

# Manipulative packaging in YouTube journalism: A quantitative content analysis in the Turkish context

*YouTube haberciliğinde manipülatif paketleme: Türkiye örneğinde nicel bir içerik analizi*

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## Abstract

This study examines the manipulative packaging patterns established between headlines, thumbnails, and video content in YouTube journalism, using Türkiye as an example. The research applies quantitative content analysis to 270 videos published on nine news channels between December 1 and 31, 2025. A composite total manipulation score based on 13 indicators is created to measure manipulation in the headline-thumbnail-content relationship. This score is evaluated in conjunction with channel types and click orientation. The findings show that manipulation differs not only in intensity but also in the composition of the indicators used among channels. While visual-discursive packaging and promise-content divergence are more pronounced in institutional news channels, manipulation in personal broadcasting examples focuses on personal reactions and performative narratives. The study conceptualizes clickbait not merely as a technique consisting of sensational headlines, but as a multi-layered presentation regime operating through the promise relationship established between headline, thumbnail, and content. In this respect, the article contributes to the discussion of manipulation in platform-based journalism through measurable indicators, channel profiles, and visibility pressures.

**Keywords:** YouTube journalism, manipulative packaging, clickbait, thumbnail, click orientation, content analysis

## Öz

Bu çalışma, YouTube haberciliğinde başlık, küçük resim ve video içeriği arasında kurulan manipülatif paketleme biçimlerini Türkiye örneğinde incelemektedir. Araştırma, 1-31 Aralık 2025 döneminde dokuz haber kanalında yayımlanan 270 videoya nicel içerik analizi uygulamaktadır. Başlık-küçük resim-içerik ilişkisindeki manipülasyonu ölçmek amacıyla 13 göstergeye dayalı bileşik bir toplam manipülasyon skoru oluşturulmuş; bu skor kanal türleri ve tık odaklılık değişkeniyle birlikte değerlendirilmiştir. Bulgular, manipülasyonun kanallar arasında yalnızca yoğunluk bakımından değil, kullanılan göstergelerin bileşimi bakımından da farklılaştığını göstermektedir. Kurumsal haber kanallarında görsel-söylemsel paketleme ve vaat-içerik sapması daha belirgin hale gelirken, kişisel yayıncılık örneklerinde manipülasyon kişisel reaksiyon ve performatif anlatı etrafında yoğunlaşmaktadır. Çalışma, clickbait'i yalnızca sansasyonel başlıklardan ibaret bir teknik olarak değil; başlık, küçük resim ve içerik arasında kurulan vaat ilişkisinde işleyen çok katmanlı bir sunum rejimi olarak kavramsallaştırmaktadır. Bu yönüyle makale, platform temelli habercilikte manipülasyonun ölçülebilir göstergeler, kanal profilleri ve görünürlük baskısı üzerinden tartışılmasına katkı sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** YouTube haberciliği, manipülatif paketleme, clickbait, küçük resim, tık odaklılık, içerik analizi

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## Introduction

Digitalization has altered how news is produced and distributed, and it has also altered how news value itself is constructed. While the traditional media is still mainly determined by the editorial criteria and corporate goals of the companies, in the platform-oriented digital journalism the visibility, user interaction and the circulation metrics are playing a greater role in determining the news value. In other words, the news value of digital journalism is determined by performance indicators internal to the platform more than the public relevance and the informative value, which are also valid for the traditional media in general (Shin, 2023, pp. 33–34; Lischka and Garz, 2023, pp. 2074–2076).

YouTube is one of the primary locations for this transformation to take place. Traditional media outlets, independent journalists, and commentary-based hybrid content creators all share the same interface there, and the result is a highly competitive news environment. Users rarely engage with the news directly; they interact through video titles, thumbnails, and the short texts embedded in them. A viewer's first judgment about a video therefore rests largely on these pre-presentation layers (Peer and Ksiazek, 2011, pp. 47–49; Cui et al., 2024, pp. 1–2).

Visibility on YouTube is tied closely to clicks, watch time, likes, comments, and shares. Journalists and content creators may know little about how the algorithms actually work, yet they build intuitive accounts of which presentation styles get rewarded and adjust their strategies to match (Peterson-Salahuddin and Diakopoulos, 2020, pp. 27–29). The pursuit of attention in journalism therefore does not stop at headline writing. It extends to the presentation package built around headline and thumbnail, and to the promise that package makes about the video content.

The sensationalist wording of the headline itself is not the core of the problem of manipulation. The relation between the promised content of a video that is presented to the user by title and thumbnail before opening the video and the content that is

presented and information that is offered to the user in the video are crucial for a discussion of manipulative packaging of YouTube journalism. Three aspects are decisive for this discussion: the congruence of title and thumbnail, the ratio of promised content to provided content and the integration intensity of indicators of manipulation (Kemm, 2022, pp. 55, 64).

Research on digital journalism in Türkiye has taken up click-oriented news practices, trust and verification habits in social media news, and the production and circulation of disinformation (Çavuş and Ede, 2021; Çömlekçi and Başol, 2019; Dağ and Taner, 2023; Kırdemir, 2020). A newer strand deals specifically with YouTube journalism. Çolak and Zinderen (2023) examined the channels of Cüneyt Özdemir and Nevşin Mengü through alternative journalism, audience participation, and journalists' own perspectives; Tunalıgil (2025) traced the move from traditional television journalism to YouTube in the case of Fatih Portakal. Dişiaçık and Aslan (2026) compared individual and institutional YouTube news channels — Cüneyt Özdemir, Nevşin Mengü, Haber Global, and CNN Türk — and pointed to differences in journalistic presentation and audience engagement. What these studies establish, collectively, is that YouTube has become an increasingly significant environment for the production and presentation of journalism in Türkiye.

That literature has nevertheless approached YouTube journalism largely through questions of alternative media, professional transformation, audience participation, and the divide between individual and institutional publishing practices. Less attention has gone to how headline, thumbnail, and video content operate together as a multimodal presentation package — above all to the relationship between the promise established before viewing and the information the content subsequently delivers. This is the narrower gap the present study addresses, examining manipulative packaging through measurable linguistic and visual indicators across different types of YouTube news channels in Türkiye.

The study therefore carried out quantitative content analysis on 270 videos from 9 YouTube news channels in Türkiye. Its main hypothesis is that clickbait extends beyond news headlines designed to attract clicks: it is a multidimensional packaging strategy, detectable through measurable visual and linguistic indicators in the titles, thumbnails, and content of news videos. The analysis provides an overview of the indicators that are manipulated most, their distribution across channels, and the degree of manipulation in relation to the click orientation. Three research questions follow:

1. Through which linguistic and visual indicators is manipulation constructed in YouTube news content?
2. How do different channel types employ these indicators in terms of intensity and combination?
3. What kind of relationship exists between the overall level of manipulation and click orientation?

The underlying aim is to show how news is packaged on YouTube and how packaging patterns vary across different publishing regimes.

This study has three principal original contributions to the field. First, by including an examination of the visual and platform aspects of clickbait, this study extends the framework presently dominant in the field of clickbait to include more than just text. Second, this study moves beyond the current practice of assessing manipulation based on the clickbait headline(s) alone. Instead, this study introduces a framework which systematically operationalizes the inter-play between the clickbait headline, thumbnail image, and article body content using 13 indicators and provides a composite manipulation score that assesses the level of manipulation of a given clickbait.

Finally, comparing channel types within the Turkish context yields a comparative framework in which manipulation can be analyzed by profile and click orientation as well as by intensity. The section that follows reconceptualizes clickbait within the logic of platforms; the discussion then turns to the literature on multimodal news presentation and

visual framing; and an analytical model linking thumbnails and packaging strategies on YouTube to empirical comparison closes the review.

### **Rethinking Clickbait Within the Logic of Platforms**

A substantial body of literature takes up clickbait in online environments and examines the textual and discursive strategies used to grab the attention of users. Clickbait is often defined there by headlines that are incomplete, exaggerated, or merely intriguing, and that consequently fail to inform users adequately about the content of the news they announce. Such headlines open an "information gap" in the user. Clicking the corresponding link becomes the way to close that gap and satisfy a need for cognitive closure (Jácono-Morales and Marino-Jiménez, 2024). A related observation is that clickbait headlines differ from traditional summarizing headlines because they are built to arouse curiosity rather than to foreground the main message (Lischka and Garz, 2023, pp. 2074–2075).

Manipulation is not treated here as synonymous with clickbait, and exaggeration, omission, and ambiguity are not treated as mutually exclusive alternatives to it. Manipulation is instead a broader process, one in which the presentation of information may shape audience perceptions and expectations by selectively emphasizing, withholding, reframing, or decontextualizing particular elements (van Dijk, 2006, pp. 366–367). Exaggeration, strategic omission, curiosity gaps, ambiguous formulations, and misleading implications thus count as distinct observable mechanisms through which manipulative packaging may operate (Apresjan and Orlov, 2022, pp. 91–94; Lischka and Garz, 2023, pp. 2074–2075). None of this makes every attention-grabbing or click-oriented presentation manipulative. What separates the two is whether a presentational device merely attracts attention or alters the informational expectations created around the content. Manipulation, in this study, is an analytical concept pointing to observable features of the headline–thumbnail–content relationship, not to

the presumed intentions of journalists or publishers.

These definitions identify the linguistic features of clickbait well enough, but they leave unexplained how it functions in a platform environment. In the digital news economy a click on a news link carries value: it makes content more visible, generates traffic for news publishers, and can even be profitable. Headlines have consequently become a central performance objective for publishers (Kaushal and Vemuri, 2021, pp. 1–2). Therefore, clickbait is a packaging device and it cannot be separated from the news content as afterthought. It is influenced by the attention economy, by online news' revenue model which is advertising-based, and by online news visibility that is measured by performance metrics (Qorib et al., 2024).

The dynamic belongs to the broader processes of platformization and the attention economy. Digital platforms are often portrayed as neutral intermediaries facilitating the distribution of cultural and journalistic content. In reality, however, the architectures, metrics and algorithms underlying these platforms significantly shape the ways in which news is produced, distributed and made visible (van Dijck et al., 2018, pp. 218–220; Nieborg and Poell, 2018, pp. 34–35). Specifically, for news organizations, the degree to which they are reliant on platforms for the distribution of their content results in the precious resource of audience attention becoming both highly valued and scarce. Measured in different ways and metrics (clicks, views, watch time, etc.) on different platforms, news organizations are forced to package their content in attention-oriented ways in order to reach audiences (Myllylahti, 2020, pp. 5, 11–12; Garcia Ramirez, 2021, pp. 109, 157). Platform capitalism matters to clickbait, then, not because platforms directly determine editorial choices, but because their economic and infrastructural arrangements create incentives for continuous optimization around audience attention.

Needless to say, not all attempts to get attention are to be deemed manipulative. For a long time, the headlines as well as the visual framing of information have been part of the presentation of

news. The question here, however, is what the packaging of information does to the information consumer's expectations of the content of that packaging. If such packaging of information manipulates, then it either overstates the significance of the information which has been gathered, withholds information essential to which due significance would otherwise have been given, creates uncertain or misleading expectations as to the content, or it in some way creates a divergence between the promise of the headline and/or thumbnail and the body of the video. Promise-content misalignment is one particularly strong manifestation of manipulation in this framework, though not its sole form. Understood relationally in this way, clickbait can be examined as a broader configuration of presentation practices rather than as a single headline technique.

Under this platform logic, organization and algorithmically distribution of information determines the extent to which content becomes visible to users (Lawrence and Napoli, 2023, pp. 6–7; Peterson-Salahuddin and Diakopoulos, 2020, p. 28), while engagement metrics are increasingly threatening to replace the editorial quality of content with the principle of popularity (Shin, 2023, pp. 33–34; Lischka and Garz, 2023, p. 2074). Recommendation systems, for example on YouTube, favor clickbait and drive users into so-called clickbait cycles in which videos of the same type, which are designed to manipulate, are recommended to users after they have viewed one such video (Zannettou et al., 2018, pp. 63, 65).

Why these practices persist becomes clear only against the structural context in which they operate: packaging strategies are not isolated instances of misuse by individual editors but systematic adaptation mechanisms, encouraged by visibility-oriented competition in the platform economy.

The intuitive "algorithm theories" that journalists and content creators develop shape the form of news presentation directly (Peterson-Salahuddin and Diakopoulos, 2020, pp. 27–29). Visibility is pursued through emotional, attention-grabbing, and curiosity-driven modes of presentation, and

techniques such as dramatization, exaggeration, and strategic omission become widespread accordingly (Biyani et al., 2016, p. 94; Umejei, 2023, pp. 141–142; Altıntaş, 2025, pp. 773–774). Lacking more accurate knowledge of the inner workings of algorithms, in other words, editors fall back on their practical knowledge of what types of content are most likely to be rewarded. Out of this intuitive knowledge regime comes a presentation culture that puts visibility and the ability to capture attention ahead of clarity and accuracy in news production.

YouTube's own policy on "misleading metadata or thumbnails" bears on this as well. The platform's recommendation features are designed to surface content packaged to attract attention, yet packaging inconsistent with the video itself is what YouTube defines as "misleading." In the context of breaking news especially, presentations that promise information the video does not deliver can damage the public information environment (YouTube, n.d.). Discussion of clickbait therefore reaches past clickability into questions of public trust and accurate information dissemination.

### **Multimodal News Presentation and Visual Framing**

To approach clickbait within this broader framework, the multimodal structure of news presentation has to be taken into account. Users on digital platforms engage with content through text, but they engage equally through non-verbal elements such as visuals, colors, facial expressions, typography, and composition. Meaning is produced, then, within a relational process in which textual and visual elements operate together (Prokofeva and Akulovich, 2021, pp. 151, 155, 161). Addressing news presentation on platforms such as YouTube solely at the linguistic level remains insufficient for that reason.

YouTube thumbnails create a visual narrative space that reinforces or reframes the meaning produced by the headline, doing so through elements such as close-up framing, color contrast, ex-

aggerated typography, facial expression, gaze direction, and visual montage (Geise and Xu, 2025, p. 803). Effective thumbnails designed to attract viewers to a video have been found to converge around three critical points—appropriate color selection, the display of facial expressions, and the use of text—with especially rich facial expressions constituting a key factor in directing viewer attention (Shimono et al., 2020, pp. 63, 66). Users form assumptions about the tone, level of importance, and emotional atmosphere of the news through these visual cues before accessing the content itself (Geise and Xu, 2025, pp. 800, 809). Multimodality is defined accordingly: not as the mere coexistence of different expressive tools, but as a regime of expectation constructed through their interaction (Geise and Xu, 2025, p. 802; Prokofeva and Akulovich, 2021, p. 153).

The multimodal structures of video covers are even more visible in YouTube environments. Cui et al. (2024, pp. 1–2) define the video cover as an "integrated system" composed of the title, thumbnail, and embedded visual text. Their findings indicate that visual and textual characteristics of video covers are associated with viewing performance, which suggests that thumbnails and titles constitute important elements of the initial presentation through which users encounter and evaluate video content. Attention on YouTube is thus shaped through the interaction of visual and linguistic cues rather than through language alone, and the relationship between the headline and the thumbnail amounts to a shared presentation mechanism rather than a form of technical complementarity. That relationship gains meaning at the level of the headline and thumbnail, and also through the connection it establishes with the video as a whole. Headline and thumbnail present a promise to the user; the video content may confirm, expand, or undermine that promise. Analysis should extend, for this reason, to the promise-content alignment between the opening presentation and the overall flow of the content. User experience is better understood in terms of this presentation chain as a whole.

The literature on visual framing provides a strong theoretical foundation here. Visuals alone have been demonstrated to frame meaning in particular directions and to generate powerful effects (Powell et al., 2015, pp. 997–1000). Text-centered framing approaches, it has likewise been emphasized, are insufficient for explaining the contemporary media environment, and visuals and text should be analyzed together (Geise and Baden, 2015, pp. 46–48).

What makes visual framing matter is that news presentation is not a neutral act of representation: selecting and emphasizing particular aspects of reality, visuals increase their salience, evoke emotional reactions, and function as the "first glimpse" that places the user in a particular state of preparedness, while the headline provides this surface with a linguistic orientation (Parveen and Showkat, 2020, pp. 7–10).

News presentation on YouTube can be analyzed on this basis as a multilayered process encompassing the headline, thumbnail, embedded visual text, and video content — the thumbnail being its most directly operative packaging element — with attention to how each element shapes attention and expectations and, above all, to how the promise is fulfilled by the content.

### Thumbnails and Packaging Strategies on YouTube

YouTube thumbnails are tools designed within the content selection process to act as "visual gateways" to online content. Most YouTube video thumbnails are not randomly taken from the video, they have been specially composed for the purpose of the thumbnail (Thomson and Bock, 2025, pp. 1798–1800). The thumbnail in this sense is more than a preview of the video: it is the packaging surface that attracts the viewer's attention, evokes emotions, and sets the first frame of meaning for the content.

A news thumbnail does more than represent the news. It functions as an attention grabber, a dramatizer, and an expectation generator, increasing the selectability of content and setting its first

frame of meaning. News accordingly circulates not through its content alone but as a package of headline, image, and presentation that directs how the content will be perceived (Thomson and Bock, 2025, pp. 1797–1817).

How manipulation is packaged is as important as the manipulation itself, since packaging as a whole is multidimensional and comprises more than individual elements. An attention-arousing individual element such as the headline constitutes only one part of the overall packaging, while other elements, the thumbnail among them, may function as visual pre-organizers by setting a corresponding tone for the verbal content of the video (Underwood et al., 2001). The video itself, however, is what matters most for the packaging. It is there that the promises made by headline and thumbnail are either confirmed or undermined by content that does not deliver on them (Andrei, 2023, pp. 112–114). Attention-arousing single elements, then, do not automatically guarantee effective packaging, and analyzing the packaging as a whole rather than its individual components becomes crucial. The analytical framework proposed in the present study can be used to compare packaging strategies across different channel types and to identify differences in their observable patterns. Brand familiarity and the perceived institutional credibility of different channel types may be related to these differences (Underwood et al., 2001).

The present study draws on this literature to conceptualize YouTube news thumbnails at three interconnected levels:

- *Structural level:* Platform logic, pressures of algorithmic visibility, and production conditions shaped by channel types.
- *Representation and packaging level:* Presentation strategies established between the headline, thumbnail, and video content, together with the alignment between promise and content.
- *Outcome level:* The relationship of these strategies with click orientation and their possible effects on user perception.

These three levels together indicate that manipulation cannot be reduced to individual intention or to isolated textual features; it emerges from the interplay between the platform's structural pressures and the multimodal character of news. The study therefore treats manipulation in YouTube journalism as a multilayered and relational regime of packaging rather than a headline-based technique.

## Methodology

This study's quantitative content analysis examines the headlines as well as the thumbnails of news videos on YouTube in order to detect strategies of manipulation. Clickbait is not merely a form of textual attention management but a complex strategy for influencing users' perceptions, and it cannot be analyzed through language alone. The present analysis accordingly takes a holistic approach to the textual and visual elements of headlines, thumbnails, and the opening of the video content. A stratified purposive sampling approach has been used to compare the news on different news channels. In total three types of channel have been included in this study: (a) institutional news channels, (b) news channels distributed on digital platforms that are independent from institutions, and (c) channels distributing news commentaries/personal views on digital platforms.

The different types of channels were coded on the basis of the organizational characteristics of a channel and the type of publications it issues. The ownership of a channel and the perceived political orientation of a channel were not defined as variables for the content analysis, since they would require the definition and measurement of additional variables. However, these factors are taken into account in the interpretation of the findings within the framework of the overall structure of the media environment in Türkiye and are summarized in Table 1.

The institutional news channel group consists of TRT Haber, CNN Türk, and Haber Global; the digital/independent news group of Medyascope TV,

DW Türkçe, BirGün, and T24; and the commentary/personal broadcasting group of Cüneyt Özdemir and Nevşin Mengü. Thirty videos were selected from each channel, giving a total of 270 videos analyzed. The data collection period was limited to 1–31 December 2025. The sample included only publicly available news and current affairs content in standard video format; Shorts videos, reuploads, and livestream recordings fell outside the scope of the study.

The channels examined here operate under markedly different ownership and funding conditions; Table 1 summarizes the organizational status and principal revenue sources of each.

**Table 1. Ownership and Revenue Structures of the Channels Examined**

| Channel        | Type                       | Ownership / legal status                                                                                             | Principal revenue sources                                                                        |
|----------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| DW Türkçe      | Foreign public broadcaster | Turkish-language service of Deutsche Welle, Germany's federal international broadcaster under the Deutsche Welle Act | German federal tax budget                                                                        |
| CNN Türk       | Commercial                 | Demirören Group, a family-owned conglomerate; CNN brand licensed                                                     | Advertising and ratings-driven commercial revenue                                                |
| Haber Global   | Commercial                 | Established in Türkiye with Azerbaijani capital (Global Media Group)                                                 | Advertising and proprietor investment                                                            |
| Medyascope     | Independent digital        | Independent company founded in 2015 by journalist Ruşen Çakır                                                        | International grants and foundations, crowdfunding and audience memberships, limited advertising |
| BirGün         | Independent newspaper      | BirGün Yayıncılık A.Ş., held by several thousand shareholders with no controlling owner                              | Reader subscriptions and campaigns, sales, advertising                                           |
| T24            | Independent digital        | Independent digital newspaper founded in 2009, stating no institutional or fund-based backing                        | Advertising and reader subscriptions                                                             |
| Cüneyt Özdemir | Journalist-led personal    | Individually operated channel outside any institutional structure                                                    | Platform advertising revenue, memberships, sponsorships                                          |
| Nevşin Mengü   | Journalist-led personal    | Individually operated channel outside any institutional structure                                                    | Platform advertising revenue, memberships, sponsorships                                          |

Note. Ownership information compiled from Reporters Without Borders and bianet (n.d.) and from the outlets' own public statements.

**Table 2. Operational Definitions and Coding Criteria**

|                           | <b>Operational definition</b>                                                                                                                        | <b>Illustrative coding criterion</b>                                                                                            |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Emotional intensity       | Presence of explicitly emotional or dramatizing verbal/visual cues that intensify the affective tone of the presentation.                            | 0 = absent; 1 = present.                                                                                                        |
| Exaggerated typography    | Visually intensified textual presentation through capitalization, unusually prominent lettering, exclamation, or comparable graphic emphasis.        | 0 = absent; 1 = present                                                                                                         |
| Out-of-context visual use | Use of a visual that is not directly representative of the event or that implies a context not sufficiently supported by the content.                | 0 = absent; 1 = present                                                                                                         |
| Promise-content alignment | Degree to which the central informational promise established by the headline and thumbnail is fulfilled by the video content.                       | Higher values = stronger alignment; lower values = greater divergence. Reverse-coded for the manipulation score                 |
| Color manipulation        | Use of high-salience colors, contrast, or visual intensity to amplify urgency, threat, or importance                                                 | Higher scores indicate stronger color-based emphasis.                                                                           |
| Visual montage            | Use of composite, edited, or juxtaposed images that construct a relationship or dramatic impression beyond a straightforward visual representation.  | Higher scores indicate more intensive montage-based presentation.                                                               |
| Misleading question       | Use of interrogative framing that suggests or insinuates an outcome not established by the available information.                                    | For example, speculative questions that imply an unconfirmed development.                                                       |
| Manipulative adjective    | Use of strongly evaluative or sensational adjectives that amplify the perceived significance of the content.                                         | Examples include expressions equivalent to “shocking,” “incredible,” or “mysterious.”                                           |
| Curiosity gap             | Deliberate withholding of a key informational element in order to create an unresolved question that encourages opening the video.                   | For example, “That name made a shocking statement” without identifying the person or statement.                                 |
| Ambiguous subject use     | Use of vague, deictic, or unidentified subjects that conceal the central actor or referent.                                                          | Expressions such as “that person,” “this,” or “who is this?”                                                                    |
| Fear/panic elements       | Presence of alarmist, threatening, catastrophic, or panic-inducing verbal or visual cues.                                                            | Higher scores indicate stronger fear- or panic-oriented framing.                                                                |
| Personal reaction         | Degree to which the presenter’s personal, emotional, or self-referential reaction is foregrounded in the presentation.                               | Examples include expressions equivalent to “I told you so” or “Enough is enough.”                                               |
| Hierarchical deviation    | Degree to which a secondary, speculative, or sensational element is elevated above the main informational content in the headline–thumbnail package. | Higher scores indicate a stronger shift of salience from the central news information toward a secondary or dramatized element. |

## Coding and Variables

For each video the headline and thumbnail were evaluated together, and 13 indicators were coded on the basis of manipulation forms emphasized in the literature: emotional intensity, exaggerated typography, out-of-context visual use, promise-content alignment, color manipulation, visual montage, misleading question, manipulative adjective, curiosity gap, ambiguous subject use, fear/panic elements, personal reaction, and hierarchical deviation. They parallel the multimodal datasets used in the literature to identify clickbait content, which include headline text, thumbnail characteristics, tags, and linguistic markers found in user comments (Zannettou et al., 2018, pp. 63, 65). None of them should be interpreted as a synonymous form of manipulation or as evidence of deliberate manipulative intent.

What they operationalize are different observable dimensions of manipulative packaging dis-

cussed in the conceptual framework, including exaggeration, ambiguity, visual-emotional intensification, information withholding, and promise-content divergence. Combined in the composite score, they capture the extent to which these presentational features cluster within a given video package.

The unit of analysis was the individual video package. Headline and thumbnail were coded jointly for all presentation-related indicators, while assessment of promise-content alignment additionally required comparison with the video content. Three directly observable indicators—emotional intensity, exaggerated typography, and out-of-context visual use—were coded dichotomously (0 = absent, 1 = present). Indicators requiring an assessment of degree were coded on a 0–1 scale in 0.1 increments, higher values indicating a stronger presence of the relevant feature. Promise-content alignment formed the exception: higher values there indicated stronger consistency between the initial presentation and the video content, and the indicator was therefore reverse-coded when the

manipulation score was constructed. Table 2 summarizes the operational definitions and illustrative coding criteria.

Two main measurements were constructed for each video from these indicators. The total manipulation score was calculated as a continuous variable ranging between 0 and 1 on the basis of the 13 indicators. Promise-content alignment, which had been coded as a raw indicator, was reverse-coded in this calculation because it stood in inverse relation to manipulation. Click orientation was treated as a separate analytical variable and left out of the total score. It did not represent actual click-through data obtained directly from the platform; it was conceptualized instead as a coded variable measuring the presentational pressure exerted by the headline and thumbnail in directing users to open the video. Keeping the two apart makes it possible to separate the repertoire of manipulation analytically from attention-grabbing performance.

Coding proceeded through a previously prepared codebook, with the coding criteria clarified after a pilot implementation carried out on a limited number of videos. To test coding reliability, 27 videos corresponding to 10% of the sample were re-coded by a second independent coder. Agreement between the two coders was generally high. Krippendorff's alpha coefficients came out high for the majority of the indicators, and the alpha value for the total manipulation score was calculated as 0.974.

## Data Analysis

The data obtained within the scope of the study were analyzed using the Python programming language and scientific data analysis libraries (Pandas, Scipy, and Statsmodels). For the data visualization we have used Matplotlib and Seaborn. We have proceeded in three stages of work to complete the analysis.

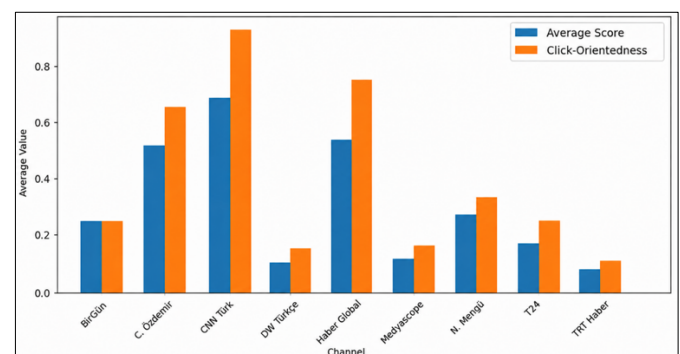
The first stage examined the 13 different manipulation indicators and the total scores derived from them through descriptive statistics, in order to get a first insight into the data and to check for the extent of variation between the single channels

by using measures of central tendency as well as of dispersion. In a second step, a One-Way-ANOVA was calculated in order to test for significant differences of the overall manipulation between the single channels. In addition to this test, Welch's ANOVA was calculated in order to check for possible violations of the homogeneity of variances assumption and in order to check for the robustness of the results obtained so far. In a third step, a Pearson-correlation analysis between the total manipulation score per channel and the click orientation variable was calculated in order to get information about the nature and the strength of the obtained relation. All tests were conducted on a significance-level of  $p < 0.05$ .

The study was based on an exploratory and comparative approach therefore the use of statistical tests were for the purpose of revealing of patterns and relationships between the studied variables as opposed to examining possible causes and effects.

## Findings

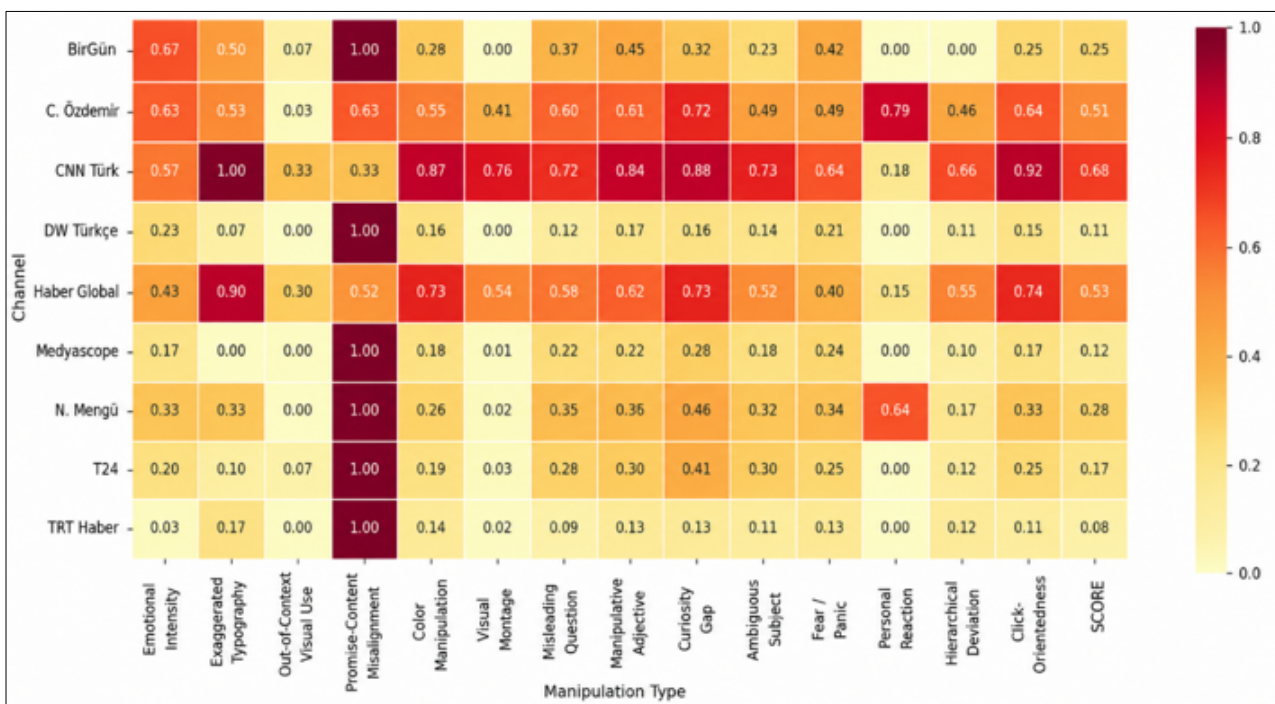
The analysis of 270 YouTube videos indicates that manipulation varies across channels in both intensity and form. Average total manipulation scores range from 0.082 (TRT Haber) to 0.680 (CNN Türk); Haber Global (0.534) and C. Özdemir (0.514) sit at the higher end, with the remaining channels positioned in between. Table 3 presents the channel-level distribution, and Figure 1 compares the average total manipulation score with click orientation.



**Figure 1. Average Manipulation Score and Click orientation by Channel**

**Table 3. Average Manipulation Indicators, Click Orientation, and Total Scores by Channel**

| Channel      | Emotional intensity | Exaggerated Typography | Out-of-Context Visual Use | Promise-content Alignment | Color Manipulation | Visual Montage | Misleading Question | Manipulative Adjective | Curiosity Gap | Ambiguous Subject | Fear / Panic | Personal Reaction | Hierarchical Deviation | Click orientation | SCORE |
|--------------|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|----------------|---------------------|------------------------|---------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-------|
| BirGün       | 0.667               | 0.500                  | 0.067                     | 1.000                     | 0.280              | 0.000          | 0.367               | 0.450                  | 0.323         | 0.233             | 0.417        | 0.000             | 0.000                  | 0.253             | 0.254 |
| C. Özdemir   | 0.633               | 0.533                  | 0.033                     | 0.633                     | 0.553              | 0.410          | 0.600               | 0.607                  | 0.720         | 0.493             | 0.493        | 0.790             | 0.463                  | 0.643             | 0.514 |
| CNN Türk     | 0.567               | 1.000                  | 0.333                     | 0.333                     | 0.867              | 0.757          | 0.717               | 0.843                  | 0.877         | 0.727             | 0.637        | 0.183             | 0.663                  | 0.920             | 0.680 |
| DW Türkçe    | 0.233               | 0.067                  | 0.000                     | 1.000                     | 0.163              | 0.000          | 0.117               | 0.167                  | 0.163         | 0.143             | 0.213        | 0.000             | 0.113                  | 0.150             | 0.105 |
| Haber Global | 0.433               | 0.900                  | 0.300                     | 0.517                     | 0.730              | 0.537          | 0.580               | 0.620                  | 0.730         | 0.523             | 0.400        | 0.150             | 0.547                  | 0.743             | 0.534 |
| Medyascope   | 0.167               | 0.000                  | 0.000                     | 1.000                     | 0.177              | 0.010          | 0.223               | 0.223                  | 0.277         | 0.183             | 0.243        | 0.000             | 0.103                  | 0.173             | 0.123 |
| N. Mengü     | 0.333               | 0.333                  | 0.000                     | 1.000                     | 0.263              | 0.020          | 0.347               | 0.363                  | 0.460         | 0.323             | 0.337        | 0.643             | 0.173                  | 0.333             | 0.277 |
| T24          | 0.200               | 0.100                  | 0.067                     | 1.000                     | 0.187              | 0.027          | 0.280               | 0.300                  | 0.413         | 0.303             | 0.253        | 0.003             | 0.120                  | 0.250             | 0.174 |
| TRT Haber    | 0.033               | 0.167                  | 0.000                     | 1.000                     | 0.143              | 0.020          | 0.087               | 0.133                  | 0.133         | 0.113             | 0.133        | 0.000             | 0.120                  | 0.107             | 0.082 |



**Figure 2. Heatmap of Average Values Across Channels and Manipulation Types**

Across the distribution of manipulation indicators, CNN Türk and Haber Global stand out with high averages in exaggerated typography, curiosity gap, color manipulation, and promise-content misalignment, alongside high click orientation (Table 3; Figure 2). Near-maximal typographic emphasis in CNN Türk combines with strong curiosity-gap and color values and a marked divergence between promise and content; Haber Global follows a similar pattern at somewhat lower levels.

What characterizes the pattern in these two institutional news channels is therefore intensive visual-discursive packaging, high click orientation, and comparatively greater promise-content divergence.

A different logic emerges, in contrast, in the personal broadcasting cases. Personal reaction, curiosity gap, and, to some extent, manipulative adjectives are what distinguish the channels of C. Özdemir and N. Mengü (Table 3). High values for

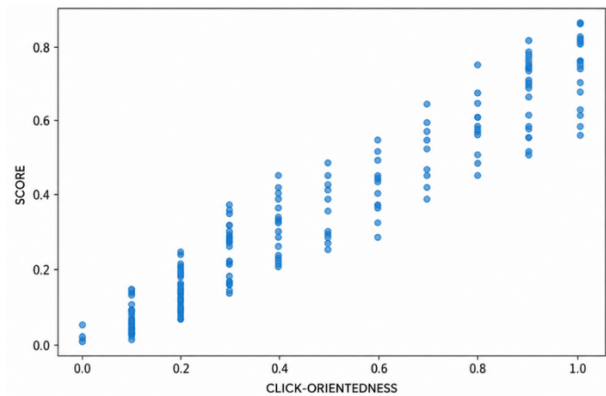
personal reaction and curiosity gap in C. Özdemir's channel, together with a relatively high total score, indicate manipulation shaped less through visual packaging than through subjective commentary and personal performance. Personal reaction is similarly prominent in N. Mengü's channel, though the lower total score points to a more limited profile in visual aggressiveness and content deviation. The personal broadcasting cases overall display a comparatively more performative profile built around personal reaction and curiosity-oriented presentation, while intensive visual packaging and promise-content divergence appear less consistently across the two channels.

BirGün constitutes a distinctive case, differing from both of these models. The channel's total manipulation score remains relatively low (0.254), yet noticeable concentrations appear in indicators such as emotional intensity (0.667), exaggerated typography (0.500), and fear/panic (0.417). The absence of promise-content misalignment (1.000) indicates at the same time that the strong framing established through the headline and thumbnail is fully supported by the content itself. BirGün thus displays a profile in which relatively strong emotional and typographic emphasis coexists with high promise-content alignment — a profile distinct from channels where attention-oriented presentation is accompanied by greater divergence between the initial promise and the video content.

The lowest levels of manipulation within the sample belong to TRT Haber (0.082), DW Türkçe (0.105), Medyascope (0.123), and T24 (0.174). Their relatively low total scores, together with the absence of content deviation, indicate that attention-grabbing strategies are employed in a more restrained manner. The averages within this group show attention-oriented presentation still present but occurring at comparatively lower levels and with greater promise-content consistency than in the higher-scoring channels.

The most critical dimension of the findings is the relationship between the level of manipulation and click orientation. Figure 3 shows a very strong positive relationship between the total manipulation score and click orientation ( $r = 0.9662$ ,  $p =$

$9.493 \times 10^{-160}$ ). Click orientation rises as the manipulation score increases, then, and manipulative presentation strategies and the packaging pressure aimed at attracting attention tend to occur together in a strongly associated manner.



**Figure 3. Relationship Between Click Orientation and the Total Manipulation Score**

A one-way analysis of variance confirmed the score differences identified across channels to be non-random ( $F(8, 261) = 73.5948$ ,  $p = 1.634 \times 10^{-62}$ ). Welch's ANOVA, less sensitive to violations of the homogeneity of variance assumption, supported this finding as well ( $F(8, 106.77) = 95.7311$ ,  $p = 3.786 \times 10^{-45}$ ). Manipulation levels, this statistical significance indicates, differ meaningfully across channels, and manipulation within the YouTube news ecosystem is not one-dimensional: it operates as a multilayered logic of content production that emerges through different techniques depending on publisher type and presentation regime.

Considered together, these findings yield at least four distinct presentation profiles within the sample: a high-intensity institutional packaging profile (CNN Türk, Haber Global); a personal-reaction and performative presentation profile (C. Özdemir, N. Mengü); an emotional-typographic emphasis profile in which strong framing coexists with high promise-content alignment (BirGün); and a low-intensity, relatively consistent presentation profile (TRT Haber, DW Türkçe, Medyascope, T24). Table 4 summarizes these profiles comparatively, and the following section discusses them further.

**Table 4. Comparative Summary of the Channels' Manipulation Profiles**

| Channel      | Level        | Dominant Manipulation Types                                                            | Interpretation                                                                                                  |
|--------------|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CNN Türk     | Very High    | Exaggerated typography; Promise-content misalignment; Curiosity gap; Click orientation | High-intensity visual-discursive packaging and the highest click orientation in the sample                      |
| Haber Global | High         | Exaggerated typography; Promise-content misalignment; Color manipulation               | High visual-discursive emphasis accompanied by relatively high click orientation and promise-content divergence |
| C. Özdemir   | High         | Personal reaction; Curiosity gap; Promise-content misalignment                         | Personal-reaction-centered and curiosity-oriented presentation with relatively high click orientation           |
| N. Mengü     | Moderate     | Personal reaction; Curiosity gap; Manipulative adjectives                              | Personal-reaction-centered presentation with comparatively limited visual packaging                             |
| BirGün       | Moderate-Low | Emotional intensity; Exaggerated typography; Manipulative adjectives; Fear/panic       | Emotional and typographic emphasis combined with high promise-content alignment                                 |
| T 24         | Low-Moderate | Curiosity gap; Ambiguous subject; Manipulative adjectives                              | Lower-intensity attention-oriented presentation with high promise-content alignment                             |
| Medyascope   | Low          | Curiosity gap; Fear/panic; Manipulative adjectives                                     | Low-intensity presentation with high promise-content alignment                                                  |
| DW Türkçe    | Low          | Emotional intensity; Fear/panic                                                        | Low emotional and visual intensity with high promise-content alignment                                          |
| TRT Haber    | Lowest       | Limited use of typography and color emphasis                                           | Lowest overall manipulation score with high promise-content alignment                                           |

The study thus offers insight into the complexity of manipulation within the YouTube news ecosystem. Manipulation does not operate in a one-dimensional way; it takes different forms across different types of publishers. In some channels it appears primarily as aggressive visual-discursive packaging, in others it is shaped by the presenter's commentary and personal storytelling, and in still others it takes the form of emotional and typographic intensification rather than promise-content divergence. Equating manipulation with a provocative headline alone therefore will not do: it operates as a multifaceted regime of presentation

embedded in the distinct publishing logics of different channel types.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how headlines, thumbnails, and video content combine in the presentation of news on YouTube, and how the resulting patterns vary across different types of news channels. Manipulative packaging, the findings demonstrate, differs across channels in overall intensity and equally in the combinations of linguistic, visual, and promise-content indicators through which it is constructed. The results in this respect support recent scholarship approaching clickbait as a phenomenon shaped by platform-based visibility and multimodal presentation rather than as a headline technique alone (Lischka and Garz, 2023; Thomson and Bock, 2025).

A particularly strong positive relationship was also found between the total manipulation score and click orientation. Videos displaying a greater concentration of manipulative packaging indicators tend, this association indicates, to exhibit stronger attention-oriented presentation as well. The relationship is not evidence that such practices cause higher audience engagement, nor that publishers deliberately employ them for particular economic or editorial objectives. What the findings show is that manipulation indicators and click-oriented presentation tend to cluster within the same video packages. The distinction matters because this study concentrates on the study of observable aspects of news presentation and does not attempt to include an analysis of editorial intention or audience response.

Distinct differences nevertheless separate individual channel types and their respective strategies of manipulation, reflecting the various news publishing logics within the YouTube news field.

**Institutional Packaging Model:** Manipulation in this model, represented most clearly by CNN Türk and Haber Global, operates through exaggerated typography, color manipulation, and above all through deviation from content (promise-content

misalignment). These indicators combined with relatively high click orientation suggest a presentation pattern in which visual-discursive emphasis and promise-content divergence occur together more strongly than in most other channels in the sample.

**Performative Presentation Model:** Manipulation in examples of personal broadcasting such as C. Özdemir and N. Mengü appears to be shaped through "personal reaction" and "performative narration" rather than through intensive visual packaging. The finding extends the discussion of clickbait beyond visual packaging, showing that attention-oriented presentation may also be associated with personal reaction and commentary-centered forms of presentation in journalist-led channels.

**Emotional-Typographic Emphasis Model:** Relatively strong emotional intensity and typographic emphasis coexist with high promise-content alignment in the case of BirGün. This pattern sets the channel apart from cases in which attention-oriented presentation is accompanied by greater divergence between the initial promise and the video content. What the finding points to is a form of presentation carrying emotional and visual emphasis without the same degree of promise-content inconsistency observed in the higher-scoring channels.

**Low-Intensity Consistent Presentation Model:** High promise-content alignment and relatively restrained use of the manipulation indicators examined in this study accompany the comparatively low manipulation scores observed in TRT Haber, DW Türkçe, Medyascope, and T24. There is not much attention-oriented presentation in these channels and also there is not much divergence between the initial presentation and the video content in this pattern. Notably, the two public broadcasters in this group operate on funding that is not tied to click performance, and the two independent outlets rely primarily on reader support rather than on advertising volume. Whether and how such conditions bear on presentational restraint cannot be

established with the present data, but they form a context that a purely descriptive reading would leave unexamined.

These differences also necessitate to study individual news producers within the framework of the generally polarized and highly concentrated media environment in Türkiye. This study examines the news producers of a single platform within this environment and refers to their individual editorial logics. As is the case with independent news providers and institutions, the news producers in this study are influenced by the highly concentrated ownership structure and the severe financial imbalance of resources as well as by the degree of pressure they are under from politicians (Egan, 2026). The World Press Freedom Index 2026 published by Reporters Without Borders rates Turkey 163rd out of 180 countries with a score of 27.94/100 (Reporters Without Borders, 2026). This study does not attempt to explain the manipulation profiles detected among the news producers by attempting to establish a causal relationship between the political stance of the news producers and the way in which they package the news that they produce. However, these structural conditions do provide an important contextual framework for understanding why different types of news producers may develop distinct editorial and presentational logics on the same platform.

These organizational positions differ in ways that bear on how the findings should be read. TRT Haber and DW Türkçe operate as public broadcasters whose core funding does not depend on advertising performance or on the click-based metrics of a single platform. The commercial broadcasters in the sample operate under advertising and ratings pressure within a concentrated ownership structure, while the independent outlets sustain journalism through subscriptions, reader campaigns, grants, and crowdfunding, largely without access to mainstream advertising revenue. The journalist-led channels operate outside institutional structures altogether and depend directly on platform-based revenue and audience reach. These are not competing conditions on a level field, and they form part of the context in

which the packaging patterns reported here should be interpreted.

The situation bears particularly on independent and journalist-led YouTube publishing. Recent studies on YouTube in Türkiye investigated the growing editorial autonomy of journalists and at the same time a range of new dependencies on the part of journalists for visibility, for income from their work and for adherence to platform rules (Ertuna and Aşık, 2025, pp. 3444-3448). These tensions matter for the present findings because personal and independent channels operate under different organizational and economic conditions from established institutional broadcasters. The performative and attention-oriented communication on YouTube of the journalist-led channels is not only the result of individual stylistic choices. Rather it is also a result of the specific platform environment in which platform visibility, audience feedback and income sustainability are intertwined.

While the current study is not the first to investigate YouTube journalism in Turkey, it contributes to the field by conceptualizing the headline–thumbnail–content relationship as a multimodal packaging structure, and by comparing how different types of YouTube channels package news online. Combining 13 observable indicators with a composite manipulation score and a separate click orientation measure gives a systematic framework for identifying how different forms of presentation cluster within YouTube news packages. The study thereby extends existing research on YouTube journalism in Türkiye, shifting attention from platform use and journalistic transformation to the measurable organization of news presentation itself.

Several limitations apply to this study. First, the analysis covers a specific time frame and a particular set of news channels, so the findings do not necessarily generalize to other channels, periods, or platforms. Second, all indicators are based on humanly observable content features; the study accordingly makes no claims about editorial intent, and dimensions such as trust and editorial quality

are addressed only indirectly. Click orientation likewise reflects an editorial presentation orientation rather than actual audience behavior, and the correlational findings indicate relational patterns rather than causal effects. Future research combining viewing statistics, audience and practitioner interviews, and multiple coders could examine more directly how the attention economy shapes editorial practices on YouTube. A classification of channels based on ownership structure and audience perception research offers another promising direction for extending this framework. The ownership and revenue information in Table 1 is descriptive context rather than a coded variable, so the readings offered in the discussion remain interpretive rather than explanatory.

In summary, manipulative packaging in YouTube journalism is multidimensional and varies considerably across channels in both intensity and composition. The relationship between headlines, thumbnails, and video content cannot be reduced to a single clickbait technique; different combinations of visual, linguistic, emotional, and promise-content indicators characterize different forms of news presentation. The strong association between manipulation scores and click orientation further suggests that these features tend to cluster within attention-oriented video packages. The differences observed across channel types, at the same time, should be interpreted in relation to both platform-based visibility pressures and the broader organizational and media context in which journalistic actors operate. What these findings underline is the importance of examining the ethical and professional implications of news packaging without assuming either manipulative intent or direct audience effects.

## Declarations

**Funding:** The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and / or publication of this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this study.

**Ethical Approval:** Ethics committee approval was not required for this study. The study is based on the quantitative content analysis of publicly available YouTube news videos and published sources and does not involve the recruitment of human participants or the collection of personal data. The author declares that scientific and ethical principles were observed throughout the preparation of the study and that all sources used were appropriately cited.

**Data Availability:** The source materials analyzed in this study consist of publicly available YouTube news videos. The study analyzed 270 publicly available videos from nine YouTube news channels published between December 1 and 31, 2025.

**AI Disclosure:** No artificial intelligence (AI)-based tools or applications were used in the preparation of this study. The entire content of the study was produced by the author(s) in accordance with scientific research methods and academic ethical principles.

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