Emotive Language in Online News: The Case of Awani News Channel

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ABSTRACT

Employing emotive words in news writing is one of the most common strategies in today's newspaper reporting. Emotive words are usually used in writings to evoke readers' emotion on the subject. It is important for a reader to be aware of this phenomenon so they would not be easily manipulated by provoking news articles. However, in Malaysia where the news media is still being controlled strictly by regulations and ethics, are emotive words the commonly employed strategy by journalists? This study intends to discover the usage of emotive words in news reporting in Awani News. The data for this study are the 'viral' news articles on one of the social media, Twitter. The tweets with mass number of engagements were taken and the article from the link attached with those tweets were analysed. From the analysis, the researcher found that generally, Awani News was able to keep their objectivity in reporting the news article but not in the headlines. However, there were also some instances where the news channel used emotive words heavily in their news reporting. Out of 14 news articles analysed, there were 13 headlines that contained emotive words/phrases and 32 emotive words/phrases within the news articles. But, the employment of emotive words in the news articles is not even as there are news articles that have 9 emotive words/phrases and there are also news articles that do not contain any of them.

Keywords: Awani News, emotive words, objectivity in news reporting, 'viral'

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Introduction

Emotive language is often used by journalists to create a significant impact on readers. Online newspaper sites often use emotive language in their news headlines especially in critical and controversial topics. The word ‘victim’ will surely arouse strong feelings among readers than the word ‘claimant’. Simply said, emotive language strikes readers’ emotion and riles them up to ensure they participate in the discussion online where there are billions of users with differing points of view. The invention of the Internet has changed the way humans lead their lives. This includes how people obtain news. Today’s news environment is shifting from a hard-printed newspaper into the digital-displayed newspaper. In this case, the effectiveness of headlines is important in ensuring readers click on the title linking them to the news. The purpose of headlines nowadays acts as clickbait⁵ which has changed the headline writing game into a new complicated process.

According to Mokalkar, et al (2016), the media portrays the news with negativity as they try to make profit out of sensationalism. This shows that emotive words have a major impact in making the news interesting. Being applied on headlines, these emotive words will create the feeling of sensation towards the readers and bait them into clicking the link towards the news.

Language in News Articles

Words can trigger readers’ feelings towards the subject and result in them wanting to respond to the news. The Lexical element is a major part in the construction of ideas according to Halliday’s (1994) linguistics theory. He also pointed out that lexical classification is the basic part of the human thinking process. Because different individuals have different cultural backgrounds and different upbringings which makes them have different social experiences, they will have different views of sociolinguistics and will interpret everything differently. Xin (2005) added, “classification means that the description of the objects or events is mainly realized by polarized lexical choice” (He & Zhou, 2015). The use of lexis in messages is always controlled by the intention of the speaker. In news discourse, the ideologies of the story may be hidden in the emotive language used by the author. Lexical choice can influence the readers if they are being used correctly.

Words can be powerful. They can flatter us, frighten us and make us do something (Macagno & Walton, 2014). Politicians, news channels and managers have been using this strategy with various intentions behind their utterances. Politicians want to win votes, news channels want to sell newspapers and managers want to keep the employees happy. One of the strategies used is the selection of emotive language in their utterances. Emotive language is word choice that is used to evoke emotion and is intended to cause an effect (emotional response) on the audience (Tsitsanoudis-Mallidis, N., & Derveni, E., 2018). Different choices of emotive language in an utterance may ignite different kinds of emotion.

In Zhang’s theory (2011), words can be divided into three categories according to their emotional colouring: commendatory words, derogatory words and neutral words. Commendatory terms are words with active evaluation that show the user’s favourable attitude to his or her descriptive objects. Derogatory terms are words with negative evaluation that reflect the user’s negative attitude. Neutral terms are words with no evaluation, and by using neutral words the user makes no comments on his or her descriptive objects but only states the fact. Both commendatory and derogatory words have evaluative colouring. Therefore, writers

may use different colouring words at will, especially adjectives and adverbs, which will carry ideologies behind them.

Online Newspaper Headlines

At times, newspaper headlines can be misleading in order to encourage Internet users' engagement on the news posting. Headlines can be defined as a riveting short-cut to the content of a newspaper (Saxena, 2006) which means that headlines serve the following functions that are 1) to summarize and 2) to attract the attention of the reader towards the newspaper article. As the definition goes, the function of the headlines of providing a summary of the article is not necessarily true (Althaus, 2001). Newspaper headlines also do not improve the comprehension of the readers towards the content, nor do they provide vital information (Infantidou, 2008).

The missing vital information in online news headlines was reported by Ecker, Lewandowsky, Chang and Pillai (2014). This is called the dual-effect theory of misinformation. This research reported on how redacting some vital information of the news from the headlines may affect readers' memory. This subtle misinformation in online newspaper headlines creates massive users' engagement on the news as it encourages users to make inference based on the facts presented in the headlines with users' built-in knowledge and experience. According to Lewandowsky (2011), the subtlety of the misdirection in these headlines was done through the cherry-picking presentation of facts of the news. People can be misled even by the truth.

Andrew (2007) viewed headlines as an autonomous text rather than the representation of the content of the article it introduced. Unless the readers read the whole story in the article, the headlines may mislead the readers into obtaining false information. According to his research, the readers who scanned through only on the headlines of the news have a different understanding of the news rather than those who read the full article (Andrew, 2007). It is a common belief nowadays that readers cannot assume the story based on its headline as it is important for the headline to be catchy and attractive to serve as a clickbait. According to MxQuarrie & Mick (1996), the unusual features of language can always be found in headlines and this can be considered as 'artful deviations' (Alipour & Monjezi, 2016). These unusual features of the language are used as readers are often attracted to something that will raise questions in their mind.

Bloom and Reneicke (2014) conducted a research on 100,000 Danish headlines and they looked into the use of forward referring words in the headlines. According to them traditional journalism suggests that a headline must: 1) summarise the story and 2) be exciting. The use of deixis and cataphoric reference words may violate the first core value of traditional headlines writing. The result shows forward-referring headlines are primarily used as clickbait luring the readers into clicking on and reading the full article thus making the news site visited more by Internet users.

Objective

The primary objective of this research is to analyse the emotive language used by news headlines and articles. The use of emotive language is to ensure rapid and mass engagement towards the headlines; thus, increase the attention towards the news.

Methodology of Research

The nature of this study requires the use of a qualitative method in analysing the data. Textual analysis was applied by the researchers on the data in order to determine the application of emotive language in news reporting. The sampling technique of this study is non-probability, purposive sampling technique. The headlines and news articles taken from selected news Twitter accounts with high number of engagements are taken into the data bank of this study (Engagement: replies, retweets & likes). An engagement rate between 0.09% and 0.33% is considered to be high, where an influencer would expect 9 - 33 reactions for every 1000 followers on Twitter. Finally, an engagement rate between 0.33% and 1% is considered to be very high, with expected reactions to be between 33 - 100 for every 1000 Twitter followers (source: <https://www.contentcal.io/>)

The followers on Twitter can be real or fake accounts. So, in order to ensure the accuracy of the engagement rate, the researchers had used TwitterAudit sites to look for real accounts that follow @501Awani. There are 809,808 followers of @501Awani Twitter account and by following the high Twitter engagement rule (0.09%).

Procedure

A total number of 14 headlines from Awani News were selected for this study. These headlines were analysed as how emotive language is used in high engagement newspaper headlines. The data was analysed through textual analysis. The researchers first determine the minimum number of engagements on Awani News twitter account. Headlines that past the minimum number were included in the data bank and the process of determining the emotive language starts. Words with embedded emotion in them were taken out and the connotation that the words/phrases carry was justified with the context surrounding the news.

Findings

Out of 14 articles chosen for this study, there are 12 emotive words/phrases used in headlines, whereas 36 emotive words/phrases are used in the news articles. However, the usage of emotive words/phrases are not well-spread among the 14 news articles. There are four articles which do not contain emotive words, seven articles (1-3) with little usage of emotive words/phrases, and three articles with frequent usage of emotive words/phrases. However, it is important to note that 13 out of 14 headlines contain emotive words/phrases. The headlines of the news are shown in the table below.

Table 1: List of Emotive Words in News Headlines

No.	Headlines	Emotive words/phrases
1.	<i>Mana perginya ARMY? MV BTS 'Stay Gold' gagal atasi tontonan 'How You Like That'</i>	<i>Gagal</i> (fail)
2.	<i>Ingkar PKP: Exco Perak mohon maaf pada rakyat Malaysia</i>	<i>Ingkar, Mohon</i> (Beg)

3.	<i>Lebih baik kerja gaji rendah daripada tiada kerja langsung – Saravanan</i>	<i>Rendah</i> (low)
4.	<i>Penularan koronavirus di Malaysia belum sampai tahap kritikal – Tun M</i>	<i>Tahap kritikal</i> (in critical state)
5.	<i>"Isteri baharu macam vitamin buat saya" - Da'i Farhan</i>	<i>Isteri baharu</i> (new wife)
6.	<i>Menteri Pengajian Tinggi mohon maaf</i>	<i>Mohon maaf</i> (beg for forgiveness)
7.	<i>Mira Filzah calon hos baharu MeleTOP ganti Neelofa?</i>	<i>Ganti</i> (replace)
8.	<i>Koronavirus: Tiada rancangan halang kemasukan rakyat China buat masa ini - Tun M</i>	<i>Tiada rancangan</i> (have no plan)
9.	<i>Ini antara petikan ucapan @zuraida_my semalam yang menjadi perbualan hangat sehingga ke hari ini. (video)</i>	<i>Perbualan hangat</i> (spicy conversation)
10.	<i>Dakwa Veveonah menipu: Zahidi dedah dapat maklumat daripada ahli Parlimen Kudat</i>	<i>Veveonah menipu, dedah</i> (Veveonah lies, revealed)
11.	<i>Zahid Hamidi mohon maaf susulan peningkatan kes COVID-19 selepas PRN Sabah</i>	<i>Mohon maaf</i> (beg for forgiveness)
12.	<i>Dah dengar rakaman yang didedah @SPRMMalaysia membabitkan perbualan Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor bersama Datuk Seri@najibrazak? Ini video penuh rakaman tersebut. (video)</i>	<i>Didedah</i> (leaked)
13.	<i>UMNO perlu jawatan untuk bantu rakyat - Tajuddin</i>	<i>Perlu jawatan</i> (need the positions)
14.	<i>Exco, ADUN Kelantan bakal naik gaji</i>	-

The first headline uses the emotive word *gagal* (fail) to describe the situation in the news. Whereas, headlines 2, 6 & 11 use the word *mohon* which can be translated into 'beg'. The third headline shows the use of the emotive phrase *kerja gaji rendah* (working with low income) that ignited rage among Twitter users at that time. The fourth headline uses the word *kritikal* (critical) and the fifth headline uses *isteri baharu* (new wife). Headline 7 uses the emotive phrase *ganti Neelofa* (replace Neelofa) which started some backlash against another celebrity mentioned in the article. The news headline number eight uses the emotive phrase *tiada rancangan* (no plan) indicating that the current government at that time had not given the restriction a thought. Headline 9 uses the phrase *perbualan hangat* (hot conversation topic) describing the rapid circulation of a politician's speech video. Both headlines 10 & 12 use the

word *dedah* (leak) and headline 10 uses the word *menipu* (lies). Lastly, headline 13 uses the phrase *perlu jawatan* (need for a ~~the~~ higher position) indicating the politicians from UMNO need to have the position otherwise they would not be able to help Malaysians.

In order to discuss the headlines further, headline 1 will be focused first. The ‘kpop stan’ (Korean Pop culture fans) is one of the biggest communities online. It is apparent why the journalist uses so many emotive words in this article, which is to provoke the fan base of a Korean Pop singing group. In the headlines the journalist uses a strong emotive word ‘fail’ in order to describe the comparison of the subject fan base to another famous Korean Pop fan base (comparing BTS fan base to Blackpink fan base). Furthermore, there are 9 emotive words/phrases in this news article alone. There are words/phrases like *teruja* (excited), *bersorak gembira* (cheering happily), *terkilan* (upset), and *sekadar* (not enough/ merely). The journalist even uses a provocative and emotive language which is “*langsung tidak menggambarkan keterujaan*” (did not show any excitement) to describe the effort made by BTS fan base to make the newly released song circulate rapidly. To put things into context, the BTS song received 21 million views on YouTube after 24 hours.

The journalists use the phrase ‘*mohon maaf*’ (beg for forgiveness) in headlines 2, 6 & 11. From the articles, it can be seen that the politicians mentioned in the articles do not beg for anything. The more accurate word here could have been ‘ask for forgiveness’. Both of these words (*minta* and *mohon*) in Malay language may seem to be interchangeable, but carry different connotations. *Minta* is usually used by someone with leverage or advantages over everyone else (in this context, politicians are the community leader). On the other hand, *mohon* is to be used by someone who does not have the leverage over others and he/she is begging for help. To further explain the connotation, the word *mohon* seems to be more polite and the usage of the emotive word is to get readers to sympathise with the politicians. In headline 2, there is also the word *ingkar* (disobey) as when the subject went out to help the community during lockdown. To use *ingkar* seems to be an exaggeration as the word is only often used (in Malaysian context) when one disobeys orders issued by either God or the Sultans.

Headline 3 uses the emotive phrase *gaji rendah* (low salary) to create a spark of emotion among readers. Having a lower salary in any circumstances is painful although, realistically, the situation is unavoidable. In the article, the journalist also uses the emotive phrase *ekonomi yang tidak menentu* (economic uncertainty) to further ignite the emotion of the readers. Headline 4 uses the emotive phrase *belum sampai tahap kritikal* (has not reached critical state) to describe the Prime Minister’s address on Covid-19 pandemic at that time. People were worried amidst the covid-19 pandemic and comment from the Prime Minister as the highest position in the government at the time sparked a lot of differing reactions. However, there was no emotive word/phrase used in the article as the article justified the action taken by the Prime Minister. The Malaysian Prime Minister was featured again in headline 8 as this time the journalist uses the phrase *tiada rancangan* (has no plan). With the Covid-19 pandemic spreading fast throughout the world, knowing the government did not have any plan to stop potential carriers of the virus into the country was worrying.

Next, headline 5 uses the emotive phrase *isteri baharu* (new wife) in describing the controversial issue of an *ustaz* (a religious figure) who had just left his former wife to marry another woman. The phrase *isteri baharu* sparks negative feelings towards the religious figure’s action because he ended his previous relationship poorly. In the article, the journalist also uses *pendakwah sensasi* (infamous preacher) and *janda anak lapan* (a widow with eight children). The word *sensasi* can be translated to ‘infamous’ as before the news, Da’i Farhan

(the subject of the news) had never gotten such coverage from the media. He became famous for the wrong reason. The second emotive phrase used in the article was *janda anak lapan*.

The next headline is headline 7 in which the journalist uses the phrase *ganti Neelofa* (to replace Neelofa). To put things into context, Neelofa is a prominent figure in the entertainment industry and had been a host for the TV show *Meletop* for a long time. The word *ganti* on its own does not fall into the category of an emotive word. However, the idea of another celebrity replacing Neelofa (especially a new celebrity) as a host was not a well-accepted idea by the fans of the show.

In headline 9 the journalist uses the emotive phrase *perbualan hangat* (talk of the town) describing the speech given by Zuraida Kamaruddin, a Malaysian politician who has twice served as the Minister of Housing and Local Government. Zuraida's speech was very controversial and has not been well accepted by some Malaysians because of some of her comments and plans during her tenure serving as Minister of Housing and Local Government.

Headline 10 uses the emotive word *menipu* (lies) in describing the action done by Veveonah in describing her hardship dealing with online tests conducted by her university. The word caused anger with the readers since most of them are aware of how poor the infrastructure in certain outskirt areas is, especially in Sabah. The way the MP addressed the situation caused a stir among netizens since they believed that he is not doing anything in order to fix the situation but to put the blame on Veveonah. Covid-19 has already put teachers and students in unconducive situations, hence this choice of word (lies) made the students and teachers feel underappreciated in their effort of adapting to the new teaching and learning process.

~~Also~~Also, in headline 10 and 12 the journalist uses the emotive word *dedah*. However, the English translation based on the two situations are different. *Dedah* in headline 10 can be translated into 'revealed'. On the other hand, *dedah* in headline 12 can be suitably translated into 'leaked' as the information was supposed to be sealed as secret. In headline 10, the politician claimed that the false information that he received was revealed by a lecturer from the educational institution. Whereas in headline 12, the word *dedah* is used in describing SPRM's action of conducting a press conference to disclose a phone call between the under-trial Najib Razak and his wife Rosmah Mansor. This trial had received wide coverage from local and international media as it was a very controversial issue involving corruption and abuse of power.

The final headline containing emotive phrases is headline 13 which is *UMNO perlu jawatan untuk bantu rakyat* (UMNO needs power to help the people). The phrase became emotive because of the instability of Malaysia's political affairs. Malaysians had seen the power transition and politicians jumping around from one political party to another. This headline further proves the power-hungry politicians are in it only for themselves.

Besides the wide usage of emotive words/phrases by journalists that can be seen from above analysis, there is also one article that does not have any emotive language in it. The headline of the news is *Exco, ADUN Kelantan bakal naik gaji* (Kelantan's Exco & MP will receive an increase in salary). The article is written as informative as possible by the journalist. But, out of 14 online newspaper articles selected, 13 of them contain emotive language.

Conclusion

The result of the analysis reveals the usage of emotive language is not only to introduce the topics, but aiming to influence the readers' understanding and comprehension towards the whole text. The author may influence the impact that news may have on the readers based on the emotive language used in the headlines. However, it is worth noting that religious beliefs, gender, age and socioeconomic status may bring different interpretations altogether. A person may think the headlines are positives whereby the other person may interpret the other way around.

From the analysis, we can conclude that Awani News uses a lot of emotive language to ignite interests from readers. The increase of interests will increase engagements and this is exactly what the news channels need. Out of 14 news articles selected, only one is not written with emotive language while the other 14 contain various emotive words/phrases that may influence readers to engage with the news and other Internet users. So, it is fair to say that although online news media in Malaysia is strictly bounded by regulations and Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, the provocative language is still used in news reporting especially news that involves politicians.

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Appendix

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