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## EFFICIENCY AND HEADLINE PATTERNS ON THE *COSMOPOLITAN* UNITED STATES WEBSITE

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**Abstract:** The present article is a corpus-based case-study of the role of using patterns for creating online headlines as a means of ensuring textual efficiency. The corpus consists of over 130 headlines from the Love category on the American website of the *Cosmopolitan* women's magazine (<http://www.cosmopolitan.com>), uploaded between 2010 and 2016.

Experts in the field of writing for the Web (for example, Krug<sup>165</sup>; Nielsen<sup>166</sup>; Redish<sup>167</sup>; Stolley<sup>168</sup>) emphasize the importance of following particular guidelines for creating successful texts in order to compensate for the “impatience” of web users, the extremely limited resources of time and attention people are generally willing to spend on any particular item of web content. In fact, all these guidelines are designed to promote processing ease, i.e. efficiency, the processing of the largest possible amount of content in minimum time and with minimum (physical and mental) effort (Beaugrande, Dressler<sup>169</sup>; Beaugrande<sup>170</sup>).

An important aspect of ensuring the quality of web headlines is the existence of patterns for creating headlines with analogous structures. Patterns in headlines serve as templates or models applied in the creation of particular headline occurrences. Firstly, these patterns comprise specific sets of constant elements which build up the basis of the pattern itself. Secondly, they include empty “slots” or positions which are open to be filled by various elements in order to produce specific occurrences or, in this case, headlines following the particular pattern in question. In addition to the constant elements which build it, each pattern contains information about the structural relations among its constant as well as its variable constituents. As a result, once a user recognizes a pattern, they can reactivate previous knowledge and experience regarding the processing operations this particular pattern involves and apply it to the occurrence at hand. Approaching actual occurrences in this manner enables users to economize on the processing resources which would have otherwise been necessary in establishing a new structure. Instead, they can focus only on the variables, i.e. the new elements which fill the slots provided by the recognized pattern. The use of patterns thus enhances efficiency by allowing for analogical processing of numerous actualizations and specific occurrences.

Another aspect of the utilization of patterns in headlines which enhances efficiency and processing ease stems from their repetitive use. Thus, the frequency with which a pattern appears and the consistency of its utilization enhance the process of acquisition of the pattern by the user: “[W]hen users learn the structure of content and see patterns in how content is organized and accessed, they become more proficient in searching and browsing of a site” (Baehr, Schaller<sup>171</sup>). In other words, the more times users encounter a particular pattern, the faster they will remember it. Consequently, their ability to recognize its instantiations quickly and apply their previous experience to processing

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<sup>165</sup> Krug, S. *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability. 2nd Edition*. Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2006.

<sup>166</sup> Nielsen, J. “Writing Style for Print vs.Web”, 2008. <http://www.nngroup.com/articles/writing-style-for-print-vs-web/> <accessed October, 2015>

<sup>167</sup> Redish, J. *Letting Go of the Words*. USA: Elsevier, 2012.

<sup>168</sup> Stolley, K. *How to Design and Write Web Pages Today*. Greenwood, ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011.

<sup>169</sup> Beaugrande, R.A., Dressler, W.U. *Introduction to Text Linguistics*, 1981/2002.

[http://www.beaugrande.com/introduction\\_to\\_text\\_linguistics.htm](http://www.beaugrande.com/introduction_to_text_linguistics.htm) <accessed November, 2012>

<sup>170</sup> Beaugrande, R.A. *Text, Discourse and Process. Toward a Multidisciplinary Science of Texts*, 1980.

<http://www.beaugrande.com/TDPOpening.htm> <accessed November, 2012>

<sup>171</sup> Baehr, C., Schaller, B. *Writing for the Internet. A Guide to Real Communication in Virtual Space*. Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood Press, pp.115, 2010.

the headline at hand will be improved. As a result, users will be able to process large chunks of information at once while at the same time economizing on processing effort.

**Keywords:** efficiency, headline patterns, writing for the Web, *Cosmopolitan US* website

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The present study investigates the ways in which the regulative principle of efficiency is being upheld within a particular type of Computer-mediated discourse, namely that of the web-content headlines featured on women's magazine websites. Previous research on the topic of online headline patterns in connection with the regulative principle of efficiency includes a number of articles by the author of the present article (see Iglíkova 2012<sup>172</sup>, 2013<sup>173</sup>, 2015<sup>174</sup> and 2016<sup>175</sup>).

In the present study, the efficiency of headlines online is studied from two aspects: firstly, from the perspective of the consistent use of particular design patterns; and, secondly, from the perspective of brevity and compactness of the patterns employed.

Thus, at the level of groups of headlines representing a particular pattern, efficiency can be seen as the cumulative effect of the presence of a particular number of similar items in close proximity, i.e. on a website homepage or the landing page of a category. This creates a strong sense of familiarity as the user gradually becomes acquainted with and "learns" the patterns, which in turn makes it easier to recognize the repeated elements as old information and focus on the variables - the new information - instead. This way the pattern becomes a "container" or a template which provides empty slots within itself where new elements are added in order to produce a new headline. In this sense, efficiency is enhanced by the consistent and repetitive use of a particular set of productive patterns - the smaller the number of patterns employed, the larger their frequency of occurrence in the overall number of headlines, and the faster users can "learn" to extract the new information from the pattern, respectively.

## 2. CASE STUDY

The analysis of the corpus materials shows a strong tendency for the American website of *Cosmopolitan* women's magazine to employ enumeration in structuring the headlines in its Love category. In most cases this is done by using a pattern consisting of a numeral (n) and a plural noun denoting items which are to be enumerated. The strong preference for headlines of this type is illustrated by the frequency of their occurrence - nearly 99 % of headlines involve enumeration and only 1 % employs a different strategy (namely, a "How to ...?" question).

Thus, headlines have been broadly classified into two separate categories depending on their use of enumeration, namely numeral-containing and non-numeral containing headlines. The different variations which numeral-containing headlines exhibit within the category itself have led to further distinctions based on the type of "items" enumerated. Respectively, numeral-containing headlines have been classified in terms of the noun which denotes the enumerated items and thus serves as the central element in an emerging pattern. The most frequently used nouns include "things", "signs", "problems", "reasons", "types", "stages" and on their basis have emerged the six most productive numeral-containing patterns.

### 2.1. Numeral-containing headline patterns.

#### 2.1.1. Pattern 1 – numeral + "things".

As was mentioned above, the analysis of the headline patterns containing numerals in the *Cosmopolitan US* website shows that there are 6 basic patterns. Most of the 6 basic patterns have a number of variations on the basic model with pattern 1 (numeral + "things") ranking at the top.

The first variation of the numeral + "things" pattern serves to introduce lists of "best things" about a particular situation. This particular variation of the pattern begins with 5 elements which are the same in each headline, namely

<sup>172</sup> Iglíkova, R. "Efficiency in the Discourse of Relationship Articles from the American and the Bulgarian Online Editions of the *Cosmopolitan Women's Magazine* - A Comparative Study". In: *Current Trends in the Study of English*. Episkop Konstantin Preslavsky University Press, pp. 64-75, 2012.

<sup>173</sup> Iglíkova, R. "Let's Talk Health - the Textual Efficiency of the Discourse of Healthcare articles in Online Women's Magazines *Cosmopolitan* (a comparative study). In: *Jahr*, №7, vol.4, pp. 513-523, 2013.

<sup>174</sup> Iglíkova, R. "The Regulative Principle of Efficiency and Web Content". In: *The Global and the Local: Current Trends in English Studies and Translation*. Episkop Konstantin Preslavsky University Press, pp.57-62, 2015.

<sup>175</sup> Iglíkova, R. "What's Your Number? - Numeral Preference in Viral Headlines from 3 Websites". In: *Lyuboslovie*, №16. Episkop Konstantin Preslavsky University Press, pp. 203-211, 2016.

“The n best things about ...”, with the second part of the headline introducing the new or specific elements. The headlines from this category can be grouped in clusters of two or three featuring not only the first 5 common elements, but also the same verb: “being” in “The 9 Best Things About Being a Single Mom” or “having” in “The 14 Best Things About Having a Boyfriend”.

Another important feature of this pattern is the fragmentariness resulting from the lack of a finite verb form and the use of a prepositional phrase containing a non-finite (“-ing”) form. Due to the specific syntactic requirements of the English language, the use of a finite verb form necessarily involves the presence of a subject, whereas a non-finite one does not include an explicit subject and is thus more economical in terms of surface structure.

Furthermore, this headline pattern includes only a thematic, or “old information”, component, while the new information (the list of “best things”) is to be retrieved by following the link and reading the actual article. Web headlines of this kind achieve brevity and efficiency by being intentionally incomplete. Their incompleteness, however, does not pose a serious problem to processing due to their hypertextual nature – i.e., they serve as direct links to the content that completes them.

The headlines designed according to the second variation of the pattern share an even larger number of elements – seven: “n things you should know before (dating)”. Thus each different headline includes only two, three or maximum five new elements (apart from the different numeral in the beginning of the headline). The headline “11 Things You Should Know Before Dating a Waitress”, for example, adds only two elements to the basic pattern. Regardless of the actual number of variable elements in each headline occurrence, they are still fewer than the seven constantly appearing ones that build the pattern. The resulting strong sense of familiarity promotes pattern-mapping. Thus, the new information can be easily integrated into the already introduced pattern and the established relationships among pattern elements can be readily applied to the newly introduced content.

Similarly to the previous pattern, this one also exhibits incompleteness in that all its elements can be treated as the thematic component (or an extended argument as opposed to a predicate) of a potential complete utterance, whereas the rhematic or new information component is once again to be found by following the link to the content.

In terms of cohesive devices for compacting surface structure and maintaining a light processing load, this pattern exhibits several features. First of all, the use of numerals expressed through digits instead of lexemes (e.g., “10”, “11”, “13” instead of “ten”, “eleven”, “thirteen” respectively) is a major source of economy of surface structure, as it involves using one or two characters instead of three, six or eight.

Secondly, the omission of the object relative pronoun “which” or “that” referring to “things” is another source of compacting surface structure that is specific to the English language. This way we can have “10 Things You Should Know” instead of “10 Things Which/That You Should Know”. In addition, the second person singular personal pronoun “you” which refers to the user is an efficient way of satisfying the requirements of English grammar while maintaining processing ease. The fact that it cannot be omitted entirely is balanced by its very low information load and its reference to the context of occurrence. It does not refer to an element that has already appeared (anaphoric reference) or is to appear (cataphoric reference) in the text of the headline, which would have resulted in redundancy; instead, it refers exophorically to an external object, whose referent can be easily supplied from the context in which the headline appears.

Finally, the use of a non-finite verb form in the prepositional phrase (similarly to the previous pattern) is a way of avoiding the explicit statement of a subject and thus aids compactness and efficiency.

The third variation of the pattern is exhibited headlines which share not only the 6 constant elements “n things not to say to”, but also the two additional “Someone Who”, such as “12 Things Not to Say to Someone Who Loves Staying In”.

Surface structure economy is achieved firstly through the use of numerals in the form of digits. This strategy is employed at least once in the beginning of each of the headlines, and in some headlines it appears twice. The use of numerals in this manner saves up to 18 characters from the total length of these headlines, as digits amount to 9 characters altogether, whereas the lexical variants of these numerals would amount to 27 characters.

In addition, the use of a non-finite verb form (the negative infinitive in the “not to” construction) is extremely efficient in terms of surface structure as it avoids the explicitation of a subject and a modal verb, which would have been necessary in order to express the same idea.

The compacting effects of the aforementioned “not to” construction are balanced and somewhat negated by the presence of the relative pronoun “who” which serves as a subject for a relative clause and therefore cannot be omitted. The low information load of the indefinite pronoun “someone”, however, can be considered as a compensation for the inclusion of the relative clause which follows it.

### 2.1.2. Pattern 2 – numeral + “signs”.

The second popular pattern which involves enumeration is based on the common element “signs”. In addition to the numeral as a slot to be filled with specific content, the pattern provides the option of filling the slot following “signs” with a different element depending on the subject of the relative clause which modifies this element:

- the user (“you”) = subject

In this case, the slot is filled by including the second person singular personal pronoun “you”, which refers to the user, as it is done in “8 Signs You’re Not Getting the Love You Deserve”. The aforementioned example achieves compactness by using the second person singular personal pronoun “you” to refer exophorically to the user. Furthermore, all such headlines omit the subordinating conjunction “that” which would serve as a link to the subordinate clause and the one from the example also omits the object relative pronoun introducing the relative clause modifying “love”.

Additional contributions to brevity are made by the use of contractions of the second person singular, present tense form of the auxiliary verb “be” (“you’re” instead of “you are”) and the negative contraction of the past form of the auxiliary verb “do” (“didn’t” instead of “did not”) in other examples.

- the user’s boyfriend/partner (signified by adding “he”/“your new boyfriend”/“your guy friend”) = subject

In this case, the position of subject of the subordinate clause modifying “signs” is filled by a third person singular personal pronoun in its masculine form (“he”) as in “9 Signs He’s Not a Cheater”. In such headlines, the subordinating conjunction “that” is omitted and the subordinate clause begins directly with the subject. The uses of the personal pronouns “he” and “you”, and the possessive “your” are exophoric in all headlines. This means that their referents are retrievable from the context of occurrence of the headline, which serves to enhance the economy of the surface expression. Additionally, six out of seven headlines use a contracted present tense form of the auxiliary verb “be” – “he’s” instead of “he is” on six occasions, and “you’re” instead of “you are”.

In addition to the omission of the subordinating conjunction “that”, 2 headlines employ parallelism and partial repetition, which serve to promote the stability of the pattern and thus the ease of its processing, for example “11 Signs Your Guy Friend Wants to Be Your Boyfriend” and “9 Signs Your Guy Friend Will Never Be Your Boyfriend”. Finally, one headline includes an instance of ellipsis by omitting the noun “Boyfriend” after “Ex” - “11 Signs Your New Boyfriend Is So Much Better Than Your Ex”.

- the user’s relationship/behavior (“a marriage”/“your relationship”/“the way you’re dealing”) = subject

In this case the headline employs the pattern by including an additional element (“sneaky”) between the numeral and “signs” - “15 Sneaky Signs a Marriage May End in Divorce”.

In the next two headlines this first potential slot is not utilized. Instead, both examples extend the pattern after the obligatory pattern element “signs” by adding 5 or 9 specifying elements respectively - “12 Signs Your Relationship Is on Lock” and “7 Signs the Way You’re Dealing With Your Breakup Is Unhealthy”.

Similarly to the previous variants of this pattern, the aforementioned headlines omit the subordinating conjunction “that” after “signs”. In addition, one headline also uses a contraction – “you’re” instead of “you are”.

### 2.1.3. Pattern 3 – numeral + “problems”/“struggles”.

The third pattern consists of a numeral combined with the noun “problems” or “struggles”. It is much less productive than the previous two patterns. The two variations of the pattern, however, are utilized in a very consistent way which involves a large degree of repetition and this enhances their efficiency.

The first variation of Pattern 3 comprises 5 elements which are shared by all headlines of this type – namely, the initial numeral and “problems every woman understands”. The only new element each headline adds to the structure is the one inserted between the numeral and the rest of the obligatory pattern elements (i.e., “bra”, “flats”, or “heels”) - “15 Bra Problems Every Woman Understands”. Additional brevity is achieved by means of omitting the object relative pronoun “which/that” which would serve to introduce the relative clause modifying “problems”.

The second variation of the pattern differs from the first one in that instead of “every” it comprises the element “only”. As a result, the pattern opens other potential slots to be supplied with specifying information not only before the element “women” (as in “15 Boob Problems Only Pregnant Women Understand”), but also after it. Thus the following two headlines fill the slot by adding respectively “who sleep with f\*ckboys” (asterisk original) and “with lots of guy friends” before the obligatory final element “understand”:

“14 Problems Only Women Who Sleep With F\*ckboys Understand”

“15 Problems Only Women With Lots of Guy Friends Understand”

In a further variation within this pattern the element “women” is replaced by the more specific “nannies” and “problems” is replaced by the actual synonym “struggles”. As a structure, however, the headline follows the model of the pattern closely and employs a numeral, “only” and “understand”: “13 Struggles Only Nannies Understand”.

#### **2.1.4. Pattern 4 – numeral + “reasons”.**

The fourth pattern includes a numeral and the noun “reasons”, which is modified by a wh-relative clause, whose initial marker (the subordinating wh-word “why”) is omitted in all occurrences: “11 Reasons He Loves Spending Time With You More Than Anyone Else”. Moreover, exophorically used pronouns such as “he”, “anyone” and “your” serve for redirecting content load towards the situation instead of condensing it into the actual text of the headline.

#### **2.1.5. Pattern 5 - numeral + (implicit/explicit) “types”.**

In spite of their low frequency, such headlines maintain a high level of efficiency by using cohesive devices in a way that promotes economy. One example includes a relative clause where the relative pronoun “which/that” is omitted in order to balance its relative lengthiness (11 elements) - “The 13 Types of Texters Every Twentysomething Knows All Too Well”. In addition to omitting the object relative pronoun “who/that”, these headlines are more efficient in that they do not explicitly state that what they enumerate are not “guys” per se, but rather types of guys.

Furthermore, the use of digits to express numerals is conducive to brevity – “20s” instead of “Twenties”, “11” instead of “Eleven”, “8” instead of “Eight”. The content load of these headlines is also made lighter by the use of the personal pronoun “you” with exophoric reference to the user.

#### **2.1.6. Pattern 6 - numeral + “stages”.**

The pattern consists of 4 obligatory elements – the definite article “the” followed by a numeral, “stages” and the preposition “of” which introduces a non-finite, “-ing” prepositional phrase. In such structures, when the subject is missing, the user (“you”) is taken to be the implicit subject - “The 8 Emotional Stages of Being Ghosted”.

#### **2.2. Non-numeral containing headline patterns - question as headline.**

Among all 100 example headlines, *Cosmopolitan US* uses a question only once - “How Can You Tell If a Guy Is Ready to Settle Down?”. Although this pattern for structuring headlines is regarded as a particularly popular and useful one by specialists in the field of writing for the Web, it occurs only once on the *Cosmopolitan US* website. As a result, its efficiency resides solely in the structure being a simple and commonly used one and the use of exophoric reference (the personal pronoun “you”) to reduce content load. Its single occurrence in the corpus makes it the least productive pattern for headline design on the American website of the *Cosmopolitan women’s* magazine.

### **3. CONCLUSION.**

The present study deals with the ways of upholding the regulative principle of efficiency within the discourse of Computer-mediated communication, with a specific focus on the web-content headlines featured on the *Cosmopolitan United States women’s* magazine website. The efficiency of headlines online comprises two aspects: the consistent use of particular design patterns and the brevity and compactness of the utilized patterns.

In this sense efficiency can be seen as the cumulative effect of the use of a particular number of similar items which creates a strong sense of familiarity. As users gradually internalize the patterns and their specific constantly appearing elements, it becomes easier for them to process quickly this old information and then focus their attention on the new information. The various patterns are thus “containers” or templates with empty slots for inserting new elements in the process of creating specific headlines. Efficiency is therefore enhanced by the consistent and repetitive use of a limited number of productive patterns.

From the perspective of the characteristics of each of the emerging design patterns, efficiency is seen as resulting from the resources language has for achieving brevity and compactness and the way in which these are utilized within patterns and within the headlines themselves in order to achieve optimal headline length. The analysis of the corpus data thus shows that the main cohesive devices pertaining to efficiency and processing ease and enhancing brevity and economy within the English language include exophoric reference, the omission of subject personal pronouns and object relative pronouns, the use of numerals in the form of digits and the use of contracted forms.

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