses. These secondary sources provided background information and contextual insights that complemented the primary data collected from the field. The validity of the questionnaire was ensured through expert review. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested through a pilot study. The collected data were analyzed using the weighted mean score method.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Data Analysis

Research Question 1: What are the predominant forms of clickbait advertising across major digital platforms in Rivers State?

Table 4.7: Responses on the predominant forms of clickbait advertising across major digital platforms in Rivers State

Items	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Mean	Decision
Sensational headlines are the most common form of clickbait advertising I encounter online.	183	114	56	25	1211	3.20	Agree
Exaggerated or misleading thumbnails are frequently used in digital clickbait advertisements.	190	123	43	22	1237	3.27	Agree
Clickbait ads in Rivers State often present misleading promises or false claims.	172	134	51	21	1213	3.21	Agree
Emotional appeals (fear, excitement, or curiosity) dominate most clickbait content.	168	141	51	18	1215	3.21	Agree
Misrepresentation of product/service quality is a common feature of clickbait advertising.	159	129	64	26	1177	3.11	Agree

SA: Strongly Agree A: Agree D: Disagree SD: Strongly Disagree

The findings revealed that digital advertising in Rivers State was largely characterised by sensational headlines, exaggerated visuals, emotional appeals, and misleading claims, indicating a widespread use of manipulative techniques aimed at attracting consumer attention and engagement rather than providing genuine information.

Research Question 2: Which digital platforms are most prevalent with the dominant forms of clickbait advertising in Rivers State?

Table 4.8: Responses on the digital platforms are most prevalent with the dominant forms of clickbait advertising in Rivers State

Items	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Mean	Decision
Facebook is the platform that has the highest number of clickbait ads.	28	52	111	187	677	1.79	Disagree
TikTok and X are the platforms that boast the highest prevalence of clickbait advertisements.	20	42	119	197	641	1.70	Disagree
YouTube frequently displays deceptive or misleading clickbait advertisements.	176	121	41	40	1189	3.15	Agree
Instagram is commonly associated with exaggerated and misleading advertising formats.	55	25	168	130	761	2.01	Disagree
News websites and blogs in Rivers State often contain misleading clickbait ads.	161	140	37	40	1178	3.12	Agree

Google search engines, online applications and marketing websites are increasingly used to spread clickbait content	190	121	55	26	1259	3.33	Agree
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SA: Strongly Agree A: Agree D: Disagree SD: Strongly Disagree

Interview Section

Research Question 1: What are the predominant forms of clickbait advertising across major digital platforms in Rivers State?

Findings from the in-depth interviews revealed that clickbait advertising in Rivers State manifests mainly in five distinct forms: sensational headlines, exaggerated or misleading thumbnails, false claims, emotional appeals, and misrepresentation of product or service quality. Across all respondent groups; students, online marketers, bloggers, and officials of the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) there was a strong consensus that these deceptive advertising practices are most dominant on YouTube and Google platforms, which serve as the primary channels for digital marketing in the state.

Research Question 2: Which digital platforms are most prevalent with the dominant forms of clickbait advertising in Rivers State?

Findings from the in-depth interviews revealed that most respondents identified YouTube and Google platforms, including Google search engines and affiliated websites, as the most dominant channels for clickbait advertising in Rivers State. The discussions, which involved students, online marketers, bloggers, and officials from the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON), showed a shared concern that these platforms have become saturated with exaggerated, misleading, and emotionally charged advertisements that manipulate public perception and exploit consumer curiosity.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: What are the predominant forms of clickbait advertising across major digital platforms in Rivers State?

The findings from this study elucidated that clickbait advertising in Rivers State is predominantly characterized by manipulative techniques designed to capture audience attention rather than convey authentic information. The quantitative analysis revealed a broad consensus among respondents regarding the five most prevalent forms of clickbait: sensational headlines, exaggerated or misleading thumbnails, false claims, emotional appeals, and misrepresentation of product or service quality. Each of these elements registered a mean score exceeding 3.0, affirming their significance in digital advertising. This indicates that advertising practices in Rivers State are primarily engagement-driven, with marketers resorting to emotionally provocative and misleading tactics to entice viewers, rather than prioritizing truthful communication. The qualitative interviews further enriched this understanding. Across all respondent demographics students, online marketers, bloggers, and officials of the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) there was a unanimous acknowledgment of the widespread nature of deceptive digital advertising. Participants consistently identified YouTube and Google as the platforms most synonymous with clickbait, attributing this phenomenon to their global reach and algorithmic frameworks that reward engagement and visibility over accuracy and ethical standards. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings affirmed that sensational headlines constitute the most ubiquitous form of clickbait advertising. Respondents noted that online platforms frequently employ exaggerated and emotionally charged titles to capture user attention. Interview participants cited illustrative examples such as “Watch how this student made one million naira in a week”

and “Doctors hate her for discovering this miracle cure,” which were intentionally crafted to incite curiosity and stimulate user interaction. These findings resonate with the conclusions of Potthast et al. (2021), who determined that clickbait headlines hinge on the creation of curiosity gaps that compel readers to seek closure by clicking. Similarly, Chen and Shi (2022) elucidated that sensational headlines manipulate human curiosity and emotion to amplify engagement and visibility. The present findings corroborate that sensationalism in advertising is as pervasive in Rivers State as it is in other global contexts.

The results from both datasets indicated that exaggerated and misleading thumbnails are frequently employed to attract attention. Respondents concurred that YouTube advertisements often showcase dramatic visuals, such as images of luxury automobiles, celebrities, or unrealistic transformations. Numerous online marketers confessed that these tactics are intentionally utilized due to their substantial impact on click-through rates. This outcome aligns with the findings of Blom and Hansen (2019), who demonstrated that visually exaggerated advertising enhances visibility and augments user engagement. Consequently, the present study reveals that visual manipulation in clickbait is a deliberate and efficacious strategy for maintaining competitiveness in an overcrowded digital landscape.

The quantitative data and interview responses consistently indicated that deceptive claims constitute a significant facet of clickbait advertising. Respondents recounted numerous advertisements that promised instant wealth, miraculous cures, and immediate employment, which ultimately proved to be misleading or fraudulent. This observation aligns with the findings of Adesina and Adefemi (2023), who noted that deceptive advertising practices have become increasingly prevalent in Nigeria and frequently result in a deterioration of consumer trust. Similarly, Kaptein and Eckles (2021) observed that repeated exposure to false claims erodes brand credibility and undermines long-term consumer loyalty.

The data further illuminated that emotional appeals are instrumental in clickbait advertising. Respondents indicated that advertisements frequently employ phrases such as “Do not miss this opportunity” or “This secret could change your life,” which exploit emotions such as fear, excitement, and curiosity. This observation corroborates the research of Escalas and Luce (2020), who demonstrated that emotional appeals possess a high degree of persuasiveness, particularly in online environments where rational thought is often suspended. Likewise, Nabi et al. (2018) found that emotion-driven content tends to provoke more profound audience reactions than logic-based communication. Consequently, the findings of the current study establish that emotional manipulation remains a predominant component of online advertising in Rivers State. Respondents from both the survey and the interviews affirmed that advertisers frequently embellish the quality of products and services. Interview participants cited instances of fabricated testimonials, manipulated imagery, and unrealistic claims that cultivate misleading expectations among consumers. These findings resonate with the observations of Fulgoni and Lipsman (2021), who noted that product misrepresentation undermines credibility and diminishes consumer confidence in digital advertising. The results of this study suggest that consumers in Rivers State routinely encounter deceptive portrayals of products, particularly within the health, beauty, and electronics sectors.

Although the two data sources exhibited notable concordance, certain discrepancies emerged in specific areas. While the quantitative data indicated that a majority of respondents were cognizant of the existence of clickbait advertising, the qualitative responses revealed that this awareness does not necessarily translate into the capacity to differentiate genuine advertisements from deceptive ones. Some students acknowledged that despite recognizing clickbait techniques, they occasionally succumbed to misleading advertisements. This reflects the findings of Fang and Holbrook (2022), who contended that awareness of persuasive strategies does not inherently engender behavioral resistance. Differences also manifested between the perceptions of consumers and marketers. While consumers predominantly

perceived clickbait as unethical, some online marketers rationalized its utilization as a pragmatic necessity within a competitive market landscape. They posited that sensational techniques are indispensable for sustaining visibility in a digital economy driven by engagement metrics. This justification aligns with Park's (2021) concept of ethical flexibility, wherein marketing professionals prioritize commercial success over stringent adherence to ethical standards. Another area of divergence pertained to regulatory accountability. While survey respondents attributed the prevalence of clickbait to individual advertisers, APCON officials emphasized that the issue is structural, stemming from the global operations of digital platforms. They elucidated that YouTube and Google function beyond Nigerian regulatory oversight, complicating efforts to enforce compliance with national advertising laws. This observation aligns with Gillespie (2020), who argued that algorithmic systems prioritize engagement over accuracy, thereby complicating accountability mechanisms in digital media. The findings of this study align with numerous contemporary investigations concerning digital advertising and media manipulation. Tandoc and Ling (2022) observed that the economic framework of online platforms incentivizes engagement, thereby inherently fostering sensationalism. In a similar vein, Chen and Shi (2022) discovered that emotionally charged and hyperbolic content tends to excel within algorithm-driven environments, corroborating the patterns evident in Rivers State. Adesina and Adefemi (2023) established that deceptive advertising practices in Nigeria engender distrust and unfavorable perceptions of brands, a phenomenon that is distinctly mirrored in the current research. Furthermore, Obot and Nwogbaga (2023) underscored the inadequacy of effective digital regulation in Nigeria, which reinforces APCON's assertion that global advertising platforms frequently function beyond the purview of national oversight. The SynDissertation of quantitative and qualitative findings indicates that clickbait advertising in Rivers State is not merely a consequence of individual malfeasance but rather a structural characteristic of the contemporary digital economy. The interplay of algorithmic systems that prioritize clicks and engagement, alongside weak regulatory frameworks and insufficient consumer protection, has cultivated an environment conducive to deception. The convergence among all respondent groups illustrates that manipulative advertising practices are both intentional and systematic. However, the discrepancies unveil critical challenges such as limited consumer comprehension, malleable ethical standards among marketers, and feeble institutional regulation. These results bolster the assertions of Gillespie (2020) and Tandoc and Ling (2022), who contend that the global preeminence of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed advertising ethics and accountability in the twenty-first century.

Research Question 2: Which digital platforms are most prevalent with the dominant forms of clickbait advertising in Rivers State?

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data on the prevalence of clickbait advertising across digital platforms in Rivers State revealed that deceptive and manipulative advertising is most concentrated on information-based and high-traffic platforms, particularly YouTube, Google, and news-related websites. In contrast, traditional social networking platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram were found to have lower incidences of such content. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence indicated a strong convergence in perception among consumers, online marketers, bloggers, and regulatory officials, but also revealed notable divergences in interpretation, awareness, and accountability regarding the proliferation of clickbait practices.

The results of the quantitative data showed that most respondents associated clickbait advertising with platforms primarily used for information search, video content, and digital marketing. Respondents disagreed that Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram were the dominant platforms for deceptive advertisements, whereas they strongly agreed that YouTube, news

websites and blogs, and Google-based platforms were the most prevalent environments for such practices. This distribution implies that consumers in Rivers State encounter clickbait advertisements more frequently while seeking information, entertainment, or products online, particularly through search engines and video platforms. These findings are consistent with the structural design of YouTube and Google, which rely heavily on algorithmic recommendation systems and programmatic advertising that prioritize engagement metrics, such as clicks and watch time, over informational integrity.

The qualitative interviews provided further insight into why YouTube and Google have become the dominant platforms for clickbait advertising. Across all respondent categories students, online marketers, bloggers, and officials from the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) there was a consistent consensus that these platforms are saturated with exaggerated, emotionally charged, and misleading advertisements. Students across higher institutions in Rivers State expressed concern about the proliferation of deceptive advertisements on YouTube and Google. They reported frequent exposure to exaggerated claims and misleading visuals that redirect users to fraudulent investment platforms or untrustworthy websites. They also highlighted that Google's sponsored search results frequently promote false offers, fake product discounts, and unrealistic investment promises. According to them, these platforms dominate because of their credibility, visual appeal, and accessibility among young audiences. Online marketers offered professional perspectives on the mechanisms behind this dominance. They explained that YouTube and Google have evolved into the primary vehicles for deceptive advertising because of their algorithmic systems that reward engagement rather than truthfulness. They stated that advertisers intentionally employ emotionally charged messages to manipulate user curiosity, acknowledging that such tactics generate higher traffic and greater financial returns. Emotional manipulation, exaggerated visuals, and false claims were identified as strategies reinforced by the commercial logic of these platforms, where engagement metrics directly determine advertising success. Bloggers corroborated these perspectives, noting that Google AdSense and YouTube monetization systems have inadvertently contributed to the spread of clickbait advertising. They admitted that the competition for visibility and revenue encourages sensationalism and exaggeration. According to the bloggers, attention-grabbing titles and misleading thumbnails significantly increase viewer engagement and search visibility. They also observed that many content creators deliberately misrepresent their content to maximize income, prioritizing economic gains over credibility. This reflects a growing culture of profit-driven communication where accuracy is often sacrificed for popularity. Officials from APCON reinforced these findings but added a regulatory dimension. They confirmed that YouTube and Google are the most problematic platforms for misleading advertisements, with frequent cases of exaggerated health claims, fraudulent investment offers, and emotionally manipulative promotions. The officials explained that Google's algorithmic design amplifies such deceptive content by giving higher visibility to advertisements that generate significant user engagement, even when they breach ethical advertising standards. They further noted that the global nature of these platforms makes regulation difficult since they operate beyond Nigerian jurisdiction. Despite receiving numerous consumer complaints, enforcement has remained limited because of technological opacity and transnational governance challenges. A strong convergence emerged between the quantitative and qualitative data. Both sources identified YouTube and Google as the dominant platforms for clickbait advertising, followed by news websites and blogs. This convergence highlights the centrality of algorithmic amplification and emotional persuasion in sustaining deceptive digital advertising. The findings confirmed that algorithmic visibility and engagement incentives play a major role in the proliferation of clickbait content. This supports Tandoc and Ling's (2022) argument that digital platforms prioritize sensationalism

because attention directly translates into profit. Similarly, Escalas and Luce (2020) found that emotionally charged content evokes stronger psychological responses, leading to impulsive online engagement a pattern evident in the Rivers State context. Both datasets also revealed that economic motivations are a primary driver of clickbait advertising. The monetization systems of YouTube and Google encourage creators to focus on high-traffic content regardless of its accuracy or ethical quality. Blom and Hansen (2019) similarly observed that attention-based economies foster manipulative advertising behaviors because visibility equates to revenue. Furthermore, both data sources pointed to regulatory limitations as a persistent challenge. APCON officials' observation that global platforms operate beyond Nigeria's jurisdiction resonates with Gillespie's (2020) findings that transnational digital systems have rendered traditional regulatory frameworks inadequate for policing online misinformation. However, despite these strong areas of agreement, several divergences were observed. One key difference lay in the level of public awareness versus institutional concern. While most respondents acknowledged the presence of clickbait on YouTube and Google, they often viewed it as a minor issue arising from unethical advertisers. Conversely, APCON officials emphasized the systemic nature of the problem, identifying algorithmic bias and corporate prioritization of profit over integrity as root causes. Another point of divergence concerned the perception of social media platforms. Although survey participants generally dismissed Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram as minor players in clickbait dissemination, several bloggers and marketers argued that these platforms play an indirect but significant role in amplifying deceptive content through cross-platform sharing. This finding aligns with Chen and Shi's (2022) observation that clickbait frequently circulates across interconnected digital ecosystems, gaining additional exposure even on platforms not originally hosting the content. A further divergence emerged in ethical responsibility. The quantitative data reflected general disapproval of clickbait advertising, whereas the qualitative responses from marketers and bloggers revealed moral ambivalence. Many admitted that they rely on sensational advertising tactics as a survival strategy in the competitive attention economy, a phenomenon described by Park (2021) as "ethical flexibility," where professionals prioritize financial stability over ethical consistency. The findings of this study align closely with recent scholarly evidence. Tandoc and Ling (2022) established that algorithmic systems promote sensationalism by rewarding engagement, while Adesina and Adefemi (2023) highlighted that deceptive advertising in Nigeria has contributed to declining consumer trust in digital platforms. Gillespie (2020) and Zulli and Zulli (2023) both emphasized that algorithmic recommendation systems on platforms such as YouTube encourage emotionally charged and controversial content, which perpetuates clickbait visibility. Moreover, Escalas and Luce (2020) demonstrated that emotional advertising manipulates consumers' decision-making by appealing to psychological impulses rather than rational thought, reinforcing the present study's findings that emotional and visual manipulation are the most effective forms of deception in Rivers State. Hence, the integration of both quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that the prevalence of clickbait advertising on YouTube and Google is not merely a consequence of unethical practices by individual advertisers but a structural outcome of the technological and economic systems that govern digital communication. The algorithmic infrastructure of these platforms rewards content that captures attention, while monetization models provide financial incentives for deceptive practices. The combination of engagement-driven algorithms, limited regulatory oversight, and strong emotional appeal creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which clickbait thrives. In conclusion, while consumers in Rivers State possess some awareness of clickbait tactics, they remain susceptible to manipulation due to the persuasive power of emotional and visual appeals. At the same time, marketers and content creators continue to exploit these vulnerabilities for economic gain, while regulatory agencies face significant barriers in enforcing ethical standards. These

findings underscore the urgent need for enhanced digital literacy among consumers, ethical training for content creators, and international cooperation to strengthen the regulation of global digital platforms. Without such measures, clickbait advertising will continue to flourish, undermining public trust and the integrity of digital communication within Rivers State and beyond.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study established that clickbait advertising in Rivers State is characterized by manipulative techniques such as sensational headlines, misleading visuals, false claims, emotional appeals, and misrepresentation of product quality, which are most prevalent on platforms like YouTube, Google, and news websites. Despite growing exposure to digital media, consumers demonstrate only moderate awareness and limited ability to differentiate genuine advertisements from deceptive ones, making them vulnerable to manipulation. Consequently, the pervasive use of clickbait has significantly eroded consumer trust, fostering skepticism, emotional fatigue, and cautious engagement with online platforms, thereby undermining the credibility of digital advertising in the region.

Recommendations

Based on the four findings, the following recommendations were made:

- i. Regulatory agencies such as APCON should strengthen the enforcement of ethical advertising standards to curb the use of sensational, misleading, and deceptive clickbait content across digital platforms.
- ii. Collaboration between Nigerian regulatory bodies and global digital corporations like Google and YouTube should be established to monitor, flag, and restrict the spread of manipulative advertisements targeting local audiences.

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