Online Headlines in Croatian and Lithuanian News Media

Martina Podboj

University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Sveučilišna avenija 4, HR-51000 Rijeka, Croatia
E-mail: martina.podboj@ffri.uniri.hr
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8326-8165
Research interests: Critical Discourse Analysis, Sociolinguistics, Narrative Analysis

Aistė Vitkūnė-Bajorinienė

Vilnius University, Kaunas Faculty
Muitinės St 8, 44280 Kaunas, Lithuania
E-mail: aiste.vitkune@knf.vu.lt
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7004-0364
Research interests: Multimodality, Semiotic Approach, Storytelling, Media and Literature

Abstract. The headline is a salient element of the news story, whose aim is to summarise the story and attract attention to its full text. The internet and online news dissemination and consumption have strongly transformed journalistic discourse, including headlines, which have become longer, significantly more complex, and multifaceted in their aim to attract readers' attention. This paper presents the results of a qualitative comparative study of online headlines published on Croatian and Lithuanian media outlets from a discourse-analytic perspective. The data was collected from four top-read online news outlets (jutarnji.hr, index.hr, lrytas.lt, delfi.lt) and qualitatively analysed bearing in mind linguistic and visual strategies used to frame the news story and attract readers' attention. The analysis showed that similar clickbait and narrative strategies are consistently aggregated across semiotic modes in all four news outlets in both countries. Apart from minor context-specific distinctions, no substantial differences were noticed in the overall discourse of headlines in the Croatian and Lithuanian observed media outlets.

Keywords: clickbait; headlines; (online) media discourse; Croatian news media; Lithuanian news media.

Introduction

The creation and dissemination of news have been significantly impacted by technological advancements; while news was traditionally consumed primarily through newspapers or TV, nowadays, it can be accessed from a multitude of websites, social media, and various digital devices. Consequently, news discourse has been digitised and

constantly adapting to the online/offline realities of communication. One particularly noticeable example of this change is the news headline, which has gained a new function in the digital context: to amass clicks and drive traffic on the online platforms which disseminate news. As Bednarek and Caple (2017, p. 9) summarise, news discourse rendered in the digital media of smartphones is packaged with a complex verbal-visual display of images, graphics, typography, words, and navigational elements that guide the reader both within and away from the story page (e.g. through hyperlinks).

The analysis of headlines can shed valuable insight into how news stories are presented and disseminated in online spaces. Therefore, the aim is to conduct a comparative analysis of the multimodal discursive strategies employed in online headlines of Croatian and Lithuanian media outlet and to answer the following research questions.

1. *What are the discursive features of headlines in Croatian and Lithuanian online news media outlets?*
2. *Are there similarities in the discursive strategies used in online headlines with regards to the type of media outlet, across the two countries?*

The most prominent findings about news headlines come from research on headlines in English (see more in Bednarek and Caple, 2017). There are several studies about textual features of headlines in Lithuanian (Liepinytė-Kytrienė, 2013; Kalinauskaitė, 2014; Gabrėnaitė, Šimkutė, 2022; Petronienė, Žvirblytė, 2012, etc.), including studies adopting the multimodal approach (Kriaučiūnienė, Papaurėlytė, 2021; Juzelėnienė et al., 2024 etc.). Research on news headlines in Croatian is relatively scarce and mostly focuses on the discourse of headlines in printed media (e.g. Veselica-Majhut, 2005), with new emerging work about clickbait strategies in online headlines (Podboj, 2024). While Croatia and Lithuania do not have notable historical and cultural connections, the two countries have many similarities: both are EU member states with small and decreasing populations; both are post-transition economies with important geopolitical positions (Croatia in the West-Balkans and Lithuania in the East-European Baltic region), and predominantly Catholic, implying quite similar value systems. Given these societal and cultural parallels, the expectation is that there will be similarities in the online news media discourse, too, not only in the topics covered and featured in online news outlets, but also when it comes to the discourse of headlines and the overall discursive strategies used in their construction and dissemination since there is a lack of comparative research about the discourse of contemporary online headlines. This type of analysis is particularly called-for.

1. The structure and function of headlines in news discourse

Due to their peculiar syntax and lexical choices, headlines have been a recognisable feature of journalistic discourse. Ifantidou (2009, p. 699) notes that newspaper headlines seek to perform two functions: to summarise and attract attention to the full-text article. Bednarek and Caple (2012) expand this view and identify four functions of headlines: an *informative function* (summarising or abstracting the story), an *interpersonal function*

(attracting the reader), a *news value function* (maximising newsworthiness), and a *framing function* (providing a lens on, a stance towards, or angle on the rest of the story).

Despite their fundamental function to summarise, research has shown that headlines often do not accurately represent the articles they introduce (Ifantidou, 2009). Namely, they tend to sensationalise and misrepresent information (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013), even outright lie about the story they announce (Scott, 2023). For example, to pique curiosity and create intrigue, authors of online headlines may use wording that is far from what is described in the articles they announce. Thus, instead of stating the essence of the content, they may hint at the topic and use quotes or intriguing phrases unrelated to the content of the article. As such, headlines can be observed as autonomous and individual information units or microtexts (Liepinytė-Kytrienė, 2013, p. 3). In other words, they function as certain signals – aiming to convey the message effectively – therefore, to grab readers' attention, they are often structured as provocative narratives (Gabrėnaitė, Šimkutė, 2022, p. 40).

According to Kilgo and Sinta (2016, p. 126), sensational tactics such as personalised headlines and narrative structure to deliver news have been found to reach a wider audience as it gets shared more often. Closely related to this is the phenomenon of sensationalism in news media, i.e. "packaging" information in news headlines in such a way that news items are presented as more interesting, extraordinary, and relevant than might be the case (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013, p. 173). Molek-Kozakowska distinguishes two aspects of sensationalism: a sensationalist choice of topics to be covered (e.g. scandals, crimes, social taboos, etc.) and a sensationalising way of packaging information to make it appear more relevant or interesting (ibid, 174). Additionally, compositional features of the headline, such as the size, position and distance of figures in space, brightness, and colour contrast, are strategically employed to establish contact with the reader (Kucuk, 2015; Jewitt, Oyama, 2001).

Compared to printed newspapers, online headlines are longer, more complex, extended and multifaceted (Kalinauskaitė, 2014, p. 28). They tend to have a sentence-like structure, include questions and rhetorical questions, exact and paraphrased quotes, and meta-comments (ibid, 42). For example, Nickl et al. (2024) note a significant and systematic increase in the length of online headlines over time, accompanied by a shift away from the dry noun phrase and growing negative sentiment, observed on lexical, syntactic, and semantic levels of analysis. Furthermore, the highlighted multimodality of online news outlets and platforms on which news is shared and read calls for a more complex layout of the news article headline, including the interplay of visual and verbal elements (Bednarek, Caple, 2012).

Besides their notably different form, online headlines also differ from traditional headlines in terms of how readers are expected to engage with them, which is where clickbait occurs. Simply put, clickbait is a style of writing online headlines that arouses readers' curiosity, luring them to click and keep reading. Compared to headlines in traditional news media, clickbait headlines tend to be informationally incomplete and exhibit recognisable lexical, semantic, and stylistic differences, typically relying on extensive use of forward-referring expressions and discourse deixis (Blom, Hansen,

2015), hyperbolic and formulaic language (Scott, 2021, 2023), as well as simplification, secularisation, negativity and provocative content (Kuiken et al., 2017). Essentially, all clickbait strategies rely on creating information gaps (Scott, 2021) and phoricity because the reader needs to locate the entities that are being referred to later in the full text or discourse for the headline to make sense (Blom, Hansen, 2015, p. 92).

Finally, online news headlines can be observed as a quintessential contemporary storytelling device because they are designed in such a way to grab readers' attention by using emotional, sensual, or even frightening and disturbing images and language (Harris et al., 2015, p. 137). Dennis and Sampaio-Dias (2021) note that news is nowadays often presented as highly personalised and in a significantly more emotional way to engage more readers, especially those using mobile devices. Therefore, information is combined with personal experiences, opinions and emotions, using storytelling as an effective tool and rejecting the usual "objective" journalistic narrative style, both in the text body and in headlines (2021, p. 1611). Elements of storytelling integrated into the presentation of news create an emotional effect and allow the use of emotional language beyond the conventions of journalistic discourse. Storytelling primarily uses imagination and emotion based on someone's personal experience. In this way, three important elements – information, experience, and emotion – are integrated into news discourse (Amangeldiyeva et al., 2020, p. 3164), demonstrating that the oldest and most effective way of sharing experience and information is highly effective even in contemporary online media.

2. Data collection and methodology

The research is based on the well-established understanding of multimodality, set forth by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2006), which focuses on the properties and interaction of *semiotic modes* (such as language, image, sound, or gesture), i.e., semiotic resources which are combined and integrated into texts and communicative events, and as such allows the simultaneous realisation of discourses and types of (inter)action. Given the increasing multimodality of contemporary communication, especially regarding online news discourse, this approach allows us to describe the complexity of the online headline, which is understood as a composite multimodal discursive unit consisting of its verbal and visual elements. Namely, the written text of an online headline is always accompanied by an image and organised as a compositional unit within the space of the news outlet's website, as seen in the images below.

The research identifies two central semiotic modes that jointly convey the meaning of online headlines to attract readers' attention to click strategically: the linguistic and the visual modes. The former refers to the written text, traditionally considered the headline *per se*, whereas the latter refers to the accompanying images and graphics.

The data consists of headlines from 1 March to 10 March 2024 from Croatian and Lithuanian popular online news outlets. For both countries, two prominent outlets were selected: one online iteration of a well-established "quality"/ "broadsheet" newspaper (the Jutarnji list – jutarnji.hr for Croatia and the Lietuvos rytas – lrytas.lt for Lithuania) and

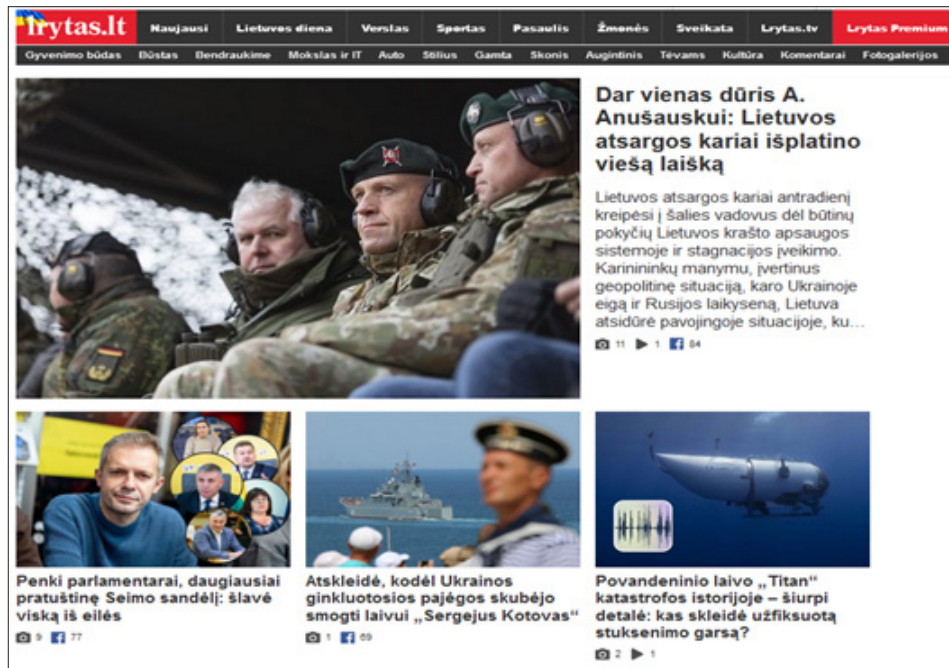**Fig. 1.** Front page of jutarnji.hr (05.03.2024)

Fig. 2. Front page of lrytas.lt (05.03.2024)

one widely popular digital-native news outlet (Index.hr and Delfi.lt, respectively). These particular news outlets were selected due to their representativeness and similarity since they are consistently the most-read online news outlets and websites in their respective countries[1]. During the collection period, authors visited them twice a day and took screenshots of the most prominent headline, i.e. its written text and the accompanying image. This resulted in 20 headlines per outlet, i.e. 40 per country and 80 altogether for all four media outlets. This approach allowed for a sample size that enables a detailed qualitative analysis while being illustrative enough of the overall discourse prominent in the news outlets in question.

The authors closely analysed the collected headlines, focusing on the verbal and visual modes and the discursive strategies used to attract readers' attention. The study employed a data-driven, customised inductive qualitative method of analysis, bearing in mind the composition of the headline and the use and interaction of verbal and visual modes. In addition, the interaction of thematic and symbolic signs and compositional features realised by the visual mode in relation to the linguistic mode were examined, i.e. the written text of the headline. Some quantitative insights are also provided to contextualise the findings and to illustrate certain trends in the sample.

3. Analysis

3.1 The linguistic mode

The linguistic mode of the headline is realised as the written text, typically positioned below an accompanying image, as seen in Figures 1 and 2 above. Looking at the linguistic characteristics of the collected headlines, the most noticeable and consistent feature across all four media outlets is their syntactic complexity and a salient dual structure, as demonstrated by the examples below. The observed headlines from the Jutarnji list and Delfi had such a dual structure. In the Lietuvos rytas, 19 out of 20 headlines had such structure, and 11 out of 20 were in the Index.

(01) U ovoj važnoj bitki Ukrajinci pobjeđuju. Ostvarili su novi veliki uspjeh *Ukrainians win this important battle. They achieve new major success* (index.hr, 07.03.2024)

(02) Ekspertai apie blogėjančius Armėnijos ir Rusijos santykius: Kremlius sulaukė ne vieno antausio, lieka laukti Maskvos reakcijos *Experts on the deteriorating relations between Armenia and Russia: Kremlin received more than one slap, Moscow's reaction is awaited* (delfi.lt, 08.03.2024)

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[1] While there are different types of analytics available, the selected online news outlets are consistently at the top in their countries. According to Gemius.com, in February 2024, *delfi.lt* and *lrytas.lt* were in the top five mostly read websites in Lithuania, whether it comes to average daily users, average time spent, real users or number of views. When it comes to Croatian online news outlets, Similarweb.com shows that throughout 2024, *index.hr* has been the most visited online news site in Croatia, followed by *jutarnji.hr*.

The main function of this complex structure is to frame the news story suggestively and thus increase its newsworthiness (Bednarek, Caple, 2012). This is done by adopting two overlapping discursive strategies: narrativity (storytelling) and clickbait. Narrativity refers to the fact that online headlines exhibit a multi-clause or -sentence structure and rely on linguistic devices that are typically used in storytelling and narrative discourse. In other words, the authors of headlines seem to purposefully be taking a narrative stance, defined by Georgakopoulou (2014, pp. 522–523) as "mobilisation of conventionalised communicative means to signal there is a narrative tale or telling in the making and/ or circulation of it". Narrative stance-taking is achieved by the division of the headline into two segments by interpunction (e.g., by a full stop, a colon, or a dash). Namely, the first segment of the headline tends to vaguely hint at the key information about the story (01 *this important battle*; 02 *deteriorating relation*s) and thus functions as the story's abstract, in Labovian terms (Labov, 1972). At the same time, this vagueness works as a clickbait information gap. The second segment of the headline typically contains more specific information. It refers to a sequence of events that happened recently and therefore signals the culmination of the narrative (01 *they achieve new major success*; 02 *Moscow's reaction is awaited*). In sum, the headline structured in such a way indicates a temporal juncture, i.e. a complicating event and its resolution, which may already be completed, as in example 01, or hypothesised to happen in the future, as in example 02.

Another salient feature of narrative stance-taking found across the corpus is the use of quotes, i.e. foregrounding someone's decontextualised quotes or paraphrased statements, as seen in the examples below. This feature is found 18 times in Croatian and 12 in Lithuanian outlets.

(03) IGRA SE BOGA Ovaj je Ukrajinac odgovoran za smrt 130 Britanaca: 'On je prezira vrijedno i zlo biće' Pratili su ga do njegove kuće u Kijevu, a on je zanijekao da je prodao smrtonosnu kemikaliju, koju BBC nije htio imenovati *HE'S PLAYING GOD This Ukrainian is responsible for the deaths of 130 Brits: 'He is an evil creature worthy of contempt' They followed him to his house in Kiev and he denied selling a deadly chemical, which BBC didn't want to name* (jutarnji.hr, 02.03.2024)

(04) Karybos ekspertas: „Bet ką, kas ateis pas mus su ginklu, reikia be skrupulų žudyti" *Military expert: "Anyone who comes to us with a weapon must be killed without hesitation"* (lrytas.lt, 06.03.2024)

Quoting event participants makes narrative discourse appear more authentic and legitimate, even though online headlines can be pretty misleading and informationally incomplete. In example 03, the quote is decontextualised and its source omitted, leaving an intriguing information gap but allowing readers to construct a narrative framework about the story. In example 04, the quote is reported directly and in quotation marks. However, the source of the quote is only vaguely referred to as "military expert". The quote itself is also decontextualised and potentially misleading – it cannot be discerned

from the headline what specific context the military expert is talking about. However, the tone and the straightforwardness achieved by the lexical choices can evoke strong emotions and frame a suggestive, intense narrative in the readers' minds, urging them to click and read on to fill in the missing information.

Phoricity, recognised as a notorious clickbait tool, is achieved by obvious deictic expressions such as pronouns and adverbials (e.g., *this important battle; this Ukrainian*). A vague reference to participants or processes announced in the headline may also be considered a type of forward-referring tool since the vague expression (typically a generic noun or a non-specific noun phrase; *military expert, important battle, important message, major success*) implies that the specific information about the participant or an event will be revealed once the headline is clicked.

In sum, it can be said that authors of online headlines employ various narrative stance-taking strategies to construct their verbal segments. Formally and functionally, Croatian and Lithuanian headlines exhibit significant similarities: they are complex, multiple-clause structures, packed with information relevant to storytelling; however, they contain numerous information gaps and forward-referring strategies (discourse deixis, vague reference, decontextualised quotes, etc.) indicating these can be filled in by clicking on the headline and reading on. The aggregation of narrative stance-taking strategies is deliberately used to exploit readers' natural curiosity and the need to fill in the information gaps in the narrative presented to them. Therefore, the gaps in these seemingly autonomous narratives can be referred to as *narrative gaps* (Podboj, 2024).

3.2 The visual mode

When it comes to the composition of the elements of the headline, the visual elements typically appear above the written text, suggesting that images might catch the reader's attention first and thus create a frame for understanding the written text below. Most visual elements are single photographs, with the occasional usage of collage-type images (see Figures 1 and 2 above), especially in Lithuanian news outlets. Collage-type images are composed of two to five smaller-format images, aiming to convey visual information related to the topic of the headline. Such fragmentary presentation of visual material artificially dramatises the importance of the message but does not seem to specify the topic.

The dominant themes found in the visuals are politics, business, crime, and war. The theme of war in the images presented in the media of both countries is found in the following contexts: images of the war in Ukraine (the dominant context, as exemplified by Fig. 3 below), visuals of the own country's defence structure (mainly ammunition and photos of soldiers), and images representing Russian military power structures.

However, a noticeable difference exists in how military-themed images are represented across the two countries. Lithuanian news outlets consistently tend to convey an emotional, menacing, and grim mood with accompanying images in the headlines, so Lithuanian readers may develop an unsettling closeness with the war in Ukraine, reflecting such a priority of Lithuania's foreign policy. Meanwhile, camouflage clothing is relatively

Fig. 3. Headline: *The war made the industrial city of Ukraine special: why photographers of the most famous publications are drawn to Kramatorsk* (delfi.lt, 01.03.2024)

rare in Croatian headlines, which reveals a more distant relationship with this military conflict. Related to that is the depiction and contextualisation of political leaders in the images, especially V. Putin, who wears a business suit even in military-themed images in Lithuanian headlines. In contrast, Croatian headlines depict him in a military uniform (Figs. 4 and 7 below).

Fig. 4. Headline: *Document emerges from 2022 negotiations. These are Putin's terms for peace* (index.hr, 02.03.2024)

Another noticeable theme captured by the images is the depiction of men, i.e. prominent and famous political figures. Notably, images of men predominate in the headlines of all media outlets.

Table 1. Frequency of depiction of men and women in headline images

News outlet	A man	A woman	Group of men	Group of women	Mixed group
Delfi (delfi.lt)	7	–	8	–	1
Lietuvos rytas (lrytas.lt)	5	–	8	–	5
Index (index.hr)	6	–	4	–	3
Jutarnji list (jutarnji.hr)	2	4	4	–	4

In both country samples, every second image accompanying the headlines depicts a man or a group of men. In only four images found in Croatian headlines, the central figure is a woman or a part of the female body, i.e., buttocks in a swimming suit, as seen in Fig. 5 below. Therefore, the dominance of male personalities in the visuals demonstrates certain masculinist values constructed in the news discourse of both societies and the significant relationship between masculinity and power reflected in the dominant themes of politics and war.

While much of the corpus exhibits a direct connection between the theme of the written text and the accompanying image, there are some occurrences of image-verbal thematic mismatch, mainly in Croatian headlines. Typically, images at least vaguely hint at the topic or provide a symbolic framing for the written text to raise curiosity. However, one headline in the Jutarnji list stands out in its manipulative image-to-text discrepancy (Fig. 5). It shows a sexist depiction of a woman's buttocks, while the headline itself has no apparent logical connection to the image. Even though the headline is packed with verbal and visual information, it is informationally incongruous and incomplete, creating many narrative gaps, and the image-to-text discrepancy works as a clickbait strategy.

Fig. 5. Headline: *SURPASSING TESLA: Europe's most valuable company has a 'golden goose', the other side of the world latches onto the miracle drug! Due to the new results of clinical trials, the market is going crazy, by 2030 it could reach the value of 10 billion dollars* (jutarnji.hr, 09.03.2024)

In terms of colour solutions, a significant difference between the headlines of Croatian and Lithuanian news outlets is that the analysed Croatian media often use red headlines to emphasise relevance or current news, as in the example above. The Croatian Jutarnji list finds bolder and more poster compositional solutions designed to attract readers' attention. Meanwhile, Lithuanian news outlets mainly present the entire headline text in black.

Symbolism conveyed by the images in the headlines reveals significant socio-cultural meanings and works as another effective way to draw readers' attention. The use of symbolic allusions in the images helps to maintain the "secrecy" of the message and, in most cases, is only related to the broader context of the topic in the headline. For example, images of military equipment, ammunition and soldiers symbolically express military power and state control. Hence, they are incredibly abundant in headlines that mention lexical units such as *war, rocket, battle, defence, NATO, military, hostility, combat, weapons, threat*, etc. A good example is the use of the letter Z, symbolising Russia's military power and support for V. Putin's invasion of Ukraine, accompanying a headline that frames a dooming narrative about the broader threat of Putin's military occupation of Ukraine (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Headline: *Experts: What the occupiers are building in the occupied territories of Ukraine poses a threat to Europe as well* (delfi.lt. 03.03.2024)

Symbolism can also be linked to the frequent use of metonymy, both in the verbal and visual part of the headline, e.g. when the headlines mention countries while the accompanying images depict their leaders, like in Fig. 7 below.

In addition to leader-for-country type metonymy, across all four observed outlets, there are frequent cases of symbolic and metonymic representation in images accompanying headlines about various other topics, i.e., in headlines about traffic images depicting cars, etc.
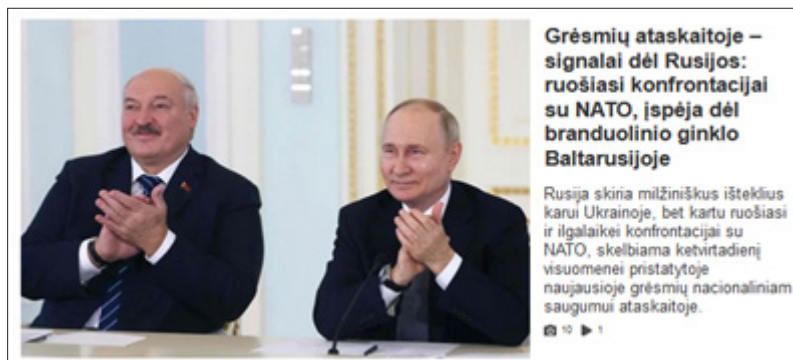
Fig. 7. Headline: *In the threat report – signals about Russia: preparing for confrontation with NATO, warning about nuclear weapons in Belarus* (lrytas.lt, 07.03.2024)

When it comes to headlines related to crime, the image tends to represent the crime location/place or a symbolic relation to the nature of the crime. For example, a Croatian headline about a case of child sexual abuse is accompanied by a dark image of a male's legs and a white teddy bear in focus, thus symbolically conveying different power positions and creating a threatening mood in line with the lexical choices in the headline (*monster, raped, disabled girl*) (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8. Headline: *Monster in Dalmatia raped disable girl over 100 times. Gets 6 years* (index.hr, 08.03.2024)

Another headline about paedophilia and child abuse, this time from a Lithuanian outlet, shows a collage of two images: one of the Catholic priests referred to in the headline and the other of hands in prayer holding a rosary. These religious symbols visually signal to the offender rather than the crime, which is a strategy chosen to delicately present this extremely sensitive topic for the predominantly Catholic society of Lithuania (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9. Headline: *Monastery walls were hiding this priest's dark past: the priest convicted of pedophilia in the US had found a peaceful shelter in Kretinga* (lrytas.lt, 10.03.2024)

In sum, the accompanying images of headlines reinforce the verbal message of the headline overall. They are widely used to supplement clickbait messages with visual information and convey a certain value or emotional context. Images are intended to allude or hint at certain scenarios and convey an anxiety-inducing and intense tone, especially related to the war in Ukraine or the topic of crime, encouraging readers to click and read the article for more detailed information.

The analysis of the visual mode shows that the accompanying images play a significant role in framing the headline and accentuating its verbally constructed narrativity. The images usually reflect the topic of the headline or are thematically close to the story the headline announces, i.e., they extend or clarify the verbal messages of the headlines; thus, the totality of these elements interact to create a complex multimodal invitation for the reader to (stop scrolling and) click on and continue reading. However, there are cases when a thematic visual-to-verbal mismatch in the headlines leaves many narrative gaps and raises curiosity.

Conclusions

Regarding the first research question, it can be concluded that the main stand-out feature of the headlines is sensationalism, manifested in various clickbait and narrativity strategies, which are accumulated across the written text and the accompanying image. It seems that the authors of headlines heavily rely on both the linguistic and the visual modes to construct effective and intriguing headlines which aim to amass clicks. By relying on verbal and visual storytelling, Croatian and Lithuanian online headlines play into humans' natural inclination to organise life experiences in narrative form, thus rejecting what was traditionally considered "objective" journalistic discourse. The verbal and visual

headline elements and their composition and organisation on the screen together function as aggregate narrative and clickbait strategies. On the one hand, the headlines are packed with verbal and visual information, creating an intriguing storytelling framework. Still, simultaneously, the key information is omitted or vaguely hinted at, aiming to pique the curiosity and interest of readers or even to mislead them into clicking on and driving traffic to the website.

Regarding the second research question, as expected, there were more similarities than differences across the observed outlets and countries. The abovementioned strategies were consistent across all Croatian and Lithuanian outlets. Again, no significant differences were noted regarding the type of outlet. For example, headlines in the Croatian Jutarnji list and Lithuanian Lietuvos rytas, i.e. online iterations of established "quality" / "broadsheet" newspapers are representative examples of sensationalism and clickbait, as identified by research (Scott, 2021; Kilgo, Sinta, 2016; Molek-Kozakowska 2013, etc.) and a good example of employing emotion in storytelling (Dennis, Sampaio-Dias, 2021; Harris et al., 2015, etc.). It must be noted that headlines in the Croatian Jutarnji list stand out significantly with their length, complexity, vagueness, sensationalist tone, and frequent misleading verbal-to-visual thematic mismatch. For example, all of its headlines have a complex dual structure (just like Lithuanian Delfi), and 14 out of 20 included pseudo quotes, more than all other outlets combined. An expectation might have been that more "tabloid-oriented" digital-native outlets such as Lithuanian Delfi and Croatian Index would rely more on this sensationalist tone in their headlines; however, this is not the case. One significant difference between the two countries is the representation of war-related themes in the headlines. Namely, Lithuanian headlines present the topic of the Russia-Ukraine war in a more affecting way, using more sensitive or disturbing images and lexical choices, whereas Croatian headlines pay significant attention to this topic, but the representation of the war is more distant. This is unsurprising, given the geopolitical position of Lithuania, which is very close to this conflict.

It remains to be seen to what extent the patterns noticed here demonstrate a widely established trend in online journalism, at least in the two countries observed. Even though the dataset consisted of a relatively small sample, it can be said with a fair amount of certainty that the type of discursive strategy aggregation across the observed semiotic modes is indicative of the existing trends in online news discourse and digital journalism, namely, the reliance on sensationalism, narrativity, and clickbait to attract readers' attention. This study was based on qualitative methods; however, quantitative and statistical analyses would certainly shed additional light on specific aspects of the phenomenon of online headlines. Still, the authors hope the proposed approach can easily be replicated to compare the discourse of online headlines across other media and/or countries.

Given these findings, the next steps in research on the discourse of online headlines should be more comparative analyses of headlines in other languages and types of media. Additionally, the role of the attention economy and its effect on the business models of online news outlets and their editorial policies should be further explored. In addition to the role of headline authors and editors, readers' interaction with online headlines and their

attitudes towards various discursive strategies used in their construction and dissemination across digital platforms should be analysed.

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Author contributions

Martina Podboj: conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

Aistė Vitkūnė-Bajorinienė: conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.