

Original Article



# Clickbait Aesthetics: A Study of Thumbnail Design Strategies and Their Effect on Viewer Behavior

Abdullah Imran<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Saba Naz<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Mahe Darakshan<sup>3</sup>

1. MS Scholar, International Relations Department, Bahria University Karachi Campus; [branded.ai@gmail.com](mailto:branded.ai@gmail.com)
2. Assistant Professor, Bahria University Karachi Campus; [Sabanaz.bukc@bahria.edu.pk](mailto:Sabanaz.bukc@bahria.edu.pk)
3. Principle of Humanities and Social Sciences, International Relations Department, Bahria University Karachi Campus; [Darakshan.bukc@bahria.edu.pk](mailto:Darakshan.bukc@bahria.edu.pk)



**Citation:** Abdullah Imran, Dr. Mahe Darakshan, & Dr. Saba Naz. (2026). Clickbait Aesthetics: A Study of Thumbnail Design Strategies and Their Effect on Viewer Behavior. *Insights: Journal of Humanities and Media Studies Review*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.63290/jhmsr.v2.i2.51>

Received: 30, April 2026  
Accepted: 15, June 2026

Revised: 28, May 2026  
Published: 30, June 2026

**Academic Editors:** Masroor Khanum



**Copyright:** © 2026 by the authors. Licensee Unity Research, Karachi, Pakistan. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

**Publisher:**  
Unity Research SMC Pvt. Ltd

**Abstract:** With the rise of online news outlets, many YouTube news channels have gone to great lengths to draw attention with their attractive/clickbait thumbnails. Some thumbnails are deceptive and some are truthful. The aim of this study is to investigate the effect of thumbnail designs on YouTube news videos' interest and trust. The method of this study was quantitative research approach and sampling which was used in this study was Purposive sampling. The survey was conducted on Google Forms and data was gathered with the use of a survey. A total of 263 people filled the survey. Out of these, 221 responses were used because these people watch news on YouTube and others don't. Jamovi software was used to analyze the data. The descriptive statistics, reliability test, one sample t test and chi square test were used. The findings revealed that mislead thumbnail induces more clicks on news videos. This would entail that they raise the short term interest. But, over time people become skeptical when they repeatedly encounter misleading thumbnails. The study also revealed that viewers tend to select videos with misleading thumbnails over honest videos. This occurs despite the fact that misleading thumbnails detract from trust. The trust scale had a good reliability for basic research. Finally, misleading thumbnails get the attention of viewers more easily, and hurt the trustworthiness of the website in the long run. The results of the study indicate that trust in online news is crucial to maintain in the form of honest and ethical thumbnail.

**Keywords:** Click bait, Design, Youtube, Thumbnails, Videos

## Introduction:

Most of the people nowadays get news from the Internet, not TV. How the news is presented has been transformed in terms of videos, for example. The thumbnail is one of the primary factors that can impact viewers' choices to view a video, as it is often the first thing they will encounter before the video. Thumbnails are a crucial part of a video to draw in audience and compel them to click on a video. YouTube allows users

to add titles, descriptions and thumbnails to their videos which can be seen by the viewer before he/she plays the video (Gothankar et al., 2021; Kalogeropoulos, 2017).

The media has evolved from the traditional newspaper and television to internet and social networks in recent years. The readers of print newspapers are declining and online news consumption is growing (Rahman & Al Mamun, 2024). Recent reports indicate that platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have emerged as prime sources of news consumption, with viewers choosing whether to watch content by the thumbnails and headlines (Newman, 2025). In an era where the attention span of people online has been shortened, news channels are increasingly using thumbnails, catchy headlines and emotional images to draw people in and boost click-through rates (CTR) (Kuiken et al., 2017).

This growing dividing of attention has also facilitated the growth of clickbaiting. Clickbait thumbnails are the thumbnails that draw viewers by using sensational, exaggerated, or false, images and emotions (Xie et al., 2021). The strategies can be effective in the short term, but can also mislead viewers and have a negative impact on the credibility and trustworthiness of news outlets (Jung et al., 2022). In the digital environment where information overload is prevalent, publishers sometimes pay much more attention to audience attention and engagement than to information sharing and journalism ethics (Kaushal et al., n.d.).

The focus of the literature has been on clickbait headlines and engagement of audiences; but there is not much research that has specifically been directed at misleading visual thumbnails in online news. Previous theories like Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory were mainly developed to explain the dynamics of traditional mass media, which are not adequate to explain the visual and algorithmic dynamics of the digital news platforms. Moreover, previous research on clickbait and visual framing has focused on Western environments and limited contextual research has focused on the visual framing of news thumbnails on YouTube and audience responses in South Asian context like that of Pakistan.

This generates a theoretical and contextual void in the understanding of the impact of misleading thumbnails on engagement, trust, perception, and decision making in digital journalism. Although thumbnails have become a vital element in online news presentation, there is less awareness of the effect of misleading and honest thumbnails on audiences' behavior and perceptions of credibility (Kim et al., 2023).

Thus, the present study aims to explore the effect on engagement, perception and trust of misleading and honest YouTube news thumbnails. The purpose of the study is to determine if misleading thumbnails will result in a higher click-through rates than honest thumbnails, to assess how repeated exposure to misleading visuals will impact viewers' trust in news content, and to determine if honest thumbnails will affect long-term trust and credibility of viewers. Moreover, the study is a discussion on the correlation between visual design ethics and the involvement of the audience in digital journalism.

The importance of this research is that it helps to understand the impact of thumbnail design on the online news environment's viewers' decisions and perceptions. The results could inform news media and content producers to develop a more ethical and effective thumbnail strategy to sustain engagement of their audiences while preserving their trust and credibility in digital media.

## Research Questions

*RQ1: What effect do mislead and honest thumbnails have on viewer click-through rates on YouTube?*

*RQ2: What are the effects of continued exposure to misleading thumbnails on viewer trust of news content?*

RQ3: What type of thumbnails misleading or honest do viewers prefer when choosing news videos?

## Hypotheses

H1: The misleading news thumbnails help in achieving more CTR on YouTube than honest news thumbnails.

Independent variable: Thumbnail (misleading)

Dependent variable: Click-through rate

H2: This has the effect of reducing the trust of viewers in online news media over time when they come across misleading thumbnails repeatedly.

Independent variable: Exposure to misleading thumbnails

Dependent variable: Viewer trust

H3: People's preference for which news videos to watch varies according to whether they are misled or not by the thumbnail.

Independent variable: Thumbnail type (misleading vs honest)

Dependent variable: Viewer preference

## Literature Review

YouTube is a significant place for getting information online and thumbnails and titles are critical in driving viewers to click. To boost click-through rates (CTR), content producers have begun to create engaging thumbnails and headlines, resulting in the general use of clickbait tactics in digital journalism (Shah & Bashir, 2024). It's common to use sensationalized imagery, emotive face, and sensationalistic statements to grab viewers' interest (Pujahari & Sisodia, 2021; Wang et al., 2025).

It has been found that the best thumbnails include a mix of visual interest and informative content, incorporating elements like color, quality of images, and emotional cues that can captivate the audience (Al-Ali & Hamzeh, 2024). It is better to create custom thumbnails than automatic thumbnails, particularly in the crowded and low-visible platforms such as YouTube where there is a lot of competition (Agarwal et al., 2024; Dong, 2024).

But, research also points out the downfall of misleading thumbnails and clickbait on trust. These practices tend to inflate and/or misrepresent information, thereby creating misinformation and diminishing news trust (Xie et al. 2021). The amount of emotional framing could also have an impact on the perception of the viewer before watching the content; it could affect the trust in digital news (Choi & Go, 2025).

The emergence of digital journalism has given rise to the use of thumbnails as tools for visual storytelling that help guide the interpretation and engagement of the audience (Jácono-Morales & Marino-Jiménez, 2024). The use of visual cues like colours, emotion, and complexity has a huge impact on user interaction, but too many emotional cues can lead to unexpected results (Kim et al., 2023).

The recommendation system on YouTube also plays a significant role in the effect of clickbait because it prioritizes videos that are very engaging, and in some cases, sensational thumbnails that lead to more clicks

(Agarwal et al., 2024). This could result in the recommendation bias, reducing the exposure to insightful and reliable information sources.

It is also observed from real life examples that the news channels are using dramatic thumbnail to attract the audience and sometimes at the cost of the truthfulness of the news. (Irfan Junejo, 2025)

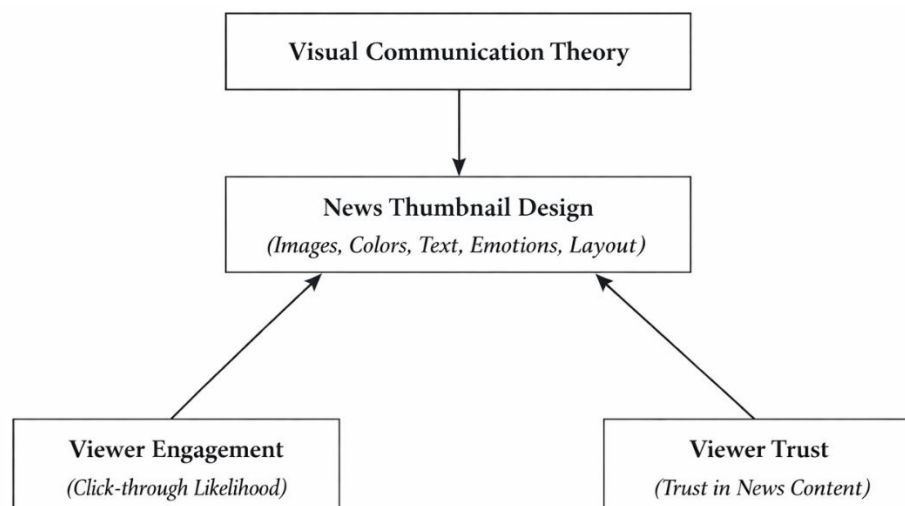
The study is guided by three theories namely: Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory. In line with Agenda-Setting Theory, which explains how media influences audience attention towards the issues and Framing Theory, which explains how presentation influences perception (McCombs & Shaw, 2017, Zaklama, 2025), the following data were gathered from the head of the meeting. Data were collected from the head of the meeting, under Agenda-Setting Theory, which explains how media influences audience attention towards the issues and Framing Theory, which explains how presentation influences perception (McCombs & Shaw, 2017, Zaklama, 2025) Uses and Gratifications Theory suggests that the audience is active in choosing media according to their needs or desires, including information, curiosity, entertainment, and more (Falgoust et al., 2022; Sichach, 2024).

In conclusion, the literature indicates that thumbnails and clickbait techniques play a key role in user engagement and perception. Yet, few studies have concentrated on the issue of misleading news thumbnails for YouTube videos and its effects on people's trust and behavior, particularly in South Asian contexts. This study fills this void by studying the influence of misleading and honest thumbnails on viewer engagement and trust in digital journalism.

## Theoretical Framework

This research work is based on the concepts of Visual Communication Theory that relates how the visual elements in forms of image, color, text and layout can affect the viewers' perception and decision-making. Thumbnails are the first thing that is visually seen by users when they browse YouTube, and they can greatly influence the choice of whether to click on a video (Zuo, 2023).

Visual Communication Theory is concerned with the image language and meaning and how audiences interpret images in media within cultural and social setting. It provides an explanation that visuals are not just used for decoration; they are powerful communication tools that impact understanding, feelings, and behavior (Aiello & Parry, 2025).



This figure shows the conceptual framework of the study, which is influenced by Visual Communication Theory, in which news thumbnail design affects the engagement and trust of viewers in YouTube news content.

Visual communication involves the application of visual aspects like typography, symbols, digital graphics, etc. that help to impart information better. Visuals help to enhance the clarity, persuasion and audience engagement when combined with text.

Thumbnails are important tools of communication in digital media, particularly on YouTube. The use of elements such as color, facial expressions and layout can affect user perception of content and whether a user will trust or click it. Thus, this theory can directly support this study, which focuses on how misleading and honest thumbnails affect the engagement and trust of viewers (Zuo, 2023).

## Methodology

The research in this study is a qualitative research design with a survey data collection method that is implemented using Google Forms. The target respondents are people who watch news content on YouTube regularly. There's questions about how the user clicks on misleading thumbnails vs honest thumbnails, as well as how much they trust the link depending on the two.

Analysis of data will be carried out using the software of Jamovi. The independent variable is the thumbnail design (misleading vs. honest) and the dependent variables are click through and trust level.

The population is comprised of frequent YouTube news viewers, who regularly interact with video thumbnails and make decisions regarding video viewing based on them. The study will be purposive sampling and the sampling will be done by structuring a questionnaire which will be distributed online. The question ("Do you watch news content on YouTube?") will be placed in a screening question to filter out the irrelevant users.

The sample will consist of about 250 respondents who will be chosen to provide a representative and statistically reliable sample of the various demographic groups.

Ethical considerations will be followed, ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, and no collection of personal identifying information.

## Data Analysis/ Results

### Descriptive Analysis

Response Category	Frequency (n)
Total responses received	263
Respondents who watch YouTube News (Yes)	221
Respondents who do not watch YouTube News (No)	42
Valid responses used for analysis	221

The survey conducted via the Google Form received 263 responses. Based on these, 221 of these respondents answered the screening question stating that they do view the news content on YouTube with “Yes” and 42 respondents answered with No. The final analysis comprised only of the 221 valid responses of the participants who view YouTube news. To summarize the basic characteristics of the data collected by the use of the survey, descriptive statistics were applied. The analysis of data was performed in Jamovi software. No reporting of missing values of any of the variables analyzed.

Variable	Mean (M)	SD
Click Likelihood (H1)	3.28	0.83
Trust Loss (H2)	4.37	0.87
Confidence in Honest Thumbnails	3.38	1.22

The descriptive statistics revealed that the average score in terms of click likelihood (H1) was as following with a Standard deviation of 0.83 and a median of 3.33; the highest score of 3.333 and the lowest score of 1. Denoting an average tendency of the respondents to open the news videos with misleading thumbnails.

In the case of losing trust because of being exposed to misleading thumbnails multiple times (H2), the average score was 4.37, Standard deviation 0.87 and median 4.50 with the min score of 1 and the maximum score of 5. Such a high mean indicates the fact that a majority of the respondents indicated a strong feeling of lost trust whenever they repeatedly view the deceptive thumbnails.

The mean score for confidence in honest thumbnails was 3.38, Standard deviation 1.22, and the median value 4 indicating a generally positive perception of honest thumbnail designs among respondents, although responses varied across the sample.

#### Reliability & Validity Analysis

Reliability and Validity analysis was conducted to examine the internal consistency of the trust scale used in the survey. The analysis was performed using Jamovi software. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was calculated to assess the reliability of the scale.

Scale	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Trust Scale	0.629

The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the trust scale was 0.629, as a result. This value is acceptable for the degree of internal consistency in exploratory research of social sciences. The scale had a good level of reliability for measuring viewers' trust concerning exposure to misleading news thumbnails.

## Research Questions & Hypotheses Results

### H1 Results

H1: The click-through rate of YouTube videos is increased when the thumbnails are misleading.

To check the validity of Hypothesis 1, a one-sample t-test was used to compare the probability that the viewers click on news videos with a true value of 0.5. To test Hypothesis 1, a one-sample t-test was performed and the probability of viewers clicking on the news videos was compared with the null value of 0.5. A neutral point on the Likert scale was used for the test value, which was assigned to the number '3'.

The results were that the mean click likelihood score was 3.28 (SD = 0.83). An analysis showed a significant result ( $t(220) = 4.99, p < .001$ ). An effect size of Cohen's  $d$  was 0.336, which is considered a small to moderate effect size.

Based on these results, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

## H2 Results

H2: Repeated exposure to misleading thumbnails decreases viewers' trust in online news content over time.

A one-sample t-test was conducted to test whether repeated exposure to misleading thumbnails significantly affected viewer trust. The test value was again set at 3, representing a neutral level of trust.

The results indicated that the mean trust loss score was 4.37 (SD = 0.87). The test results showed a statistically significant effect,  $t(220) = 23.5, p < .001$ . The effect size measured using Cohen's  $d$ , was very large 1.58.

These findings indicate that repeated exposure to misleading thumbnails significantly reduces viewers' trust in online news content. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is strongly supported.

## H3 Results

H3: Viewers' preference differs between misleading and honest thumbnails when choosing which news videos to watch.

To test Hypothesis 3, a chi-square goodness-of-fit test was conducted to examine viewers' thumbnail preferences. Thumbnail A represented a misleading thumbnail design, while Thumbnail B represented an honest thumbnail design.

The results showed that 165 respondents (74.7%) preferred the misleading thumbnail, whereas 56 respondents (25.3%) preferred the honest thumbnail. The chi-square test revealed a statistically significant difference in preferences,  $\chi^2(1) = 53.8, p < .001$ .

Based on these results, Hypothesis 3 is supported, indicating that the majority of viewers preferred misleading thumbnails when selecting news videos.

Hypothesis	Test Used	Key Result	Decision
H1	One-sample t-test	$t(220) = 4.99, p < .001$	Supported
H2	One-sample t-test	$t(220) = 23.5, p < .001$	Supported
H3	Chi-square test	$\chi^2(1) = 53.8, p < .001$	Supported

## Discussion & Conclusion

### Discussion of Findings

The findings of this paper are quite clear that the design of news thumbnails plays a significant role in the engagement and trust of viewers on YouTube. The researchers discovered that false thumbnails gain more clicks due to the fact that most interviewees indicated that they would have been more inclined to clicking on false thumbnails. This implies that thumbnails which contain dramatic pictures, faces with emotion and exaggerated pictures attract the attention of people. These aspects assist videos to be noticed and get instant fame in a crowded online environment. Nevertheless, the article also results in the fact that misleading thumbnails have a negative impact on the trust of the viewers quite strongly. When such thumbnails are repeatedly viewed by the audience, their confidence in online news is lessened. This implies that despite the fact that misleading thumbnails may yield quick clicks; it destroys trust in the long-term. When a video content is not as depicted in the thumbnail, the viewers might be disappointed or cheated, and this may make them have low confidence in the news channel.

### Conclusion

The research examined the influence of the design of news thumbnails on YouTube viewer engagement and trust. The findings indicate that there is an effect of misleading thumbnails on increasing the number of clicks and they are found to be favored among a large number of viewers when they are deciding on news videos. Nevertheless, a repeated exposure to these thumbnails reduces the trust of the viewers to online news. The research indicates that even though deceptive thumbnails may result in temporary interaction, they pose severe challenges on the credibility and ethical journalism. Honest and accurate thumbnails will assist in achieving long term trust between the news organizations and the viewers. In the modern dynamic digital media, this study indicates that responsible visual communication is significant. The thumbnails must be in a manner that will draw the audience and also retain their trust.

### References

1. Agarwal, N., Poudel, D., & Cakmak, M. C. (2024). *15 publications 112 citations see profile*.
2. Aiello, G., & Parry, K. (2025). *Visual communication: Understanding images in media culture*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529721522>
3. Al-Ali, M. N., & Hamzeh, M. S. M. (2024). Extra cues extra views: A multimodal detection of Arabic clickbait thumbnail verbo-visual cues. *Discourse & Communication*, 18(1), 3–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17504813231190332>
4. Choi, S., & Go, Y.-M. (2025). *Capturing children's attention: AI-driven analysis of thumbnail design in YouTube educational content*.
5. Dong, S. (2024). A study on video thumbnails design attributes and their influence on video outcomes. *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*, 41(1). <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/41/20240778>
6. Falgoust, G., Winterlind, E., Moon, P., Parker, A., Zinzow, H., & Chalil Madathil, K. (2022). Applying the uses and gratifications theory to identify motivational factors behind young adults' participation in viral social media challenges on TikTok.
7. Gothankar, S., et al. (2021). Clickbait detection in YouTube videos.
8. Kaushal, V., & Vemuri, R. (2021). Clickbait and audience trust in digital journalism.
9. Kuiken, J., et al. (2017). Effective headlines and online audience engagement.
10. McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. (2017). The agenda-setting function of mass media.
11. Xie, Q., et al. (2021). Clickbait headlines and misinformation on social media.
12. Zuo, Y. (2023). Visual communication and digital media engagement.