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Journalism in Africa

New Trends

Edited by
Folu Ogundimu

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Journalism in Africa: New Trends

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Guest Editor

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About the Editor

Folu Ogundimu

Folu Ogundimu is an Associate Professor at Michigan State University, School of Journalism and College of Communication Arts and Sciences. He is a co-editor of *Media and Democracy in Africa* (2002;2003), issue editor of the journal of *African Rural and Urban Studies* on 'Mass media and democratization in Sub-Sahara Africa' (1997;1998), and was the principal investigator of the WHO Eradicating Polio in Northern Nigeria project (2010-2011). Dr. Ogundimu also previously served as a senior research associate for Afrobarometer, African Capacity Building Foundation, and Freedom House. His other roles include serving as a consultant for the UN Economic Commission for Africa (Ethiopia 2002,2003), the Globalization Center for Research in Africa UCLA (2000/2001), and USAID (Zambia Democratic Governance Project 1995). He was a visiting professor at the University of Lagos, Nigeria 2008, and SICHUAN University, China (2014,2017). He is a member of the Michigan State University African Studies Core Faculty, the Center for Health and Risk Communication, Global Center for Gender and Development, and the Center for Advanced Study of International Development. He is a former recipient of research grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Population Institute for research and training, and the World Health Organization. At Michigan State University, the research subjects he teaches include international journalism and communications; media, democracy, and governance; public health communications; research methods; and broadcasting, media law, and ethics.

Editorial

Journalism in Africa: New Trends—Guest Editor's Note

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Journalism and Media is pleased to announce the completed edition of this Special Issue, 'Journalism in Africa: New Trends'. When we launched a call for papers in late 2022, we aimed to probe how scholars are using research to shape new narratives about the direction of journalism in Africa, seeking to obtain new insights about numerous aspects of journalistic performance. This includes the emerging trends concerning press–state relations; journalistic performance and accountability; trust in journalism and journalists; audience engagement or disengagement with journalism; gender dynamics in journalistic production; and the impact of new digital media technologies on journalism.

The nine papers published in this open access journal, re-issued in a reprint edition, attempt to uncover new scholarship on the topics of interest we outlined in our call for papers. While they may not have explored them all, they provide useful knowledge and advance research on the role of journalism and the use of creative expression in the African context.

We invite readers to use the insights gained from this collection of papers as frameworks for future research, deepening our knowledge of journalism's place in Africa.

The articles in this Special Issue could not have been published without the excellent reviews and careful vetting provided by our many peer reviewers who offered critical and thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of the manuscripts; we are grateful for their efforts in the peer-review process. We also extend our gratitude to the Editorial Office of *Journalism and Media* for managing the peer-review service, manuscript preparation, and publication process; their input was invaluable.

As the Guest Editor of this Special Issue, I would like to welcome you to read the articles published in this Special Issue. These papers have garnered a significant amount of interest since their publication online, judging by their high number of impressions—a testament to their impact on the wider community of scholars on Africa. In this introductory essay, I aim to highlight some key points from this Special Issue, without undermining the insightful work of the authors, for those who may not have the time to read it all in full, hoping to encourage greater engagement with the individual papers. They employ a broad range of methods, including survey research, content analysis, historical research, focus groups, expert interviews, critical reviews, and discourse analysis. Furthermore, they cover a range of different places, with three of the papers about North Africa, four examining West Africa, and one each focusing on West-Central Africa and Southern Africa.

Regarding the papers on North Africa, two concern Egypt and one focuses on Tunisia. The former articles use a mixed-methods approach to address related issues, combining survey research, focus groups, and expert interviews to examine audience engagement, selective attention to news, news avoidance, trust in media, and the implications of the emergent fragmented online digital information ecosphere for news consumption in an authoritarian or transitional political system such as Egypt's. In Dinana et al.'s (2025) 'Trust pathways in digital journalism,' the authors explore several factors contributing to

declining trust in journalism and news media. By comparing news consumption patterns in Western and non-Western national Arabic news media and information channels, the study reveals a more nuanced picture of audience engagement and disengagement with news, emphasizing a dynamic interplay of factors. The authors demonstrate that strict state regulatory control of the formal media sector compromises Egyptians' trust in state narratives churned out by journalists working for state-aligned media. One consequence of this is that Egyptian news audiences exhibit more active selective attention behavior in the ways they consume news narratives, and with the increasing salience of online digital media, more alternative sources of information are emerging in this fragmented media landscape.

Their study also highlights how audiences' trust in news and how they select it is affected by their awareness of the state's regulatory control of the media and its influence on narratives about political, economic, and cultural news. Additionally, they investigate how the absence of gatekeeping, the algorithmic curation of news on social media, and trust propensity shape audience behavior in news consumption. For example, while trust is high in Western media platforms, journalists, and civic engagement, in the national media sample, trust propensity and civic engagement are weaker but still positive.

In the related work by Taher and Ismail (2025) on 'News avoidance and media trust. . .', they show how news avoidance may be a complex adaptation behavior to news overload of repetitive overbearing state narratives perpetuated by rigidly controlled state media. They discuss four broad findings: First, this adaption behavior ensures that news audiences are not overwhelmed and suffer cognitive dissonance from news overload in transitional authoritarian systems. Second, the low trust in state-aligned media platforms and journalists is importantly linked to the repetitive and homogenous state narratives they disseminate. This drives Egyptians to seek counter narratives from alternative sources on digital media and encrypted channels outside state control that fit with their objective realities, particularly when state-controlled narratives depart from their lived experiences. Audience engagement with the news and civic engagement and disengagement should therefore be viewed through the lens of selective attention rather than news avoidance as a whole. Third, important demographic, socio-technical, and cultural factors mediate the ways in which Egyptians attend to, consume, and interpret news narratives, showing that younger Egyptians may be more adept at navigating socio-technical constraints such as the impact of algorithmic news, news curation, misinformation, and disinformation. Moreover, it is crucial to understand how family communication patterns affect how people in Egypt interpret news narratives. Fourth, the study provides empirical evidence that the robust digital media environment provides a platform for independent journalists and those that work for state-aligned media channels to creatively publish content outside the rigid control of authoritarian regimes. Citizens tend to be more invested in the public affairs of their countries; as such, independent journalists whose work is available outside state-controlled channels are more likely to engage news audiences when their narratives reflect people's realities.

In 'Political listening and podcasting: the case of Tunisia', Snoussi et al. (2024) explore how online digital spaces, specifically podcasting, can be coopted by an elected leader with authoritarian power to shape the representation of political realities, thus marginalizing the voices of the political opposition. This study conducts a content analysis of political podcasts on Arabic news following the Tunisian President Kais Saied's dissolution of legislature and assumption of full executive and legislative powers, which prompted an outbreak of mass protests in support of and opposition to the president. This work is particularly significant as Tunisia was the ground zero of the 2010/11 so-called Arab Spring revolution that toppled many autocrats in the Middle East and promised a new era of

democratization. For Tunisia, this entailed multiparty elections that resulted in a new parliament, dominated by Islamic-oriented political groupings. The election also ushered in the installation of Saïed as President. Barely more than a decade on from this transition, worsening economic conditions and the paralysis of legislature in addressing the needs of the populace were exploited by President Saïed.

The authors show how declining political and economic conditions can be taken advantage of by opportunistic leaders with authoritarian tendencies and how they can court sizable support for their political agenda by garnering the backing of political podcasters with large audiences in the burgeoning digital media landscape. The processes observed in the Tunisian case have implications for comparative studies of political podcasting and civic engagement or disengagement with politics in both transitional and established democratic societies around the world. In this case study, the authors document the many tactics employed by podcasters to cultivate audience engagement and both popularize and justify the President's agenda, such as the use and command of local Arabic and Tunisian dialects, tonality, humor, and other linguistic techniques.

This case reveals how media content producers, including journalists, can be coopted by authoritarian leaders; likewise, Maodza's study (Maodza, 2025), 'The independent press and the fall of Robert Mugabe [...]', on Zimbabwe shows that the analog press and their digital offerings are no less immune from manipulative tactics exploited by powerful politicians who seek to use the press to achieve political ends. The study combines field interviews with a framing analysis of political content published in two private Zimbabwe newspapers to expose the shortcomings of the political press in covering the succession battle by politicians within the ruling political party, ZANU-PF. Examining *The Daily News* and *Newsday*, two privately owned newspapers, reveals that journalistic norms and professionalism can be undermined by corruption, low wages given to journalists, competitive jealousy, and paranoia within newsrooms. The study confirms that the absence of strong institutional control and oversight, micro factors such as personal characteristics, and the influence of powerful politicians in agenda setting are far more insidious in shaping the reportage of the political press. These effects may be more important than the macro (political, regulatory, and ownership) and meso (organizational routines, training, and newsroom socialization) factors that the press theory literature cites as major aspects of press performance in developing countries.

Abondo Ndo's article (Abondo Ndo, 2024), 'Digital shifts and ethno-political dynamics: exploring actor and event designation in the coverage of the Boko Haram terrorism conflict [...]', interrogates press performance, journalistic norms, and the dangers of unbridled journalism in the context of Cameroon, a multiethnic society where identity politics can have a destabilizing effect. The author employs critical reviews, media sociology, discourse, and framing analysis to examine the production of both online digital and print newspaper content in the coverage of the Boko Haram terrorism conflict in Cameroon. Abondo grounds the study in the country's history, exemplifying how the transformation of both politics and the media landscape over the last 40+ years has shaped the competing narratives observed in the Cameroonian press. Whereas Cameroon's politics have been mainly controlled by a single political party and the leadership of President Paul Biya (despite attempts at political reforms), the emergence of online digital journalism has made it difficult for the ruling party and state narratives to dominate digital spaces. Without the gatekeeping and strict regulatory control of media content, the coverage of both online digital media and print sites is influenced by identity politics.

The author takes the Boko Haram terrorism issue as a prism to understand how media narratives and commentators on public affairs seek to influence opinion about the conflict, finding that discussions in the online space are far more robust, unrestricted, and

likely to imbue ethno-political hatred. In contrast, print media coverage of the conflict is far more restrained and modulated, perhaps because state regulatory measures and the fear of sanctions ensure that journalists abide by standards established by political authorities. For example, the language deployed in the print press is often a means of political signaling that affirms loyalty to President Biya and the ruling party and attacks the political opposition. The coverage also tends to portray the opposition composed of different ethnic groups as either terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. The counter narrative offered by citizen journalists in the online digital space is no less restrained, virulent, and fractious, thus heightening ethno-political tensions.

The study has some implications for press performance and journalistic production in multi-ethnic societies where unrestrained and unregulated media coverage of political and cultural conflicts can potentially lead to the unraveling of fragile politics. Are there alternatives for press freedom and journalistic practice short of outright press censorship? Is tightening citizen access to online digital media spaces an appropriate policy response to modulating the intensity of ethno-political tensions observed online?

If the Cameroon study exposes the dark side of the impact of journalistic production on politics, the article by Tawiah (2025) offers a more optimistic outlook regarding the use of online digital media for citizen engagement with politics. In his study on 'social media and campaign strategies, a case study of political issue framing by 2024 presidential candidates in Ghana,' the author examines how the two major candidates in the presidential election deployed social media to hone their campaign strategies for citizen engagement in three core areas: education, economy, and jobs. The article finds that platform-specific affordances were crucial for citizen engagement and more effective messaging that might have made a difference in the outcome of the election. It argues for campaign strategists to be more thoughtful and creative about how they deploy messages for both audience engagement and persuasion. The findings are in line with other conclusions made about youth and their reliance on social media and other online digital media spaces including Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) and encrypted messaging channels such as WhatsApp.

Although the study is inconclusive about whether social media use for political campaigns leads to electoral success, it offers a basis for future research to build upon.

One of the contradictions in studying journalism and the new digital media in Africa is that there is a lack of studies on the connection between the use of indigenous languages and journalism, media content, audience attention to media fare, and the political environment. Replicating the type of study conducted by Tawiah that examines social media campaign strategies for indigenous language messaging in digital and print media would prove illuminate in this regard. Fosu's (2024) study on 'Language choice and the problematics of ideology in the pre and post independent Ghanaian press' addresses this issue. The author conducts historical research and a meta-analysis of the secondary literature, demonstrating that whereas pre- and post-independent press outlets were key in inspiring nationalism and independence among Ghanaians, the political elite using these platforms belonged to a narrow socio-cultural class fluent in English. Fosu argues that this condition had built-in structural advantages for the emergence of a political and cultural elite that was literate in the command and use of the English language. The study argues that the dominance of the English-language press in the pre- and post-independence eras was a limiting factor for the development of a local language and indigenous press. While English language exhibited a hegemonic relationship with elite access to power in the post-independent state, a local language and indigenous press could have broadened political participation and mobilized non-English speakers in the discourse of national development. Fosu reminds us that 'If Ghanaians, and Africans for that matter, want their languages to develop, they

must promote the use of their languages in their press and other social contexts.’ This observation is crucial given the debate in the development literature about the role of language in forging innovation and sustainable development.

The last two papers in this reprint are case studies on Nigeria. The first concerns journalistic practice in using a law on freedom of information to improve journalistic performance. The second provides insight into the use of activism or creative expression as counter narratives to state propaganda and resistance led by demonstrators, most of them youths, against repressive and violent police tactics.

In ‘Knowledge and use of the Freedom of Information Act in Nigeria,’ Eze (2024) found that knowledge and the use of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), passed into law in 2011, was very high amongst Nigerian journalists. The study uses survey research to reveal that journalists with high levels of knowledge in this regard are more likely to use the provisions of the law to obtain information about data, policies, and other issues that government officials may want to keep from public knowledge. Journalists with FOIA-related skills are also likely to utilize the provisions of the law to further develop their investigative reporting. Despite the law, government officials are usually obstinate in attempts to block the release of information sought by journalists.

The study also delineates how journalists in developing media systems can best utilize open access laws such as the FOIA to improve press reportage. In the case of Nigeria, the author notes that journalists and their professional associations were the main actors in lobbying for the passage of the freedom of information law. Once passed, unions of journalists partnered with non-government civil liberty groups to offer specialized training on details of the legislation and teach journalists about employing the law to improve their reporting for democratic accountability.

Finally, in Afolabi and Gabriel’s (2025) ‘Soro Soka: A framing analysis of creative resistance during Nigeria’s “NSARS” Movement in 2020,’ the authors use framing and discourse analysis to show how art was deployed as forms of creative resistance to dismantle state narratives by youth-led protesters. The demonstrations were against the violent tactics of a special anti-robbery police squad that was accused of indiscriminate extrajudicial killings. The squad was also implicated in many acts of unlawful detentions and using violent tactics against youths.

Afolabi and Gabriel’s study demonstrates how different art forms such as paintings and visual art, songs, totemic imagery, dramatic sketches and skits were utilized in both physical spaces and online digital media to highlight grievances against the police squad. Through creative expression, the demonstrators also countered state propaganda that attempted to delegitimize the protesters.

The article is part of a larger global social movement that leverages digital media technologies to use creative forms of expression, aiming to mobilize protests in the street against social injustice, oppose oppression and dramatize grievances against the state.

Other examples cited include the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement in the USA; the Umbrella Protesters in Hong Kong (China); and the Polish Women’s protests. These cases illustrate the power of activism as forms of creative expression to amplify the voices of protesters, counter state narratives, publicize grievances, and draw global attention to social injustice. In these struggles, art becomes a platform for those who are excluded from elite privileges.

We hope this collection provides depth to the scholarship on journalism in Africa, focusing on new trends in journalism that deserve further exploration.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Article

Trust Pathways in Digital Journalism: Comparing Western and National News Media Influence on Civic Engagement in Egypt

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Abstract: Trust remains fundamental to an audience's engagement with digital journalism, yet research has predominantly focused on Western contexts, overlooking trust dynamics in diverse digital environments. This study examines news media trust and civic engagement in Egypt's evolving digital landscape, comparing Western and national digital news consumption patterns. Using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling with data from 426 Egyptian digital news consumers, we apply a four-factor trust model to analyze (1) the relationship between trust propensity and trust in digital news content and (2) how journalist assessment relates to both content trust and civic engagement across platforms. Our results reveal significant differences in trust formation, whereby trust propensity strongly predicts content trust for Western digital media ($\beta = 0.440$) but weakly for national digital media ($\beta = 0.191$), while journalist assessment consistently influences both content trust and civic outcomes across platforms. Our findings contribute to digital journalism theory by illuminating how journalist credibility functions as a trust anchor across platforms. For digital journalism practice, we identify platform-specific trust-building strategies for Western and national digital news organizations operating in complex media environments. This study extends digital journalism research beyond Western-centric models, demonstrating how cultural context, educational factors, and platform characteristics shape digital trust pathways.

Keywords: digital journalism; news media trust; civic engagement; Egypt; cross-platform comparison; trust propensity; journalist credibility

1. Introduction

In an era of rapid digital transformation and information abundance, news media trust has emerged as a critical factor shaping public discourse and democratic processes. The proliferation of digital platforms has fundamentally disrupted traditional journalism, blurring the boundaries between news producers and consumers, while challenging established notions of objective truth (Williams, 2021). Understanding how audiences develop trust in different news sources and the influence this has on civic participation has become increasingly urgent for scholars and practitioners of digital journalism.

This study examines news media trust within the Egyptian digital landscape. This perspective has been significantly under-represented in the predominantly Western-focused literature on digital journalism. Egypt presents a compelling case study, as its media ecosystem has undergone profound digital transformation amid political transitions and regulatory challenges. With 54 million internet users and 45 million social media users as of 2024, Egypt's digital news environment represents a vibrant understudied context for exploring trust across different digital platforms.

For the sake of this study, we implement a multidimensional schema to classify Western and national digital media. The designations are determined according to a number of key characteristics. The term Western digital news refers to digital media local to North America or Europe, with global reach and influence, that share editorial principles drawn from Western journalistic traditions; it is published in English, but Arabic editions are published that are directed at Middle Eastern readers. Western digital news also refers to media owned by Western media corporations or foundations with predominantly Western funding structures, using a hybrid of Western journalists and regional journalists such as the BBC, CNN, Reuters, The Guardian, and Deutsche Welle. National digital media refers to digital news sources that are Egyptian in ownership and primarily Egyptian in focus, operating under Egyptian media regulations and governance structures; they are primarily written in Arabic with Egyptian cultural frames of references, predominantly employing Egyptian journalists that are familiar with local contexts, including both legacy media organizations with a digital presence (e.g., Al-Ahram and Al-Masry Al-Youm) and digital-native outlets (e.g., Mada Masr and Cairo24).

This typology is not just based on location—it captures the distinct ownership models, editorial orientations, regulatory environments, and cultural frameworks guiding how outlets cover news of interest to Egyptian readers. These distinctions become even more crucial in analyzing how trust takes shape on these platforms in Egypt.

This study defines trust propensity as an individual's general willingness to rely on others, including digital sources and news media institutions (Westjohn et al., 2022). Civic engagement is conceptualized as how citizens participate in digital and physical spaces to improve conditions for others or shape the community's future (Huttunen et al., 2022). These definitions are needed to understand the complex interplay between digital media trust and civic participation.

The Egyptian digital media landscape offers unique insights with its diverse array of outlets serving approximately 102 million, coupled with its restrictive legislation (Allam & Dinana, 2021). This environment has shifted how Egyptians consume and trust news, with digital platforms acting as critical spaces for public discourse, often in contention with traditional media. According to Fletcher and Park (2017), trust in news media significantly impacts online news consumption and digital participation relationships that may manifest differently in non-Western contexts like Egypt.

To explore these issues, we employ a four-factor model developed by Kohring and Matthes (2007) and refined by Jia (2023), which assesses trust in digital news media across four dimensions—the selectivity of topics, the selectivity of facts, the accuracy of depictions, and journalist assessment. By applying this framework to the Egyptian digital context, we aim to understand how media trust operates in a rapidly evolving digital landscape outside Western settings. Our study addresses two primary research questions, as follows:

What is the relationship between audiences' trust propensity and digital news media content in Western and national Egyptian contexts?

How does journalist assessment relate to trust in digital news content and civic engagement in these different media environments?

The significance of this research for digital journalism studies is threefold. First, it extends existing trust frameworks to a non-Western digital media environment, testing their applicability and identifying necessary adaptations. Second, it provides empirical evidence for how trust dynamics operate differently across Western digital platforms and national Egyptian digital outlets, contributing to our understanding of cross-cultural variations in digital news consumption. Third, it illuminates how digital media trust influences civic engagement in an emerging democracy, offering insights into how digital journalism might better serve democratic functions in politically complex environments.

By examining these questions, we contribute to the growing literature on digital media trust and civic engagement. We also provide valuable insights specific to the rapidly evolving Egyptian digital media landscape. These findings have implications for journalism studies and digital news organizations seeking to build trust and engagement in diverse global contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Digital Trust Crisis*

Public trust toward news media has declined globally, particularly in digital environments. A U.S. Gallup poll revealed that in 2016, only one-third of Americans expressed high confidence in mass media, with a further decline to 12% in subsequent years (K. Jones, 2020). This erosion of trust is not limited to the United States but represents a global trend accelerated by digital transformation (Myllylahti, 2020). As Shahbazi and Bunker (2024) demonstrated, this trust deficit has become particularly pronounced in online news environments, where there is an absence of traditional gatekeeping mechanisms and a proliferation of misinformation.

High-choice digital media environments have created challenges for traditional news outlets (Steppat et al., 2020), including increased competition for audience attention in what Thiele (2025) describe as an attention economy that is characterized by information overload and diminishing audience attention spans. The proliferation of alternative digital media sources (Helles, 2016) and user-generated content has complicated trust dynamics by introducing non-professional content alongside traditional journalism. Mauldin (2024) argues that these digital offerings often disparage traditional news organizations, while digital platforms and social media have empowered political actors to bypass established news channels (Horoub, 2023).

Selective exposure—where audiences gravitate toward information that aligns with their existing views (Fletcher et al., 2020)—has been amplified in high-choice digital environments (Melki & Kozman, 2021). The algorithmic curation creates filter bubbles, which limit exposure to diverse perspectives (Pariser, 2011). Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019) suggest low media trust correlates with increased selective exposure, creating potential echo chambers and further fragmenting public discourse.

While the relationship between trust propensity and digital news media trust has been explored in Western contexts, research examining this dynamic in non-Western digital media environments, particularly in the Middle East, is scarce (Noman et al., 2024).

2.2. *Digital Journalism in Egypt*

Egypt's digital media ecosystem is characterized by rapid transformation and persistent constraints. With 54 million internet users and approximately 45 million social media users, it faces significant regulatory and economic challenges (Aal, 2024). High operational costs have led to the closure of numerous print publications, accelerating digital-first strategies. However, as Elsheikh et al. (2024) observe, this digital transition has occurred within a regulatory environment that significantly constrains journalistic freedom.

The government maintains a strong influence over the digital media through the Egyptian Radio and Television Union and legislation, such as the Cybercrime Law of 2018, which restricts certain digital expression forms. AlAshry (2022) found that these constraints have increased distrust in national digital media outlets among younger, more educated Egyptians, many of whom have turned to Western digital platforms for news.

Digital platforms have introduced new dynamics. Social media, particularly Twitter (now "X") and Facebook, has emerged as a vital space for alternative discourse, often circumventing traditional media. According to M. O. Jones (2022), these platforms played

a particularly significant role during the Arab Spring and subsequent events, establishing themselves as important nodes in the Egyptian information ecosystem. However, Scheffauer et al. (2024) note that the relationship between social media and traditional journalism remains complex, with professional journalists often using these platforms to bypass editorial constraints while competing with citizen journalists and user-generated content.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and automated content production represent another significant transformation in Egypt. Nassar (2024) observed that several major Egyptian news outlets have begun experimenting with AI-driven content creation and curation, raising new questions about transparency and trust in digital news environments.

This complex digital media environment makes Egypt an ideal case for studying how trust operates across different digital platforms and influences civic engagement. Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) argue that comparative analyses of trust across different media systems can provide valuable insights into the contextual factors that shape trust relationships in digital news environments.

2.3. Trust and Civic Engagement in Digital Media Environments

The relationship between digital media trust and civic engagement is critical. However, the directionality and strength of this relationship may vary across different cultural, political, and technological contexts. Dutton and Reisdorf (2019) found that the impact of digital news consumption on civic engagement is mediated by trust, and trusted sources produce stronger effects on participatory behaviors regardless of the content itself.

Taneja and Yaeger (2022) found that this relationship becomes more complex in politically polarized digital media environments, where political identities increasingly influence trust judgments. These dynamics may be particularly relevant in the Egyptian context.

Thorson and Battocchio (2024) describe digital news repertoires as diverse combinations of platforms and sources that users assemble to manage the presence (or absence) of news and to meet their information needs. This further complicates the relationship between trust and civic engagement. These repertoires are shaped by trust judgments and habit, convenience, and social influences (Duvekot et al., 2024).

However, the implications of these trust patterns for civic engagement, particularly in non-Western digital contexts, remain underexplored. Our subsequent hypotheses address these relationships, as follows:

H1: *A positive relationship exists between audience trust propensity and digital news media content trust in both Western and national Egyptian news environments.*

H2: *A positive relationship exists between the audience assessment of journalists and digital news media content trust.*

H3: *A positive relationship exists between the audience assessment of journalists and civic engagement in digital environments.*

Strömbäck et al. (2020) propose a multi-level approach to analyzing digital news media trust, including news content, journalists, organizations, and the broader media system. This multi-faceted conceptualization allows for a nuanced understanding of trust across different aspects of the digital news ecosystem.

To operationalize this approach, we adopt the four-factor model developed by Kohring and Matthes (2007), which was refined for digital contexts by Jia (2023). This model measures trust across four dimensions that are relevant to digital journalism—the selectivity of topics, the selectivity of facts, the accuracy of depictions, and journalistic assessment. By

applying this model to the Egyptian digital context, we aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of news media trust in the evolving digital landscape.

3. Theoretical Framework

Our study integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives to examine the relationship between digital media trust and civic engagement in the Egyptian context—the Theory of Subjective Quality Assessment (TSQA), Media Dependency Theory, and emerging frameworks of algorithmic trust.

3.1. Theory of Subjective Quality Assessment in Digital Environments

The TSQA posits that media users' interactions with news sources are influenced by their subjective assessments of content quality and form (Wolling, 2004, 2009). In digital journalism, these assessments evaluate traditional journalistic criteria like accuracy and completeness and digital-specific elements such as interactivity, immediacy, and multimodality (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2017).

The TSQA is particularly relevant to digital journalism as it explains how user evaluations shape trust formation in environments characterized by abundant choice and limited attention. As Thiele (2025) argues, these subjective quality assessments have become critical determinants of which digital sources users trust and regularly consume in high-choice media environments.

In the contemporary digital media environment, where users openly evaluate news sources through comments, social media, and other feedback mechanisms, the TSQA provides a valuable framework for understanding how trust in digital media brands is constructed. Van Aelst et al. (2021) found that these subjective assessments have created networked credibility through distributed evaluation processes rather than traditional institutional authority.

3.2. Media Dependency Theory in Digital Transformation

Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) focuses on how reliance on media increases during periods of social instability or crisis. This theory has gained renewed relevance in digital journalism, where dependency relationships have become more complex and technologically mediated (Thiele, 2025).

Melki and Kozman (2021) extended this theory to digital contexts, arguing that digital platforms may intensify dependency relationships through immediacy, ubiquity, and personalization. Their research in the Middle Eastern context suggests that during social or political upheaval, digital platforms often become primary information sources due to their speed and circumvention of institutional controls.

This theory is relevant to Egypt, where political and social upheavals have significantly impacted digital media consumption and trust relationships. Lewis and Molyneux (2018) found that during political contestation, social media platforms often serve as alternative public spheres where trusted information can circulate despite institutional constraints; this is also why some Egyptians may trust certain digital platforms over others during politically sensitive periods.

3.3. Algorithmic Trust in Digital Journalism

Our framework is further strengthened by incorporating emerging perspectives on algorithmic trust—a concept that is particularly relevant to digital journalism studies. As Diakopoulos (2019) argues, trust in digital news is increasingly mediated by algorithmic systems that select and present content to users. These algorithmic intermediaries create new dimensions of trust that go beyond traditional journalistic considerations.

Algorithmic trust encompasses users' confidence in content and delivery systems (Zarouali et al., 2021). This may include recommendation systems, content moderation processes, and data collection practices in digital journalism. Park and Yoon (2024) found that perceptions of algorithmic transparency and fairness significantly influence overall trust in digital news platforms, creating a trust transfer from systems to content.

This perspective explains how Egyptian news consumers may develop different trust relationships with Western digital platforms (which often employ sophisticated algorithmic systems) versus national digital outlets. Algorithmic trust also highlights why some users may trust content on social media platforms despite expressing low trust in those platforms institutionally—a paradox observed by several digital journalism scholars (e.g., Nielsen & Graves, 2017).

3.4. Integrated Theoretical Approach

By combining these perspectives, we develop a comprehensive framework for understanding how trust in digital news media influences civic engagement in Egypt. The TSQA explains trust formation through subjective content evaluation, Media Dependency Theory elucidates how reliance on digital media during crises affects trust relationships, and algorithmic trust perspectives account for how technical systems mediate trust in digital journalism.

This integrated approach enables us to analyze the interplay between individual dispositions (trust propensity), content assessments (news media content trust), journalist evaluations, and civic outcomes in Egypt's digital media landscape. The framework is particularly well-suited to examining cross-platform trust variations, as it accounts for both content-level and system-level factors that may differ between Western and national Egyptian digital news sources.

The four-factor model we employ (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Jia, 2023) aligns with this theoretical framework by capturing multiple dimensions of trust that are relevant to digital journalism—the selectivity of topics (what issues are covered), the selectivity of facts (what information is included), the accuracy of depictions (how information is presented), and journalist assessment (perceptions of the individuals creating content). These dimensions may operate differently in digital compared to traditional media contexts, making them valuable measures for understanding trust in Egypt's evolving digital news landscape.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Research Context and Sampling

Egypt's pluralistic digital media ecosystem and population of approximately 102.3 million make it an ideal site for investigating trust dynamics in non-Western digital journalism (Allam & Dinana, 2021). With 54% internet penetration and 44% social media usage the country represents a vibrant yet understudied digital news environment characterized by complex interactions between traditional media institutions, native digital outlets, and global platform companies.

Our survey sample comprised 426 valid responses from Egyptian news consumers across five digital news source categories—Western digital media ($n = 145$), national digital media ($n = 120$), regional digital media ($n = 70$), non-Western digital media ($n = 31$), and social media platforms ($n = 60$). This categorization examines how trust operates across different types of digital news while acknowledging the limitations of smaller subsamples for certain categories.

In this paper, we focus primarily on the two largest subsamples—Western digital media consumers and national digital media consumers. Western digital media was operationalized in the form of digital outlets headquartered in North America or Europe

with global reach and English or Arabic language offerings targeting Egyptian audiences. This category included the digital platforms of outlets such as CNN, BBC, Reuters, and Deutsche Welle. National digital media encompassed Egyptian-owned digital news outlets operating primarily within the country, including both traditional news organizations with digital presences (Al-Ahram and Al-Masry Al-Youm) and digital-native outlets (Mada Masr and Cairo24).

A stratified random sampling was employed to ensure representation across age, gender, education levels, and digital media usage. Participants were recruited through panel sampling. They targeted social media advertising, with screening questions being used to verify their regular consumption of digital news (at least three times per week). While this sampling method improves upon the convenience sampling approaches common in digital media research, potential limitations in generalizability are acknowledged and addressed in our limitations section.

4.2. Methodological Approach and Justification

We employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) as our primary analytical approach, implemented through SmartPLS 4.0 software. This methodology was selected for several reasons particularly relevant to digital journalism research.

First, PLS-SEM is well suited for exploratory research in emerging fields (Hair et al., 2019), making it appropriate for investigating digital trust dynamics in the understudied Egyptian context. Second, it accommodates complex models with multiple latent constructs, capturing the multidimensional nature of trust in digital environments. Third, PLS-SEM is robust to the non-normal data distributions common in survey-based media consumption research (Henseler et al., 2016). Fourth, it performs well with smaller sample sizes than covariance-based SEM, enabling a meaningful analysis of our media type subsamples.

This approach aligns with recent digital journalism studies examining trust relationships across media platforms. For example, Sohaib (2021) successfully applied PLS-SEM to analyze trust transfer processes between social media and news content. This demonstrates the method's utility for investigating complex trust relationships in digital environments.

4.3. Measures

This study employed a four-factor model to assess trust in digital news media across multiple dimensions, building on established measures while adapting them to the Egyptian digital context. All items were measured using 5-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), unless otherwise noted.

4.4. Trust Propensity

Trust propensity was measured using four indicators assessing participants' willingness to rely on digital news sources. The Western digital media sample showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.660$), with indicators including coverage trust ($\lambda = 0.854$), media professional trust ($\lambda = 0.450$), entity ownership ($\lambda = 0.380$), and political background ($\lambda = 0.418$). The national digital media sample demonstrated lower reliability ($\alpha = 0.494$) across similar indicators.

Example items included "I tend to trust information from online news sources until they give me a reason not to" and "I generally believe digital journalists report accurately and fairly." These measures were adapted from the work of Westjohn et al. (2022) and were contextualized for digital news environments.

4.5. Digital News Media Content Trust

Digital news media content trust was evaluated through nine indicators, showing strong reliability in the Western digital media ($\alpha = 0.841$) and national digital media ($\alpha = 0.826$) samples. Indicators included the accuracy of depictions, different viewpoints, important information, important topics, audience needs, news coverage, important facts, and the separation of facts from opinions. Factor loadings ranged from $\lambda = 0.460$ to $\lambda = 0.763$ for the Western sample and from $\lambda = 0.432$ to $\lambda = 0.663$ for the national sample.

Example items included “The digital news sources I follow present verified facts rather than unverified claims” and “The digital news outlets I use clearly separate factual reporting from opinion content.” These measures were adapted from the work of Kohring and Matthes (2007) to reflect specific aspects of digital journalism such as real-time updates and multimedia content.

4.6. Journalist Assessment

Journalist assessment was measured using indicators focused on the perceptions of journalists working for digital news outlets. The measure showed moderate reliability in the Western digital media ($\alpha = 0.626$) and national digital media ($\alpha = 0.746$) samples, with factor loadings ranging from $\lambda = 0.626$ to $\lambda = 0.728$ for Western and from $\lambda = 0.655$ to $\lambda = 0.763$ for national consumers.

Example items included “The digital journalists I follow on social media provide unbiased reporting” and “Digital journalists at my preferred news outlets consider the audience’s interests.” These measures were based on Prochazka and Schweiger’s (2019) framework and were tailored to digital journalism contexts.

4.7. Digital Civic Engagement

Digital civic engagement was assessed through eight indicators, measuring different aspects of engagement with digital news and subsequent civic activities. The measure demonstrated acceptable reliability in both samples (Western: $\alpha = 0.727$; national: $\alpha = 0.777$). Indicators included attention to digital images/videos, news headlines, civic attitudes influenced by digital news, sharing content, commenting articles, and participating in digitally organized civic activities.

Example items included “I often share digital news articles with my network when I find them important” and “Information from digital news has motivated me to participate in civic activities.” These measures were adapted from recent studies examining the relationship between digital news consumption and civic outcomes (Waeterloos et al., 2024).

4.8. Control Variables

Several control variables were included to account for factors that might influence both digital media trust and civic engagement. These included the following:

Digital Media Literacy (5 items, $\alpha = 0.812$): Measuring participants’ ability to critically evaluate online information sources.

Political Interest (3 items, $\alpha = 0.773$): Assessing general interest in political matters.

Demographics: Age, gender, education level, income, and location (urban/rural).

Digital Access (4 items, $\alpha = 0.801$): Measuring the quality and frequency of internet access (See Tables A1 and A2 in Appendix A).

4.9. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through an online survey administered in Arabic and English (with back-translation verification) between September and November 2023. The survey platform (Qualtrics) was optimized for both desktop and mobile devices to ensure accessibil-

ity. The questionnaire was piloted with 30 participants, representing different demographic groups, with subsequent refinements to improve clarity and cultural relevance.

Participants first completed screening questions about their digital news consumption habits, followed by measures of trust propensity, content trust, journalist assessment, and civic engagement. To minimize order effects, the presentation of these sections was randomized. Participants then provided information about their preferred digital news sources, allowing classification into our five media categories, followed by demographic questions and control measures.

4.10. Analytical Strategy

We used a multi-step analytical approach to test the hypothesized relationships. This comprehensive approach allows us to examine both direct and indirect relationships in our model while accounting for potential group differences and moderating factors relevant to Egypt's complex digital media landscape (see Figure 1).

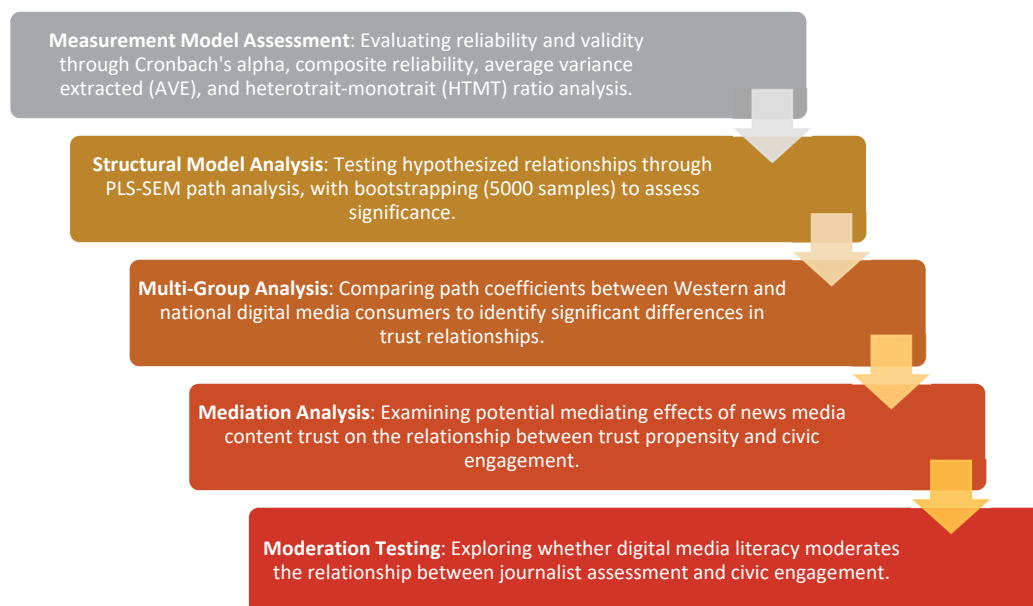


Figure 1. The multi-step analytical approach.

5. Results

5.1. Measurement Model Assessment

To establish our measurement model's robustness, we comprehensively evaluated reliability and validity metrics across both Western and national digital media samples. Table 1 summarizes these results.

Internal consistency reliability was examined through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability indices. The analysis revealed satisfactory reliability levels across most constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.626 to 0.841 for the Western sample and from 0.494 to 0.826 for the national sample. Composite reliability values demonstrated similar patterns, ranging from 0.616 to 0.840, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.60 for exploratory research (Hair et al., 2019).

Convergent validity was assessed through average variance extracted (AVE) analysis. While digital news media content trust and journalist assessment demonstrated strong convergent validity, with AVE values approaching or exceeding 0.50, the trust propensity dimension fell below this threshold in both samples (Western: 0.216; national: 0.196). This suggests opportunities for measurement refinement in future digital journalism research, particularly for assessing general trust dispositions in different cultural contexts.

Table 1. Measurement model results for Western and national digital media samples.

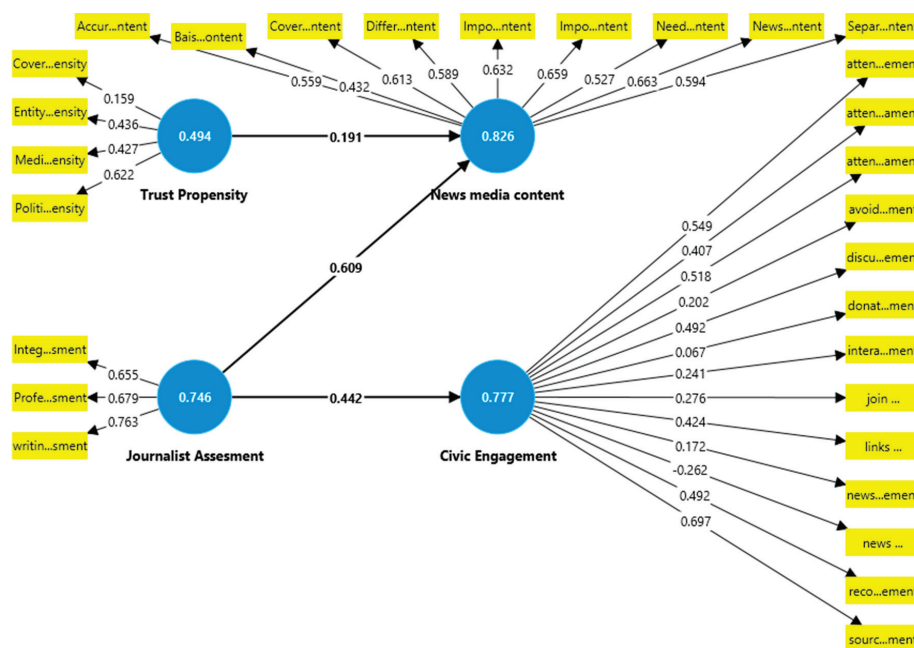
Construct	Western Digital Media	National Digital Media
Trust Propensity		
Cronbach's α	0.660	0.494
AVE	0.216	0.196
Digital News Media Content Trust		
Cronbach's α	0.841	0.826
AVE	0.347	0.347
Journalist Assessment		
Cronbach's α	0.626	0.746
AVE	0.491	0.491
Civic Engagement		
Cronbach's α	0.727	0.777
AVE	0.166	0.166

Discriminant validity was confirmed through heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio analysis, with all values being below the conservative threshold of 0.85, indicating adequate construct separation. The highest HTMT value was between journalist assessment and news media content trust (0.710), reflecting their conceptual relatedness while maintaining discriminant validity.

The evaluation of collinearity through variance inflation factors (VIFs) revealed no serious concerns, with values ranging from 1.133 to 2.303, well below the critical threshold of 5.0. This suggests minimal multicollinearity among predictor variables.

5.2. Structural Model Results

The structural model demonstrated a strong explanatory power across both digital media samples. Figures 1 and 2 present the path models for Western and national digital media, respectively.

**Figure 2.** The national news media trust model.

For the Western digital media sample, the model explained the substantial variance in the endogenous variables, with R^2 values of 0.517 ($R^2_{adj} = 0.510$) for digital news media content trust and 0.159 ($R^2_{adj} = 0.153$) for civic engagement. The national digital media sample showed similar patterns, with R^2 values of 0.570 ($R^2_{adj} = 0.563$) for content trust and 0.195 ($R^2_{adj} = 0.189$) for civic engagement.

The path coefficients and effect sizes (f^2) are presented in Table 2. In the Western digital media sample, trust propensity showed a strong positive relationship with news media content trust ($\beta = 0.440$; $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 0.372$), supporting H1. Journalist assessment demonstrated a strong positive relationship with news media content trust ($\beta = 0.462$; $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 0.409$) and civic engagement ($\beta = 0.399$; $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 0.189$), supporting H2 and H3.

Table 2. Path coefficients and effect sizes.

Path	Western Digital Media	National Digital Media
Trust Propensity → Digital News Media Content		
Path Coefficient (β)	0.440 ***	0.191 *
Effect Size (f^2)	0.372	0.044
Journalist Assessment → Civic Engagement		
Path Coefficient (β)	0.399 ***	0.442 ***
Effect Size (f^2)	0.189	0.243
Journalist Assessment → Digital News Media Content		
Path Coefficient (β)	0.462 ***	0.609 ***
Effect Size (f^2)	0.409	0.443

Note: * $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$.

In the national digital media sample, trust propensity showed a weaker but still significant relationship with news media content trust ($\beta = 0.191$; $p < 0.05$; $f^2 = 0.044$), providing partial support for H1. Journalist assessment demonstrated a stronger relationship with news media content trust ($\beta = 0.609$; $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 0.443$) and civic engagement ($\beta = 0.442$; $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 0.243$) compared to the Western sample, strongly supporting H2 and H3.

5.3. Model Fit Assessment

Both digital media models demonstrated acceptable fit indices. The Western sample showed SRMR values of 0.102 (saturated) and 0.109 (estimated), with NFI values of 0.538 (saturated) and 0.531 (estimated). The national sample demonstrated similar fit characteristics with SRMR values of 0.103 (saturated) and 0.106 (estimated), and NFI values of 0.488 (saturated) and 0.484 (estimated). These values are within acceptable ranges for complex models in exploratory research (Henseler et al., 2016).

5.4. Multi-Group Analysis Results

To assess whether the differences in path coefficients between Western and national digital media samples were statistically significant, we conducted multi-group analysis (MGA) using the permutation approach (5000 permutations). The results revealed significant differences in the path from trust propensity to news media content trust ($\Delta\beta = 0.249$; $p < 0.01$), confirming that trust propensity has a significantly stronger influence on content trust for Western digital media compared to national digital media. The differences in the paths from journalist assessment to content trust ($\Delta\beta = 0.147$; $p < 0.05$) and from journalist assessment to civic engagement ($\Delta\beta = 0.043$; $p > 0.05$) were smaller, with only the former reaching statistical significance.

5.5. Mediation Analysis

We conducted mediation analysis to examine whether digital news media content trust mediated the relationship between trust propensity and civic engagement. For the Western digital media sample, the indirect effect was significant ($\beta = 0.072$; $p < 0.05$), indicating partial mediation. For the national digital media sample, the indirect effect was smaller and non-significant ($\beta = 0.026$; $p > 0.05$), suggesting that the mediation pathway operates differently across the two digital media environments.

5.6. Digital Media Literacy as a Moderator

Our analysis of digital media literacy as a potential moderator revealed interesting results. For Western digital media, media literacy significantly moderated the relationship between journalist assessment and civic engagement (β for interaction term = 0.183; $p < 0.01$), with the relationship being stronger for individuals with a greater level of digital media literacy. For national digital media, this moderation effect was insignificant (β for interaction term = 0.078; $p > 0.05$), suggesting that digital media literacy plays a more important role in facilitating civic outcomes from Western digital sources than from national digital sources.

5.7. Demographic Influences on Digital Media Trust

Additional analyses revealed significant demographic patterns in digital media trust. Educational level showed a strong positive correlation with trust in Western digital media ($r = 0.37$; $p < 0.001$) and a negative correlation with trust in national digital media ($r = -0.24$; $p < 0.01$). Age demonstrated the opposite pattern, with older participants showing increased levels of trust in national digital media ($r = 0.31$; $p < 0.001$) and lower levels of trust in Western digital media ($r = -0.18$; $p < 0.05$).

Digital access quality, measured as a control variable, was positively correlated with trust in both Western ($r = 0.29$; $p < 0.001$) and national digital media ($r = 0.23$; $p < 0.01$), but the relationship was stronger for Western sources, suggesting that reliable internet access may be more important for developing trust in international digital platforms.

5.8. Platform-Specific Trust Patterns

Our comparison across the five media categories (Western, national, regional, non-Western, and social media platforms) revealed distinct trust patterns. Figure 3 presents the mean trust scores across these categories (Appendix A, Table A3).

Western digital media received the highest overall trust ratings ($M = 3.76$; $SD = 0.81$), followed by national digital media ($M = 3.54$; $SD = 0.92$), regional digital media ($M = 3.31$; $SD = 0.88$), non-Western digital media ($M = 3.18$; $SD = 0.91$), and social media platforms ($M = 2.88$; $SD = 1.03$). However, these differences were substantially reduced when controlling for education level, suggesting that educational background significantly shapes platform-specific trust assessments.

The pattern changed considerably when examining trust in specific journalists across platforms. Trusted journalists on social media received higher trust ratings ($M = 3.67$; $SD = 0.87$) than the platforms, approaching the levels of institutional digital media sources. This finding supports journalist-centered trust transfer across platforms, where journalist credibility may override platform-level distrust.

These results provide a comprehensive picture of how digital news media trust operates across different Egyptian platforms, revealing similarities and important differences between Western and national digital media environments.

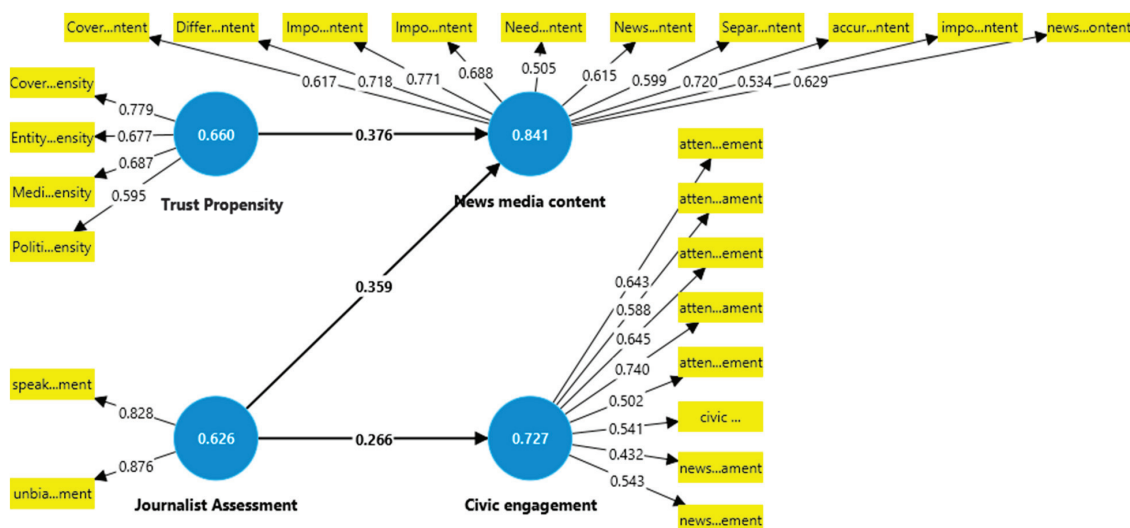


Figure 3. The Western news media trust model.

6. Discussion

The findings illuminate the complex dynamics of digital news media trust among Egyptian audiences, with substantial variations between Western and national digital media consumption patterns. Several key discoveries warrant in-depth discussion and have significant implications for digital journalism theory and practice.

6.1. Differential Impact of Trust Propensity in Digital Environments

One notable finding is the significant variation in the correlation between trust propensity and news media content trust across the two samples. Trust propensity strongly predicts content trust for Western digital media consumers ($\beta = 0.440$; $f^2 = 0.372$), but has a substantially smaller impact for national consumers ($\beta = 0.191$; $f^2 = 0.044$). This suggests that general trust dispositions play a much more significant role in shaping trust in Western digital platforms than in national outlets.

This pattern aligns with Edgerly and Vraga's (2020) familiarity principle, which highlights that trust in familiar media environments is based on specific evaluations rather than general dispositions. Egyptian users likely have more direct experience with national platforms, allowing for more nuanced, experience-based trust judgments. In contrast, Western platforms may be assessed more through distant trust (Strömbäck et al., 2020), which is more dependent on general trust disposition because of the less-direct information.

This finding has significant implications for global digital journalism. Western digital news organizations seeking to build trust among Egyptian audiences may face greater challenges than local outlets due to cultural distance and general trust propensities. The stronger relationship between trust propensity and content trust for Western platforms suggests these outlets might benefit from transparency initiatives that address trust barriers, such as clear disclosures about editorial processes, ownership, and journalistic standards.

6.2. Consistent Impact of Journalist Assessment in Digital News Environments

Despite differences in trust propensity effects, journalist assessment showed strong relationships with news media content trust and civic engagement across both samples, validating H2 and H3. This consistency indicates that evaluations of journalists' truthfulness, bias, and representativeness remain crucial components of media trust in digital environments, whether the content comes from Western or national sources.

Interestingly, the national sample showed a stronger correlation between journalist assessment and content trust ($\beta = 0.609$; $f^2 = 0.443$) than the Western sample ($\beta = 0.462$;

$f^2 = 0.409$). This highlights the importance of journalist trustworthiness in national digital contexts, where consumers may feel more connected to the covered issues and have stronger expectations for journalist integrity.

These findings align with the work of Ross Arguedas et al. (2024), who identified journalist credibility as a trust anchor that has become increasingly important as institutional trust in media organizations has declined. In digital environments where content is often consumed in disaggregated forms (separated from its institutional source), individual journalist credibility may be a crucial heuristic for trust judgments. The stronger effect in the national context may represent journalistic authority or ability to generate credibility through their perceived connection to national concerns and citizens (Carlson, 2018).

These findings suggest that both Western and national outlets should foreground their journalists' expertise, integrity, and connection to audience concerns through journalists-centered social media accounts, the transparent disclosure of conflicts of interest, and opportunities for audience-journalist interaction.

6.3. Digital Trust and Civic Engagement Pathways

Our models explained a modest proportion of the variance in civic engagement (Western: $R^2 = 0.159$; national: $R^2 = 0.195$), with journalist assessment being a significant predictor in both contexts. This relationship between digital journalist assessment and civic outcomes contributes to the growing literature on media trust as a predictor of civic outcomes (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

The stronger relationship between journalist assessment and civic engagement in the national media context ($\beta = 0.442$, $f^2 = 0.243$ vs. Western: $\beta = 0.399$, $f^2 = 0.189$) suggests that perceptions of national digital journalists have more direct relevance to immediate civic concerns. This aligns with Coleman et al.'s (2009) argument that trusted local information sources can effectively mobilize civic action by connecting news to citizens' lived experiences and community contexts.

This finding shows how digital media trust affects civic engagement differently depending on the source's proximity to users' concerns. It suggests that national outlets may have particular potential to foster civic engagement when perceived as trustworthy, while Western platforms may need to work harder to establish the relevance of their coverage to local civic issues.

6.4. The Digital Divide in Trust Patterns

Our demographic analysis revealed important patterns in how different population segments develop trust in digital news sources. Higher-educated participants demonstrated greater trust in Western platforms, while those with lower levels of education, as well as older participants, showed greater trust in national outlets. This educational divide aligns with Taneja and Yaeger's (2022) findings on repertoire polarization, where educational background increasingly predicts not only which digital platforms users frequent, but also which sources they trust.

This pattern may reflect levels of digital media literacy, with higher-educated participants potentially possessing greater critical evaluation skills and English language proficiency that facilitate engagement with Western sources. This reflects Fletcher et al.'s (2020) trust gap, or the tendency for digital media environments to exacerbate existing social divisions in information access and evaluation.

These findings suggest the need for targeted strategies to build trust across demographic segments. Western outlets might focus on accessibility initiatives to reach less-educated audiences, while national platforms could implement transparency and verification to address the skepticism of more educated news consumers.

6.5. Trust Transfer Across Digital Platforms

Our comparative analysis of trust factors across the five media categories (Western, national, regional, non-Western, and social media) revealed interesting patterns of trust transfer between platforms (See Table A3 in Appendix A). Despite overall lower trust scores for social media compared to traditional news outlets, we found evidence of platform-to-content trust transfer or the process by which trusted social media accounts (Zhang, 2024), particularly journalist accounts, can confer trust onto news content shared through less-trusted platforms.

This finding aligns with the work of Velloso (2025), who identified complex trust pathways in digital news environments, where credibility flows between platforms, journalists, and content, challenging traditional institutional trust frameworks. Egyptian digital news consumers appear to negotiate complex trust relationships, using journalist credibility as a transferable currency to overcome platform-level distrust.

While general trust in Twitter/X was low (mean = 2.88 on a 5-point scale), content from established journalists on this platform received higher trust ratings (mean = 3.67). This pattern was pronounced among younger, educated participants who reported higher digital literacy scores, suggesting that media literacy may facilitate nuanced, cross-platform trust judgments.

6.6. Implications for Digital Journalism Theory

Our findings suggest the need for nuanced, multi-level models of digital media trust that distinguish between platform-level trust, journalist-level trust, and content-level trust. The significant differences between Western and national media trust patterns indicate that these relationships may operate differently across cultural and media system contexts.

Our results challenge the notion of institutional trust transfer in digital environments, suggesting instead networked credibility and trust judgments that emerge through distributed evaluation rather than directly from established institutions (Diakopoulos, 2021). In the Egyptian context, journalist credibility appears to be more portable and resilient than institutional affiliation, particularly for Western platforms.

Third, our findings on digital media trust and civic engagement contribute to theories of digital citizenship by highlighting how trust mediates the civic impacts of news consumption. A stronger relationship between journalist assessment and civic engagement for national outlets suggests that proximity and relevance may strengthen the connection between digital trust and civic outcomes.

Fourth, the demographic differences in trust patterns contribute to the theoretical understanding of digital divides in news consumption. Rather than a simple binary divide in access, our findings refer to third-level digital divides or differences in outcomes from digital media use based on education, age, and media literacy (Scheerder et al., 2019).

6.7. Implications for Digital Journalism Practice

Our research offers several practical implications for digital journalism organizations operating in complex media environments like Egypt.

6.7.1. For Western Digital News Organizations

1. **Journalist-Centered Trust Strategies:** Given the strong impact of journalist assessment on content trust and civic engagement, Western outlets should consider journalist-centered approaches to building credibility in Egypt. This could include featuring journalist profiles, highlighting expertise and connection to local issues, and creating direct engagement between journalists and audiences.

2. **Transparency in Trust-Building:** As trust propensity strongly predicts content trust for Western outlets, these organizations should invest in trust-building initiatives that address skepticism among Egyptian audiences. This could include the transparent disclosure of editorial processes, ownership structures, and journalistic standards, as well as explanations of how stories are sourced and verified.

3. **Targeted Audience Development:** Given the educational divide in trust patterns, Western digital news organizations might develop differentiated approaches for different demographic segments. For less-educated audiences with lower trust, this could include simplified content formats, translated materials, and connections to local concerns.

4. **Platform-Specific Trust Strategies:** Our findings on trust transfer across platforms suggest that Western digital news organizations should develop platform-specific strategies for building trust. Content shared through social media might benefit from clearer journalistic attribution and verification indicators given the lower trust in these platforms.

6.7.2. For National Digital News Organizations

1. **Leverage Journalist Credibility:** Given the strong relationship between journalist assessment and content trust for national outlets, these organizations should emphasize journalistic expertise and integrity in trust-building efforts. This could include developing journalists as brand ambassadors and highlighting their connection to audience concerns.

2. **Address Educational Divides:** The lower trust among educated consumers presents a challenge for national outlets. These organizations might adopt enhanced verification procedures, greater analytical depth, and balanced coverage to address this demographic segment.

3. **Civic-Oriented Content Strategies:** The stronger relationship between journalist assessment and civic engagement for national digital outlets suggests the potential to foster civic participation. National organizations might develop civic-oriented content strategies that connect news coverage to audience action and engagement.

4. **Digital Literacy Initiatives:** As digital media literacy influences trust patterns, national organizations might invest in initiatives that help audiences critically evaluate digital news content, potentially increasing trust among educated segments and empowering less-educated consumers.

6.8. Measurement Challenges in Digital Trust Evaluation

The measurement model results highlight challenges in capturing the complexity of digital media trust dimensions, particularly in relation to trust propensity. The low AVE scores across both Western and national media suggest that our operationalization may not fully capture the construct's complexity in Egypt. This finding parallels Kohring and Matthes' (2007) concerns about the contextual nature of media trust metrics and their recommendation for adapting approaches to measuring trust dimensions in different environments.

Content trust demonstrated higher reliability coefficients ($\alpha = 0.841$ and 0.826) than trust propensity ($\alpha = 0.660$ and 0.494), suggesting participants conceptualize content-specific trust more coherently than general trust dispositions. This aligns with Fletcher and Park's (2017) finding that trust assessments become more predictable with specific media attributes rather than general trust tendencies, underscoring the need for tailored measures of trust propensity in digital journalism research.

These measurement challenges highlight the need for continued methodological refinement in digital journalism trust research, particularly in non-Western contexts where existing measures may not capture the nuances of local media trust relationships.

7. Conclusions

This study offers subtle perspectives on digital news trust in the Egyptian context, identifying key differences in the trust processes pertaining to the Western vs. national digital news ecosystem. The trust assessment model finds empirical support for our hypotheses, as trust propensity and journalist assessment are significant predictors of digital news media content trust (H1 and H2) and journalist assessment predicts civic engagement (H3).

First, our analysis points to three key conclusions. The first major finding is that trust propensity and specific trust assessments interact differently depending on whether respondents consume digital media and news from Western or national sources. This may imply that trust-building strategies would have to vary in their intensity for Western and national media outlets in the case of Egypt, where Western media may need to work on a broad reach perception-building effort because of a low baseline in terms of trust disposition.

Second, despite their differences, journalist assessment proves to be a consistently relevant factor across both digital news environments, reinforcing the important role that perceptions of journalist trustworthiness, bias, and representativeness play in understanding digital news trust and civic engagement. This suggests the need for transparent journalistic modes of proceeding, as well as for trust building initiatives for digital media, to focus on strengthening the perceptions of journalist trustworthiness, as content circulates independently from its institutional source.

Third, the relationship between digital news trust dimensions and civic engagement shows that media trust matters more than just its effect on news consumption patterns. This relationship implies that declining trust in digital media is deleterious for democratic participation, particularly in emerging democracies such as Egypt, in which outlets that frame themselves as digital media are gaining an ever more dominant role in the to-be-constructed public sphere.

Fourth, our results indicate important demographic trends in platform trust preferences, which, to a large extent, parallel the demand for platform trust, notably education level, as a major predictor of platform trust preferences. Everything mentioned above is a system that can be used by educators and those who want to close the information gap. This educational gap in media trust is a stratification that could amplify the gap in the information people receive and lead to separate realities among people with different news consumption patterns. The differences in this population compared to EGPs are significant and will need to be a primary consideration in any trust-building or audience engagement strategy for media organizations operating in Egypt.

Fifth, there is strong evidence that journalistic credibility is a trust anchor that works across platforms despite low institutional or platform-level trust. This is especially pertinent in the Egyptian context, in which journalists of high professional integrity appearing on lesser-credentialed outlets (e.g., social media) diminish the legitimacy of particular pieces of content flowing through their personal or professional reputations. This finding hints at a possible path to building trust in complex media environments based on journalist-centric approaches.

These findings deepen our understanding of digital news media trust in non-Western settings, point to the need for context-sensitive models that identify the specific characteristics of diverse digital media landscapes. As Egypt grapples with its intricate digital media transition, these insights provide theoretical grounding for how trust emerges, along with practical tools for building credible digital journalism that promotes civic engagement. Future iterations of this work could investigate how these pathways shift and adapt in the face of continued technological, political, and social change in Egypt and similar emerging media ecosystems.

8. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, despite our stratified sampling, potential selection bias remains a concern. Future research should employ probability-based sampling methods to enhance generalizability. Second, measurement issues with trust propensity indicate the potential for the further refinement of these dimensions. Third, the cross-sectional nature of our data limits causal conclusions about trust measures and civic engagement. Fourth, our focus on a quantitative assessment of trust could be complemented by qualitative approaches that improve digital news media trust understanding from consumers' perspectives.

Future research should investigate how digital news media trust interacts with variables such as algorithm awareness, platform literacy, and exposure to mis/disinformation. Comparative studies across Arab countries would provide valuable perspectives.

As digital platforms reshape journalism globally, understanding the complex trust dynamics in non-Western contexts like Egypt will be increasingly important for both scholars and practitioners. This study offers a foundation, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities for building trusted digital journalism in complex media environments.

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Appendix A. Descriptive Statistics

Table A1. Demographic characteristics of the sample ($N = 426$).

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	231	54.2%
	Female	195	45.8%
Age	18–24	98	23.0%
	25–34	143	33.6%
	35–44	107	25.1%
	45–54	56	13.1%
	55+	22	5.2%

Table A1. *Cont.*

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Education	Less than high school	19	4.5%
High school	64		15.0%
Some college	83		19.5%
Bachelor's degree	205		48.1%
Graduate degree	55		12.9%
Location	Urban	304	71.4%
	Rural	122	28.6%
Digital Media Usage	Daily	357	83.8%
	4–6 times per week	49	11.5%
	1–3 times per week	20	4.7%

Table A2. Descriptive statistics for key study variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Western Digital Media (<i>n</i> = 145)						
Trust Propensity	3.42	0.86	1.25	5.00	−0.38	−0.54
Digital News Media Content Trust	3.76	0.81	1.44	5.00	−0.63	0.12
Journalist Assessment	3.58	0.75	1.33	5.00	−0.42	−0.11
Civic Engagement	3.31	0.93	1.00	5.00	−0.24	−0.45
Digital Media Literacy	3.87	0.95	1.40	5.00	−0.74	0.06
Political Interest	3.93	0.99	1.00	5.00	−0.83	0.19
National Digital Media (<i>n</i> = 120)						
Trust Propensity	3.06	0.94	1.00	5.00	−0.15	−0.83
Digital News Media Content Trust	3.54	0.92	1.22	5.00	−0.38	−0.44
Journalist Assessment	3.47	0.92	1.33	5.00	−0.32	−0.63
Civic Engagement	3.16	1.01	1.00	5.00	−0.12	−0.81
Digital Media Literacy	3.63	1.02	1.20	5.00	−0.53	−0.34
Political Interest	3.69	1.04	1.00	5.00	−0.61	−0.38

Table A3. Trust scores across different digital media categories.

Media Category	<i>N</i>	Mean Trust Score	SD	Education Level Correlation (<i>r</i>)	Age Correlation (<i>r</i>)
Western Digital Media	145	3.76	0.81	0.37 ***	−0.18 *
National Digital Media	120	3.54	0.92	−0.24 **	0.31 ***
Regional Digital Media	70	3.31	0.88	0.12	0.07
Non-Western Digital Media	31	3.18	0.91	0.09	0.14
Social Media Platforms	60	2.88	1.03	0.06	−0.22 *

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

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Article

News Avoidance and Media Trust: Exploring Intentional Public Disengagement in Egypt's Media System

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Abstract: This study examines news avoidance behaviors in Egypt's media system, addressing a significant gap in understanding how audiences disengage from news content in non-Western contexts. Using a mixed-methods approach combining focus groups ($n = 16$), surveys ($n = 512$), and expert interviews ($n = 4$), we investigate the relationships between news overload, trust in formal media, and selective attention in shaping news avoidance behaviors. Our structural equation model demonstrates strong explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.505$), with news overload emerging as the strongest predictor of avoidance behaviors ($\beta = 0.481$). Trust in formal media ($\beta = -0.265$) and selective attention ($\beta = -0.184$) show significant negative relationships with news avoidance. Qualitative findings reveal how Egypt's media system creates unique conditions for news avoidance, with audiences developing sophisticated strategies for managing information flow within an environment of state control. The study advances the theoretical understanding of news avoidance by demonstrating how Media Saturation Theory operates within authoritarian contexts while providing practical insights for news organizations operating under state control. Our findings suggest that news avoidance in authoritarian systems represents not simply audience disengagement but rather a complex adaptation to specific institutional and social conditions.

Keywords: information overload; media consumption patterns; media saturation; news trust; press freedom; selective exposure

1. Introduction

The growing phenomenon of news avoidance presents a significant challenge to journalism's democratic function and the sustainability of news organizations worldwide. Intentional news avoidance describes an intermittent news use practice in which people deliberately turn away from the news (Schäfer et al., 2023). Recent global research indicates that 36% of news consumers actively avoid news content, marking a concerning 9% increase from 2017 (Newman et al., 2024). This trend emerges against a backdrop of unprecedented accessibility to news through digital platforms, creating an apparent paradox: despite the news being more available than ever, a substantial portion of the global population chooses to disengage from it (Xu et al., 2024). Egypt's news avoidance patterns should be examined within this global trend, as the country represents an important case of how audience disengagement manifests in non-Western authoritarian contexts which are underrepresented in the Reuters Institute's annual global surveys.

While existing scholarship has extensively examined news avoidance in Western democratic contexts (e.g., Andersen et al., 2024; Woodstock, 2014; Palmer et al., 2020;

Damstra et al., 2023), there remains a critical gap in understanding how this phenomenon manifests in non-Western societies, particularly those operating under authoritarian media systems. This study addresses this gap by investigating news avoidance behaviors in Egypt, where the intersection of digital transformation, strict press regulations, and complex socio-economic factors creates a unique environment for examining news consumption patterns.

Egypt represents a particularly valuable case study for examining news avoidance due to its unique position as the most populous Arab nation with significant regional influence, its complex media environment characterized by tension between state control and digital expansion, and its rapidly evolving digital landscape where traditional authority intersects with new information flows (Allam, 2019; Elsheikh et al., 2024). The Egyptian context allows for examining how audiences navigate news consumption in what scholars have variously characterized as an authoritarian (Khalifa, 2021) or transitional media system (Allam, 2022), where state intervention coexists with growing digital connectivity and alternative information sources. This distinctive environment creates conditions for news avoidance behaviors that may differ significantly from those documented in Western democratic contexts, offering valuable comparative insights for expanding the theoretical understanding of this phenomenon.

The Egyptian context offers valuable insights into news avoidance behaviors for several reasons. Egyptian news organizations face substantial challenges in retaining audiences amid digital transitions, declining financial revenues, and competition from citizen journalists and international media organizations (Elsheikh et al., 2024). The strict press regulation system enforces specific frames for content creation, establishing distinctive conditions (Obia, 2023) that shape news consumption and avoidance behaviors.

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining focus groups ($n = 16$), surveys ($n = 512$), and in-depth interviews with media professionals and academics to examine the factors influencing news avoidance in Egypt. The study addresses two primary research questions: What factors contribute to news avoidance behaviors in Egypt? Furthermore, what factors motivate increased news engagement among Egyptian audiences? Through this investigation, we test hypotheses regarding the relationships between news overload, trust in formal media organizations, and selective attention to specific news topics with news avoidance behaviors.

Our findings show that news overload, trust in formal media, and selective attention influence news avoidance behaviors among Egyptian audiences. Excessive news exposure leads to cognitive overwhelm, driving these avoidance behaviors regardless of media system type. However, in authoritarian contexts, audiences are more sensitive to repetitive state-approved narratives, indicating that media saturation differs qualitatively from the information abundance typical in democratic environments.

This study contributes to journalism scholarship in several ways. First, it expands our understanding of news avoidance beyond Western democratic contexts by examining this phenomenon within an authoritarian media system. Second, it provides empirical evidence of how socio-political contexts influence news consumption patterns. Third, it offers practical insights for news organizations operating in non-Western markets, particularly those working under strict regulatory frameworks.

The findings of this research have significant implications for both journalism theory and practice. They challenge existing assumptions about news avoidance that have been primarily based on Western experiences and offer new perspectives on how authoritarian media systems influence audience engagement with news content. Furthermore, this study provides valuable insights for news organizations seeking to address declining audience engagement in similar media environments.

2. Theoretical Framework

The examination of news avoidance behaviors in Egypt's authoritarian media system requires a sophisticated theoretical foundation that integrates multiple perspectives from media studies, psychology, and political communication. This section develops an expanded theoretical framework that explicates the complex relationships between media saturation, cognitive processing, institutional structures, and cultural contexts that shape news avoidance behaviors.

Media Saturation Theory provides our primary theoretical lens, offering critical insights into how the overwhelming presence of media content influences audience behavior in contemporary digital environments (S. Lee & Peng, 2024). The theory posits that individuals' attitudes and behaviors are shaped through three key mechanisms: cognitive overload, emotional exhaustion, and behavioral adaptation (Klopfenstein et al., 2024). In Egypt's rapidly digitalizing media landscape, these mechanisms help explain how constant exposure to news across multiple platforms affects audience engagement (Zayani & Khalil, 2024). The theory suggests that when cognitive processing capabilities are overwhelmed by excessive information, individuals develop adaptive behaviors—including avoidance—as coping mechanisms. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant in examining how Egyptian audiences navigate an information environment characterized by both state-controlled traditional media and increasingly prevalent digital platforms.

The emotional dimensions of news consumption and avoidance provide another crucial theoretical lens. Song (2017) demonstrated how discrete emotions—particularly fear, anger, and enthusiasm—influence news consumption's selective approach and avoidance patterns differently. In authoritarian contexts, state control of media narratives may amplify these emotional responses, potentially intensifying both approach and avoidance behaviors. The interaction between emotional responses and institutional constraints creates unique patterns of selective exposure that differ from those observed in democratic media systems.

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) with selective exposure processes to understand the psychological mechanisms underlying news avoidance is integrated to complement this foundation. Cognitive dissonance theory explains how individuals strive to maintain psychological consistency by avoiding information that challenges their existing beliefs (Zhou & Xie, 2024). This theoretical combination helps illuminate how Egyptian audiences decide about news consumption within an environment where state control often results in homogeneous news coverage. The theory of motivated reasoning further enriches this framework by explaining how individuals' pre-existing beliefs and motivations influence their processing of news information (Lockett, 2024).

Media systems theory, particularly its articulation of how institutional structures shape audience behavior, is incorporated into our theoretical framework. While classical media systems theory primarily focused on Western democratic systems, recent theoretical developments have expanded our understanding of how authoritarian media systems influence audience engagement patterns (Jamil, 2021). This theoretical perspective helps explain how state control, regulatory frameworks, and limited media plurality in Egypt create specific conditions that may encourage news avoidance behaviors. The theory suggests that when media primarily serve state interests rather than public information needs, audiences may develop systematic patterns of disengagement.

Cultural theory provides an additional theoretical dimension essential for understanding news avoidance in non-Western contexts. Drawing from theoretical work on cultural dimensions of media consumption (Hofstede, 2001), we consider how Egyptian cultural values, social structures, and communication patterns influence news consumption behaviors (Allam & Hollifield, 2023). Also, the prevalence of fake news and disinformation may constitute an uncertainty that needs to be avoided according to Hofstede (Arrese,

2024). These theoretical perspectives help explain how cultural factors might mediate the relationship between media saturation and avoidance behaviors in ways that differ from Western contexts.

These theoretical approaches coexist and interact in ways that create a unique explanatory framework for news avoidance in Egypt's transitional media system. Media Saturation Theory's emphasis on cognitive overload intersects with institutional factors highlighted by media systems theory, as state-controlled narratives may create distinctive forms of content repetition that differ from information abundance in democratic contexts. Similarly, selective exposure processes operate differently under conditions of limited media plurality, creating tension between cognitive consistency needs and information availability constraints (Zhou & Xie, 2024).

Critically, these theoretical intersections reveal potential contradictions that require empirical examination. For instance, while Media Saturation Theory generally predicts avoidance behaviors during information overload, research in other transitional contexts suggests that during national crisis or political uncertainty, some audiences may increase consumption despite overwhelm (Skurka et al., 2023). Similarly, institutional distrust might lead to wholesale avoidance in some contexts but selective migration to alternative sources in others. Our integrated framework acknowledges these tensions while providing analytical tools to examine how psychological processes interact with structural constraints in shaping news avoidance behaviors in Egypt's specific media environment.

3. Literature Review

The examination of news avoidance emerges at the intersection of multiple scholarly traditions, reflecting broader theoretical concerns about media engagement, audience behavior, and institutional structures. This review synthesizes existing research while identifying critical gaps in understanding news avoidance within non-Western, authoritarian media contexts.

Contemporary scholarship demonstrates a significant global increase in intentional news avoidance, with frequent news avoiders rising from 27% in 2017 to 36% in 2023 (Newman et al., 2024). This trend coincides with fundamental transformations in media landscapes, accelerated by global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, international conflicts, and economic instability. These structural changes have profoundly altered news organizations' relationship with their audiences, challenging traditional assumptions about news consumption patterns.

Research examining news overload provides crucial insights into avoidance behaviors. The proliferation of media channels and technological innovations has created an information environment that frequently exceeds individuals' cognitive processing capabilities (Goyanes et al., 2023). This overwhelming volume of information interferes with effective news processing, leading to information fatigue syndrome (Shahrzadi et al., 2024). Studies indicate that this phenomenon and information literacy manifest particularly strongly in social media environments, where algorithmic content delivery can rapidly overcome users' cognitive limits (Heiss et al., 2023).

The deterioration of trust in media institutions represents another critical dimension in news avoidance research (S. Park et al., 2024). Global studies reveal a consistent decline in media trust, with only 40% of international participants expressing confidence in mainstream news coverage (Newman et al., 2024). This erosion of trust becomes particularly significant in authoritarian media systems, where state control of information creates complex dynamics between institutional credibility and audience perception (Verboord et al., 2023). Research suggests that a declining trust may manifest differently under authoritar-

ian systems than in democratic contexts, potentially leading to distinct patterns of news avoidance behavior (F. L. Lee, 2024).

Social media's transformation of news consumption patterns adds another layer of theoretical complexity, particularly when considering socioeconomic factors often overlooked in Western-centered research. Studies document a significant shift toward social media as primary news sources (Casero-Ripollés, 2022), but this shift is mediated by economic barriers like internet access costs, technological literacy variations, and educational differences that may disproportionately affect news consumption in countries like Egypt (Allam & Hollifield, 2023). These structural barriers interact with algorithmic content curation systems that may amplify or mitigate news avoidance tendencies depending on user behaviors and platform design.

This complexity extends to the "news finds me" perception (Skurka et al., 2023), where individuals believe passive social media exposure provides sufficient information. However, this perception operates differently across socioeconomic groups. It may serve as an economically rational response in contexts where economic factors and state intervention constrain access to diverse news sources. Research indicates potential consequences for civic engagement (Swart, 2023), but these relationships require examination within Egypt's specific socioeconomic context rather than assuming patterns observed in higher-resource environments.

Recent research has highlighted how incidental exposure to news on social media platforms influences news consumption patterns and perceptions. C. S. Park and Kaye (2020) found that incidental exposure to news via social media strengthens the news-finds-me perception while negatively affecting news consumption from traditional and online media. This finding becomes particularly significant in authoritarian contexts where social media may be an alternative to state-controlled traditional media. The intersection of incidental exposure and state control creates unique conditions for news avoidance behaviors, potentially reinforcing selective exposure patterns while weakening engagement with traditional news sources.

Within Egypt's transitional media context, distinctive structural characteristics demand theoretical attention beyond general news avoidance frameworks. Egyptian media operates within a complex environment characterized by self-censorship practices among journalists (Elsheikh et al., 2024), surveillance concerns that may shape audience behavior, and the emergence of parallel information ecosystems through alternative media sources, including exile journalism and independent digital platforms (AlAshry, 2022). These conditions create unique parameters for news consumption where avoidance may represent not disengagement but strategic information management under perceived surveillance and limited plurality.

The role of alternative media in transitional systems introduces additional complexity, as audiences may simultaneously avoid state-aligned news while actively seeking information from opposition sources operating abroad or through encrypted messaging systems (Allam, 2022). This selective avoidance differs substantively from patterns observed in Western contexts, suggesting news avoidance in transitional systems may function as a form of information curation rather than wholesale disengagement. Such dynamics remain undertheorized, as the existing literature has predominantly focused on Western media markets with fundamentally different structural conditions (Damstra et al., 2023).

The proliferation of misinformation presents another critical area of scholarly investigation (Aïmeur et al., 2023). Recent research examines how spreading false information influences trust in media institutions and contributes to avoidance behaviors (Chan et al., 2024). This relationship becomes particularly significant in contexts where press freedom is limited, and state control of media is prevalent. However, theoretical development in

this area remains limited, especially regarding how misinformation dynamics operate in non-Western settings.

Egypt's media system has evolved through distinct phases, from Nasser-era state control to limited liberalization in the 1990s–2000s, followed by a brief opening during 2011–2013, and subsequent reconsolidation of control (AlAshry, 2022). The current landscape is characterized by dominant state and military-affiliated ownership of mainstream outlets following the 2016–2018 consolidation wave, with legal frameworks, including the 2018 cybercrime law and Supreme Media Regulatory Council regulations, significantly constraining content (Elsheikh et al., 2024).

This environment creates media outlets that primarily advance state-approved narratives. Simultaneously, Egypt has experienced rapid digital transformation, with internet penetration exceeding 70% by 2023, creating tension between growing social media usage and state efforts to maintain narrative control (Allam & Hollifield, 2023). This unique combination of institutional restrictions and digital expansion establishes distinctive conditions for news consumption and avoidance behaviors that merit specific examination beyond frameworks developed in Western democratic contexts.

We acknowledge the ongoing scholarly debate regarding classifying Egypt's media system. While our study initially characterized Egypt as an authoritarian media system following Khalifa (2021), we recognize the value of considering alternative perspectives. Recent scholarship by Elsheikh et al. (2024) and Allam (2019) suggests that Egypt might more accurately be understood as a transitional system, reflecting ongoing institutional evolution and complex relationships between state institutions, media organizations, and emerging digital platforms. Rather than strictly categorizing Egypt within a single system type, we propose examining news avoidance behaviors within this contested classificatory space offers valuable insights into how audience behaviors adapt to evolving control mechanisms. Throughout our analysis, we attend to both authoritarian characteristics (centralized content control, limited pluralism) and transitional elements (digital expansion, alternative information channels) that shape news consumption patterns. This nuanced approach allows us to contribute to theoretical discussions about how different system characteristics influence audience engagement and avoidance strategies.

Recent research indicates that Egyptian digital news platforms prioritize entertainment and service journalism over hard news coverage, creating content patterns that may influence audience engagement and avoidance behaviors (Elsheikh et al., 2024). This emphasis on lighter content occurs alongside sophisticated state efforts to manage online information flows through regulatory mechanisms above and beyond content moderation (AlAshry, 2022). The resulting digital environment creates complex conditions where audiences navigate between state-aligned narratives, entertainment content, and alternative information sources accessed through social media and international platforms. Young Egyptians in particular, rely on these digital channels, with over 65% primarily accessing news through social platforms rather than direct visits to news websites (Allam & Hollifield, 2023). This selective consumption pattern suggests that news avoidance in Egypt's digital space may manifest not as complete disengagement but rather as strategic navigation between approved narratives and alternative information ecosystems.

This review reveals significant gaps in our theoretical understanding of news avoidance, particularly in non-Western, authoritarian contexts. While existing research provides valuable insights into the mechanisms of news avoidance in democratic media systems, it offers limited theoretical guidance for understanding these phenomena in different institutional and cultural contexts. The present study addresses these theoretical gaps by examining news avoidance within Egypt's unique media environment, contributing to a

more comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding global patterns of news engagement and disengagement.

4. Materials and Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to examine news avoidance behaviors in Egypt's unique media environment. The university institutional Board approved the research design, sampling methods, procedures, instruments, and consent forms. The sequential design allowed findings from each phase to inform subsequent data collection, providing comprehensive insights into how and why Egyptians disengage from news content.

The study's sampling strategy was designed to balance representativeness with feasibility given the unique challenges of conducting research in Egypt's media environment. The mixed-methods approach employed different sampling strategies for each phase: purposive sampling for focus groups to ensure demographic diversity (Etikan et al., 2016), random sampling from a large sampling frame of 2.5 million Egyptians accessed by a professional field marketing research company for the survey to achieve broad representation across key demographics, and expert sampling for interviews to capture diverse professional perspectives. This multi-layered sampling approach helped mitigate potential biases while ensuring adequate representation of audience segments and expert viewpoints.

The research proceeded through three distinct phases: focus groups to explore news consumption patterns, a quantitative survey to test hypothesized relationships, and expert interviews to contextualize findings. This design enabled methodological triangulation while capitalizing on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

4.1. Focus Groups

We conducted two focus groups using purposive non-random sampling to ensure participant diversity across age and gender. Focus group protocols were developed through a three-stage process. First, preliminary topics and questions were derived from the existing literature on news avoidance, particularly focusing on themes relevant to authoritarian media contexts. Second, the protocol underwent expert review by two senior media researchers with extensive experience in Egyptian media studies. Their feedback led to refinements in question wording and the addition of prompts specific to local media consumption patterns. Finally, a pilot focus group with six participants helped identify potential comprehension issues and optimal question sequencing (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

The final protocol included four main discussion sections: (1) general news consumption habits and preferences, (2) experiences with news overload and fatigue, (3) trust in different news sources, and (4) strategies for managing news exposure. Each section began with open-ended questions followed by specific probes. The moderator was trained to encourage participant interaction while maintaining focus on key themes. Sessions were conducted in colloquial Arabic to ensure a natural discussion flow, with professional translation for analysis purposes. Table 1 presents the demographic composition of the focus groups.

Table 1. Focus group demographics: distribution by age and gender.

Age Group	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
18–24 years	4	4	8	50.0
25–45 years	4	4	8	50.0
Total	8	8	16	100.0

N = 16. Focus groups were conducted online via Zoom in October and November 2024.

Focus groups were conducted online to enable participation across different geographical regions of Egypt, including participants from Cairo, Alexandria, Mansoura, and Aswan. The online format was chosen to overcome geographical limitations and logistic concerns that might have affected participation in physical settings while ensuring diverse regional representation. Sessions were conducted with incentivized participants online via Zoom, lasting approximately 2.5 h each. Discussions followed a semi-structured protocol exploring news consumption habits, experiences with news overload, trust in media organizations, and selective attention patterns. Sessions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using Krippendorff's (2018) content analysis procedures.

4.2. The Survey

The survey instrument integrated established scales from previous research, modified for the Egyptian context through rigorous pilot testing (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021). A pilot study with 30 participants led to translation and item wording refinements. Table 2 presents the final measurement scales and their sources.

Table 2. Measurement scales with reliability analysis.

Construct and Items	Factor Loading	Source	Cronbach α
News Avoidance		Betakova et al. (2024)	0.940
Q9. If I encounter news, I actively turn away	0.868		
Q10. I don't want to engage with news	0.942		
Q12. I'd like to reduce time spent on news	0.938		
Q13. I don't want to waste time with news	0.933		
News Overload		Song et al. (2016)	0.875
Q16. I receive more news than I can process	0.619		
Q17. I feel stressed with news volume	0.928		
Q18. I feel confused with news volume	0.934		
Q19. I feel reluctant to follow news	0.912		
Formal Media Trust		Arlt (2018)	0.971
Q21. News is credible	0.944		
Q22. News is well-researched	0.961		
Q23. News presents facts as they are	0.959		
Q24. News covers all important aspects	0.954		
Q25. News is neutral	0.886		
Q26. News presents different perspectives	0.908		
Selective Attention		Martin (2013)	0.926
Q27. Following specific topic news	0.907		
Q28. Attention to specific topic news	0.942		
Q29. Attention to other topics news	0.950		

N = 512. All items measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

The final survey was administered online using random stratified sampling through social media and professional networks. The sampling criteria were to have a stratified sample with at least 100 participants in each of the four news consumption frequencies given in Table 3, while maintaining the gender balance evenly split. The sample comprised 512 valid responses collected over a six-week period. Table 3 presents sample demographics. Both theoretical and statistical considerations guided sample size determination. A priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1 indicated that a minimum sample of 485 participants would be needed to detect medium effect sizes ($f^2 = 0.15$) with 95% power at $\alpha = 0.05$ for our structural equation model with three predictors. Our final sample of 512 participants

exceeded this threshold, providing adequate statistical power while accounting for potential invalid responses. Additionally, the sample size satisfied common guidelines for structural equation modeling, which recommend a minimum ratio of 10 observations per estimated parameter (our model included 42 free parameters, requiring at least 420 observations).

Table 3. Sample demographic characteristics.

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	263	51.4
Female	249	48.6
Age Group		
18–25 years	97	19.0
26–35 years	108	21.1
36–45 years	122	23.8
45–55 years	96	18.8
Over 55 years	89	17.4
Education Level		
Bachelor’s degree	397	77.5
High school	94	18.4
Master’s degree	19	3.7
PhD	2	0.4
News Consumption Frequency		
Three to five times weekly	147	28.7
Two to three times daily	144	28.1
Three or more times daily	100	19.5
Once or twice weekly	120	23.4
No news consumption	1	0.2

N = 512. Data was collected through an online survey between September and October 2024.

4.3. Expert Interviews

Four in-depth interviews were conducted with media professionals and academics selected through purposive sampling based on their expertise in Egyptian media. Participants included two senior journalists and two university professors specializing in journalism and mass communication. Senior journalists were those with at least 15 years of professional experience in Egyptian news organizations and current or former editorial decision-making positions. The selected journalists represented private and state-affiliated media organizations to capture diverse institutional perspectives. Academic experts were full professors from the journalism and mass communication departments at Cairo University and the American University in Cairo. They were selected for their extensive research on Egyptian media systems and institutional history. These institutions were chosen based on their prominence in media education and research in Egypt. Cairo University represents the established national education system and AUC offers an international perspective within the Egyptian context. Selection criteria included publication records on Egyptian media, a minimum of 10 years of academic experience, and the absence of current political appointments to ensure scholarly independence. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol focused on interpreting survey findings within Egypt’s media context.

4.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis employed a mixed-methods approach corresponding to our research design. Focus group transcripts were analyzed using Krippendorff’s content analysis procedures, involving systematic coding, categorization, and theme identification. This analysis followed a rigorous protocol of initial coding, collaborative code refinement, and

thematic synthesis to ensure analytical rigor. Survey data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2024). This analytical approach was chosen for its suitability for exploratory research and complex models with multiple constructs (Hair et al., 2022). The measurement model fit was assessed using standard indices (SRMR, NFI) alongside construct reliability (Cronbach's α) and discriminant validity (HTMT ratios). Expert interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key insights regarding the structural and contextual factors influencing news avoidance in Egypt's media environment.

This comprehensive methodological approach enabled a thorough examination of news avoidance behaviors while maintaining rigorous data collection and analysis standards. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods provided rich insights into individual-level motivations and broader structural factors influencing news avoidance in Egypt's media environment.

5. Results

The analysis proceeded in two stages: first, assessing the measurement model's reliability and validity, and then examining the structural model and hypothesized relationships. The measurement model demonstrated strong reliability and validity. All constructs showed high internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.875 to 0.971 (see Table 2).

Discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). Table 4 presents the HTMT matrix, showing all values below the conservative threshold of 0.80, confirming discriminant validity between constructs. The PLS path model demonstrated strong fit indices, as shown in Table 5.

Table 4. Heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) matrix.

Construct	1	2	3	4
1. Formal Media Trust	-			
2. News Avoidance	0.528	-		
3. News Overload	0.205	0.662	-	
4. Selective Attention	0.812	0.539	0.246	-

Table 5. Model fit statistics.standard.

Fit Index	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.053
d_UIS	0.427
d_G	0.326
Chi-square	1015.231
NFI	0.903

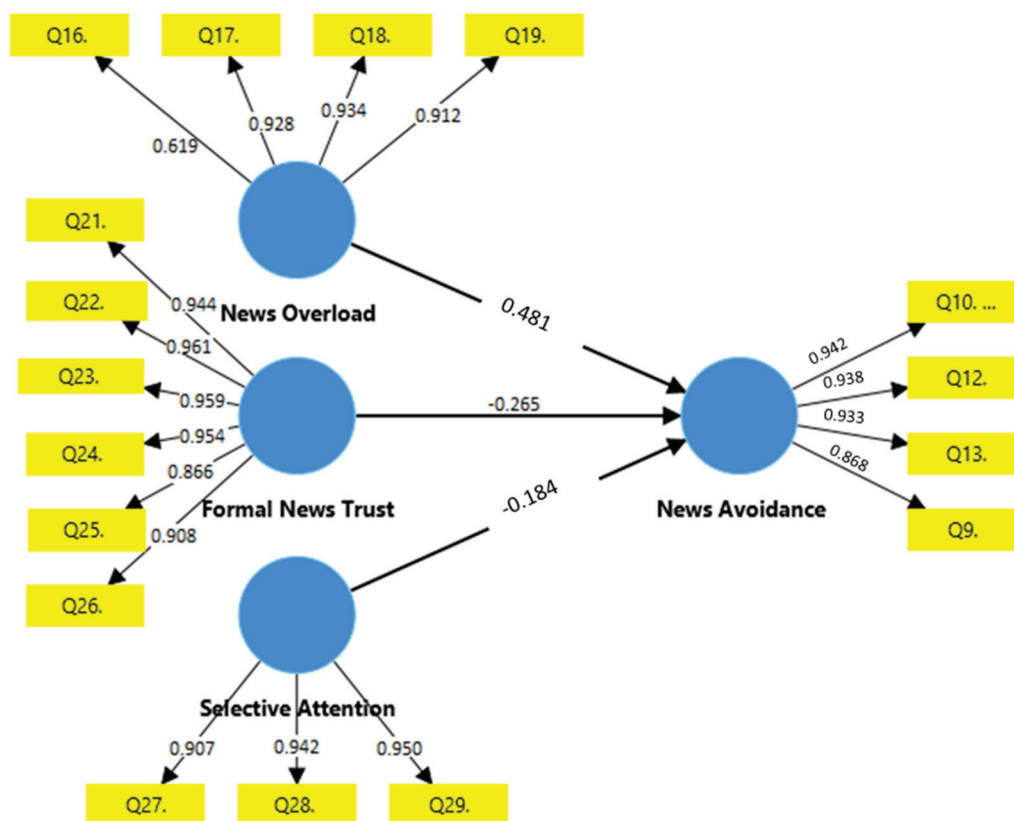
5.1. Structural Model Results

The structural model demonstrates strong explanatory power, accounting for 50.5% of the variance in news avoidance behaviors. This substantial R^2 value indicates the model's robust capability to explain news avoidance patterns in the Egyptian context. The results (Table 6) reveal several significant relationships that align with our theoretical framework (Figure 1).

Table 6. Structural model results: path coefficients and effect sizes.

Path	Coefficient (β)	t-Value	p-Value	f^2	Hypothesis Support
News Overload $\rightarrow$ News Avoidance	0.481	12.847	<0.01	0.439	H1 Supported
Formal Media Trust $\rightarrow$ News Avoidance	−0.265	8.236	<0.01	0.058	H2 Supported
Selective Attention $\rightarrow$ News Avoidance	−0.184	6.124	<0.01	0.028	H3 Supported

Note: $R^2 = 0.505$; $N = 512$.

**Figure 1.** The path model diagram from the document showing relationships and coefficients.

News overload emerged as the dominant predictor of avoidance behaviors ($\beta = 0.481$, $p < 0.01$), with a large effect size ($f^2 = 0.439$). This strong positive relationship aligns with Media Saturation Theory, suggesting that when individuals experience cognitive overload from excessive news exposure, they develop avoidance as a coping mechanism. The substantial effect size indicates that news overload plays a crucial role in driving avoidance behaviors within Egypt's media-saturated environment.

Trust in formal media demonstrated a significant negative relationship with news avoidance ($\beta = -0.265$, $p < 0.01$), with an effect size ($f^2 = 0.058$) that falls within Cohen's (2013) guidelines for a small-to-medium effect. This finding supports institutional trust theories, indicating that declining trust in formal media organizations corresponds with increased avoidance behaviors.

While this effect size might be considered modest in general research contexts, it represents a meaningful influence within Egypt's media environment, where institutional trust operates within complex constraints. The relatively smaller effect compared to news overload ($f^2 = 0.439$, considered large by conventional standards) suggests a hierarchy of influences in Egypt's media environment, with cognitive overwhelm functioning as the primary driver while trust issues play a significant but secondary role in shaping avoidance behaviors.

Selective attention showed a significant negative relationship with news avoidance ($\beta = -0.184$, $p < 0.01$), albeit with a smaller effect size ($f^2 = 0.028$). This relationship aligns with selective exposure theory, suggesting that individuals who actively select specific news topics are less likely to engage in wholesale avoidance behaviors. The smaller effect size indicates that selective attention plays a more modest role in mitigating avoidance behaviors compared to other factors.

These relationships demonstrate the complex interplay between cognitive, institutional, and behavioral factors in shaping news avoidance within Egypt's unique media environment. The findings particularly highlight how Media Saturation Theory's predictions about information overload manifest strongly in an authoritarian media context, while institutional trust and selective exposure mechanisms play supporting roles in explaining avoidance behaviors.

5.2. Qualitative Findings

Our qualitative analysis revealed distinct patterns in how different demographic groups approach news avoidance, while expert interviews provided crucial context for understanding these behaviors within Egypt's media landscape.

Focus group discussions highlighted significant differences between age groups in their news consumption and avoidance approach. This generational variation aligns with Shehata's (2016) findings on developing news habits among young people, which demonstrated the crucial role of family communication patterns in shaping news consumption behaviors. In our Egyptian context, family influence manifests distinctly within the authoritarian media environment, where parents often serve as news filters and interpreters for younger family members. This familial mediation becomes particularly important given the complex relationship between state-controlled traditional media and emerging digital platforms.

Younger participants (ages 18–24) clearly preferred social media-based news consumption, with particular attention to visual content and concise formats. They reported more selective consumption patterns, engaging primarily with topics directly relevant to their interests or trending on social media. In contrast, older participants (ages 25–45) expressed a more complex relationship with news avoidance, often describing a sense of obligation to stay informed despite experiencing information fatigue. This sentiment was particularly strong among male participants, who frequently cited economic and political implications as motivators for continued news consumption. One older male participant articulated this tension: *"I want to avoid consuming the news, but unfortunately, I do not have this luxury because I will be affected by its consequences at the end of the day"*.

Gender differences emerged as particularly noteworthy in our qualitative analysis. Female participants across age groups reported greater sensitivity to emotionally distressing news content, especially regarding conflict and humanitarian crises. As one young female participant explained, *"I usually avoid harsh videos including hard scenes of war victims. I play the videos covering negative events but only listen to the sound instead of actively watching the scenes"*. This suggests gender-specific avoidance strategies focused on managing emotional impact rather than wholesale content rejection. Male participants, conversely, more frequently cited practical utility and economic impact as primary factors in their news selection decisions, with several expressing a perceived obligation to remain informed despite experiencing information fatigue. These gendered patterns suggest that news avoidance manifests differently across demographic groups, with potentially different intervention points for re-engagement.

Our findings on selective attention highlight audience agency in news selection, but this agency operates within increasingly algorithmic information environments that war-

rant critical examination. Algorithmic content curation on social media platforms—where many Egyptian news consumers obtain their information—creates personalized information environments that may amplify or mitigate avoidance tendencies (Merten, 2021). For younger participants who primarily access news through social platforms, algorithmic filtering may reinforce selective exposure patterns while potentially reducing incidental exposure to diverse content. The interaction between user preferences and algorithmic systems creates complex dynamics where avoidance behaviors may be technologically amplified beyond individual intentions.

Our findings suggest that different demographic groups experience these algorithmic effects differently. Younger, digitally native participants are more adept at navigating algorithmic systems to curate preferred content. In contrast, older participants reported more frustration with algorithmic unpredictability. These differences highlight the need to examine news avoidance not merely as an individual choice but as the product of socio-technical systems that shape information availability and visibility.

5.3. Professional Perspectives on News Avoidance

Expert interviews provided valuable insights into the structural factors influencing news avoidance in Egypt. Media professionals emphasized how recent global events, particularly the war in Gaza, have intensified news fatigue among Egyptian audiences. A senior journalist observed that initial high engagement with crisis coverage eventually led to avoidance behaviors: *“Consumers started to feel overwhelmed and saturated with the amount of repeated news reports covering the same single topic”*.

This crisis fatigue manifested not as complete disengagement but as strategic exposure modulation. Participants described maintaining awareness through headline scanning while limiting in-depth engagement with distressing content—a selective consumption strategy rather than wholesale avoidance. This suggests that crisis news avoidance may function as an emotional regulation mechanism rather than apathy or disinterest. This pattern appeared particularly pronounced among female participants and those with family connections to affected regions, suggesting both demographic and psychosocial factors influence crisis news coping strategies.

Academic experts highlighted the role of Egypt’s media system in shaping avoidance behaviors. They pointed to how strict press regulations and state control of information create conditions that influence audience disengagement. A journalism professor noted *“The number one issue affecting consumers’ trust in news sources may be their recognition of organizational agenda-setting attempts. Consumers understand that every channel functions as a voice for a certain entity, country, or ideology”*.

Economic factors emerged as a significant theme in professional analysis. Media experts emphasized how Egypt’s current economic challenges influence news consumption patterns, with audiences increasingly focusing on news directly affecting their financial well-being. One media professional explained *“Most Egyptians follow news that addresses economic topics, for example, currency rates and petrol prices, because they have high levels of awareness that these updates will impact them and their families”*. This selective attention to economic news represents strategic engagement rather than avoidance.

However, our analysis also revealed that economic hardship contributes to avoidance behaviors through several mechanisms. First, the psychological burden of financial stress creates cognitive limitations that reduce the capacity for processing complex information, leading some participants to avoid news perceived as additionally taxing. Second, economic pressures create practical constraints on news consumption, with several participants noting reduced data plans and limited leisure time as barriers to engagement. Third, economic challenges create what Festinger (1957) described as cognitive dissonance when

aspirational messaging in news content conflicts with lived experience, motivating selective avoidance of content that heightens this dissonance. These findings suggest economic factors shape news avoidance through content preferences and through broader psychological and practical constraints—a relationship requiring further investigation, particularly in developing economies.

These qualitative findings complement our quantitative results by providing a rich context for understanding how news avoidance manifests within Egypt's unique media environment. The integration of focus group insights with expert perspectives reveals both individual-level motivations and broader structural factors that shape news avoidance behaviors in an authoritarian media system.

6. Discussion

This study contributes to understanding news avoidance by examining how this phenomenon manifests within an authoritarian media system. Our findings reveal complex relationships between news overload, trust in formal media, and selective attention in shaping news avoidance behaviors among Egyptian audiences. This section will discuss several theoretical and practical implications for journalism studies and media organizations and contextual factors specific to the Egyptian media system.

The strong relationship between news overload and avoidance behaviors ($\beta = 0.481$) provides compelling support for Media Saturation Theory in non-Western contexts. This finding suggests that cognitive overwhelm from excessive news exposure remains a powerful driver of avoidance behaviors across different media systems. However, our qualitative findings reveal distinct mechanisms of news overload in Egypt's transitional system that differ substantially from democratic contexts.

Specifically, Egyptian audiences report three distinctive characteristics of news overload: first, homogeneity of content across supposedly diverse outlets creates echo chamber fatigue, where the same narratives are encountered repeatedly; second, perceived constraints on critical perspectives create information gaps that generate uncertainty rather than clarity; and third, the predictability of approved narratives diminishes informational utility, as participants expressed knowing *"what will be said before it is said"*. These patterns differ from democratic contexts, where news overload typically stems from competing perspectives and information abundance rather than narrative homogeneity (Damstra et al., 2023). This suggests that Media Saturation Theory requires contextual refinement when applied to transitional systems, as the psychological mechanisms driving avoidance behaviors may operate through different pathways despite producing similar outcomes.

Our findings both reinforce and challenge existing theoretical frameworks for understanding news avoidance. The strong relationship between news overload and avoidance behaviors aligns with previous research in democratic contexts (Song et al., 2016), suggesting that some universal cognitive mechanisms operate across different media systems. However, our findings challenge simplistic applications of selective exposure theory that presume significant audience choice.

In Egypt's media environment, where content homogeneity limits meaningful selection, avoidance appears more contextually constrained than purely preference-driven. Additionally, our findings complicate institutional trust frameworks by revealing that distrust in Egypt operates not through wholesale rejection of news but through sophisticated verification strategies incorporating alternative sources. This suggests that existing theories require refinement when applied to transitional media systems.

Egypt differs in the persistence of strong traditional media institutions alongside digital alternatives, creating hybrid consumption patterns not observed in contexts with more rapid digital transitions. These insights suggest that news avoidance theory requires

greater attention to institutional configurations specific to each national context, moving beyond Western-derived frameworks to account for different patterns of state-media-audience relationships.

Our focus on news overload, trust, and selective attention was guided by both theoretical foundations and preliminary qualitative insights. However, we acknowledge other potential predictors that merit consideration in future research. Political interest likely plays a significant role, particularly in transitional systems where political engagement may carry perceived risks (de Bruin et al., 2024). Media literacy represents another critical factor that could moderate the relationship between information exposure and avoidance behaviors (Wang et al., 2024). Economic considerations also warrant examination, both in terms of direct barriers to access and psychological burden during economic hardship. While our model demonstrated strong explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.505$), these additional factors could provide a more comprehensive understanding of news avoidance in Egypt's complex media environment. Preliminary analysis of our qualitative data suggested these factors operate through rather than independent of our three primary variables, but direct measurement in future studies would enhance theoretical development.

Trust in formal media's negative relationship with news avoidance ($\beta = -0.265$) extends our theoretical understanding of institutional trust in transitional media systems. While previous research has documented declining trust in news media globally, our findings suggest that distrust in transitional contexts manifests through distinctive strategic behaviors rather than wholesale rejection.

Our qualitative data provides compelling evidence for these strategic approaches. Participants described specific tactics, including cross-checking information across multiple sources, developing trusted verification networks through messaging apps, and using international sources as reality checks for domestic coverage. One 34-year-old male participant explained *"I always watch the official news first to understand the government's position, but then immediately check alternative sources to fill in what is missing"*. Another participant described maintaining a mental translation guide for interpreting state-approved narratives: *"When they say 'economic adjustments, I know to check inflation rates"*. These sophisticated verification strategies demonstrate how Egyptian audiences maintain awareness of state-approved information while supplementing it through alternative channels. This nuanced relationship between trust and strategic consumption challenges simplified narratives about institutional trust in transitional systems and highlights audience agency even within constrained information environments.

Our findings suggest that news avoidance in Egypt's transitional media system may strengthen rather than diminish alternative information networks, though this relationship requires further empirical investigation. Focus group participants who reported high levels of news avoidance from mainstream sources simultaneously described active engagement with alternative information channels, including independent digital platforms, exile media, and encrypted messaging groups. This pattern was particularly evident among younger participants and those with higher digital literacy, suggesting demographic factors mediate this relationship.

For example, several participants described using VPN services to access blocked websites while maintaining active WhatsApp groups dedicated to sharing news from non-mainstream sources. One participant explained *"When I stopped watching TV news, I became more active in seeking information from people I trust"*. While our current data provides preliminary support for this relationship between mainstream avoidance and alternative engagement, we acknowledge the need for a more systematic investigation of how avoidance behaviors reshape rather than simply reduce information flows. Future

research should directly measure both mainstream avoidance and alternative channel engagement to establish more definitive empirical relationships between these behaviors.

The societal implications of news avoidance in authoritarian contexts extend beyond individual behavior to affect broader social and political dynamics. As audiences develop sophisticated strategies for navigating state-controlled media environments, their avoidance behaviors may paradoxically strengthen alternative information networks while weakening traditional media's influence (Mano & El Mkaouar, 2022). This creates a unique dynamic where news avoidance, rather than simple disengagement, represents a complex audience adaptation to authoritarian media control. Such adaptation has significant implications for social cohesion, political awareness, and civic engagement, potentially creating parallel information ecosystems that challenge state narrative control while risking further social polarization (Scott & Ujvari, 2024).

The modest but significant relationship between selective attention and news avoidance ($\beta = -0.184$) provides new insights into how audiences navigate controlled media environments. Our qualitative findings suggest that Egyptian audiences have developed sophisticated strategies for selective consumption, particularly focusing on economic news that directly impacts their lives. Selective engagement is a coping mechanism for managing both information overload and state control of media narratives.

These findings have significant implications for journalism practice in authoritarian contexts. Media organizations operating under state control face particular challenges in maintaining audience engagement amid declining trust and increasing news fatigue. Our results suggest that addressing news overload through more focused, relevant coverage might be more effective than attempting to rebuild institutional trust directly. Egyptian audiences' strong preference for economic news indicates potential strategies for maintaining engagement while working within system constraints. For journalists and editors working in these environments, this suggests prioritizing content directly relevant to audiences' daily lives, particularly economic information, while carefully balancing the quantity of information to prevent cognitive overwhelm.

Beyond content considerations, delivery mechanisms require strategic attention. Media organizations should invest in developing more personalized news delivery systems that help audiences navigate information flows more effectively. Monitoring and following the general and specific interests of the public represents an essential first step, but implementation requires sophisticated audience analysis capabilities and content categorization systems. News organizations might benefit from creating distinct content streams—one addressing immediate economic concerns that capture initial attention and another providing broader contextual information for those seeking deeper engagement. Such approaches acknowledge audience agency within constrained media environments while potentially preserving journalism's informational function even under authoritarian constraints. The study also advances methodological approaches to studying news avoidance. Our mixed-methods design revealed how quantitative broader structural factors in authoritarian media systems shape relationships between key variables. The integration of focus groups and expert interviews provided crucial context for interpreting statistical relationships, demonstrating the value of methodological triangulation in studying complex media phenomena.

Several limitations should be noted alongside their specific impacts on our findings. Social media recruitment likely overrepresents urban, educated, and digitally connected Egyptians. Consequently, our findings may underestimate structural barriers to news access facing rural and lower-income populations while potentially overrepresenting strategic avoidance behaviors that require digital literacy. The 77.5% of participants with bachelor's

degrees are triple Egypt's national education profile, suggesting our results may not capture avoidance patterns among less formally educated citizens.

Our cross-sectional design offers valuable insights into current relationships between key variables but cannot establish causal directions or temporal development. News avoidance behaviors likely evolve in response to changing political and media conditions, particularly during social reform or policy shifts. Additionally, self-reported behavior measures may underestimate actual avoidance due to social desirability bias, particularly in contexts where civic engagement carries normative expectations.

Despite these limitations, our mixed-methods approach provides methodological triangulation that strengthens confidence in key findings, particularly regarding the mechanisms of news overload and strategic avoidance patterns. Future research should address these limitations through broader sampling strategies, longitudinal designs, and potentially observational methods to complement self-reported behaviors. These limitations suggest promising directions for future research. Comparative studies examining news avoidance across different authoritarian media systems could further illuminate how system characteristics shape audience behaviors. Additionally, investigating how digital platforms interact with traditional state control of media could enhance our understanding of contemporary news avoidance patterns.

7. Conclusions

This study provides significant insights into how news avoidance manifests within authoritarian media systems, offering both theoretical contributions and practical implications for journalism in non-Western contexts. Our findings demonstrate that while news overload remains a primary driver of avoidance behaviors, the mechanisms through which audiences disengage from news content are deeply influenced by the structural characteristics of authoritarian media systems.

The research agenda emerging from this study suggests five promising directions for advancing our understanding of news avoidance in contemporary media environments. First, future research should examine the dynamic interaction between digital platforms and state control of media. As social media platforms increasingly serve as primary news sources, understanding how algorithmic content delivery intersects with state narrative control becomes crucial. This line of inquiry could explore how audience agency in digital spaces challenges or reinforces traditional patterns of news avoidance in authoritarian systems.

Second, longitudinal studies tracking changes in news avoidance behaviors across significant political or economic events could illuminate how audience engagement patterns evolve in response to shifting media conditions. Such research could help identify critical moments when audiences are most susceptible to news fatigue or most open to re-engagement with news content. This temporal understanding could inform both theoretical models and practical strategies for maintaining audience engagement during periods of intense news coverage.

Third, comparative studies across different authoritarian media systems could enhance our theoretical understanding of how system characteristics shape avoidance behaviors at both individual and societal levels. By examining variations in state control, media ownership structures, and regulatory frameworks, researchers could develop more nuanced models of how news avoidance influences social cohesion and political awareness across different system types. Such comparative work could also identify successful strategies for maintaining audience engagement while accounting for the unique challenges posed by authoritarian control of information flow (Dimitrov, 2023). This research direction is

particularly crucial for understanding how news avoidance behaviors might contribute to or hinder democratic transitions in authoritarian contexts.

Fourth, research exploring the intersection of news avoidance and emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence and automated content delivery, could provide valuable insights into future challenges and opportunities. As these technologies reshape news production and distribution, understanding their impact on audience engagement becomes increasingly important, especially in systems where technology deployment is subject to state control.

Finally, investigations into the relationship between news avoidance and civic engagement in authoritarian contexts could enhance our understanding of the media's role in social and political participation. This line of inquiry could examine how selective news avoidance might serve as a form of political expression or resistance rather than simple disengagement.

These research directions collectively point toward a more comprehensive understanding of news avoidance as a complex phenomenon shaped by technological, institutional, and social forces. By pursuing these lines of inquiry, scholars can continue to build theoretical frameworks that better account for the diversity of global media environments while providing practical insights for journalism practitioners working within various system constraints.

The future of news avoidance research lies in recognizing and examining these complexities. We must move beyond simple models of audience disengagement to understand how different media systems create unique conditions for news consumption and avoidance. This expanded understanding will be crucial for developing theoretical frameworks and practical strategies to address journalism's challenges in an increasingly complex global media landscape.

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Article

Political Listening and Podcasting: The Case of Tunisia

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Abstract: This paper examines the dynamics of political listening, news processing, and podcasting in North African countries through the case study of Tunisia. The analysis centers on Tunisian President Kais Saied's speech on 25 July 2021, in which he dissolved the Parliament and assumed full control, following widespread public protests against the country's deteriorating conditions. By leveraging the concept of political listening, this study investigates the methods podcasters employ to foster political engagement in Tunisia. The content analysis encompasses five podcasts produced between 25 July and 31 December 2021. The findings reveal that podcasters address the constitutional legitimacy of Saied's actions and criticize the Ennahda party for its power monopoly attempts. The use of interview-based narratives, coupled with emotional elements such as humor and sarcasm, enhances the linguistic impact, conveys optimism, and garners support for the president. This approach signifies the emergence of an alternative public sphere, purposefully crafted to attract political listening, enrich public knowledge, foster cohesion, and encourage civic participation.

Keywords: podcasting; North Africa; political listening; Tunisia; public concern

1. Introduction

Since gaining independence in the mid-1950s, Tunisia has been governed by illiberal regimes that maintained strict control over the media, stifling free expression. However, the landscape began to shift dramatically following the Arab Spring in 2011, a movement in which social media played a crucial role. As Tunisians like others across the region turned to social media in unprecedented numbers, these platforms became powerful tools for communication, activism, and the dissemination of information. This surge in digital engagement transformed social media into a significant force, extending the influence of traditional media like radio into the digital realm (Starkey 2017). Amid this digital revolution, podcasts emerged as a new medium, providing a platform for free expression and diverse content in the Arabic-speaking world. Since the Arab Spring, podcasts have carved out a niche in the digital communications landscape, gradually winning over a growing segment of the Arab audience (Khattab 2017).

The focus of this research will be on political podcast news in Tunisia. The content of a sample of political debates will be analyzed to identify the components of the Arabic podcast as an organized portal for free expression that skirts the censorship of organized media institutions targeting a broad audience. To do so, the authors chose Tunisian political issues as a case study, and precisely the address by President Saied on 25 July 2021, which he delivered on Republic Day and in which a number of resolutions were announced. In his address, Saied activated Article 80 of the Tunisian Constitution, suspending the parliament, adding legislative legitimacy to his executive powers, and emerging as the country's most powerful ruler.

To put the case of the study in context, Tunisians, whose protests led to drastic political changes during the Arab Spring, once again resorted to social media to vent their anger

at the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the worsening economic conditions. Social media posts openly called for nationwide demonstrations on 25 July 2021 to ask for radical change. On 17 July 2021, the High Council for Youth published a statement calling for demonstrations with the slogan "Go out, take your motherland back!" (Dalacoura 2021). Between September and October 2021, many Tunisians took to the streets to demonstrate their loyalty to the president, while others protested against his policies (Ridge 2022). The resolutions decreed by the president caused a wide schism within the Tunisian population. On the one hand, some applauded the president, seeing in him the man attempting to save the country from a triple crisis—economic, political, and health. On the other hand, others accused him of violating the constitution and becoming a threat to democracy (Tamburini 2022).

This research aims to examine the content of a selected sample of podcasts that address political issues in the North African region, with a particular focus on Tunisia. The objectives are to analyze the different elements within this content, and to investigate the emotional strategies that podcasters use to effectively engage and capture their listeners. The analysis includes the titles and abstracts posted on the podcast pages of the studied sample, along with the content of each podcast episode.

The primary question of this research dwells on dominant themes of Saied's speech and resolutions with focus centered on the major topics touched upon, the angles addressed, and the attitudes made explicit. The audience's portrayal of Saied's resolutions is investigated by analyzing their narrative and linguistic features. The authors chose to employ a qualitative analysis to uncover the narrative elements of Saied's resolutions as interpreted within the podcasts under study. Ultimately, the research seeks to unravel the effective practices in the studied podcasts tackling Saied's resolutions. The study attempts to provide answers to the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the main ideas and attitudes associated with Saied's resolutions that were addressed in the studied podcasts?
- RQ2: How do studied podcasts portray Saied's resolutions?
- RQ3: What affective practices do studied podcasts employ when addressing Saied's resolutions?

2. Literature Review

2.1. What Differs Podcasts from Radio

Previous research has highlighted the popularity of podcasts and analyzed their resemblance to radio as an audio medium (Perry and Carter-Long 2016; Tobin and Guadagno 2022; Chan-Olmsted and Wang 2022). The research also pointed out the extreme levels of intimacy, sociality, and flexibility listening to podcasts can offer. Podcasting has become a modern radio with a wide range of news, information, interviews, and stories, both factual and fictional, which audiences can choose from and listen to on demand (Tobin and Guadagno 2022). According to La-Chica Duarte (2022), podcasts have become the trendy medium in the entertainment world. However, podcasts remain podcasts; they cannot be viewed as radio, a YouTube channel, or a distribution medium, although they share some common features with them all. McHugh (2022) explains that the power of voice lies in the knowledge, entertainment, and empathy that the show host builds. These key elements lead directly to thinking about logos, pathos, and the spirit of classical rhetoric, and so the union of knowledge and entertainment would give rise to what we know as stories. Drawing on Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation, Casser (2020) investigates Althusser's concept of socialization, which suggests that sociology as an academic discipline could further its knowledge of the society if it critically studied its social structures by applying "a specular sociology". Casser applies the concept to shed light on the contingent consequences of interpellation on establishments in logical, empirical, and historical terms. The theory of interpellation, though not dealing with podcasting, is relevant to social networking and partnerships, which are essential for listening.

It has to be added that mentioned elements are also present in radio, but McHugh rightly points out that this is because sound has always been the most intimate of media, because in the voice we can feel and not just know. Thanks to tone, timbre, and accent, the listener can acquire information that is not present in the same way in written text. In fact, the emotional specificity of sound in podcasts has been increased especially with "hyper-listening", since the podcast auditor usually listens privately, and often, through headphones, with the sound going directly to the ears, without physical distance, as is the case with the radio. The listening conditions between traditional radio and podcast as mediums are not the same.

2.2. Podcasts for Politics

The podcast, as a type of media content available on the Internet, can be used to discuss current events and politics in the modern era (Lee 2021). Research assessing the political use of digital media including podcasts has consistently confirmed their positive effects on political participation and activism (Bachmann and Ingenhoff 2017; Ekström et al. 2014; Llinares et al. 2018). Political podcasts are claimed to be a new source of information for political issues as contributors to enhancing political involvement, especially among young generations (Lee and Hwang 2013).

Chadha et al. (2012) consider that podcasts are a strong predictor of online and offline political participation. In the meantime, Lee and Hwang (2013) discuss that individuals may either escape or pursue political facts depending on the content published or the context in which the reception occurs. Analyzing successful journalism podcasts, Lindgren (2023) reveals that podcasters use a personal and subjective narrative style to foster a sense of intimacy and emotional engagement among listeners. Thissen et al. (2021) argue that the informality and intimate style of many podcasters, while addressing political issues, may lead to the formation of para-social relationships with podcast listeners. To the extent that podcasts contain narrative elements, satisfy needs, stimulate curiosity and positive affect, or provide a sense of coherence, listening is expected to be associated with a greater sense of meaning in life (Tobin and Guadagno 2022). Highlighting the political use podcast are put to, Howard (2018) mentions various reasons, including providing information, entertaining, often with sarcasm or comedy, and advocating for a cause.

2.2.1. Podcasting and Political Listening

Political listening is a central concept for deliberations in a democracy. It is explored as part of "*a social and political process*" (Bassel and Bassel 2017, p. 1). Scholars have associated political listening with holding power to account and endowed it as well with the capacity to disrupt the privileges of power and the dichotomies between us and them (Dreher and De Souza 2018). Dreher (2009) argues that listening in general cannot be dismissed as merely a simple gesture of social interaction. Listening, the author adds, has the potential of transforming relationships in different spheres. Dreher maintains that specific forms of conversation meant to bring interlocutors into accord, harmony, or sympathetic relationships. For example, the specific forms of silence and pausing can be interpreted as signals of acquiescing to others or indicating intense interest. Still, Rae (2023, p. 182) in an article on the relationship between podcasting and political listening, says that scholars have yet to explore the potential of political listening and "the opportunities and challenges that podcasts provide in literally hearing voices". Similarly, Amalia (2023) and Ding (2024) examine selective perception, showing how individuals filter political information based on pre-existing beliefs and biases, influencing their interpretation and acceptance of political messages. Both perspectives emphasize the complex dynamics of how political content is received and processed by audiences. Active listening, discussed by Oslawski-Lopez and Kordsmeier (2021) as well as Andriani and Tama (2024), highlights the attentive and engaged reception of political discourse, fostering deeper understanding and informed civic participation. Concurrently, the phenomena of echo chambers and filter bubbles, explored by Sindermann et al. (2020), and Scott (2023), elucidate how digital environments and

algorithmic filtering can polarize political viewpoints by selectively exposing individuals to information that reinforces their ideological inclinations, potentially hindering exposure to diverse perspectives. These studies collectively contribute to a nuanced understanding of how political communication is received, processed, and influenced in contemporary contexts marked by digital media and personalized information environments.

2.2.2. Researching the Case of Tunisia

There is a plethora of literature dealing with the case of this study. The research tackles the issue from different perspectives. However, to the authors' knowledge, the literature is sparse when it comes to the role of political podcasting and listening in the case of Tunisia. For instance, Tamburini (2022) threw ample light on the President of Tunisia Kais Saied's decrees, and how he resorted to the constitution to confer legitimacy on his decree to freeze parliamentary sessions, remove the deputies' immunity, disband the government, and dismantle the constitution. The author investigates whether the president's decrees were constitutional or rather a self-coup. Ennahda has likewise been the topic of research. In a case study of how Tunisia's Islamist Party, the Ennahda Movement, responded to post-2011 Arab uprisings, McCarthy (2018) argues the movement was bent on reversing commitment to constitutional and electoral legitimacy for fear of being marginalized. The author demonstrates Ennahda itself was embroiled in internal struggle over ideology, and how to balance political ambitions with religious tenets. Albrecht et al. (2023) emphasize how new democracies are threatened when people voice support for authoritarian governments, the thing which can lead to the emergence of a weak party system and in turn an authoritarian alternative. Using Tunisia as a case study, the author explores the alienation of the public from established rule and political actors. Research has also attempted to unravel the decision by the Tunisian president to suspend the constitution, disband the parliament and dismantle the government. Sebei and Fulco (2022), for instance, draw on a political party perspective to fathom the reasons Tunisian political parties failed to coordinate stands to prevent presidential decrees from being implemented. Ridge (2022, p. 1539), who describes the Tunisian president's decrees as "an anti-democratic turn" and a "self-coup", uses a survey conducted weeks following the issuing of the decrees and finds little support for democracy. The author points to "democratic backsliding" which may encourage other non-democratic and authoritarian regimes to take similar measures. In a recent study, Ridge (2023, p. 69) draws on a 2021 survey study and cluster analysis and finds that support for liberal values to be different and separate from support for electoral democracy. "There are liberal democrat and liberal non-democrat populations. Overall, the democratic culture outstrips the support for democratic elections", Ridge writes.

Although there is no single well-known or widely recognized theory specifically called "political listening theory", the concept of political listening is a topic of interest in communication and political communication studies. It centers on how individuals engage with and interpret political messages, speeches, and rhetoric. Scholars and researchers have explored various aspects of political listening, including selective perception, active listening, and the phenomenon of echo chambers and filter bubbles. For example, Rae (2023) finds that audiences cherish the aural nature of political podcast. Aural speech helps audiences to "listen with a critical ear", Rae maintains. With the shift to informal speech, the author notes, audiences find aural podcasts friendly and endowed with the capacity to challenge the power of traditional production processes. The author concludes that paying attention to sound only can expand understanding of politics and the media.

This paper explores how the analyzed podcasts employ effective strategies to engage and influence listeners, thereby shaping public opinion regarding Saied's suspension of the parliament and his decision to rule the country by decree.

To sum up, there have been attempts to theorize the use of digitization in media. However, the literature on podcasts and political activism in Tunisia is somewhat scarce. This paper attempts to bridge this gap by focusing on the role of audio podcasting in

exposing and criticizing political issues within this country, and the emotional features used to attract listeners.

3. Method

The method adopted to analyze the data is both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative method is not sophisticated as it is limited to the level of frequency counts. The authors resort to the qualitative method in their interpretation of the podcasts, their texts, vocabularies, certain linguistic features, and context. The authors chose to proceed with a thematic analysis in which the coding to texts into thematic categories are merged with frequency counts. An inductive coding approach, allowing a set of codes to arise organically from the data, was adopted (see Table 1).

Table 1. Initial codes identified through inductive coding.

Research Question	Codes	Description
RQ1: Main ideas	Support for Saied's resolutions	Instances of approval towards Saied's actions.
	Criticism of Saied's resolutions	Instances of criticism or challenge to Saied's decisions.
	Legal justification	References to constitutional or legal reasoning.
	Impact on democracy and future of Tunisia	Discussions on effects on democratic institutions.
RQ2: Portrayal of Saied's resolutions	Narrative techniques	Storytelling (anecdotes, personal stories), expert opinions (interviews with analysts, academics), statistical or factual evidence, use of metaphors or analogies.
	Contextual framing	Providing historical, socio-political, and economic context.
RQ3: Affective practices	Fear-inducing language	Language evoking fear or anxiety about Saied's actions.
	Anger and frustration	Expressions of anger or frustration regarding the outcomes or implications of Saied's actions.
	Hopeful tone	Optimistic tone that subtly ridicules unrealistic expectations of Saied's resolutions.

The mixed method allows us to draw insights, make inferences, and understand the underlying messages, ideas, or representations within the analyzed content (Stemler 2000; Drisko and Maschi 2016; Wiedemann and Fedtke 2022).

The study's content encompasses a selection of five podcasts exposing President Saied's speech on 25 July 2021, with the aim of identifying the main ideas and positions expressed, narrative techniques, and affective practices employed to enhance rhetorical effects. The designated period for this analysis spans from the day of the speech until the 31 December 2021, totaling six months. Notably, the authors extended this timeframe due to the limited availability of podcasts addressing President Saied's speech.

Sample Selection

When selecting the sample, the following criteria were considered:

- Podcast ownership: Making sure that the podcast enjoyed a high degree of independence in terms of programming, and/or affiliation with any radio station or television channel.
- Podcast language: Only podcasts delivered in the Arabic language are included in the sample
- Podcast Content: Only podcasts that addressed Saied's resolutions were included in the studied sample.

The sample includes five podcasts with a total time of 247 min and 8 s, selected from the most popular podcasts that use the Arabic language and dedicate space to political topics and provided coverage for the Tunisian president's 25 July 2021 address (see Tables A1–A4 in Appendix A for more details). The choice was based on the number of subscriptions outlined on podcast websites as well as views on YouTube. The podcasts selected for analysis are published in an audio format via Google Podcasts, Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, Soundcloud, Castbox, Pocket Casts, Copy RSS, Deezer, and Amazon music. The sample includes:

- Tax Justice Network Arabic (4.2K subscribers, 248,106 views in YouTube): A network on tax abuse and the economic damage it causes to societies.
- Kiff Dealer (4.83K subscribers, and 129,922 views in YouTube): A Tunisian podcast with topics considered mostly a taboo.
- Inkyfada (740 subscribers, 51,102 views): A Tunisian podcast offering exclusive audio content.
- Ezio Lesto (815 subscribers, 38,977 views in YouTube): A Tunisian satirical humorous podcast on social and political affairs.
- Al Awsat (14.5K subscribers, 1,642,607 views in YouTube): A podcast emphasizing USA foreign policy and current political and social topics in the MENA region.

4. Findings

4.1. Main Ideas and Attitudes (RQ1)

The authors listened carefully to the podcasts to identify the clips, or the major points selected for coverage from the Tunisian president's resolutions. The data show only seven podcast episodes raised the issue of President Saied's address. There are only three podcasts from Kiff Dealer on the subject (two of them on the same day, the third three months later); other networks (Inkyfada, Ezio Lesto, Al Awsat, Tax Justice Network Arabic) broadcast one podcast each about the speech (it is important to clarify that the analysis includes seven episodes produced by a sample of five podcasts).

It is necessary to emphasize that political podcasting in Tunisia is still an emerging form of media and has not yet become a widely adopted practice in mainstream news media. Meanwhile, Al Awsat, a weekly from the Washington-based Middle East Institute, seems to show limited interest in Tunisia's political affairs as it only had one podcast. As for the date and duration of time allocated to the topic in each episode, the results are varied, ranging from 16:45 min to 59:30 min. The findings are listed in Table 2.

The data in Table 2 indicate that Tax Justice Network Arabic was the first podcast to address the topic (after 9 days), followed by Inkyfada (after 14 days), and the third was Ezio Lesto (after 16 days). No podcast referred to the Tunisian president's speech during the first week after it was delivered, probably due to the fact that podcasts may take time and effort to produce (Van Kooten and de Bie 2018). Regarding duration, Ezio Lesto had the shortest podcast at 16 min and 45 s, while Inkyfada had the longest at 59 min and 30 s. Kiff Dealer included two long episodes, 48:50 and 54:55 min, respectively. The remaining episodes of the Tax Justice Network Arabic, Al Awsat, and Kiff Dealer podcasts ranged from 20 to 27 min.

Table 2. Timing and duration allotted to the topic.

	Podcasts	Diffusion Date	Nber of Episodes	%	Duration (min)	%
1	Tax Justice Network Arabic	3 August 2021	1	14.28	26:38	10.64
2	Inkyfada	8 August 2021	1	14.28	59:30	23.93
3	Ezio Lesto	12 August 2021	1	14.28	16:45	6.63
4	Al Awsat	20 August 2021	1	14.28	20:32	8.20
		31 August 2021			48:50	19.57
5	Kiff Dealer	31 August 2021	3	42.88	22:30	8.99
		28 October 2021			54:55	22.03
Total			7	100	247:80	100

4.1.1. Support vs. Critique of Saied's Resolutions

In addressing RQ1, related to main ideas and attitudes, the authors conducted a thorough analysis encompassing the titles, and abstracts posted in the podcasts along with the content of each episode. Data revealed several key ideas and attitudes towards Saied's resolutions. These include support for Saied's resolutions, where podcasts expressed approval of his actions, often highlighting the need for decisive leadership in a time of crisis. The endorsement of the decisions appeared to be motivated by a fear that the Ennahda Islamic Party, deemed accountable for the events that occurred, would dominate the government. Podcasts' guests' remarks expose their criticism of the Ennahda Party, attributing responsibility to it for the deteriorating situation in Tunisia. For instance, a guest on the Kiff Dealer Podcast stated, "Ennahda movement wants to rule alone", while another added, "Ennahda Party wants to seize power".

Conversely, criticism of Saied's resolutions emerged as a significant code, reflecting concerns over potential overreach and the undermining of democratic principles. The decision to freeze the House of Representatives and transfer legislative powers to himself sparked wide coverage and a heated debate all over the world (Hali 2020; Ridge 2022). In Tunisia, many people primarily considered it a way out of the severe political crisis embodied in political corruption, financial bankruptcy, and inability to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the title 'Tunisia: Bartering health for economy' that the Tax Justice Network Arabic podcast posted 3 August 2021 to announce the episode addressing the topic, contains a keyword with a nuanced meaning (bartering). The authors perceive a potential negative connotation in the tradeoff between 'health' and 'economy', suggesting a cumbersome and time-consuming process that may imply inefficiency. Bartering is not always conducive to economic progress and development, and it is often associated with challenging economic conditions (Taskinsoy 2020). Additionally, the title Inkyfada has podcasted on 8 August 2021 '25 July: One-way communication', introduces confusing vocabulary related to one-way communication, a communication style that neglects the receiver as a crucial component of an effective communication process (Aronson 2004), thereby overlooking the concept of feedback.

Denunciation of Saied's resolutions have been detected using certain vocabularies in the abstracts of three podcasts that might be attributed to their stance towards Tunisia and its president. The critique is displayed in Tax Justice Network Arabic as follows:

"In this month's episode, we conducted a dialogue with the researcher in public policies, Sirin Ghannouchi, to talk about her paper on how Tunisian governments dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic and how it contributed the worsening situation of the vulnerable groups. The paper discusses how the conditions negatively affected the internal authorities in a country already suffering from weak infrastructure and high cost of treatment amid a decline in government spending in the health sector".

A negative tone is evident in the paragraph discussing the COVID-19 pandemic and its significant role in exacerbating the challenges faced by vulnerable groups and the country's internal authorities.

The Inkyfada podcast also conveys a negative tone in the following extract:

*"This first episode of Inkytalk, looks back on 25 July 2021, a date that has already made history with the decision of President Saied to apply Article 80 of the Constitution, and to (**temporarily**) assume full powers. Eight days following this event, Inkytalk's guests examine the **one-way** communication of the presidency, the **tumultuous** relationship between the government and the media, and the access to information and its **Kafkaesque universe**".*

The abstract conveys skepticism, particularly by using terms like "temporarily?" with brackets and a question mark, questioning the timeliness of the resolutions. It also describes the events as historical and unprecedented:

"The date that has already made history with the decision of the President of the Tunisian Republic, Kaïs Saïed, to apply Article 80 of the Constitution".

A negative perception of the communication process between the Tunisian president and his people is reflected in the podcast title: *"the one-way communication of the presidency"*. In addition, the relationship between the government and the media is described as *"tumultuous"*.

In Kiff Dealer (3), the producer announced that the episode would focus on discussing police brutality in Tunisia following the events of 25 July:

"In this episode (#6), we invited Louay Cherni and Henda Chennaoui (Activists) to discuss politics, youth, liberties, and police brutality in Tunisia After 25 of July, trying to answer a main question: Is Better Tunisia Possible After 25 July 2021?"

In short, the theme of support versus criticism emerges prominently in relation to Saïed's decisions on 25 July 2021. Supporters strongly criticized Ennahda, blaming it for the country's deteriorating conditions and emphasizing the necessity of Saïed's actions, despite questions about their legality. On the other hand, opponents expressed concerns about potential presidential overreach and the expansion of powers beyond the initially stated timeline, fearing that this could lead the country toward dictatorship.

4.1.2. Legal Justifications of Saïed's Resolutions

Regarding the legal rationale for Saïed's resolutions, Kiff Dealer guests considered them essential, irrespective of their legitimacy. According to an interviewee, regardless of constitutional legitimacy, a coup plot was being prepared by the Ennahda Movement Party. Guests added that Saïed saved the country by activating Article 80 of the Tunisian Constitution (Kiff Dealer 1, and Kiff Dealer 2). To address the delicate political situation of the country, guests recommended the imperative of unity and rallying around the president (Ezio Listo; Kiff Dealer 2). They emphasized the need for Tunisians to support the president's resolutions to safeguard the country from internal strife and division.

4.1.3. Democracy and Future of Tunisia

The *Impact on Democracy and Future of Tunisia* code reflects broader concerns about the long-term effects on Tunisia's political landscape. On 12 August 2021, the Inkyfada podcast posted a provocative question, '25 July coup????', as a title of its podcast on the subject, reflecting uncertainty about the future impact of Saïed's resolutions. Similarly, Kiff Dealer posed a title on 28 October 2021, asking, 'Do you think the claim of 'better Tunisia' is possible?'. This indicates ongoing skepticism regarding the effectiveness of Saïed's measures. It is noteworthy that Kiff Dealer had previously employed sarcasm and irony in their episodes posted on 31 August 2021, presenting a markedly different tone compared to the more direct questions posed later (Tunisia 14 January–25 July 2021: Papa dear, where are we going?).

Some of the guests on Inkyfada deemed them ineffective, observing that the nation was in a state of division and confronting a difficult situation (Ezio Lesto; Kiff Dealer 2). However, uneasiness could be felt when reference was made to the potential for the president adopting a course of tyranny and extending his consolidation of power far beyond the initially declared timeframe (Kiff Dealer 1 and 3). The consequences of Saied's resolutions for the future were mainly viewed as mitigating. However, the guests seemed to maintain hope, noting the fear many Tunisians harbor if Ennahda grabbed power once again, or if it managed to assassinate the president (Kiff Dealer 2). There were concerns that Tunisians might lose the democratic rights they have gained in the event of Ennahda assuming power (Inkyfada). Additionally, there was discussion about the determination of Tunisians to change the course of events if such a scenario unfolds (Kiff Dealer 1).

4.2. Portrayal of Saied's Resolutions (RQ2)

The podcasts analyzed in this study employed various narrative strategies to portray Saied's resolutions, with a strong emphasis on storytelling. Most podcasts relied on the insights of experts and political activists, who were interviewed to discuss the political climate, the Tunisian president's measures, and the implications of his resolutions. Sarcasm was a notable feature, particularly in the commentary of guests and the satirical one-man show podcast, Ezio Lesto. In addition to narrative techniques, the conceptual framing strategy was also evident, especially in the "Tax Justice Network Arabic" podcast, which provided a comprehensive socio-political and economic context for understanding the broader impact of Saied's actions.

4.2.1. Narrative and Linguistic Features

Podcasts often utilize various narrative techniques to capture listeners' attentions and effectively convey their messages, as noted by Berry (2016). These techniques include talks, monologues, and documentaries. However, the Tunisian podcasts examined in this study lack depth and richness of analysis when addressing Saied's resolutions. Only one podcast falls under this category: Ezio Lesto's.

Storytelling techniques in Ezio Lesto's podcast are key to engaging listeners and making complex issues more relatable. As the sole podcast featuring sketches and irony through a one-man show format, Ezio Lesto is described by its producer as *where we talk about little things in Tunisia*. The podcaster employs anecdotes and real stories about the Ennahda Party, which he considers the primary cause of the declining circumstances, using sarcasm to convey its perspective on Saied's resolutions and the broader context in Tunisia.

4.2.2. Expert Opinions (Interviews with Analysts and Academics)

Incorporating expert opinions adds credibility and depth to the analysis. Podcasts may include interviews with analysts, academics, or policy experts who provide insights and evaluations of the resolutions. These expert perspectives can help contextualize the resolutions within broader political, economic, or social frameworks and offer informed critiques or endorsements. The data show that the podcast tackled the topic using mainly interviews. Two podcasts have multiple interviews. Kiff Dealer holds two interviews while Inkyfada conducts four. It has to be highlighted that choosing interviews as a narrative style in podcasting creates a human connection, shares diverse viewpoints, and enhances audience engagement through a conversational approach. Podcast interviews leverage the power of the human voice to connect with audiences and provide valuable insights, making them an effective communication tool. Podcast interviews are important because they provide an intimate space to have a conversation with a celebrity, expert in a given field, or someone who has an important story to share, as Dodd (2014) has explained.

The time allotted for each interview likely reflects variation in consistency of political content provided by interviewees (16:32 to 59:30 min). Thus, the authors found it useful to track guests' area of expertise (Table 3).

Table 3. Formats, guests, and their domain of expertise.

	Podcasts	Duration (min)	Formats	N. of Guests	Domain of Expertise
1	Tax Justice Network Arabic	26:38	Interviews	1	Civil society activist
2	Inkyfada	59:30	Interviews	4	Journalist and Commercial Director of Inkyfada Journalist and editor-in-chief of Inkyfada Activist and member in the Bowsala Association Researcher in the Almoukhakkera Althakafya
3	Ezio Lesto	16:45	Comedy –	0	1 man talk show (the podcaster)
4	Al Awsat	20:32	Interviews	1	Director of North Africa and Sahel (NAS) Program at the Middle East Institute
5	Kiff Dealer (1)	48:50	Interviews	1	Journalist and blogger
6	Kiff Dealer (2)	22:30	Interviews	1	Civil society activist
7	Kiff Dealer (3)	54:55	Interviews	2	Social media influencer Civil society activist

The data reveal 10 guests, of which four are civil society activists, three are journalists, one is a researcher, one is a social media influencer, and one is the director of the North Africa and the Sahel Program at the Middle East Institute. The political podcasts under study mostly include guests with apparently limited experience in political affairs. This could be an effort to appeal to a younger audience, typically similar in age and intellect. In fact, using the same jargon and dialect as those used by young people in Tunisia creates a distinct atmosphere, providing listeners with the sense that they are participating in a friendly conversation facilitated by the intimate delivery of the host's voice, which is delivered primarily via smartphones and headphones. Podcast literature has demonstrated that award-winning podcasts in journalism are the ones which offer the personalized journalistic content that is afforded by the intimacy of the audio form (Lindgren 2023, p. 704).

Regarding linguistic characteristics, the data indicate that the language used in the podcasts is the Tunisian dialect (a local Arabic dialect mixed with French and sometimes English terms). On the other hand, the Al Awsat podcast uses formal Arabic exclusively.

The authors suggest that the informal nature of the Tunisian dialect resonates with listeners on a personal level, fostering a sense of ease and connection to the content. This linguistic choice creates a relaxed conversational atmosphere, encouraging engagement and a deeper connection to the podcast's message. Ultimately, it makes it a more engaging choice for listeners.

4.2.3. Contextual Framing

The contextual framing code was identified in the "Tax Justice Network Arabic" podcast, particularly in the episode titled "Tunisia: Bartering Health for Economy", posted on 3 August 2021. This episode skillfully connects Saied's resolutions with the broader economic and health conditions in Tunisia, offering a comprehensive socio-political and economic context. The discussion delves into how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the already fragile situation for vulnerable groups and strained the internal governance of the country. The guests on the podcast highlight the pandemic's role in worsening economic disparities and the overall deterioration of living conditions, which set the stage for Saied's subsequent actions and public address. Through this analysis, the podcast provides a nuanced understanding of how Tunisia's health crisis is intertwined with economic decisions, illustrating the complex factors that have influenced Saied's policies.

4.3. Affective Practices (RQ3)

To address Research Question 3, which explores the affective practices employed by the studied podcasts when discussing Saied's resolutions, an inductive coding approach was used to identify various emotional strategies. This analysis revealed codes related to fear-inducing language, expressions of anger and frustration, as well as the use of an optimistic tone.

4.3.1. Fear-Inducing Language, Anger, and Frustration

Audio sound has the unique ability to create a deep sense of intimacy and affection with its audience through the power of the human voice. The audio medium is a sustainable and durable outlet with the power to connect speakers and listeners (Hoover 2022). When we listen to someone speak, we connect on a deeply personal level, where the sound carries not only words, but also emotion, nuance, and authenticity. The gentle cadence, warmth, and expressiveness in a speaker's voice can make the listener feel like they are having a one-on-one conversation, creating a bond of trust and familiarity (Tobin and Guadagno 2022). This intimate connection attracts people, making them more receptive to the content and more likely to engage with the message being conveyed, whether it is an honest story, an informative discussion, or a soothing narration.

In this regard, the authors note that with the exception of Ezio Lesto, the traditional style of mainstream media prevailed in the podcasts selected for analysis. The interviews had a semi-formal tone, leaning more towards the listener-friendly style of spoken Tunisian accent. However, the overall atmosphere retained a serious demeanor, resembling stringent journalistic interviews, with jokes or smiles being infrequently incorporated.

Fear-inducing language was primarily identified in the statements of the interviewees. For instance, a guest on Inkyfada openly expressed his fear by stating, 'It is worrying; we are afraid of losing democracy!' Meanwhile, another guest on the Tax Justice Network Arabic podcast conveyed his concerns more subtly, noting, 'The country is in a state of division, and the situation is unclear.' Moreover, a guest in Kiff Dealer (2), has explained: 'There is a fear that Ennahda will rise to power again if it manages to assassinate the president'.

Direct expressions of anger and frustration regarding the outcomes or implications of Saied's actions were evident in the guests' interpretations on various platforms. For instance, a guest on the Tax Justice Network Arabic podcast voiced his frustration by shouting, 'The people are angry and want urgent solutions, but the state treasury is empty.' Similarly, a guest on Kiff Dealer (1) expressed his combined frustration and anger while analyzing Tunisia's situation and political future, stating, 'There is a fear of the president's tyranny and his seizure of all powers for a longer period than announced, but the Tunisian people are capable of changing the situation if that happens!'. This comment implied that Tunisians could remove Saied from power, just as they did with Ben Ali in 2011. Another guest of Kiff Dealer (3) answered the questions on whether the Tunisian police were brutal with an irritated demeanor: 'Yes, I can swear that there is huge brutality of the police after 25 July 2021'.

4.3.2. Optimistic Tone

An optimistic tone that subtly ridicules unrealistic expectations or overly positive views of Saied's resolutions is present in one podcast only: Ezio Lesto, the only audio performance in the study sample to trace reported affective practices.

In Ezio Lesto, the young podcaster used the Tunisian dialect, and frequently mixed three languages in the same sentence (Arabic, French, and English). For example, in the opening sentence, he started with "oh yah" (English), then switched to Arabic to indicate that the episode is dedicated to the events of 25 July 2021. He then used the French linking tool "donc" meaning "thus" to conclude in Arabic with the word "تابعوني", which means "follow me". Throughout the episode, the French and English languages were merged in the Tunisian dialect, reflecting the variety of spoken Arabic commonly used in the capital Tunis.

The podcast also incorporated expressions in currency among Tunisians. The style was intimate, mixing humor, and sarcasm. For example, the podcaster was talking about the Ennahda movement project with enthusiasm, insisting that the aim of this party was only to improve the country's economic and political conditions. Then, he suddenly interrupted his story by a loud, long, sarcastic laugh. In the meantime, he injected a number of fatalistic expressions in an ironic manner, such as "الله أكبر", which means "God is victorious", in the belief that all events are predetermined and therefore inevitable. The podcast also included excerpts with a sad tone, revealing the difficult situation that Tunisia is experiencing due to the rule of the Ennahda.

The Ezio Lesto podcast included sarcasm and comedy to enhance rhetorical effect while expressing the political position of the podcaster on what happened on 25 July 2021. The podcast host appears to be seeking to motivate listeners to adopt specific positions and urge them to agree with his political ideologies. This highlights the interactive relationship between political podcaster as influencer and the listeners as independent identities.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings indicate that, of the seven podcast episodes discussing President Saied's speech on 25 July 2021, six were aired in August 2021. No podcast referred to the Tunisian president's speech during the first week after it was delivered. Additionally, only one follow-up episode was released in October by Kiff Dealer. The authors highlight that, despite the significance of the political event, deemed by some as historical (Hali 2020), and irrespective of people's perspectives, political podcasts in the region appear to insufficiently address it.

Moreover, the results confirm the prevailing themes about the motives for Saied's decisions on 25 July 2021, and their direct and future consequences for Tunisia. The Ennahda movement faced significant criticism, being holding responsible for the worsening of the situation, while the urgent necessity of Saied's decisions was emphasized, regardless of its legal status. Hannah Ridge (2023) reiterates that similar apprehension was felt internationally about what happened in Tunisia. The author argues that after a decade as the preeminent democracy in the Middle East, Tunisia took an anti-democratic turn in July 2021 with what she called "the self-coup" of President Kais Saied. She also points to the possibility of democratic backsliding in Tunisia through the strategic implementation of liberal but anti-democratic actions. Tamburini (2022) refers to the interference of the leaders of the Islamic Party in all matters of governance and their attempt to monopolize power as what led to the current political suffocation in Tunisia, adding that the Tunisian public opinion, weakened by years of governmental inefficiency, political chaos, and corruption, blamed the Islamic party Ennahda as solely responsible for the crisis.

In the meantime, McCarthy (2018) and Pargeter (2016), argue that Ennahda showed a lack of political culture and expertise, failing in the long run to balance political pragmatism and ambitions with the creation of an "Islamic alternative". In September 2021, Ennahda leadership even admitted its failure to manage the affairs of governance in Tunisia and acknowledged the mistakes it had committed in running the economy and internal affairs of the country since its entry into power, which contributed not only to fuel street anger against it, but also resulted in its loss of seats in subsequent elections (Al-Arabiya 2021). According to ex-Tunisian president Moncef Marzouki (2022), people blame Islamists for betraying their promise to deliver clean and efficient governance, for prioritizing a politics of petty agreements and backdoor deals with parties from the former regime, and for catastrophically mismanaging deadly health and economic crises. Jrad (2021) finds that some experts and jurists testified that Saied acted within the framework of Article 80, because he simply froze the parliament's activity instead of dissolving it. This wave of support for the Tunisian president was reflected in the studied sample through the interviewees' tolerance of violating the provisions of the Tunisian constitution so long as this step saves the country from the Tunisian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Similarly, Albrecht et al. (2023) highlighted the fluctuations in Tunisians' perceptions of

political options in the country. They found that one in five Tunisian adults reported contrasting preferences for authoritarian alternatives and civil society. This indicates that many Tunisians want something other than what they see in the current political situation.

The findings affirm that despite apprehensions regarding potential presidential overreach and an extension of powers beyond the initially declared timeframe, there is a prevailing sense of optimism, coupled with a clear call to unite around Tunisia's president. This contradicts the conclusions of Sebei and Fulco (2022) who find that Tunisians reject President Saied's resolutions of 25 July 2021, noting that many political activists advocated the formation of a united front against his unilateral takeover of state institutions. Sebei and Fulco even point to the negative perception of the events taking place in Tunisia, characterizing them as "Saied's presidential coup".

Regarding the narrative features, interviews emerge as a dominant style in the podcasts studied, enhancing listener engagement, and leveraging the power of the human voice to connect with audiences and provide valuable insights, making them an effective communication tool. Likewise, the Tunisian dialect prevails over classical Arabic. It seems to be a linguistic choice aimed at attracting a larger audience by using the same jargon, sarcastic expressions, and jokes to become closer to listeners and interact with them in an intimate and para-social audio interaction. This is in line with Hali's (2020) argument that the podcasts in the Tunisian spoken dialect are more accessible to those who read and speak both French and Arabic, bringing their Tunisian audiences together. Podcast creators also use emotional practices, including sarcasm and humor, to enhance rhetorical impact and effectively engage listeners.

Ezio Lesto is the only podcast that was aired on a one-man talk show format. Affective practices throughout this podcast are evident in the use of French and English languages along with the Tunisian dialect, occasionally mixed with humor and mockery to enhance the linguistic effect, express optimism, and call to rally behind the president. In fact, via the intimate medium of audio, the podcaster skillfully incorporates emotions, such as empathy, enthusiasm, sarcasm, and jokes, to create a nuanced and engaging story. Infusing content with emotion, the podcast creator aimed to make a connection with his listeners and influence their views and attitudes. It is important to mention that affective practices act as a persuasive tool, fostering deep connection and resonance with listeners. Whether by conveying the urgency of a social issue, evoking sympathy for certain viewpoints, or using humor to criticize, podcasters leverage these practices to craft a narrative that not only informs, but also shapes public sentiment about the topics discussed.

Borrowing the concept of "interpellation", as defined by Louis Althusser (Casser 2020), the authors assert that the podcaster attempts to invite listeners to take certain positions and encourages them to conform to their political ideas. This may highlight the dynamic relationship between the podcaster as influencer and the self-identity of listeners, without neglecting the potential for resistance and negotiation as the process unfolds. In the same vein, Franzén et al. (2021) assert that affective practices encompass various psychological states and feelings, including happiness, anger, sadness, fear, and other emotional reactions to different political stimuli and positions addressed by the podcaster. Robson (2023) also notes that emotional practices also involve performative acts and auditory emotional effects. In this way, sound turns the listening process into an unforgettable emotional experience.

To sum up, the authors highlight the power of podcasting as distinctive communication tool for political listening in Tunisia. Podcasts may serve as an affective audio medium to address key issues of public interest in a way that helps raise civic responsibilities among the audience. This awareness-rising role that the political podcast may play in the region makes it possible to consider it an alternative public sphere aimed at increasing public knowledge, cohesion, and mobilization (Clark and Aufderheide 2009).

In such a context, the concept of the "pseudo-public sphere" (De Zeeuw 2024; Snoussi et al. 2023) becomes effective in engaging political listeners on crucial issues, providing them with information, and stimulating public debates. Delivering more emotionally based podcasts could be a strategic approach to raise awareness and encourage political

participation in Tunisia and the North African region. The authors suggest that future research should involve more systematic coding of recent podcasts related to political issues in Tunisia, especially with the upcoming presidential elections in October 2024. This approach could help in understanding how podcast listening might influence or reflect public opinion.

6. Research Contribution

This paper investigates the role of political podcasts in shaping public opinion in Tunisia. It analyses a sample of podcasts discussing President Kais Saied’s speech on 25 July 2021, in which he suspended parliament and assumed executive powers.

The study offers a valuable contribution to understanding the impact of political podcasts in Tunisia. By addressing a timely and under-researched topic, it illuminates how podcasts influence public opinion. Further research with a larger sample size and a broader timeframe would enhance the analysis and provide a more comprehensive understanding of this emerging media landscape.

Additionally, this paper introduces a novel perspective to political listening theory. Traditionally, the theory emphasizes understanding opposing viewpoints. This contribution suggests reframing disagreement as a catalyst for deeper listening. By recognizing the inherent value in contrasting perspectives, it advocates for moving beyond mere comprehension to genuine curiosity and exploration. This shift promotes a more engaged and empathetic form of listening, potentially leading to the identification of common ground and the creation of new solutions.

However, the research is not without limitations. One basic limitation is the scope of the data, which only includes five podcasts. This limitation restricts the findings to the data involved in the analysis, hindering the generalization of the results to the whole scene of political podcasting and listening in Tunisia. Also, the findings and implications of the study are confined to one particular event, that is, the Tunisian president’s speech and the way it was handled by the five podcasts at a particular junction of the country’s political transformation. For a generalized view of podcasting in Tunisia, a longer period needs to be selected, and more podcasts added to the data.

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Data Availability Statement: Data available on request due to restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. The language used in the podcasts.

	Podcasts	Diffusion Date	Language	%
1		20 August 2021	Standard Arabic	8.20
2	Tax Justice Network Arabic	3 August 2021	Standard Arabic and Tunisian dialect	10.64

Table A1. *Cont.*

	Podcasts	Diffusion Date	Language	%
3	Inkyfada	8 August 2021	Tunisian dialect	81.16
4		12 August 2021		
5	Kiff Dealer (1)	31 August 2021		
6	Kiff Dealer (2)	31 August 2021		
7	Kiff Dealer (3)	28 October 2021		
Total 5 podcasts	7 episodes	-		100

Table A2. Titles of the studied podcasts.

	Podcasts	Diffusion Date	Title
1	Tax Justice Network Arabic	3 August 2021	Tunisia: bartering health for economy.
2	Inkyfada	8 August 2021	25 July: One-way communication
3	EZIO LESTO	12 August 2021	25 July coup????
4	Al Awsat	20 August 2021	President Saied and the future of Tunisia
5	Kiff Dealer (1)	31 August 2021	Tunisia (14 January–25 July 2021): Papa dear, where are we going? Part 1 (<i>ironic title</i>)
6	Kiff Dealer (2)	31 August 2021	Tunisia (14 January–25 July 2021): Papa dear, where are we going? Part 2
7	Kiff Dealer (3)	28 October 2021	Do you think the claim of “better Tunisia” is possible?

Table A3. Abstracts of the studied podcasts.

	Podcasts	Abstract
1	Tax Justice Network Arabic	In this month’s episode, we had a tour of the sporadic news from Libya, Lebanon and the development of the political situation in Tunisia. Then we conducted a dialogue with the researcher in public policies and international affairs, Sirin Ghannouchi about a paper issued by the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights. The paper deals with the treatment of Tunisian governments of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it contributed the worsening situation of the vulnerable groups and how the conditions negatively affected internal authorities of the country already suffering from weak infrastructure and high cost of treatment amid a decline in government spending in the health sector.
2	Inkyfada	This first episode of inkytalk, looks back at 25 July 2021, a date that has already made history with the decision of the President of the Tunisian Republic, Kais Saied, to apply Article 80 of the Constitution, and to (temporarily?) assume full powers. Eight days following this event, inkytalk’s guests examine the one-way communication of the presidency, the tumultuous relationship between the government and the media, and the access to information and its Kafkaesque universe.
3	EZIO LESTO	A podcast in which we talk about Tunisia and what happened in it in a critical and satirical way. Today we will talk about little things in Tunisia, about riots and presidential resolutions. Is there not a coup? Where is the country heading?
4	Al Awsat	Episode questions: What prompted the Tunisian president to freeze parliament and assume executive power, and what has he been doing since 25 July? What are the internal actors in Tunisia and what are their current positions? What is the future of the elected institutions in Tunisia and the future of the constitution? What positive role can external parties play to help Tunisia? What are the possible scenarios for the near future in Tunisia and what must we follow to know where Tunisia is heading? Follow us in this episode with Ibrahim Al-Aseel and Intisar Fakir

Table A3. *Cont.*

	Podcasts	Abstract
5	Kiff Dealer (1)	We invited Haythem El Mekki, Journalist/Blogger, to discuss the exceptional political situation in Tunisia. We talked about what happened on 25th July 2021 with a clear vision as young Tunisians and the type of future awaiting us. We also talked about Thawra 14 January, the media, and hard politics, trying to respond to many questions that we have in mind.
6	Kiff Dealer (2)	
7	Kiff Dealer (3)	In this episode (#6), we invited Louay Cherni and Henda Chennaoui (Activists) to discuss politics, youth, liberties, and police brutality in Tunisia After 25 of July. Answering a main question: Is Better Tunisia Possible After 25 July 2021?

Table A4. Communication content attitudes by questions raised.

	Podcasts	Questions Raised
1	Al Awsat	1. What prompted the Tunisian president to freeze parliament and take over the executive power? And what has he been doing since 25 July? 2. What are the internal actors in Tunisia? And what are their current positions? 3. What is the future of the elected institutions in Tunisia? And the future of the constitution? 4. What positive role can external parties play in helping Tunisia? 5. What are the possible scenarios for the near future in Tunisia? And what/who should we follow to know where Tunisia is heading?
2	Inkyfada	1. Is the activation of Article 80 of the Constitution and the singling out of all powers, according to you, a temporary measure? 2. After eight days have passed since 25 July 2021, what do you think of the unilateral communication imposed by the power system? 3. How do you visualize the relationship of the floundering power with the media?
3	EZIO LESTO	1. What are the reasons for 25 July 2021? 2. Why were the resolutions made? 3. What did Saied do on 25 July 2021? 4. Is Saied a dictator? 5. Is it a coup? 6. What will happen after the resolutions? Scenarios?
4	Tax Justice Network Arabic	1. How have Tunisian governments dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic? 2. What is the extent of the pandemic's contribution to the worsening situation of vulnerable groups and the country's interior? Is it a reason for what happened on 25 July 2021? 3. How did the decline in government spending in the health sector affect the high cost of treatment? What are the repercussions on the political situation?
5	Kiff Dealer (1)	1. What are the reasons for 25 July 2021? 2. Are resolutions constitutional and necessary to save the country? 3. What are the future scenarios?
6	Kiff Dealer (2)	1. What do you think of the resolutions of 25 July 2021? 2. What are the reasons for these resolutions? 3. Are resolutions necessary to save the country? 4. What are the future scenarios?
7	Kiff Dealer (3) (Oct. 2021)	1. What is the state of freedoms in Tunisia after 25 July 2021? 2. Can you talk about police brutality in Tunisia after 25 July 2021? 3. Is Tunisia better after 25 July 2021?

Table A5. Communication angles according to guests' responses in the podcasts.

Podcasts		Answers
1	Al Awsat	■ The Islamic Ennahda Movement Party is responsible for what happened on 25 July 2021; ■ The Tunisian people must support the president's resolutions to save the country from strife and division; ■ It is difficult to predict the future, but the initial indicators are in the country's interest; ■ The reason behind what happened is a political attempt to exclude the Ennahda Movement from the government and put the implementation of constitutional reforms that establish a true democracy on the back burner.
2	Inkyfada	● The activation of Article 80 of the Constitution and the singling out of all powers may not be a temporary measure; ● It is worrying, we are afraid of losing democracy; ● Communication imposed by the power system is not effective; ● The relationship of the floundering power with the media is certainly negative.
3	EZIO LESTO	■ The reasons for 25 July are due to the Ennahda Movement party; ■ The resolutions are necessary and came at the time because a coup plot was being prepared by Ennahda Movement Party; ■ Saied saved the country by activating Article 80 of the Tunisian Constitution; ■ Saied is not a dictator and he did not carry out a coup; ■ The country is in a state of division and the situation is unclear; ■ We have to support the president.
4	Tax Justice Network Arabic	● Tunisian governments have failed miserably in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic ● The pandemic contributed widely to the worsening situation of vulnerable groups and the country's interior; ● Yes, it is the reason for what happened on 25 July 2021; ● The decline in government spending pushed to increase the cost of treatment and taking into consideration the financial condition of a large group of the Tunisian people, there is no longer the ability to pay for medicine and hospital accommodation; ● The repercussions of this are great for the future; the people are angry and want urgent solutions, but the state treasury is empty.
5	Kiff Dealer (1)	■ The reasons for 25 July 2021 are due to the Ennahda Movement Party, which wants to seize power; ■ The resolutions are not constitutional but are political and also necessary to save the country; ■ There is a fear of the president's tyranny and his seizure of all powers for a longer period than what was announced, but the Tunisian people are able to change the situation if that happens.
6	Kiff Dealer (2)	■ Al-Nahda movement wants to rule alone; ■ The resolutions are not constitutional but are political and can be accepted in the current situation; ■ Tunisians are divided and it is necessary to rally around the president and support his resolutions to save the country; ■ There is a fear that Ennahda will rise to power again if it manages to assassinate the president.
7	Kiff Dealer (3) (Oct. 2021)	● It seems that we cannot speak about freedoms in Tunisia after 25 July 2021; ● Yes, I can swear that there is huge brutality of the police after 25 July 2021; ● Tunisia seems to be better after 25 July 2021 for now, but nothing is guaranteed.

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Article

Independent Press and the Fall of Robert Mugabe: Some Empirical Reflections

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Abstract: This comparative case study interrogates how Zimbabwe's independent press reported on ZANU-PF factionalism in the period from 2014 to 2017. It focuses on two dailies, *Daily News* and *NewsDay*. These were Zimbabwe's only privately owned newspapers at the time. The other daily newspapers were *The Herald* and *Chronicle*, whose editorial was controlled by the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government of Robert Mugabe. Whereas scholarship on ZANU-PF factionalism and the press is still burgeoning, little has been studied about how the independent press reported on Mugabe's succession. The study is guided by framing theory. Data were gathered through archival research and in-depth face-to-face interviews with purposively selected journalists at *Daily News* and *NewsDay* who published stories on Mugabe's succession. Findings reveal that rival ZANU-PF factions captured bribed journalists and influenced how they reported on Mugabe's succession. Journalism grew "factionalized" (biased) as reporters became agents of the rival ZANU-PF factions. This disabled the newspapers from playing their informative and educative roles effectively. The factionalized reports left Zimbabweans ill-informed about developments in the governing party.

Keywords: ZANU-PF factionalism; Robert Mugabe; independent press; capture; Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

This qualitative comparative study examines how Zimbabwe's privately owned daily newspapers, *Daily News* and *NewsDay*, reported on ZANU-PF factionalism towards the end of Robert Mugabe's rule. Mugabe had been in power since Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 following a protracted liberation war that dislodged the colonial administration of Ian Douglas Smith and the Rhodesian Front. Mugabe's old age saw his ZANU-PF allies fighting for his position. He was 93 years old when the military removed him from power in 2017. This study focuses on the period between 2014 and 2017. Major events occurred during this time. Mugabe dismissed vice president Joice Mujuru from ZANU-PF and government in 2014 on allegations of plotting to remove him from power through unconstitutional means (Maodza, 2017; Gadzikwa, 2018; Chuma et al., 2020; Maodza, 2024). Two factions existed at the time, the Mnangagwa group and the Mujuru camp. Mugabe proceeded to appoint the then Justice Minister, Emmerson Mnangagwa, as vice president. While the move was anticipated to end ZANU-PF factionalism, it exacerbated it. Two factions emerged again, Mnangagwa's Team Lacoste camp and the Grace Mugabe aligned Generation 40 (G40) group. Grace was Mugabe's wife and the ZANU-PF secretary for the women's league. Media reports claimed that she wanted to succeed her husband (Ruhanya & Gadzikwa, 2024). Team Lacoste reportedly enjoyed the support of ZANU-PF old guards, veterans of

Zimbabwe's liberation war, and the military. The G40 was allegedly composed of relatively younger ZANU-PF politicians including Jonathan Moyo, Saviour Kasukuwere, Patrick Zhuwa, and Walter Mzembe (Ruhanya & Gadzikwa, 2024). Mugabe dismissed Mnangagwa from his government and ZANU-PF on 6 November 2017. He accused Mnangagwa of plotting to seize power. Mnangagwa went into exile in South Africa. The military toppled Mugabe on 21 November 2017. Mnangagwa returned to Zimbabwe on 22 November 2017 and was inaugurated as president on 23 November 2017. The study examines how *Daily News* and *NewsDay* reported on these intraparty seismic schisms.

This academic terrain has been overlooked by extant scholarly work which has been focused on how state-controlled newspapers, *The Herald* and *Chronicle*, reported on ZANU-PF factionalism (Maodza, 2017; Chuma et al., 2020; Maodza, 2024; Ruhanya & Gadzikwa, 2024). Zimbabwe's independent press is celebrated for historically holding the ZANU-PF government to account through its practice of oppositional journalism. *The Herald* and *Chronicle* practice patriotic journalism, which supports the government of the day (Rusike, 1990; Ranger, 2005; Chibwe, 2016). Patriotic journalism is a "narrow and divisive journalism" (Ranger, 2005, p. 11) that was adopted by Zimbabwe's state-aligned media between 2000 and 2005 when a political scientist, Jonathan Moyo, was Information Minister. This was the period following the formation of Zimbabwe's main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, led by Morgan Tsvangirai. The MDC posed a serious threat to Mugabe's rule. The same period saw Mugabe embarking on the controversial land reform programme, which evicted white farmers from their properties. The state-controlled media blindly supported the land reform programme and Mugabe's combative diplomatic stance after the Europe Union and the United States of America imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe in what Ranger (2005) termed patriotic journalism. The independent press condemned Mugabe's policies and maladministration in what became known as oppositional journalism (Ranger, 2005; Chibwe, 2016). How the Zimbabwean media report on issues of national interest has always been informed by their political economy, and particularly ownership structure (Rusike, 1990; Saunders, 1999). Unlike *The Herald* and *Chronicle*, which are controlled by the government by virtue of its stake in the Zimbabwe Newspaper Company (Zimpapers), the publishers of the two newspapers, *Daily News* and *NewsDay*, are privately owned and do not suffer state interference in their editorial operations. This positioned them well to professionally report on ZANU-PF factionalism. Informed by framing theory, this study answers the following questions:

- How did *Daily News* and *NewsDay* report on ZANU-PF factionalism?
- What factors influenced how the newspapers reported on Mugabe's succession?
- How did journalists' beliefs inform how they reported on the ZANU-PF fissures?

This study is significant. Firstly, it detours from existing literature that examines how the government-controlled press reported on Mugabe's succession. Secondly, it scrutinizes the independency of Zimbabwe's independent press in the context of ZANU-PF factionalism. Further, the study shows how *Daily News* and *NewsDay* attempted to shape public opinion on Mugabe's succession while also exposing the extent to which journalistic beliefs affected reporting on ZANU-PF factionalism.

1.1. Synopsis of ZANU-PF Factionalism

Whereas ZANU-PF suffered incessant waves of factionalism leading to the 2017 coup that removed Mugabe from power, Zimbabwe's governing party has always experienced leadership-related wrangles. ZANU-PF factionalism is traceable to the liberation war (Sithole & Makumbe, 1997; Chung, 2006; Tekere, 2006). The party's formation in 1963 is attributed to factionalism. Robert Mugabe and Ndabaningi Sithole formed the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) on 8 August 1963 after breaking away from the Zimbabwe

African People's Union (ZAPU). This followed disagreement with ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo over execution of the liberation war. ZANU soon imploded after Mugabe and Sithole fought over leadership of the newly formed party. Two factions emerged that were modelled around Mugabe and Sithole. Ethnic differences worsened the fissures (Chung, 2006; Tekere, 2006). Mugabe was Zezuru and Sithole was a Manyika. Whereas these ethnic groups fall within the broader Shona tribe, the Zezuru and Karanga dominated the Manyika and other smaller ethnic groups in leadership positions during Zimbabwe's liberation war, causing factionalism. Thus, Mugabe came from the dominant Zezuru ethnic group while Sithole was of Manyika, specifically the Ndau ethnic minority tribe. Other key liberation war moments that reflected factionalism included the Nhari Rebellion of 1974 and the murder of Herbert Chitepo. With the Nhari rebellion, ZANU fighters, displeased by Dare reChimurenga and the High Command's poor management of war, coalesced around a provincial military commander, Thomas Nhari. They captured Josiah Tongogara's family (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army Chief of Defence) and other senior ZANU leaders based in Zambia, accusing them of corruption and mismanagement of war (Chung, 2006; Tekere, 2006). ZANLA was ZANU's military wing. Herbert Chitepo-chaired Dare reChimurenga was mandated to lead the war from Zambia after Smith banned ZANU in 1964. The Nhari faction was arrested and executed by Tongogara's camp. The Tongogara camp assumed leadership of the Dare reChimurenga. Chung (2006, pp. 89–90) argues the Nhari Rebellion was an attempt by junior officers to take over leadership and to end war. ZANU factionalism worsened after the Tongogara camp (dominated by Karanga) associated the Nhari Rebellion with Herbert Chitepo (Manyika). Chitepo was murdered. Dare reChimurenga always experienced ethno-regionalism. The Manyika and Karanga dominated the Zezuru and Ndebele in ZANU leadership positions. Chung (2006, p. 92) posits that the Nhari Rebellion had negative repercussions for ZANU beyond the liberation war.

The Workers/*Vashandi* is another key historical moment that reflected intrinsic factionalism within ZANU. After Chitepo's murder, the Zambian government arrested Tongogara, members of Dare reChimurenga and the High Command. This created a leadership vacuum in ZANU and ZANLA. Wilfred Mhanda's group, which was known as the Workers/*Vashandi*, emerged and filled the gap. The Workers/*Vashandi* were divided, and "most of the young guerrillas under Wilfred Mhanda were against any form of dialogue with Robert Mugabe or old nationalists" (Chung, 2006, p. 173). The release of Tongogara and old military leadership from Zambian jails ended the Workers/*Vashandi*'s reign. The Workers/*Vashandi* were "immobilized in a ruthless military exercise by Tongogara" (Chung, 2006, p. 173). The formation of the Front for the Liberation of Zimbabwe (FROLIZI) in 1971 also reflected the deep-seated divisions within ZANU and ZAPU (Chung, 2006). FROLIZI was established by disgruntled ZAPU and ZANU cadres who felt eclipsed by the Karanga and Manyika.

It is this kind of factionalism that permeated ZANU-PF in post-war Zimbabwe. The divisions emerged within the first decade of self-rule. By the end of 1980s, ZANU-PF started experiencing "cracks in elite cohesion" (Sithole & Makumbe, 1997, p. 134). Mugabe's dismissal of ZANU-PF secretary general Edgar Tekere in 1988 for opposing his ambition for a one-party state and Edison Zvobgo's 1995 call for the democratization of national constitution (section on presidential powers) signaled divisions within ZANU-PF (Sithole & Makumbe, 1997; Mangani, 2020). There are suggestions that Mugabe "manufactured" factionalism as a political survival strategy (Compagnon, 2010, p. 18; Msindo, 2016, p. 162; Maodzha, 2024). This implies that Mugabe nurtured intraparty divisions as "curtailing factionalism created possibilities for the rival camps to unite and unseat him" (Msindo, 2016, p. 162). The run-up to the ZANU-PF December 2014 elective congress spurred another

bout of factionalism. Media reports suggested Mujuru, a vice president then, planned to challenge Mugabe at congress. Two factions vied for Mugabe's position, the Mujuru faction and the Mnangagwa camp (Chuma et al., 2020). The factions angled for Mugabe's position since 2000. In 2004, Mnangagwa and his allies, including then Information Minister Jonathan Moyo, secretly organized a meeting in Tsholotsho, Matabeleland North province (Mpofu et al., 2022). The meeting sought to position Mnangagwa for the vice presidency ahead of Joice Mujuru and enhance his chances of succeeding Mugabe (Msindo, 2016). The Mujuru faction convened its own meeting at Beatrice (Mashonaland East) and insisted on Mujuru succeeding Mugabe (Moyo, 2017). This was a replay of ethnic factional wars witnessed during Zimbabwe's liberation war. Mugabe reacted to Mnangagwa's Tsholotsho convention by purging all his allies from ZANU-PF. Mujuru was appointed vice president and her allies were handed senior ZANU-PF and government portfolios. Mnangagwa was demoted from his position as ZANU-PF secretary of administration. Mugabe appointed Didymus Mutasa, a Mujuru ally, the new secretary of administration (Msindo, 2016, p. 165). Mnangagwa also ceded his position as a speaker of parliament to John Nkomo. In 2014, Mugabe dismissed Mujuru and purged all her allies from party and government positions. Mnangagwa was appointed vice president. Mugabe dismissed Mnangagwa from ZANU-PF and government in 2017 on allegations of plotting a power grab. His allies were purged from government and party positions. Mnangagwa fled to South Africa. He returned after a military coup that toppled Mugabe from power and became president.

1.2. Media and ZANU-PF Factionalism

Scholarship on the media and ZANU-PF factionalism is burgeoning (Maodza, 2015; Maodza, 2017; Chuma et al., 2020; Gadzikwa, 2018; Ruhanya & Gadzikwa, 2024; Maodza, 2024). Nevertheless, the extant literature examines how the state-controlled press mediated ZANU-PF factionalism towards the end of Mugabe's rule. There is poverty of scholarship interrogating how independent press reported on ZANU-PF factionalism. The current study addresses this academic lacuna by investigating how *Daily News* and *NewsDay* reported on Mugabe's succession between 2014 and 2017. The Zimbabwean press is bifurcated into binaries of patriotic journalism and oppositional journalism (Ranger, 2005; Chibwe, 2016). The state-controlled press indulges in patriotic journalism which blindly supports the ZANU-PF government's policies and ideology while projecting the opposition political parties as neocolonial agents seeking an illegal regime change. On the contrary, independent press practices oppositional journalism, which seeks to hold power to account by exposing corruption and maladministration. It is within this context that this study explores how *Daily News* and *NewsDay* reported on ZANU-PF factionalism since the newspapers do not suffer direct government interference in their editorial operations. This positioned them well to objectively report on Mugabe's succession.

Maodza (2017) deployed political economy of the media theoretical lenses to examine how *The Herald* reported on ZANU-PF factionalism after the ruling party's December 2014 elective congress. Chuma et al. (2020) investigate how another state-controlled newspaper, *Chronicle*, reported on Mugabe's succession during the same period using the principal-agent model as their theoretical guide. Maodza (2017) and Chuma et al. (2020) concur that ZANU-PF factionalism cascaded into state-controlled newsrooms and influenced how *The Herald* and *Chronicle* mediated Mugabe's succession. They contend that a faction in charge of the government's information portfolio influenced how the state-controlled media empire reported Mugabe's succession at any given time. Gadzikwa (2018) explores how Zimbabwe's daily newspapers reported on Mujuru's expulsion from ZANU-PF through a concept he termed "tabloidization". In a study largely deriving from content analysis, Gadzikwa (2018) argues that the newspapers were undergoing "tabloidization",

which prioritized sensationalism in news reports over facts. While Gadzikwa (2018) offers valuable insights into the press and ZANU-PF factionalism, he struggles to account for the forces that influenced the newspapers' narratives on Mugabe's succession. Ruhanya and Gadzikwa (2024) also deploy the tabloidization conceptual framework in a study seeking nuanced understanding into how *The Herald* reported on Mujuru's dismissal from ZANU-PF in 2014 and Mugabe's removal from power in 2017. They conclude that *The Herald* suffered editorial tabloidization, which valued sensationalism over facts. The current study, which derives from in-depth interviews with political journalists at *Daily News* and *NewsDay*, investigates how the selected newspapers reported on ZANU-PF factionalism. It examines the forces that influenced how the newspapers reported Mugabe's succession and seeks to establish how journalistic beliefs informed the generation of news reports on Mugabe's succession.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by framing theory. First developed by Bateson (1972) before its refinement by Goffman (1974) and Entman (1993), framing theory assumes that the media try to influence audiences on what to think and how to think about it. They achieve this by selecting "some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient" than others (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing involves "conscious and unconscious construction of a perspective to encourage a specific way of interpretation by the intended target" (Fordjour & Sikanku, 2022, p. 67). The media generate texts in a way that is meant to influence the audience's perception of reality. Reese (2007, p. 248) argues that "framing suggests more intentionality on the part of the framer (media)" and "we see what the system and frames embedded within them allows us to see". This implies that "the media attempt to influence audience's way of thinking" by consciously manipulating frames and ensuring that debate on a subject of their choice happens within the boundaries that they define. The news media "bracket out certain happenings via routinized, legitimized and institutionalized structures that favour certain ways of seeing" (Tuchman, 1978 as cited in Fordjour & Sikanku, 2022, p. 148). This means that framing "can be analyzed through specific language construction" and by examining media's "choice of words, ideological positions, phrases, and terminologies" (Fordjour & Sikanku, 2022, p. 868). Thus, frames become "structures that draw boundaries, set up categories, define some ideas as out and others as in" (Reese, 2007, p. 150). It is, however, important to note that frames do not operate within a vacuum. This suggests the existence of forces that inform the frames or what D'Angelo (2002) terms frame sponsors. There are forces beyond journalists that influence how the media frame reality. This argument is reinforced by Boesman et al. (2016, p. 4) when they contend that "frames are not necessarily initiated by the authors (journalists) of news reports. . . They become the outcome of interactions with editors as well as sources outside the newsroom". This is a call for researchers to extend beyond highlighting and describing frames to avoid "locking them in place as though they were not part of a larger conversation serving particular interests" (Reese, 2007, p. 248). It again implies the existence of forces that structure and shape the frames that newspapers deploy in news reports and accounts for Reese's (2007, p. 248) claim that framing "relates explicitly to political strategy". Through framing theory, this study demonstrates how *Daily News* and *NewsDay's* use of certain terminologies, words, phrases, and language aided the generation of reports that positioned one faction to succeed Mugabe, at any given moment, over the other. It also demonstrates how news sources informed the frames adopted by *Daily News* and *NewsDay* in their reportage of ZANU-PF factionalism. This is achieved by critically examining the sources speaking in the newspapers, identifying and analyzing the stories on ZANU-PF factionalism that were granted saliency.

1.4. Methodology

This is a qualitative comparative multiple case study. Studies of a qualitative nature capture people's lived experiences and enable the extraction of meaning from occurrences (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999; Polit & Beck, 2004). A qualitative research paradigm also seeks depth of understanding as opposed to the quantitative paradigm, which is oriented towards achieving the breadth of understanding (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 2002). The study recalls the experiences of the *Daily News* and *NewsDay* journalists capturing how they mediated Mugabe's succession. A case study allows exhaustive exploration of a phenomenon within specific context (Yin, 1984; Zainal, 2007). *Daily News* and *NewsDay* were the only privately owned daily newspapers in Zimbabwe when this study was conducted. Other daily newspapers, *The Herald* and *Chronicle*, were controlled by the ZANU-PF government through the Ministry of Information, which appoints ruling party members as editors (Rusike, 1990). Data were gathered through in-depth face-to-face interviews with senior political journalists at *Daily News* and *NewsDay* who published stories on ZANU-PF factionalism. The study employed purposive sampling in selecting journalists for interviews. Purposive sampling involves the selection of participants knowledgeable about a phenomenon under study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) or what Patton (2002) terms information-rich cases. The participants must also be willing to participate in the study (Spradley, 1979; Bernard, 2002). The researcher selected four senior political journalists at *Daily News* (2) and *NewsDay* (2) for in-depth face-to-face interviews. Zimbabwean newsrooms are small and compartmentalized. Journalists specialize in portfolios that range from politics, agriculture, entertainment, and education to municipality, among others. The four senior journalists interviewed were selected since they specialized in political reporting and published stories on ZANU-PF factionalism that address this study's objectives. Whereas the researcher intended to interview the editors for *Daily News* and *NewsDay*, they were unwilling to participate in the study. The researcher deduced that their refusal derived from the sensitivity of the study since it was conducted when ZANU-PF factionalism cascaded into newsrooms and created an environment of suspicion and fear. This explains why journalists that agreed to be interviewed chose an out-of-workplace venue and anonymity. Journalists specializing in portfolios such as education, entertainment, sports, agriculture, and municipality were rationally excluded from the sample as their duties were outside the study's objectives and thrust. While on the surface interviewing four journalists may appear inadequate, it does not in any way affect the study's objectives and findings as these were the only participants involved in the phenomenon. The standard determining the number of participants in any study is informed by its aims and thrust (Guest et al., 2006; Padgett, 2008; Morse & Niehaus, 2009). This study sought nuanced understanding of how journalists at *Daily News* and *NewsDay* reported on ZANU-PF factionalism. It also endeavored to establish the factors that influenced how they reported Mugabe's succession and the extent to which journalistic beliefs informed their reports. It sought depth and not breadth of understanding. The table below (Table 1) shows journalists who were interviewed and their designations.

Table 1. Journalists who were interviewed at *Daily News* and *NewsDay*.

Informant	Designation
Participant A	<i>Daily News</i> Political Reporter 1
Participant B	<i>Daily News</i> Political Reporter 2
Participant C	<i>NewsDay</i> Political Reporter 1
Participant D	<i>NewsDay</i> News Manager 2

Further, the study did not solely rely on interviews but also subjected the stories published by *Daily News* and *NewsDay* on ZANU-PF factionalism to framing analysis to identify similarities and dissimilarities in frames and account for the agenda they set. The study settled for front page stories that were published around three key ZANU-PF events. These three key events, which witnessed the manifestation of ZANU-PF factionalism, were the December 2014 elective congress, the elevation of Emmerson Mnangagwa to the vice presidency, and Mnangagwa's dismissal in 2017. This decision was taken to ensure easy management of the study. The purposively selected key events also marked the height of ZANU-PF factionalism, which culminated in the removal of Mugabe from power. Front page stories communicate the extent to which newspapers consider them the most important news of the day (Weldon, 2008; Kim & Chong, 2017). *Daily News* published 104 front page stories against *NewsDay*'s 38. The stories and data from interviews were subjected to a framing analysis. Framing analysis enabled the researcher to identify the hidden meanings of texts (Esser & D'Angelo, 2006) and the dominant ideas embedded in the journalists' reports (Benoit, 1999). Thus, the researcher read all the front page stories and identified the manifest devices in the articles and in data gathered from interviews. They then proceeded to interview the journalists to account for why they used certain words, phrases, and terminology which bluntly supported the interests of one faction over those of the other. It is critical to note that for ethical reasons, the researcher deliberately avoided pinning down the selected stories to each participant who generated them. This is because the articles bear the participants' name, and such a decision would unwittingly expose them violating the terms and conditions under which the interviews were secured. It also explains why the findings from interviews are largely in narrative form. The interviews were conducted from both a biographical narrative approach and focused discourse style (Odell et al., 1983). The biographical narrative approach encouraged journalists to recite how they generated news on ZANU-PF factionalism. The focused discourse section was mainly interested in establishing the origins of the framing devices (sources). Interrogating the sourcing habits exposes the extent to which journalists' news reports were influenced by sources and the extent to which news reporters "function as conduits for the source" (Boesman et al., 2016, p. 6). The interview questions posed to journalists sought to establish the following: How did they source news on ZANU-PF factionalism? Who were their sources? Why did journalists grant politicians from one faction a voice while denying those from the rival camp? Who did they want to succeed Mugabe? How did their beliefs influence how they reported on Mugabe's succession? Why did they use certain terms, phrases, and terminology that bluntly promoted the interests of one faction over those of the other?

2. Findings

The study sought to explore how *Daily News* and *NewsDay* reported on ZANU-PF factionalism, establish factors that influenced how they reported on Mugabe's succession, and examine how journalists' beliefs informed their news reports.

2.1. ZANU-PF Factions "Captured" *Daily News* Journalists, Influenced How They Reported Mugabe's Succession

Interviews with *Daily News* journalists confirmed that they consciously adopted factions. In some instances, the journalists were motivated by "material things." I deliberately quote verbatim what journalists revealed to avoid dilution of the findings. A prominent *Daily News* political journalist pseudo-named Participant A revealed that they adopted Mujuru's faction. This influenced how they reported on Mugabe's succession. The journalist attended, as a special guest, private meetings that were organized by the Mujuru faction.

I remember very well attending a very high-level meeting with the then deputy chief secretary in president office (name withheld) and another very senior politician aligned to Mujuru camp, who is now a Zimbabwean ambassador in Europe. I was the only journalist from the private press. There is no one from the state media. The idea at the meeting was, “go and sell this idea to the people. If we give it to the state media, it would be killed, but you guys can do it for us” (interview with Researcher, 17 August 2023, Harare).

Participant A claimed, “ZANU-PF (politicians) had money to buy even editors in the private press”. This points to the extent to which ZANU-PF factions captured (bribed) journalists at the privately owned press and influenced how they reported on Mugabe’s succession. Participant A’s assertions reveal the extent to which *Daily News* became entrenched in ZANU-PF factionalism. Participant A emphasized how journalists were manipulated by factions when they revealed how they were instructed to “go and sell this idea to the people”. Normally, journalists unbiasedly report facts. This raises controversy over the circumstances under which Participant A became a Mujuru faction’s asset. Participant A revealed that politicians within Mujuru’s camp facilitated his acquisition of farmland, and this influenced how they reported Mugabe’s succession. The journalist also started “a small business” courtesy of assistance from the same faction and quipped, “those are the things that really came into play as well”, adding that “the idea was to try and reform ZANU-PF. Mujuru seemed like a reformist. Mnangagwa was anti-business, a Chinese protégé, and tough guy” (interview with researcher, 17 August 2023, Harare).

The journalist demonstrated involvement in ZANU-PF factionalism when they declared, “the idea was to try and reform ZANU-PF”, in violation of basic journalism tenets that exhort “disinterested objectivity” (Sigelman, 1973; Schudson, 1990). It explains why the Mnangagwa faction later blacklisted the journalist.

Once one faction identifies you with another faction, they never wanted to talk to you. Their fear was that you could be a transmitter of information from one camp to another camp (interview with researcher, 17 August 2023, Harare).

Thus, Participant A’s news sourcing abilities were disabled. This exacerbated the *Daily News*’ generation of biased reports on ZANU-PF factionalism, a predicament the journalist also confirmed, saying:

Journalism became factionalized and even the output, it was no longer about the story but defending the territory on its own. Defending your package. . . We also became at some point enemies within the journalism sector (Participant A, interview with researcher, 17 August 2023, Harare).

Two factions emerged after Mugabe’s dismissal of Mujuru—Mnangagwa’s Team Lacoste versus the Grace Mugabe aligned G40. This did not unshackle *Daily News* from the clutches of factions as confirmed by another *Daily News* journalist, herein identified as Participant B.

At editorial level, the editor is greased (bribed) so they will sanction stories. It cascades down but you see, when it cascades down the reporter is given *mafufu* (leftovers). You would be given USD 20 for lunch but you know exactly that at the very apex (editor level) a lot of money has been given and at the apex the G40 prevailed (interview with researcher, 15 September 2023, Harare).

Mujuru’s dismissal saw the *Daily News* editorial stance mutating towards the G40 while sustaining its anti-Mnangagwa disposition. Participant B confirmed that associating with either faction that was contending to succeed Mugabe affected the sourcing of news on ZANU-PF factionalism. The journalist revealed that, “Team Lacoste would actually point it

at you that you are a G40 journalist" (you are biased in favor of G40). The *Daily News* editors also reportedly "killed" stories offending the interests of factions that they supported.

I had problems with the deputy editor because when he wanted to dismiss my story instead of telling me that because it is not "factionally" correct (the story did not support a ZANU-PF faction that the editor supported), he told me there is no story. I would try to argue that no, this is a story. The moment I win the argument that this is a story, he will turn up and say the story offends the newspaper's commercial interests (interview with researcher, 15 September 2023, Harare).

Participant B recalled how one of the *Daily News* editors aligned to Mnangagwa's faction once "threw us under the bus" when he revealed his sources to a rival camp. This complicated the journalist's relations with sources thereafter.

What happened during that period is that ZANU-PF G40 politicians (names withheld) were my deep throat sources especially about the goings on in ZANU-PF politburo. One day another editor went to report to the Mnangagwa faction that the people who are leaking stories on ZANU-PF (to the *Daily News*) are the G40 politicians (names withheld). They are giving our reporters information to the extent that when there was a ZANU-PF conference in Victoria Falls, ZANU-PF politicians were refusing to talk to us. . . Newsroom was seriously "factionalised". Colleagues would steal diaries (stories ideas on ZANU-PF factionalism) and alert factions (interview with researcher, 15 September 2023, Harare).

Participant B claimed this affected his relations with some editors and added, "I know what is good journalism, and what is bad journalism, but in practice do I have the room to practice good journalism?"

What was toxic was at the top (editors) because it really did affect us as reporters. You see, when you write a story because it has been sanctioned by that editor, you then are given a faction (accused of belonging to a faction). You are given a faction that the editor supported (interview with researcher, 15 September 2023, Harare).

Participant A shifted political allegiance following the dismissal of Mujuru and adopted the G40 faction. They were motivated by financial rewards. They revealed during interviews that, "What would happen is G40 would bring money for you to sustain their agenda and for a journalist who is not empowered a USD 100 note is too much" (interview with researcher, 17 August 2023, Harare). Again, the incentives influenced how Participant A reported on ZANU-PF factionalism post Mujuru. This reveals the extent to which factions captured journalists in the private press and influenced reports on Mugabe's succession. It also affected newsroom relations as journalists aligned with rival factions.

You would never leave your cup of tea (in the newsroom unattended) fearing that this person who supported this other faction would poison me. It became so personal. So personal to some of us journalists and now I look back and laugh at it (interview with researcher, 17 August 2023, Harare).

Participant A also confirmed Participant B's claim that the *Daily News* editors were entrenched in ZANU-PF factions. They would reportedly refuse to publish stories undermining the interests of factions that they supported.

Editor (name withheld) would side with G40. We also had another editor, who was on the side of Mnangagwa. Then came another editor who was clearly a Mnangagwa person. . . On my part, "personally as a journalist I supported G40 and preached the gospel—the anti-Mnangagwa gospel" (interview with researcher, 17 August 2023, Harare).

2.2. *NewsDay* Journalists Captured, Adopt ZANU-PF Factions

Interviews with journalists at *NewsDay* also confirmed that they were captured by ZANU-PF factions. This influenced how they reported on Mugabe's succession. When asked whether it involved material benefits, a senior *NewsDay* journalist, herein identified as Participant C, claimed:

In some cases, materially. In fact, in most cases materially, where you innocently call a source for a story and then that source has informants in the newsroom. The informant would call him and say *Mudhara* (old man) there are negative stories generated here about you. Then *Mudhara iyeye* (old man) would do something for the informant to such an extent that the informant would take you to them and he would say this is the guy writing about you and then they would try influence the narrative. Then the material things happen (interview with researcher, 17 August 2023, Harare).

The journalist revealed that at some point they were offered residential property by a senior G40 politician and minister who wanted to influence how they reported on Mugabe's succession. The G40 was desperate for positive coverage as *The Herald* always portrayed them negatively.

One day when (name withheld) had a press conference and on seeing me he asked—do you have a residential stand (property)? I responded, I do not have a residential land minister. He invited me to his office and offered 2000 square meters of land in Mt Pleasant (interview with researcher, 17 August 2023, Harare).

The journalist, who refused the offer, blamed the capture of the media by ZANU-PF factions on poor remuneration, saying that “journalists have a challenge when it comes to their remuneration so a lot of stories would be sacrificed just to get something from the politicians and in the newsroom, people would go to extremes to please their sources who had become their paymasters”. Participant C also confirmed ZANU-PF factionalism complicated the sourcing of news. Once either of the ZANU-PF factions associated a journalist with a rival camp, they blacklisted them and refused interviews. Journalists ended up generating single-sourced stories on Mugabe's succession, further polarizing narratives. Participant C said sources influenced how they reported on ZANU-PF factionalism. The journalist had close ties with the Mnangagwa camp.

The sources were biased in favour of the Mnangagwa faction and against the Mujuru camp. Because of the sources I had or the people who were willing to give me information then, Mujuru was on the quiet side. She was attacked but she never publicly responded. . . we ran with people who wanted to talk (interview with researcher 17 August 2023, Harare).

ZANU-PF factionalism cascaded into the *NewsDay* newsroom as well. The newsroom was compartmentalized, with Participant C saying that:

There was a problem because key factional elements within ZANU-PF captured journalists. The newsroom was deeply divided along factional lines to an extent that any story you would suggest in a diary meeting (story idea caucus), the next thing you will get a call from an involved factional element, you know, commenting about the story that you are working on, which is yet to be published. So, it became very toxic in the newsroom. . . (Participant C interview with researcher, 17 August 2023, Harare)

Participant C also revealed how they would at times manipulate information given by sources, even at public gatherings such as political rallies, and ensured it served the political interests of a ZANU-PF faction that they supported.

Grace (Mugabe) would say whatever she would want to say (at rallies) but the story now would be influenced by another faction. To say, she may have said this, but this is what we are saying. So, you find that a story from Grace would be twisted to suit the agenda of a rival faction. (interview with researcher, 17 August 2023, Harare)

Journalists became political commissars of rival ZANU-PF factions with Participant C claiming that “each journalist spoke for his or her faction through the stories they generated”. A balance was struck, albeit accidentally.

We had almost the same number of journalists in the newsroom who were aligned to Grace Mugabe’s G40 and those aligned to the Mnangagwa faction, the Lacoste faction. So, you would find that on a Monday you would write a story attacking Mnangagwa, for example. Then on Tuesday, the Lacoste journalists in the newsroom would write a story maybe responding to your Monday story. . . (interview with researcher, 17 August 2023, Harare)

Participant C also revealed how personal beliefs informed how they reported on ZANU-PF factionalism and noted that they “were opposed to Grace Mugabe succeeding her husband”. This informed how they reported on ZANU-PF factionalism. Once there were signs that Grace Mugabe intended to succeed Mugabe using the G40 as a launchpad, Participant C said, “most of the stories we ran were now negative to say we cannot have a bedroom coup”. A former *NewsDay* editorial manager, identified as Participant D, also confirmed the assertions by Participant C.

The factions were not confined to reporters, but editors were big into factions. I will give you an example. We had this editor who fronted the Mnangagwa faction together with some reporters, who were so close to him. The editor would kill every story that portrayed the G40 faction in good light. He would simply poke holes in the stories like, your story is not balanced. You write another story tomorrow and again, he would dismiss it as biased (interview with researcher, 22 August 2023, Harare).

Whereas Participant D confessed “having a soft spot for the G40”, they claimed the editor belonged to Mnangagwa’s faction.

They would hold private meetings at Ambassador Hotel where they shared ideas on propping up Mnangagwa. This manifested in the stories they wrote, choice of adjectives and demonizing Mnangagwa’s opponents, you could pick their bias (interview with researcher, 22 August 2023, Harare).

Allegations that the Mnangagwa faction materially captured some *NewsDay* journalists also emerged during the researcher’s interview with Participant D, confirming how factions desperate for positive media coverage materially invested in selected journalists and sponsored narratives (frames) on Mugabe’s succession, which promoted their interests.

“I know a lot of reporters like (name withheld) who benefited financially from supporting Mnangagwa. He always had money and would boast about it. At one time, I remember his car had a breakdown and I escorted him to a Mnangagwa strong ally in Harare where he was given money to service it. . .” (interview with researcher, 22 August 2023, Harare)

But whereas Participant D claimed journalists were materially incentivized by the Mnangagwa faction to generate positive narratives, other *NewsDay* reporters branded him a G40 functionary. When the researcher sought clarity over the allegations from Participant D, they responded:

One day I met Kasukuwere at a fuel station and he gave me USD 100 to fill my vehicle. Kasukuwere was famous among journalists for being stingy. So, when I got to the newsroom, I announced that Kasukuwere had given me USD 100 but then a pro-Mnangagwa faction reporter took the information to Mnangagwa's faction, who in the ZANU-PF politburo raised the matter saying I was being paid by G40 to scandalize him and his allies. I was then branded a G40 activist. . . (interview with researcher, 22 August 2023, Harare)

Interestingly, from their own confession, Participant D told the researcher they supported the G40 and loathed the Mnangagwa faction. They claimed Mnangagwa displayed signs of dictatorship just like Mugabe, who ruled Zimbabwe for close to 40 years.

I had soft spot for G40 because I always considered Team Lacoste as an aggressive group that would be very difficult to remove from power. . . I just felt removing ZANU-PF through G40 would be easy because this group had a loose relationship with the army so after the takeover they would be easy to remove even using the ballot (interview with researcher, 22 August 2023, Harare).

What emerges from Participant D's assertions demonstrates how personal beliefs also influence journalistic work although this claim is weakened by the fact that there were also material relations between the journalist and some G40 politicians. Participant D also confirmed that the *NewsDay* newsroom was bifurcated along ZANU-PF factions and remarked that, "there was potential journalists could kill each other over factions".

The working environment was toxic to the extent of spying on each other on behalf of certain factions. A good example, you would during diary meetings suggest a story and it would be recorded down. A story about Mnangagwa having done something bad but then before I even write the story someone would alert the Mnangagwa faction. You would be phoned by members of that faction saying we know what you are writing about us (interview with researcher, 22 August 2023, Harare).

Although editors at *NewsDay* and *Daily News* refused interviews with the researcher, it is clear from the journalists' assertions that ZANU-PF factions captured the privately owned newspapers and influenced how they reported on ZANU-PF succession politics. The next sections examine how the *Daily News* and *NewsDay* reported on ZANU-PF factionalism—The Stories.

Case 1: The *Daily News's* pro-Mujuru, anti-Mnangagwa narratives

This section analyzes the stories that were published by *Daily News* in the run up to the ZANU-PF December 2014 congress and demonstrates how the newspaper aligned with the Joice Mujuru faction in its reports while undermining the rival Mnangagwa faction. *Daily News* published 16 front page stories between 21 July 2014 and 8 December 2014 (see Table 2 below). ZANU-PF held its congress from 2 December 2014 to 7 December 2014.

Table 2. The stories published by *Daily News* in the run up to the ZANU-PF 2014 congress and soon after the event.

Date	Story Headline	Page
21 July 2014	Fear paralyses Mujuru faction	Front Page
10 October 2014	ZANU-PF killed Rex—Mujuru	Front Page
26 October 2014	I will never surrender—Mujuru	Front Page
31 October 2014	State media attacks Mujuru	Front Page
10 November 2014	Let us pray: Mujuru	Front Page

Table 2. Cont.

Date	Story Headline	Page
13 November 2014	Mujuru ally tortured	Front Page
14 November 2014	Axing Mujuru will backfire	Front page
15 November 2014	Is this Mujuru's end?	Front Page
16 November 2014	Carnage for Mujuru	Front Page
17 November 2014	Is Mujuru facing imminent arrest?	Front Page
18 November 2014	Mujuru defence spot on	Front Page
21 November 2014	Mujuru attacks now comical—analysts	Front Page
26 November 2014	Explain Mujuru death: Brother	Front Page
3 December 2014	Mujuru fears for her life	Front Page
8 December 2014	They murdered my Rex: Mujuru	Front Page
4 March 2015	Spies at Mujuru farm	Front Page

Whereas all the *Daily News*' headlines captured in Table 2 show the newspaper's pro-Mujuru faction editorial disposition, the researcher only picks a few articles to demonstrate the extent the newspaper was entangled in ZANU-PF factionalism. In doing so, the researcher argues that these editorial characteristics are endemic in other stories. In a front-page article, "I will never surrender—Mujuru" (26 October 2014), *Daily News* assertively declared that Mujuru was "determined to overcome First Lady Grace Mugabe's recent scathing attacks on her and would never surrender". Although it constantly described Mujuru as "the beleaguered widow of the late liberation hero Solomon Mujuru", *Daily News* was certain she would prevail. While adopting the under-siege frame, the newspaper projected Mujuru as an invincible giant when it claimed she "confronted Mugabe" over Grace Mugabe's public attacks on her person. The deployment of the word "confronted" frames Mujuru as brave to challenge Mugabe, who was well known for his ruthlessness when his rule was under threat. The article re-emphasized the point that Mujuru was a national hero by constantly referencing her contribution to Zimbabwe's liberation war. Another headline, "State media attacks Mujuru" (31 October 2014), dismissed *The Herald*'s allegations that Mujuru engaged in corruption. It read:

Mujuru faced a new round of damaging allegations yesterday from *The Herald*, widely seen as the voice of government and powerful forces within ZANU-PF. It accused her of illegally receiving money from investment partners and using her political clout to squeeze them out of a business venture.

The story deployed the victimhood frame and projected Mujuru as a target of negative powerful forces within ZANU-PF. This explains why *Daily News* dismissed the allegations raised against her without instituting its own investigations. *Daily News* was renowned for exposing corruption in ZANU-PF in the past, but in this instance, it firmly stood with Mujuru. It quoted carefully chosen "political analysts" dismissing the allegations levelled against Mujuru by *The Herald*. Instead, the article reminded the audience that Mujuru was "a battle-hardened veteran of the 1970s liberation war" and "will overcome her enemies". It also claimed that Mujuru's family "is known to own businesses including a diamond mine in southern Zimbabwe" without elaborating how such investments were started. When Mujuru absconded congress, a *Daily News* headlined moaned, "Mujuru fears for her life" (3 December 2014), with the newspaper once again deploying the victimhood frame as it sought public sympathy for a vice president whom it had earlier on framed as invincible. The story dismissed the ZANU-PF congress as a "damp squib" and slammed Mugabe for

mistreating Mujuru, yet it was Solomon Mujuru (Joice Mujuru's husband) who installed "the nonagenarian as ZANU-PF's leader way back in the 1970s". Mugabe is projected as unthankful. In "Is Mujuru facing imminent arrest?" (17 November 2014), *Daily News* quoted "political analysts" Dumiso Dabengwa, Dewa Mavhinga, and Pedzisai Ruhanya—well-known anti-Mugabe political activists—warning Mugabe against arresting Mujuru on corruption charges. Ruhanya dismissed the allegations as "sheer political madness" and was further quoted saying, "Anything can happen when lawless takes precedence, but it will be unfortunate . . . when the history of this country is written, Mugabe will be portrayed as the villain if this woman is arrested". Such storylines framed Mujuru as a saint. Another *Daily News* article, "Axing Mujuru will backfire" (14 November 2014), begs Mugabe to keep Mujuru in ZANU-PF. The article reads in part:

If ZANU-PF hardliners succeed in ousting embattled Vice President Joice Mujuru, it is possible the opposition will take advantage and join forces with members of parliament who support her which will result in President Robert Mugabe and the ruling party being booted out, analysts say.

This demonstrated the extent to which *Daily News* stretched itself to protect Mujuru from her perceived ZANU-PF enemies and exposed its biased narratives. Mujuru's perceived ZANU-PF rivals were framed as "hardliners", while use of the word "embattled" implied that the vice president was besieged by powerful and ruthless forces.

Case 2: The *Daily News* anti-Mnangagwa storylines

When Mugabe appointed Mnangagwa his deputy after the dismissal of Mujuru, *Daily News* generated stories that undermined the then vice president's faction (Team Lacoste) while propping its rival, the G40 (see Table 3 below).

Table 3. *Daily News* anti-Mnangagwa articles.

Date	Story Headline	Page
9 January 2015	42% tip Mnangagwa for presidency	Front
12 January 2015	Mnangagwa sucked into USD 600,000 share dispute	Front
27 February 2015	VP Mnangagwa contradicts Mugabe	Front
15 March 2015	Mnangagwa heads for trouble?	Front
2 May 2015	Mnangagwa lacks social base	Front
15 May 2015	Mnangagwa allies humbled in Gutu	Front
19 May 2015	Mnangagwa not heir apparent	Front
25 May 2016	Mnangagwa behind secret meetings	Front
26 May 2015	Mnangagwa cannot win election	Front
6 October 2015	Mnangagwa in bizarre apostolic rites	Front
8 December 2015	Mnangagwa test has come	Front
16 December 2015	Mnangagwa camp feels ZANU-PF heat	Front
12 January 2016	Mnangagwa allies face ZANU-PF sack	Front
26 January 2016	Mnangagwa faction goes for broke	Front
1 February 2016	Mnangagwa's ZANU-PF stress mounts	Front
15 February 2016	Mnangagwa might resign	Front
15 February 2016	Team Lacoste courts Mujuru	Front
21 February 2016	End of Mnangagwa	Front

Table 3. Cont.

Date	Story Headline	Page
10 March 2016	More Mnangagwa allies face the chop	Front
5 April 2016	Mnangagwa allies suffer massive blow	Front
25 April 2016	ZANU-PF okays Mnangagwa demo	Front
26 April 2016	Team Lacoste stalks Mugabe	Front
3 May 2016	Mnangagwa begs for mercy	Front
3 May 2016	Mnangagwa embarrassed	Front
27 May 2016	Mugabe shuts door on Mnangagwa	Front
16 June 2016	Grace frustrates Mnangagwa in Dubai	Front
31 June 2016	Can Mnangagwa survive the chop	Front
27 July 2016	Mnangagwa's problems mount	Front
30 July 2016	End nigh for Mnangagwa	Front
31 July 2016	Mnangagwa dumps allies	Front
6 September 2016	Mnangagwa camp falls further behind G40	Front
13 January 2017	Mnangagwa on the ropes	Front
30 July 2017	Grace roasts ED, Charamba	Front
31 July 2017	Will Mnangagwa survive?	Front
11 August 2017	Mnangagwa ally arrested	Front
3 September 2017	Mnangagwa beefs up security	Front
8 September 2017	Mnangagwa allies isolated	Front
12 September 2017	Mnangagwa at crossroads	Front
18 September 2017	Mnangagwa's fate: All eyes on Mugabe	Front
5 October 2017	ED (Mnangagwa) now a dead man walking	Front
11 October 2017	Defining moment for Mnangagwa	Front
30 October 2017	It's a sink or swim for ED	Front
2 November 2017	Plot to oust Mnangagwa thickens	Front
7 November 2017	Mnangagwa fired	Front
11 November 2017	Mnangagwa skips to China	Front

Daily News published 45 front page stories caricaturing Mnangagwa between 9 June 2014 and 11 November 2017. The researcher did not examine every story as interviews with journalists already confirmed they adopted the G40 faction in their reportage of ZANU-PF factionalism post Mujuru era. Thus, selection and analysis of stories was conducted merely to endorse a phenomenon already confirmed by journalists who are quoted widely in the previous section. When Mugabe appointed Mnangagwa as vice president, a front page *Daily News* article screamed, "Mnangagwa finally arrives" (11 December 2014). It read:

After years of struggle and suffering some debilitating defeats, Justice Minister Emmerson Mnangagwa was finally appointed ZANU-PF's first vice president yesterday, a position that sets him up to succeed President Robert Mugabe when the 90-year-old leaves office.

Saliency is placed on Mnangagwa's "struggle" to become vice president. This infers Mnangagwa was unfit for the position in the first place hence it took a struggle. The same story emphasizes the hollowness of the vice presidency when it quotes Mugabe saying, "we

have two vice presidents who have no real function except that they are my deputies". This implies that Mnangagwa struggled for a useless position. When it campaigned for Mujuru to become vice president, *Daily News* projected such an elevation as strategic in Mugabe's succession matrix. To emphasize its argument that vice presidency was a useless position, *Daily News* mobilized anti-Mnangagwa sources. These included Dewa Mavhinga, who equated Mnangagwa's elevation to "the end of ZANU-PF". Another *Daily News* headline, "Mnangagwa must shut up", drew from an anti-Mnangagwa source, Didymus Mutasa of the vanquished Mujuru faction. Mutasa dismissed Mnangagwa as a "charlatan" who failed to contribute meaningfully to Zimbabwe's liberation war. A charlatan is an impostor. This is an attempt at deconstructing Mnangagwa's liberation war credentials. *Daily News* also framed Mnangagwa as a sell-out in a headline, "Mnangagwa faction: US links exposed". It claimed Mnangagwa's ally Chris Mutsvangwa hosted US diplomat Eric Little at his house and concluded Mnangagwa was "clandestinely working with American officials" to weaken ZANU-PF. This demonstrates how sources sponsored narratives (D'Angelo, 2002) on ZANU-PF factionalism and the extent to which journalists consciously constructed a perspective to encourage a certain way of thinking (Fordjour & Sikanku, 2022, p. 867) on who should have succeeded Mugabe.

Case 3: The *Daily News*' pro-G40 stories

The table below (see Table 4) captures pro-G40 headlines in *Daily News*.

Table 4. The pro-G40 front page stories that were published by *Daily News* during the period under study.

Date	Story Headline	Page
12 February 2016	G40 outwits Team Lacoste in Politburo	Front
18 November 2016	War vets declare war on Moyo, "Tyson"	Front
19 March 2016	G40 finishes Team Lacoste	Front
24 March 2016	Ngwenya's new age of denials: It wasn't me	Font
23 March 2016	G40 puts last nails on Team Lacoste	Front
31 October 2016	Moyo's enemies ramp up the heat	Front
9 November 2016	Moyo roasts Mnangagwa	Front
28 December 2016	Moyo savages Lacoste, again	Front
3 January 217	Lacoste, G40 wars escalate	Front
12 January 2017	G40 hunts Mnangagwa, Team Lacoste	Front
27 January 2017	Lacoste youths warn Chipanga	Front
28 November 2016	G40, Team Lacoste tuck into each other	Front
28 November 2016	Moyo savages Mnangagwa	Front
25 January 2017	Kasukuwere mauls Mnangagwa supporters	Front
14 March 2017	Moyo wants to be president: Mutsvangwa	Front
17 March 2017	We'll crush G40, Mnangagwa's camp vows	Front
23 April 2017	Ghost of 2008 spooks ZANU-PF	Front
6 May 2017	Team Lacoste squeezes G40	Front
26 May 2017	"Time to cut Tyson loose"	Front
2 June 2017	Dark clouds hang over Kasukuwere	Front
14 June 2017	D-Day for Jonathan Moyo	Front
15 June 2017	Con-Court reserves ruling in Moyo's case	Front

Table 4. Cont.

Date	Story Headline	Page
21 June 2017	Tyson opens up	Front
22 June 2017	Tyson survives another day	Front
23 June 2017	Explosive Politburo as factions face off over Kasukuwere	Front
28 June 2017	Chiwenga after Jonathan Moyo	Front
4 July 2017	War vets want Moyo censured	Front
7 July 2017	Mahoka, Moyo off the hook	Front
17 July 2017	Jonathan Moyo: Rebel without a cause or voice of reason	Inside
30 July 2017	Grace roasts ED, Charamba	Front
30 July 2017	Case against Tyson collapses	Front
12 June 2017	G40 fears Mnangagwa is shoo-in	Front
10 April 2017	Vultures circle wobbly “Tyson”	Front
4 September 2017	Tyson regains lost ground	Front
21 September 2017	Jonathan Moyo in Ngwenya’s jaws	Front
22 September 2017	Moyo itching for day in court	Front
13 October 2017	Game on as Mnangagwa hammers Moyo	Front
20 October 2017	Grace Mugabe leads race for VP	Front
22 October 2017	Team Lacoste hatches Plan B	Front
2 November 2017	Plot to oust Mnangagwa thickens	Front
12 November 2017	Case against Tyson collapses	Front
19 December 2017	G40 kingpins allege persecution	Front

Daily News largely projected G40 as front runners to succeed Mugabe. A lead story, “G40 finishes off Team Lacoste” (19 March 2016), deriving from the dismissal from ZANU-PF of Mnangagwa’s ally July Moyo, read:

In arguably the most devastating blow to befall the ZANU-PF faction rallying behind embattled Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s mooted presidential aspirations, one of the Midlands godfather’s most trusted allies, July Moyo, has now also been booted out of the warring government (*Daily News*, 19 March 2016).

The story quoted a nameless G40 source saying, “this officially marks the end of Team Lacoste. We have now decapitated all the heads of this successionist outfit, meaning that it is all over, including for their leader (Mnangagwa)”. Besides the article being single-sourced from a nameless person, describing the dismissal of July Moyo as “most devastating blow” exaggerated the situation. Moyo held no position in Mugabe’s government when he was dismissed. Equally, describing the then vice president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, as “the Midlands godfather” framed him as a regionalist who lacked national appeal. In “G40 outwits Team Lacoste in politburo” (12 February 2016), *Daily News* celebrated the Mnangagwa faction’s alleged failure to “bring down G40 group”. It read:

The *Daily News*—which has reported accurately and consistently on the ruling party’s brutal infighting over the past five years—learnt yesterday that contrary to State media reports that the G40 had received a heavy shellacking, it was in fact Team Lacoste that left with their tails between their legs after the explosive meeting.

This “participatory” kind of journalism betrays *Daily News*’ pro-G40 editorial disposition. The same article predicted purging of “many other Mnangagwa camp storm troopers”. The phrase “storm troopers” is derogatory as these were “members of the private Nazi army notorious for aggressiveness, violence and brutality” (Merriam–Webster

dictionary). The same story also celebrated G40 successes by quoting nameless sources claiming that “the G40-linked politburo members, in particular Moyo and the party’s national political commissar Saviour Kasukuwere, had allegedly ‘outclassed the successionists (Mnangagwa faction) hands down in the meeting’”. Another story, “Mnangagwa might resign” (15 February 2016), propels the agenda for Mnangagwa to quit. Mnangagwa’s voice is missing in the story, which was derived from a nameless single source. It suggested “embattled” Mnangagwa was “crumbling under intense political pressure exerted on him and his allies by his determined ZANU-PF foes (G40)” and is “seriously mulling quitting both his party and government positions”. The deployment of the words “embattled” and “crumbled” seemed designed to create a notion that the G40 defeated the Mnangagwa faction and were favorites to succeed Mugabe. When unknown elements allegedly broke into Mnangagwa’s office, a *Daily News* headline screamed, “Ngwenya’s new age of denials: It wasn’t me” (24 March 2016), which read:

Mnangagwa, in all righteous indignation, looked the nation straight in the eye and insisted he suspected foul play. If apocryphal, it is definitely in character. Mnangagwa, with his colourful Karanga prose and melodrama, regularly embraces bad ideas or even invents fibs so totally that he convinces himself of their rightness. . . His persistent denials have undercut public confidence in his vice presidency.

Ngwenya is Mnangagwa’s nickname. Conversely, *Daily News* generated articles sympathizing with G40 politicians. These included “Vultures circle wobbly ‘Tyson’” (10 April 2017), “Dark clouds hang over Kasukuwere” (2 June 2017), “G40 allege persecution” (19 December 2017), “Case against Tyson collapses” (12 November 2017), “Tyson survives another day” (22 June 2017), and “Tyson survives the chop” (30 July 2017). This may account for *Daily News’* triumphant editorial tone whenever the G40’s Kasukuwere reportedly prevailed over the Mnangagwa faction—“Tyson survives the chop”, “Case against Kasukuwere collapses”, and “Tyson survives another day”. Kasukuwere was framed as infallible. Similar frames were deployed when reporting about Jonathan Moyo, who was initially projected as infallible and later as a victim of a ruthless Mnangagwa faction. Examples include headlines “Jonathan Moyo in Ngwenya’s jaws”, “Moyo’s enemies ramp up the heat”, “Team Lacoste guns for Moyo”, “Team Lacoste squeezes G40”, “G40 kingpins allege persecution”, and “Chiwenga after Jonathan Moyo”. *Daily News* clearly framed the Mnangagwa faction as aggressors and the G40 as victims. Occasionally, too, *Daily News* framed Moyo as mulish through headlines, “Moyo roasts Mnangagwa” and “Moyo savages Lacoste, again”.

Case 4: NewsDay’s pro-Mnangagwa anti-Mujuru narratives

NewsDay adopted a pro-Mnangagwa and anti-Mujuru editorial disposition in its reportage of ZANU-PF factionalism (see Table 5 below).

Table 5. *NewsDay’s* stories on Mujuru.

Date	Story Headline	Page
14 February 2014	Mugabe disqualifies Mujuru, Mnangagwa	Front
11 February 2014	VP Mujuru torches storm	Front
17 October 2014	Dump Mujuru, Grace tells Mugabe	Front
21 October 2014	Mujuru faction regroups	Front

Table 5. Cont.

Date	Story Headline	Page
23 October 2014	Mujuru must resign	Front
24 October 2014	MDC-T formed in Mujuru house	Front
24 October 2014	Mujuru's US ties behind fall out with Mugabe	Front
26 October 2014	Mujuru after my life	Front
31 October 2014	Mujuru faction fired in Masvingo	Front
18 November 2014	I have evidence against Mujuru: Grace Mugabe	Front
29 November 2014	ZANU-PF congress to seal Mujuru, allies fate	Front
3 December 2014	Mugabe blasts Mujuru	Front
4 December 2014	Mujuru a thief, says Mugabe	Front
4 December 2014	Mujuru consulted N'angas	Front
5 December 2014	Its game over for VP Mujuru	Front
19 December 2014	Real reason behind Mujuru ouster	Front
3 April 2015	ZANU-PF fires Mujuru	Front
27 July 2015	ZANU-PF land barons funded Mujuru	Front

NewsDay delegitimized Mujuru as Mugabe successor while legitimizing Mnangagwa. This is evidenced by headlines including, “Mujuru’s US ties behind fallout with Mugabe”, “MDC-T formed in Mujuru house—Grace”, “ZANU-PF congress to seal Mujuru, allies’ fate”, “It’s game over for VP Mujuru”, and “VP Mujuru torches storm”. Relying on nameless sources in a story, “Mujuru’s US ties behind fallout with Mugabe”, *NewsDay* framed Mujuru as a stooge of the West (Europe and America). It read:

Highly placed sources in Mugabe’s office yesterday said that fears in ZANU-PF hardliners were that given her (Mujuru) close links with the West, particularly the United States, she could reverse the “gains of the liberation struggle, in particular the land reform (*NewsDay*, 24 October 2014).

It quoted Grace Mugabe warning that, “Mujuru would bring back the pre-1980 era if she took over as President” while insinuating they were better candidates in ZANU-PF to succeed Mugabe. An unnamed source is quoted stating:

It is clear that with her, the country is at risk, we don’t want to go back to the pre-1980 era and there is a feeling that she can take us there as it seems she has a soft spot for the West. Zimbabwe cannot go back to that era before 1980. We want someone who will protect the revolution of the country, but with her, we can’t trust (*NewsDay*, 24 October 2014).

Mujuru is framed as a Western puppet bent on destroying ZANU-PF. The claim that she would “reverse gains of liberation struggle” projected her as a sell-out while allegations she helped form Simba Makoni’s opposition party *Mavambo/Khusile*/Dawn, constructed her as a rebellious (the rebel frame). Another single-sourced headline, “MDC-T formed in Mujuru house—Grace” (18 October 2014), reinforced the notion that Mujuru was a sell-out. Although such accusations emanated from Grace Mugabe’s public addresses, *NewsDay* failed to consider the context in which the texts were generated. In “Mugabe disqualifies Mujuru, Mnangagwa” (21 February 2014), *NewsDay* quoted a nameless source claiming, “Mugabe once promised Mnangagwa power when he finally relinquished it”. This projects Mnangagwa as Mugabe’s heir apparent. “VP Mujuru torches storm” (11 February 2014) constructed Mujuru as an incorrigibly corrupt politician. *NewsDay* invited opposition

politicians, MDC's Douglas Mwonzora and MDC 99's Job Sikhala, to comment on *The Herald's* reports implicating Mujuru in corruption. Expectedly, one of the politicians said:

I always thought she was reasonable, but now I realize that she is also lost despite sitting in a position of high authority, influence and power. . . she will be exposed for being heavily involved in the corruption that has swept across our public service institutions (*NewsDay*, 11 February 2014).

Case 5: *NewsDay's* pro-Mnangagwa, anti-G40 narratives

The post-Mujuru era saw *NewsDay* adopting an anti-G40 and pro-Mnangagwa faction editorial disposition. This is demonstrated in Table 6 below.

Table 6. *NewsDay's* pro-Mnangagwa anti-G40 stories.

Date	Story Headline	Page
12 May 2015	Kasukuwere on the ropes as ZANU-PF infighting intensifies	Front
28 September 2015	Mnangagwa ignores G40, continues on charm offensive	Front
29 January 2016	Charamba, Moyo clash over G40	Front
24 May 2016	Mugabe raps Kasukuwere	Front
8 August 2016	Chiwenga takes aim at 40	Front
20 October 2016	All things come to an end, even if you are Jonathan Moyo	Centre
4 November 2016	G40, a faction at the deep end	Centre
6 November 2016	G40 on the receiving end	Front
17 February 2017	Mugabe roasts Kasukuwere	Front
31 March 2017	Kasukuwere on the ropes	Front
5 April 2017	Kasukuwere, Mafios woes mount	Front
10 April 2017	Mugabe's pre-emptive strike saves Kasukuwere	Front
19 April 2017	ZANU-PF youths dump Kasukuwere	Front
23 June 2017	Kasukuwere on tenterhooks	Front
2 October 2017	It's gloves off: Mnangagwa	Front
9 November 2017	Mugabe out in weeks—Mnangagwa	Front
16 November 2017	Army arrests G40 criminals	Front
25 November 2017	Jonathan Moyo, political turncoat par-excellence. . . would be kingmaker that never was	Front
25 November 2017	G40 embraces Mnangagwa	Front
7 December 2017	G40 wanted Mnangagwa dead	Front

NewsDay published 20 front page anti-G40 stories between 15 May 2015 and 7 December 2017. The stories positioned Mnangagwa as a frontrunner to succeed Mugabe. This was achieved through biased single-sourcing and giving saliency to pro-Mnangagwa stories (placement on front page). In "Mnangagwa ignores G40, continues on charm offensive" (28 September 2015), *NewsDay* reported:

Acting President Emmerson Mnangagwa has publicly ignored attacks by members of a ZANU-PF faction known as the G40 and continued on a charm offensive

that has won him admirers and sympathizers in the battle to succeed President Robert Mugabe.

This frames Mnangagwa as enjoying popular support in ZANU-PF and poised to succeed Mugabe. The article accused G40 of “seeking to block” Mnangagwa from succeeding Mugabe. The word “block” implies Mnangagwa was a Mugabe natural successor. The same story described Mnangagwa’s silence despite attacks from the G40 as “a sign of political maturity”. This inferred that the G40 was immature. In “It’s gloves off: Mnangagwa” (2 October 2017), *NewsDay* dismissed the G40 as “Johnny-come-latelies”. Framing G40 as “Johnny-come-latelies” betrays *NewsDay*’s pro-Mnangagwa editorial alignment. Collins dictionary describes Johnny-come-lately as “a person who becomes involved in an organization after it has already started”. Therefore, *NewsDay* framed the G40 as political novices lacking clout. It deployed such frames throughout other stories it published during the period under review. After Mnangagwa went into exile in South Africa, *NewsDay* published a headline story, “Mugabe out in weeks—Mnangagwa” (9 November 2017). Although Mnangagwa left Zimbabwe for South Africa fearing assassination by his rivals, the *NewsDay* quoted a nameless source claiming:

He was working towards reviving the economy and progressively re-engaging the world, despite numerous calls from many quarters for him to stand against Mugabe. He refused and said he held high respect for his former boss although he knew the things that Mugabe was doing were wrong.

This was an attempt at framing Mnangagwa—who appeared a coward when he fled Zimbabwe leaving his allies at the mercy of Mugabe—as a well-cultured and fearless politician. When Mnangagwa became president, a *NewsDay* headline screamed, “G40 embraces Mnangagwa” (25 November 2017), which derived from remarks by two junior G40 politicians which the newspaper interviewed to infer an endorsement by the broader faction. This frame legitimized Mnangagwa by creating a notion in the minds of audiences that even his enemies recognized him as the rightful Zimbabwean leader. At the same time, the frame ignored the fact that Mnangagwa was a beneficiary of a military coup.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

It is clear from the interviews and the stories that ZANU-PF factions manipulated journalists at *Daily News* and *NewsDay* and influenced how independent newspapers reported on Mugabe’s succession. The independence of Zimbabwe’s independent press drowned in factions. *Daily News* and *NewsDay*—the only remaining daily newspapers free of state control—were weaponized by feuding ZANU-PF factions. These newspapers were renowned for pursuing oppositional/adversarial journalism (Ranger, 2005; Chuma, 2008; Maodza, 2024) that promoted justice and accountability but were swallowed by factions as ZANU-PF imploded. This disabled them from reporting squarely on developments in Zimbabwe’s governing party and denied citizens suffering from decades of Mugabe’s misrule vital information on political developments in their country. The mass media are central to Zimbabwe’s democratization (Chibwe, 2016) and must effectively play the informative and educative role without bias. How the media—especially the independent press—report on ZANU-PF succession affects democratic governance and national cohesion and negatively impacts the economy.

Findings suggest that *Daily News* aligned with Joice Mujuru’s faction and maligned her rival, the Emmerson Mnangagwa camp. From interviews with journalists at *Daily News*, it emerged that the Mujuru faction captured (bribed) journalists through “material things” and influenced how they reported on Mugabe’s succession. This was confirmed by Participant A, when they said they acquired a farm and started “a small business”

courtesy of the Mujuru faction. They also intimated that how they reported on ZANU-PF factionalism was driven by the desire to “defend the package” (benefits from Mujuru camp). Participant A also confirmed that the Mujuru faction would tell him to “go and sell this idea to the people” and that as a journalist he consciously supported the Joice Mujuru faction to succeed Mugabe as “Mujuru seemed a reformist” and Mnangagwa was “anti-business and a Chinese protégé”. Participant A also noted that because of his actions, “journalism became factionalized” and revealed that editors “would side with G40”. These claims are sustained by another *Daily News* journalist, Participant B, who revealed that even editors were “greased” (bribed) to “sanction stories” and the newsroom “was seriously factionalized (divided)”. On the other hand, *NewsDay* endeared itself with Mnangagwa’s faction whom it positively framed as Mugabe’s natural successor. Interviewed journalists at *NewsDay* confirmed that ZANU-PF factions captured (bribed) journalists and influenced how they reported the ruling party fissures. Participant C revealed that journalists “would go to extremes to please their sources who had become their paymasters” and confessed that his sources “were biased in favor of Mnangagwa and against Mujuru faction”. The journalist also indicated that rival ZANU-PF faction members “captured (bribed) journalists” while Participant D revealed that “editors were also into factions and fronted the Mnangagwa faction”. A journalist confessed to having “a soft spot for G40” and that he considered Team Lacoste “an aggressive group” that was not supposed to succeed Mugabe. The factions became frame sponsors (D’Angelo, 2002). Journalists also engaged in biased news gathering, which denied the maligned factions a right of reply in violation of basic journalism tenets that exhort fairness in news reports. For example, *NewsDay* derived anti-Mujuru stories from her rivals without granting her right of reply. *Daily News* committed a similar offence when it published a series of singled sourced anti-Mnangagwa faction articles (see Table 4) without affording the group a right of reply. Such an editorial stance helped set an agenda against the Mnangagwa faction. Scholars (Carlson & Franklin, 2011; Mathisen, 2021) note that there are always two sides to every news story and dismiss single sourcing as bad journalism. Whereas multiple sources enable the establishment of facts and consequently generation of truthful stories, it is evident that *Daily News* and *NewsDay* single-sourced information to promote frames that advocated the agenda of rival ZANU-PF factions. The data gathered from interviews also confirm that the journalists’ ideological beliefs influenced how *Daily News* and *NewsDay* reported on ZANU-PF factionalism. For example, Participant A revealed that “the idea was to try and reform ZANU-PF. . . Mujuru seemed like a reformist. Mnangagwa was anti-business, a Chinese protégé and tough guy”. This is also confirmed by Participant C when he indicated that he “were opposed to Grace Mugabe succeeding her husband (Robert Mugabe)” and generated stories that opposed “a bedroom coup” while Participant D confessed, “I had soft spot for the G40 because I always considered Team Lacoste (Mnangagwa faction) as an aggressive group that would be difficult to remove from power”. This demonstrates how *Daily News* and *NewsDay* became active players in ZANU-PF factionalism. The development further polarized the Zimbabwean media and weakened the position of the independent press as an epitome of professional journalism in a context where the state-aligned media were ZANU-PF lapdogs. Journalism at *Daily News* and *NewsDay* became factionalized as it bluntly represented the interests of rival ZANU-PF groups fighting to succeed Mugabe.

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isation of journalism: interrogating the state of print media journalism in Zimbabwe, 2014–2017. HSSREC/00003562/2021) Maodza, Takunda (221115748) for which I am the Principal Investigator, has been approved (UKZN Research Office).

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Article

Digital Shifts and Ethno-Political Dynamics: Examining Event and Actor Designation in the Cameroon Boko Haram Terrorism Conflict through Print and Online Platforms

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Abstract: This study examines how the issue of ethnic identity is approached in Cameroon within the context of combating Boko Haram terrorism, considering the influence of the rise of social media on journalistic practices. The advent of these platforms has fundamentally altered the landscape of media coverage, challenging the traditional monopoly of journalists in shaping the narrative of news. How does this technological shift affect the discourse, especially in the designation of events and actors in the reporting of Boko Haram terrorism in Cameroon, whether in traditional print media or on online platforms like Facebook? Do these designations in print media and Facebook discussion forums indicate shifts in the dynamics of the Cameroonian media sphere (censorship, government repression, etc.), resulting from the emergence of new voices in digital discursive spaces? This study employs a dual analysis, integrating a critical examination of media discourse with a sociological study of journalistic production. The scrutiny of media discourse is based on the investigation of 497 articles published between 1st January and 30 June 2015, sourced from seven Cameroonian newspapers. The online corpus encompasses 450 written publications from three Facebook forums. We aim to establish a dialectical relationship between newspaper discourse, online content, and the sociological foundations shaping their production. The observed quality of designations in the studied forums unveils a surge in hate speech within the ethno-political landscape of Cameroon. While this phenomenon remained manageable through the intervention of state regulatory bodies in traditional media, the unrestrained nature of online content, coupled with the absence of state control, has facilitated the rise of inter-ethnic discursive hatred in politics. In conclusion, this study underscores the challenges stemming from the evolution of journalistic practices in a technological landscape and emphasizes the urgent need for regulatory frameworks to counteract the upswing in hate speech and inter-ethnic tensions within political discourse.

Keywords: event and actor designation; Boko Haram terrorism; ethnic identity; print and online platforms; critical analysis of press discourse

1. Introduction

On 17 May 2014, on the steps of the Elysée, the Cameroonian president officially declared war against Boko Haram, a terrorist group affiliated with Daesh (the Islamic State). This decision followed numerous attacks by this Islamist sect in the region of the Cameroonian Far North. This area borders the State of Borno in neighboring Nigeria, where this movement originated and established its base. Seven months later, Cameroonian newspapers used various designations to name this event: the rebellion of the North, the northern plot, the insurgency of the Grand North, the specter of 6 April, and the demonstration of strength of the northern front. By a press event, we mean the media treatment of what Alice Krieg-Planque (2009, pp. 77–90) refers to as an occurrence (that is, what happens in the phenomenal world) perceived as significant in a particular context that determines (or not) its remarkability. These designations of the conflict by Cameroonian

newspapers have the particularity of assigning it an identity definition. They associate a specific ethno-regional and religious identity group with this press event, while also invoking the collective memory related to the painful history of the country.

Indeed, the reference to Northern Cameroon in these formulations reflects the fact that Ahmadou Ahidjo, the first president of the country (1960–1982), was Fulani, a Muslim native of this region. On 4 November 1982, he resigned and handed over power to his constitutional successor, Paul Biya, who was sworn in on 6 November 1982, and is still in office.

On 6 April 1984, a faction of the armed forces, predominantly composed of individuals from the region of the first president who remained loyal, attempted a coup d'état. The coup ended in failure after more than 72 h of combat against loyalist and republican forces. Decades later, as the wounds from this failed coup were still healing, Boko Haram attacks on Cameroonian soil were swiftly perceived in public opinion as a resurgence of the reconstituted mutineers seeking revenge. The responsibility of politicians from this part of the country, allegedly supported by France, was implicated (Pommerolle 2015). The Speaker of the Lower House of Parliament (of Fulani and Muslim descent) and the then Minister Delegate for Supreme State Control (belonging to the Béti ethnic conglomerate, like the Head of State) successively denounced Boko Haram's accomplices, mainly in the northern regions and external powers. The tone, language used, the nature of accusations, and reactions in specific newspapers led to framing the coverage of these events within historical conflicts linked to ethno-regional identity trajectories. This phase of the conflict against Boko Haram was labeled by newspapers as the northern conspiracy theory. It triggered several other event sequences, including the war effort of the populations, a national solidarity operation initiated by ethno-political leaders in each region of the country to aid the populations of the Far North, devastated by terrorist attacks, and to support the army on the front line. Support marches and mobilizations on its behalf and motions of support for the Head of State, the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, constituted four press event sequences in total.

These narratives and politico-identity clashes extended onto digital social media (DSM). We focused on three Facebook discussion groups: *Le Cameroun c'est le Cameroun* (LCCLC) (Cameroon is Cameroon), *Le Cameroun pour tous* (LCPT) (Cameroon for Everyone) and *Le Cameroun que je veux voir*, (The Cameroon I Want to See). In one of these groups, the Cameroonian army is likened to an ethnic militia, specifically the Bulu militia named after the ethnic group to which the Head of State belongs. Supporters of the ruling party refer to a certain faction of the opposition as Talibans, against the backdrop of the Beti/Bamileke cleavage (the two major ethnic conglomerates around which struggles for the conquest and retention of power crystallize), which marked the last presidential election in October 2018. Our interest in these online discussion forums stems from their prevalence in the Cameroonian political discourse, the high daily publication rates, the substantial number of followers, and the significant interaction among users in these groups. This study focuses on the event and actor designation in both newspapers and online publications within our corpus related to this current affair. It is structured around the research questioning below:

How does this technological shift affect the discourse, especially in the designation of events and actors in the reporting of Boko Haram terrorism in Cameroon, whether in traditional print media or on online platforms like Facebook? Do these designations in print media and Facebook discussion forums indicate shifts in the dynamics of the Cameroonian media sphere (censorship, government repression, etc.), resulting from the emergence of new voices in digital discursive spaces?

In Cameroon, the shift from print media to online content has transformed the relationship with information. The arrival of new actors (webnotes/internet users) means that journalists are no longer the exclusive arbiters of the meaning of news. For Christensen (1997), Andreessen (2011), Tapscott and Tapscott (1994), and Paul Maharg's (2016) terminology, this phenomenon is referred to as disintermediation. This involves a process whereby intermediaries in a supply chain are eliminated, typically through the digital re-engineering

of processes and workflows. This process can lead to the dismantling of nearly all industries and professions and the restructuring of nearly every facet of customer-centric activities. In our context, this pertains to the relationship between journalists and their audiences.

While journalists operated in an environment where their content was regulated by numerous state institutions, new actors operate with more freedom online, especially when outside the country. Locally, new legal frameworks empower authorities to penalize online content creators deemed unlawful, rules that are challenging to enforce on internet users based abroad.

2. Theoretical Approach

Our approach revolves around the concept of designation, specifically focusing on event designation and actor designation as forms of informative framing. We delve into how these designations contribute to the unfolding of identity-related phenomena in both newspaper articles and online content within our corpus. In other words, we examine how designative choices shape the perception of the fight against terrorism in Cameroon, establishing the ethno-regional contours and stakes. Amossy (2005) discusses the sociality of discourse in this context, emphasizing that discourse is contingent upon its audience, to which the speaker must adapt (Perelman 1989). Seeking the sociality of the text is, above all, questioning who is speaking to whom, at what moment, from which place, under what circumstances, and in what space (Amossy 2005, p. 61).

Addressing the relationship of designation in this context aligns with the broader semiotic problematics of signs, particularly those that consider the study of meaning and its variations from the perspective of denomination or nomination (Kleiber 1984, 2001, 2003; Frath 2015; Petit 2012), among others. Understanding the reality of the identity dynamics in Cameroon regarding the fight against terrorism through the lens of designation involves considering discursive phenomena that underlie the apprehension of signs by speaking subjects. To do so, it is crucial to distinguish what designation is not from what it is. Designation is not nomination, and certainly not denomination. To illustrate this distinction, we refer to the passage by Kleiber. According to him,

the two types of relations cannot be confused because, contrary to the sole relationship of designation, the relationship of denomination requires, that the relationship X (linguistic expression) $\rightarrow x$ (things) has been established beforehand. Indeed, there is a relationship of denomination between X and x only if and only if there has been a prior act of denomination, i.e., the establishment of a referential link or a referential fixation, which can result from an effective act of denomination or simply from an associative habit, between the element x and the linguistic expression X . Such a requirement is not at all necessary for the relationship of designation. If I can only call something by its name if the thing has been named as such beforehand, I can designate, refer to, or point to something with an expression without that thing having been previously designated as such.

(Kleiber 2001, p. 24)

Denomination is a kind of “label nomenclature, the inventory of which dictionaries compile, capturing the meaning conveyed by discourse” (Longhi 2015, p. 5). Kleiber (2001) attributes several characteristics to it, including a pre-established fixed reference between the linguistic sign and the extralinguistic reality, a durable referential association, a preconstructed representational sense, an existential presupposition, etc. Nomination, on the other hand, categorizes a referent by placing it within a class of objects identified in the lexicon (Longhi 2015, p. 6). According to Frath (2015, p. 39), it is a candidate to become a denomination.

Thus, designation involves referring to an extralinguistic object without any stable and fixed relationship between the linguistic sign and the referent having been previously established. The designator is therefore an unstabilized lexical form, a product of the creative imagination of the speaker. In journalistic work, it serves as a powerful framing tool, directing the perception of recipients through specific designation modalities (Calabrese 2009). This is because journalists select information to disseminate and often

assign designations to the actors they discuss (Calabrese 2009, 2015). In upcoming sections, we will explore how designation operates in newspaper articles and online content within our corpus, and examine how it addresses dynamics related to ethnic identity. On this matter, Van Ginneken (1997) is quite prescriptive: “the production of meaning is intricately embedded in the activities of men and women in the institutions, or organization, and professions associated with their activities, and they produce and reproduce, create and recreate” (Van Ginneken 1997, p. 18).

To better understand the act of designation in a newspaper and in the online content of our corpus within the scope of this study, it is essential to consider the mediation of journalists or webnotes, who update designative referents used to define ethnic identities, as well as the (identitarian or non-identitarian) relationship that connects them to their source. Identifiable identities in publications (online or otherwise) are only through words used to designate them. In other words, they are the product of a journalistic naming protocol that has consequences in our perception (Calabrese 2008). Through the mediation of journalists and webnotes, they can control and neutralize the effects of these protocols (Boyomo Assala 2009; Tuchman 1972). This is why designations in a newspaper or in online publications sometimes bear the marks of a struggle for the definition of the meaning to be given to current events. The act of designation is thus intimately linked to the editorial policy of a newspaper and in the online discussion forums of Cameroon. It is the arena of social struggles (Siblot 1998). Its analysis reflects how the figure of the sender unfolds in the semiotic space of a given medium or platform, betraying intentions, goals, and the sought-after effect. This is made possible through how the contents of publications are handled in their enunciative structure. In our analysis, we specifically focus on event designators and actor designators within the studied printed and online publications.

2.1. Event Designators

Event designators come into play when a new event emerges on the public stage, with the media (or webnotes) appropriating it through a process of designation (Calabrese 2008). Through a series of operations, they seek to objectify it by defining its context and highlighting distinctive characteristics that facilitate its referencing (Ibidem).

Depending on the media’s objectives or the webnote’s intentions, the preferred characteristics in the designating term may include a date, a proper name, or even a strict event name (Calabrese 2009) containing senses of eventuality (conflict against Boko Haram). Based on this, we refer to event designators as discourse elements used to describe, and sometimes define, situational contexts through their strong referential and semantic load, sometimes linked to a historical-media event (Calabrese 2008, 2009). Their circulation through the media and continued presence in our daily conversations ensures their recognition throughout their duration in discourse (Calabrese 2008). They have the capacity to store the coordinates of the event to which they refer (Calabrese 2009). Shutz (1994) refers to this as a social stock of shared knowledge. Simply mentioning their names is enough to trigger the recall of the events they suggest. “The media thus give a name to the event, which is supposed to describe it (even in its future and transformations) based on the dominant values in society. Some have a high degree of formatting (elections, heatwaves), others imply a certain interpretation of the context (a crisis, a war, riots), and a small number involve the public positioning of the speaker regarding a conflict (a genocide)” (Calabrese 2009, p. 3).

Although the events suggested in our study by event designators did indeed have a physical reality, their verbalization is a socially constructed artifact. There are several types of event designators, including toponyms (which focus on the event’s location as the main information coordinate), xenisms (aiding in the recall of toponymic coordinates through phonetic resonance and the exact naming of the event), and hemeronyms (event designators focusing on the date), etc.

In our research, we will delve further into hemeronyms. Morphosyntactically and semantically, the hemeronym is a date that designates an event (Calabrese 2008). Its

eventuality load relies on an evocative context, and its formulation fulfills a need for linguistic economy aimed at producing a specific effect on the representation of the event (Calabrese 2008). Pragmatically, the hemeronym is capable of designating events limited in time, with a strong political component that interrupts the usual course of society. It would thus have a very particular effect on the construction of the event, interrupting a natural temporality and establishing a transversal series of facts that, however, are not perceived homogeneously (Calabrese 2008, p. 6). In other words, it is a form of event designator whose explanatory and predictive character is operational in the study of events of a political nature (Calabrese 2008). In our view, this gives it sufficient relevance as an analytical instrument for examining the identity markers at play in the Cameroonian media space. The hemeronym that captures our attention in the analyzed articles is the date of April 6. It interests us here for the narrative it suggests in the national opinion, especially during the conflict against Boko Haram, specifically in a context where the attacks of this terrorist group are perceived by a certain political elite belonging to the Béti ethnic conglomerate as a rebellion in the North.

2.2. Actor Designators

Actor designators play a crucial role in framing events (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988, p. 58), as media outlets select information to disseminate and often assign designations to the actors they discuss. This task is carried out in reference to shared cognitive frameworks, professional protocols, and with the assistance of other social actors responsible for nomination and designation (e.g., the military, police) (Calabrese 2015). A few months after Cameroon officially entered conflict with the Boko Haram terrorist group, different media outlets used distinct designations for this organization. Some national media referred to it as a northern rebellion, a designation contested by others that earlier labeled it as Boko Haram, depicting it as a violent Islamist sect. In the former case, the designation attributes the aggression against Cameroon to a specific ethno-regional identity group, while the latter emphasizes an external aggression.

Hall (2007, p. 207) terms this situation the struggle for positionalities, highlighting the challenges related to designating social actors in newspapers within an environment of ethno-regional identity competition for power benefits.

3. Methodology

This research combines critical analysis of press discourse with sociological analysis of journalistic production. Our approach aims to contextualize the ideology behind the designations of press articles and online content under study, particularly by examining their relationship to the mechanisms they result from, such as (for printed press) the territorial anchoring of the newspaper, its editorial line, its language of production, and (for both printed press and online content) the identity of the person speaking, or the community involved in the event.

The main objective is to establish a dialectical relationship between the discourse of newspapers, online content, and the sociological foundation of their production. The analysis of press discourse is based on the examination of 497 articles published between 1 January and 30 June 2015. They are drawn from 7 Cameroonian newspapers selected based on several criteria: the importance given to the identity (ethnic) question and the social claims it has generated. Other criteria such as language of publication, territorial coverage, and the origin of capital (public, private) were also considered. Moreover, these newspapers hold significant symbolic weight in structuring the public space in Cameroon despite the crisis prevailing in this field of activity. These include the bilingual government daily *Cameroon Tribune* (CT) (with a circulation between 8000 and 12,000 copies), four private national dailies: two in French (*Le Messager* and *Le Jour*, each with a circulation between 3000 and 5000 copies), two in English (*The Post* and *The Median*, each with a circulation between 2500 and 5000 copies), and two regional newspapers (Table 1) (*L'Œil du Sahel* and *Ouest Échos*, each with a circulation between 2500 and 3000 copies).

Table 1. Variables for the analysis of print and online contents.

Corpus \ Variable	Territorial Anchoring of the Corpus	Editorial Line	Language of Publication	Individuals/Community Involved in the Event	Media Owner (Public/Private)
Print corpus	National, regional	✓	French, English	Individuals and community	Public and private
Online corpus		✓	French, English	Individuals and community	Private

Source: The author.

The online corpus includes 450 written publications from the three Facebook forums: *Le Cameroun c'est le Cameroun* (LCCLC), *Le Cameroun pour tous* (LCPT), and *Le Cameroun que je veux voir*. Our approach involved, initially, applying for membership in each of these online discussion groups. Once accepted as a member of these platforms, we conducted keyword searches in each group's search bar related to each of the news topics under study. Thus, in each of the Facebook groups, we initiated searches based on expressions such as war against Boko Haram, regional balance, and Anglophone problem. The goal was to see all the publications produced in each of these groups on these specific topics. In addition to the search bar, the Facebook social network allows the delimitation of a specific period in relation to the launched search. Our observation in this regard is that the three selected groups produced nothing on our analyzed news topics in 2015, 2016, and 2017. They were created at the earliest in 2018 for the oldest, otherwise in 2019 for the others. Although social networks are now a prominent source of information in Cameroon, this reality is very recent. With a population of nearly 30 million, Facebook was still one of the favorite social networks for Cameroonians in the first quarter of 2022. By February 8 of the same year, there were more than 5 million account holders. Facebook ranked third among the most visited platforms in the country, behind YouTube in second position and Google in first position.

For the group *Le Cameroun c'est le Cameroun* (LCCLC), which we studied, its oldest publications date back to 2018. We make this clarification because we identified four groups with the same name. After investigations with reliable sources, we learned that originally there was only one group with this name, created in 2015. The split into multiple groups would have occurred because the administrator of the original group had joined the MRC, a party whose candidate officially came second in the last presidential election of 2018. One of the groups resulting from this split is called *Le Cameroun c'est le Cameroun libre* (Cameroon is a free Cameroon).

Concerning the groups *Le Cameroun pour tous* (LCPT) and *Le Cameroun que je veux voir*, the oldest publications related to our research date back to 2019. On this basis, it was challenging for us to grasp the thoughts of internet users on our analytical themes within the study period from January to June 2015, which is our interval of investigation. We observed that several discussion groups of Cameroonians emerged between 2018 and 2019. Nevertheless, we chose to analyze this content as an extension of these news topics. The aim was to see if they are addressed through the same enunciative registers and if they carry the same imaginaries as in the print media, a few years earlier. The specific news topics that captured our attention are as follows: the fight against Boko Haram terrorism, the Anglophone crisis, and regional balance.

As for the sociology of journalistic production, it is based on 15 semi-directed interviews conducted with publishers, editorial managers, journalists who covered these events, officials from journalists' associations, and government officials dedicated to managing the media sector in Cameroon.

3.1. Data Processing and Analysis

To identify actor and event designations in our corpus, we plan to rely on what Gamson and Modigliani (1989) call packages. These are elementary cores of meaning, which can be a word, a date, or an expression with a designation value related to ethno-

regional identities, headlines, or simple statements. Our approach involves contextualizing the designations in our printed and online corpus in relation to the mechanisms they result from. This includes the territorial anchoring of the newspaper, editorial policy, language of publication, the identity of the media owner, and the person/community involved in the event (Table 1). The objective is to establish a dialectical relationship between the discourse of newspapers and the sociological underpinning of their production. Subsequently, we will indicate how and in what manner the designation mode deployed in our online and print corpora reflect changes in the dynamics of the Cameroonian media sphere (censorship, government repression, economic pressures, etc.) concerning the emergence of new voices in digital discursive spaces.

To conduct this work, we initially compiled the main designations of actors and events associated with the fight against Boko Haram terrorism in our print corpus, especially in the four identified event sequences. Next, we sought to understand how they were discursively framed in different newspapers and the sociopolitical stakes they convey. We then examined the online content corpus to determine if the structure identified in the print media for the fight against Boko Haram was replicated and to identify the event and actor designations whenever they were used in this context. The observed differences will help understand the changes in the dynamics of the Cameroonian media sphere (censorship, government repression, economic pressures, etc.) with the emergence of new voices in digital discursive spaces. The quality of the designation observed in the studied forums will determine the actual change or mere complementarity between print media and online content. Both spheres of content publication exhibit a significant asymmetry in the rigor of state control. Online content offers greater flexibility and a wider margin of maneuver, as authorities may not have the means to act online as they do in print media.

3.2. *Processing of Transcribed Interviews*

The objective behind processing the transcribed interviews is to account for the role of ethno-regional identity interferences in the editorial attitude or professional behavior of media actors (journalists and publishers). As mentioned earlier, information here proves to be less a product of journalistic work and more a result of interactions among journalists, webnotes, and other actors, particularly those from business and political spheres (Champagne 1984). These forces intertwine within the journalistic milieu, shaping its internal dynamics. Thus, the production of both print and online content is influenced by political realities. In this case, we consider ethno-regional identities within the context of the fight against terrorism.

Given the diverse profiles of our interviewees and the different positions from which each expressed themselves, maintaining a certain distance from the interview content became necessary. The goal was to conduct an analysis as detached as possible from the biases that characterize the statements of our interviewees. In such a context, our reflective approach and distancing in the analysis of interviews involved, each time, specifying the position of our interviewee, their background, and possible conflicts of interest that could influence their speech in the context of this research, essentially placing them within the broader context of the mechanisms they are part of. From there, we sought to better understand the relevance of their statements to produce our analysis in relation to the phenomenon under study.

4. Results

To conduct this work, we initially compiled the main designations of actors and events associated with the fight against Boko Haram terrorism in our press corpus and then online. Next, we attempted to understand their discursive framing where they appeared and the sociopolitical stakes they convey. The tables below (Tables 2–5) present the main designations of actors and events in our corpus related to the fight against Boko Haram terrorism, organized by newspaper.

Table 2. Designations of actors and events within the government daily in the context of the fight against Boko Haram terrorism.

Sequences Newspaper	Population's War Effort		Motions of Support for the Head of State		Marches and Mobilization in Support against Boko Haram		Theory of a Northern Conspiracy	
	Actor Designation	Event Designation	Actor Designation	Event Designation	Actor Designation	Event Designation	Actor Designation	Event Designation
<i>Cameroon Tribune</i>	Bamboutos Chiefs, The Elite of the North-West, The Haut-Nyong elites	War effort, popular support	The elites of Wouri Bwele canton, The driving forces of Menoua, The vibrant forces of Noun, etc.		Southwest Youths, Inhabitants of the South, Bui Women, The elite of the South, The Noun March, etc.	Patriotic March	The Population of the Far North Region, the Eldest Daughter of the Renewal Movement	The Call of Lékié

Source: The author.

Table 3. Designations of actors and events within the Anglophone press in the context of the fight against Boko Haram terrorism.

Sequences Newspaper	Population's War Effort		Motions of Support for the Head of State		Marches and Mobilization in Support against Boko Haram		Theory of a Northern Conspiracy	
	Actor Designation	Event Designation	Actor Designation	Event Designation	Actor Designation	Event Designation	Actor Designation	Event Designation
<i>The Median</i>	Southwest Chiefs, Northwest Fons	Solidarity against Boko Haram	Southwest Chiefs		Persons from all, Cameroonians	Solidarity against Boko Haram		
<i>The Post</i>	Southwest The Fako Chiefs	Solidarity against Boko Haram			Southwest	Patriotic march		

Source: The author.

Table 4. Designations of actors and events within the regional press in the context of the fight against Boko Haram terrorism.

Sequences Newspaper	Population's War Effort		Motions of Support for the Head of State		Marches and Mobilization in Support against Boko Haram		Theory of a Northern Conspiracy	
	Actor Designation	Event Designation	Actor Designation	Event Designation	Actor Designation	Event Designation	Actor Designation	Event Designation
<i>L'Écoute Sahel</i>	The elite of the Adamawa, the elite of the Grand North	War effort			The average Cameroonian, the minister, parliamentarians, ordinary citizens, United for Cameroon collective	Patriotic march, Kousseri march, Peul, Kirdi, Arab-choa	Nordiste	Northern conspiracy, Northern Rebellion, 6 April 1984
<i>Ouest Échos</i>	The department of Koung-khi, High Plateaus, etc.	War effort			Le Haut-Nkam			

Source: The author.

Table 5. Designations of actors and events within national private dailies in the context of the fight against Boko Haram terrorism.

Sequences Newspaper	Effort de Guerre des Populations		Motions de Soutien au Chef de l'État		Marches et Mobilisation de Soutien Contre Boko Haram		Théorie d'un Complot Nordiste	
	Actor Designation	Event Designation	Actor Designation	Event Designation	Actor Designation	Event Designation	Actor Designation	Event Designation
<i>le jour</i>	The South region, the Nyong-et-Kelle department, elites of the Mfoundi, etc.	Effort of war, popular support, popular mobilization			The average Cameroonian, the minister, parliamentarians, actors from civil society, ordinary citizens, the collective United for Cameroon, etc.	Patriotic march	North, northerner	Conspiracy theory
<i>Le Messenger</i>	The Bamboutos, The elites of the Sanaga Maritime, etc.	War effort, popular support, popular mobilization	The Bamboutos		The Cameroonians, the minister, parliamentarians, Unis pour le Cameroun collective	Patriotic march	The minister, the president of the National Assembly	The call from Lékié, the specter of an April 6th, a show of strength from the northern front, problème nordiste

Source: The author.

4.1. Designation of Actors and Events in the Print Media of Our Corpus

In analyzing these tables, we observe that the mode of designation of both actors and events in the fight against Boko Haram in Cameroon varies depending on the newspaper, its ownership (public, private), territorial coverage, editorial line, and language of publication (Table 1).

In privately-owned newspapers published in French with national territorial coverage (*Le Jour* and *Le Messenger*), the mode of designation of actors and events relies primarily on toponymic referencing of actors, most of whom belong to the bourgeois ethno-political elite. For instance, in the sequence titled effort de guerre des populations (war effort of the populations), while the designation of actors almost exclusively refers to a small bourgeois ethno-political elite, the event is endowed with a popular aura. In *Le Jour* and *Le Messenger*, synonyms such as soutien populaire (popular support) and mobilisation populaire (popular mobilization) are used, ultimately confirming the political crowning of a few territorially entrenched ethno-political leaders. Examples include Bamboutos Chiefs, l'élite du Nord-Ouest (the elite of the Northwest) (Table 5), les élites de la Sanaga maritime (the elites of the Sanaga maritime) (Table 5), and so forth. This type of designation associates a community or a personality with a specific territoriality, indicating their origin.

While this approach is somewhat measured or limited in privately-owned press (Table 1) due to the interests it carries, in the columns of the publicly-owned newspaper *Cameroon Tribune*, it is a nearly systematic approach. This newspaper was, in fact, most solicited by these ethno-political elites themselves to cover this news. The idea behind this strategy is to showcase the support of the diverse ethno-political high nobility in the fight against terrorism. In this event sequence, the designation of actors primarily associates the toponymic reference of the designated actor (department, region, canton, etc.) with their social rank/status (elites, traditional Chief, minister, etc.) (Table 2). This results in actor designations such as les forces vives du Noun (the living forces of Noun), les élites du canton Wouri Bwele (the elites of Wouri Bwele), and so on.

In the sequence titled théorie du complot nordiste (theory of the northern conspiracy), on the other hand, the designation of actors and events revolves almost exclusively around two communities: the Béti (from the Lékié department) and the northerners. In a statement called l'appel de la Lékié (the call of Lékié), which went viral and was published in the state-owned daily, the ethno-political elite of the Lékié department uses the "expression

complice de Boko Haram dans les régions septentrionales”¹ (accomplice of Boko Haram in the northern regions) to designate their colleagues from the northern regions of the same ruling political party. This situation recalls the painful past that links these two ethno-political communities, notably with the failed coup of 6 April 1984. *Le Messager* even speaks of the “spectre d’un 6 avril”² (specter of April 6) (Table 5) and of a problème nordiste (northern problem) (Table 5). The designation of actors in this sequence mainly relies on the toponymic references of the actors, using terms such as la Lékié, Nordiste, and régions septentrionales (northern regions) (Tables 2 and 5). It also relies on conflict markers with toponymic references, using expressions like “complices de Boko Haram dans les régions septentrionales”,³ (accomplices of Boko Haram in the northern regions), thus indicating a conflictual perception of this conflict with an identity anchoring.

In the publicly-owned newspaper, on the other hand, the designation of actors or events on this subject explicitly does not reference violence towards any specific ethno-political group nationally. The tone is not one of stigmatization. To refer to this territoriality, the newspaper speaks of la fille “ainée du Renouveau”⁴ (the eldest daughter of the Renewal), as if it were in a courting situation. For many political observers, the leaders of Boko Haram reportedly find it relatively easy to recruit from the youth in the Extreme North region simply because it is perceived as neglected by the public authorities: under-education, economic poverty, insufficient healthcare and road infrastructure, among other grievances. When the state-owned newspaper refers to la fille aînée du Renouveau in this manner, it adopts a seductive and counter-communication approach. The aim is to convey that this region is at the heart of the presidential attention and has been since the arrival of Paul Biya in power. These explanations are explicitly clarified by the newspaper in the following excerpt:

“The political elites, regularly echoed by the media, often like to repeat, at their leisure, that the Far North, emerging in August 1983, in the aftermath of the breakup of the vast province of the North, which covered at the time the three current northern regions (Adamaoua, North, and Far North), is the eldest daughter of the Renewal. This expression is not an empty slogan devoid of any foundation. By traversing the deep Cameroon, the Far North can boast of being among the privileged regions of the country in terms of roads: all departmental capitals are connected to the regional capital by paved roads...”⁵

However, the newspaper fails to mention that the fragmentation of the former large Northern region into three, including the one affected by Boko Haram, was more of a political maneuver. It aimed to weaken the political base of the first president, where he still had significant support.

In the French-language private newspapers, the event designation in this sequence known as the theory of the northern plot also relies on references that suggest conflict.

This is evident with expressions like the rebellion of the North, the northern plot, the insurrection of the Grand North, and northern problem. This is a lexical field of aggression associated with an ethno-political community. This event designation also takes the form of a date that acts as a synonym for the same aggressive reference, such as the specter of an April 6, the date of the failed coup. This is mainly developed in the regional newspaper *L’CEIL du Sahel* but also in *Le Messager*. However, this lexical field of aggression is completely changed in the other subsequent event sequences, namely the war effort of the populations, motion of support for the Head of State, and march and mobilization in support of the army. In terms of the number of publications for each journal on these topics, the first two did not interest these editorial teams much. As we have pointed out, the ethno-political elites of each locality had sought the public capital newspaper more for this coverage. Nevertheless, for the few designations of actors that come back to it, we observe fewer conflictual references as in the theory of the northern plot, even if the designation of actors remains mainly characterized by toponymic references.

Within the private English-language newspapers (Table 1) in our corpus, this event sequence has not been the subject of many publications. It is as if it were a Franco-French question. However, this is indeed a question of power struggles at the top of the state. The only articles published by the English-language press (Table 1) in the corpus on this subject exclusively focus on the statements of the Chadian Minister of Communication, who reveals that the majority of weapons found in the hands of Boko Haram militants are of French origin, without pointing an accusing finger at a specific Cameroonian ethno-political group as an accomplice. Likewise, for the three other event sequences of the conflict against Boko Haram (war effort of the populations, motion of support for the Head of State, march, and mobilization in support of the army), these newspapers almost exclusively focused on what happened in the Anglophone regions and by actors originating from these territories. Yet, we are dealing with newspapers that are not regional but national (Table 1). The main designations of actors found here in the context of the war effort of the populations are Southwest Chiefs, Northwest Fons (Table 3). These are elitist references that are mainly found in reports and summaries. However, this event, in the columns of Cameroun Tribune, has interested several other ethno-political and linguistic leaders in territorialized regions. We observe this mode of coverage also in support marches and motions addressed to the Head of State in these newspapers—a coverage mode that we qualify as Anglo-centric for newspapers that claim a national territory.

In the private press with regional territoriality (Table 1) in our corpus (*L’Œil du Sahel*, *Ouest Échos*), the relationship to news about Boko Haram terrorism or the number of publications seems to depend greatly on the territory of the newspaper and the ethno-political community involved in the event. We see this, for example, in the designation choices in the sequence reserved for the theory of the northern plot. In *Ouest Échos*, for example, there is no mention of a northern plot, rebellion of the North, let alone April 6 or northern problem. On the other hand, these designations return in *L’Œil du Sahel* with the perspective of deconstructing them, with articles of analysis and extensive interviews often granted to ethno-political leaders in this region. After the publication of the communiqué called the call of the Lékié in the government daily, the newspaper *Nordistes* will specifically focus on this chosen piece of this document.

“Not against all pernicious manoeuvres on the part of these accomplices of Boko Haram; manoeuvres of political blackmail comparable to an attempt to take hostage or destabilise the Institutions of the Republic or to a political conspiracy, inspired by various ends, in particular political, personal or regionalist ambitions; against the personal and unspeakable behaviour of these objective allies of Boko Haram, in particular their doublespeak and other similar failings, with regard to the fundamental and permanent obligation of loyalty, which is incumbent on all citizens, at all levels, towards the President of the Republic.”⁶

In its analysis of this statement, the newspaper first addresses the disassociation of other power elites belonging to the Béti ethnic conglomerate. Specifically, the Minister of Higher Education and the then Secretary-General of the Presidency, both influential figures in the Bulu tribe, the same as the Head of State. In the local political context, this reflects the notion that within the broader Béti community, these accusations do not enjoy unanimous support, especially among the Bulu elite. The article notes, “this literature had sparked multiple reactions, all condemning such deviations in the Republic. Jacques Fame Ndong, Belinga Eboutou, and many other personalities distanced themselves from this stigmatizing position.”⁷

It is not coincidental that the newspaper focuses precisely on these two political heavyweights originating from the South region. The first has held the position of Minister of Higher Education for over 20 years and is also the regional leader of the ruling RDPC party in the South. The second, who has since passed away, was, at the time of the events, the Director of the Civil Cabinet of the Presidency. This underscores the significance of the ethnic variable in Cameroonian politics and its influence on the editorial choices in

covering certain events. This could be seen as an ethno-political bias that is not lost on the journalists at this publication, who are aware of the stakes surrounding this issue.

In *Ouest Échos*, there seems to be a general lack of interest in this news. The ethno-political groups primarily in conflict in the coverage of this news are not within its coverage territory. However, this is a national issue, especially concerning the fight against terrorism.

4.2. Designation Issues Vary from One Newsroom to Another

- **Journalists and political players use different methods of appointment.**

We saw this in *Cameroon Tribune*, the state-owned daily. This state-owned daily refuses to use the word 'Nordiste' in the texts written by its journalists. Nor is there any mention of a conspiracy. The newspaper prefers to use official toponymic references or even political flattery to refer to the people of this part of the country stricken by Boko Haram in this sequence of events. It refers to the people of the Far North region, and even to the eldest daughter of the Renewal⁸ (two issues), as can be seen in this extract:

Political elites, regularly echoed by the media, like to repeat at will that the Extreme North, which emerged from the baptismal font in August 1983, following the break-up of the vast Northern Province, which at the time covered the three present-day northern regions (Adamaoua, North and Extreme North), is the eldest daughter of the Renewal. This expression is not a hollow slogan devoid of any foundation.⁹

The excerpt is from an article in which the newspaper defends the government against criticism claiming that terrorism is thriving in the region due to rampant poverty and neglect of the population. In its edition of Tuesday, 2 September 2014, *Cameroon Tribune* published a list of statements supporting the Head of State. The most resonant was the one called Lékié Appeal (Table 2). It is signed by high dignitaries of the government, characterized by belonging to the Eton and Manguissa ethnic groups (from the Béti-Bulu ethnic conglomerate). They accuse political leaders from ethno-political and linguistic groups originating from the Grand North, largely Islamized, of being "accomplices of Boko Haram, mainly in the northern regions of Cameroon, and of their sly strategies or attempts to incite the partition of the national territory, in light of the regrettable developments recorded in other countries or regions of the African continent."¹⁰ A stigmatizing designation mode that contrasts with that of the journalists in the editorial office. There is no room for censorship in this type of content in the government newspaper, even when the statements undermine social cohesion, especially when made by top government officials. While the state-owned newspaper, through the publications produced by its journalists, does not directly accuse northern elites or use stigmatizing designations, it leaves this latitude to ethno-political leaders of other identity groups. The newspaper has not faced any sanctions from the National Communication Council, the regulatory institution for the media. Similarly, no editorial manager has been sanctioned for this publication resembling hate speech. This indicates that *Cameroon Tribune*'s publications are the product of a media environment dominated by the political authorities. To illustrate this political influence in the newspaper, the Editor-in-Chief revealed, "*Cameroon Tribune is a newspaper where everyone thinks they have a right to oversight. As soon as you have a position, if you are the President of the National Assembly, for example, you believe that you should make sure there is also someone from the Far North at Cameroon Tribune*".¹¹

This reference is not at all insignificant, considering that the President of the National Assembly is indeed from the Far North region. This situation suggests various layers/surfaces of embedding and power relations that intersect with each other in this editorial office, particularly ethnic power relations often associated with language, region, tribe, etc.

- **6 April: Between commitment and disinterest, depending on the community involved in the event**

Within our corpus, the date of 6 April 1984 (Table 5), in reference to the failed putsch, is actively evoked by three newspapers: *Le jour*, *Le Messenger*, and *L'Œil du Sahel*. In the columns of *Le jour*, the date is cited eight times in seven issues of our corpus.¹²

In *Le Messenger*, this date is mentioned six times in two issues.¹³

The newspaper devotes an entire dossier to it, notably in its issue number 4298 on Tuesday, 7 April 2015, on page 4. In *L'Œil du Sahel*, this date is cited 19 times (Table 4) in our corpus,¹⁴ including 12 times in issue number 697 on Thursday, 23 April 2015. In the edition of Thursday, 2 April 2015, on page 9, we learn on this subject that

ultimately, essential questions that only historians will elucidate one day remain today. Indeed, many people continue to wonder, for example, if the coup was not desired or provoked, to find a credible and solid pretext to clean up the remnants of what would later be called the old regime. If that were the case, it cannot be said that this strategy was not successful. Whether it was a trap or a solitary adventure of a handful of misguided military personnel, it is undeniable that the northerners have never recovered from this historical accident. Since 6 April 1984, they continue, in one way or another, to pay for the mistakes of a few of their own.

In other words, for this newspaper, it is a story whose official intrigue's initiative remains in the hands of the victors. In English-language newspapers (Table 1), despite their national focus, there is no mention of these events. This gives the impression that, from the perspective of Anglophones, it is a Franco-Francophone affair. In the columns of *Cameroon Tribune* and *Ouest Échos*, very few references to these events are found. In the government-owned daily, we only found one mention of this date. It is a column by a communicator from the ruling party. He expressed outrage at the media treatment by French newspapers towards the Head of State. He declared, in essence, to denounce it:

(...) how can anyone be unaware, with reference to what is stated in the article in *Le Monde Afrique*, that the BIR did not exist at the time of the failed coup d'état on 6 April 1984, but only since 2001?¹⁵

Not surprisingly, the state-owned newspaper never revisits these events, as its editorial line aligns with the official positions of the government. In *Ouest Échos*, this date also appears once incidentally, in an open letter critical of the Head of State. The letter is written by a Cameroonian expatriate from Noun, from the Bamoun ethnic group in the West Region of Cameroon, as specified in the newspaper. One can read, in essence:

(...) Colonel NCHANKOU (President of the military tribunal during the events of 6 April 1984) and today Mr. YAP ABDON, president of the special criminal tribunal (as part of Operation Sparrow). These few examples show the effectiveness of the Bamoun officials in carrying out the tasks entrusted to them by the Head of State. It is therefore curious that all the Bamoun are now being punished because they are assimilated to UDC militants.¹⁶

Considering the above, there is selective attention to events suggested by the April 6 date, depending on the newspapers. This selection evidently varies based on the language of the newspaper, its territoriality, and its editorial line. Only privately-owned French-language newspapers revisit this date. Among them, there is a publication specializing in the northern regions, and two nationally renowned newspapers known for their criticism of the government. This reveals a fragmentation of the media public space. This fragmentation is based on politico-ideological, as well as ethno-regional and linguistic factors. The Publisher of *L'Œil du Sahel*, who is also a native of the territory covered by his newspaper, does not deny his proximity to political leaders in the Grand North. A similar attitude was found in his colleague from the West Region, also a native of the territory covered by his newspaper. Hence, this date may seem less relevant to this editorial team because the events it conveys relate to another region and, consequently, to another ethno-political

group. In the interview that the Publisher of this editorial team granted us, he emphasizes the precedence of his role as a politician over that of a journalist. He states, in essence:

I'm a politician even before I'm a journalist, because on campus, at the time of the democratic opening, I was the coordinator of the students of the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), which is the first political party in Cameroon, the nationalist party. So I was the coordinator of the UPC students at that time and I was the first president of the congress of the youth branch, the young people of the JDC, which is called the JDC. Jeunesse Démocratique du Cameroun, which is the youth branch of the UPC and at that time I was the first president who organised the congress after coming out of hiding. As you know, the UPC was banned in 1955, temporarily rehabilitated in 1962 with Mayi Matip before being reabsorbed into the Cameroon National Union, the single party that was created in September 1966. So when democracy was opened up, we came out of hiding and I was the president who led the young people of the UPC to their first congress in 1992.

In other words, although *Ouest Échos'* editorial line would, in principle, justify the lack of attention to the April 6th date in this editorial team, this choice is also based on political considerations.

4.3. Designation of Actors and Events in Our Online Corpus

The online corpus is highly dynamic and undergoes continuous changes. On the Facebook social network, it is even more dynamic, as users can delete their posts. Additionally, the social network provides a wide variety of content appreciation modalities, including comments, likes, dislikes, and more. Regardless of the publication year of a content piece, modifications can occur. Therefore, it is challenging to have stabilized content on which we can consider a representative sample. Similarly, for each of the event sequences studied in the fight against Boko Haram, we realized that users' posts and discussions do not necessarily align with the event sequencing in the print media. While the same thematic event (the fight against Boko Haram) seems to be shared in both print and online media, in the online sphere, users appear to engage more freely in choosing publication angles and discussions. Thus, the fight against Boko Haram is not necessarily perceived here in the event sequences of war effort of the populations, northern conspiracy theory, march and mobilization in support of the army, or even motions in support of the Head of State, etc. The dynamics of users' posts are often influenced by current events and sometimes vice versa. Having content on the Boko Haram conflict was sporadic/episodic based on new information on the subject. Indeed, while most of the conflict favored the Cameroonian army, there has not yet been an official declaration of the end of the conflict against Boko Haram by the Cameroonian Head of State. Between 2015 and today, Boko Haram has shifted from coordinated and organized frontal attacks to high-profile suicide bombings. In 2015, at the height of the conflict, the interest in social media as information hubs in Cameroon was not as prevalent as it is today. This phenomenon significantly gained traction during the 2018 presidential election.

4.3.1. Online Designation in the Fight against Boko Haram: A Tool for Inter-Ethnic Hate Speech

By hate speech, we mean a malicious discourse motivated by prejudices, targeting an individual or a group based on their inherent real or perceived characteristics. It expresses discriminatory, intimidating, disapproving, antagonistic, and/or harmful attitudes towards these characteristics, including gender, race, religion, ethnic background, color, national origin, disability, or sexual orientation. The purpose of hate speech is to injure, dehumanize, harass, intimidate, weaken, degrade, and victimize targeted groups, fostering insensitivity and brutality towards them (Cohen-Almagor 2011, pp. 1–2).

From this definition, three dimensions of this type of discursive manifestation emerge, namely the affective dimension, primarily an emotional and sentimental expression. It

then acts as a stimulant for violence towards others, and finally, a powerful consolidator of stigmas (Monnier et al. 2019).

In Cameroon, the changes in the dynamics of the Cameroonian media sphere (censorship, government repression, etc.) with the emergence of new voices in digital discursive spaces, manifested by the migration of political discourse from print media (subject to state regulation) to online forums (outside the control of the state), have led to the rise of inter-ethnic hate speech around power issues.

By way of comparison, the conflict against Boko Haram in the print media has reported on several categories of actors, including the national army, Boko Haram, ethno-political leaders from each territory, and the Head of State. In print media, this political conflict primarily opposes a part of the Elite from the Beti ethnic conglomerate, especially those from the Lékié department, to the ethno-regional Elite of the Grand North of Cameroon. The former accuses the latter of being behind Boko Haram with the support of a major power, with the idea of seeking revenge for the failed coup d'état on 6 April 1984.

Conversely, in the online content of the studied forums, discussions about the conflict against Boko Haram are more focused on criticizing the Cameroonian army, referred to as a 'Bulu militia,' an ethno-political critique of the incumbent regime associated with the Beti ethnic group (to which the president belongs). Boko Haram attacks are more of a pretext for this criticism. All of this is articulated in an electoral context that witnessed the emergence of the Beti/Bamileké divide. The electoral aspect of these online ethno-political clashes between Beti and Bamileké, under the false pretext of the conflict against Boko Haram, is clearly illustrated in the publication below, taken from the '*Le Cameroun pour tous* (LCPT)' forum. The oldest publications from this group date back to 2018, a year marked by a tumultuous presidential election that saw the resurgence of the divide between these two communities. Both communities resort to derogatory designations, symbolizing an escalation of ethnic hatred in online politico-media discourse. The forum's administrator (referred to as Éric le Retour) published a clarification note on 2 November 2018, to specify the objectives of the initiative, as captured below (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Screenshot of the 2 November 2018 post by Éric le Retour in the Facebook group *Le Cameroun pour tous* (LCPT), 20 January 2023 at 2:35 a.m. Translation into English: "Settlement of accounts! We are fighting against the RDPC, not the Beti people. Wilfried Ekanga cannot fight against the culture to which he belongs; Fabrice Noah Noah cannot struggle against his own tribe, and Sorelle Onguene cannot be against her own brothers. Our Beti brothers who, naively or intentionally, play on the identity card to obscure the truth of the election results, will have only themselves to blame. We are fighting against the RDPC, which has done next to nothing for Cameroonians for 36 years. Too bad for the sorcerers. In 2011, when they sensed that Marafa was eyeing power, they opened the door to Boko Haram and let the people know that the northerners wanted to destroy Cameroon. Today it's the Bamileke. We'll see!"

In this publication, the author draws a connection between political parties and ethnic identity. These links had already been highlighted by Menthong (1998) about the 1992

presidential election. But he goes on to try to dissociate ethnicity and political party when he states in substance that “We are fighting the CPDM, not the Béti people”. According to this publication, the conflict against Boko Haram terrorism is defined as a political weapon deployed in the context of the 2011 presidential election by Béti elites to neutralize those of the Far North. A scenario that seems to be repeating itself in the 2018 presidential election, just a few days before this publication. An election in which outgoing President Paul Biya, of Béti origin, faces a candidate of Bamiléké origin as his main challenger. This explains his last sentence: “Today it’s the Bamiléké. We’ll see!”, effectively associating political party and ethnic identity. The designation of actors in his publication considers ethnonyms (Bamiléké, Béti). It also uses ethno-political toponyms (les Nordistes), which it articulates in a conflict dynamic. Yet this discussion group has set for itself the rules of friendliness, courtesy, refusal to incite hatred, and so on, as mentioned in their rules and regulations below, taken by screen capture (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Screenshot of the rules of the Facebook group *Le Cameroun pour tous* (LCPT), 20 January 2023, 2:37 am. Translation into English: “No incitement to hate, no harassment, no promotions or unwanted content. Be kind and courteous.”

The administrator himself is breaking the rules he has set himself. In terms of our sequencing of events, we can possibly classify this publication as part of the fight against Boko Haram. The author alludes to the northern conspiracy theory, but this time it is the Béti versus the Nordiste conspiracy for electoral purposes. Indeed, the brief reminder of the northern conspiracy theory is used in this publication to indicate that the regime in power (which it equates with the Béti in this case) always uses identity-based divisions to win elections. This is a technique whereby the regime in power victimizes itself on the pretext of being attacked by a community that is supposed to be a rival in terms of its political and identity background. In this way, the regime would use its media to justify its victimization of a community that was either rebellious or uncontrollable. This would lead to a war-mongering vocabulary in the above publication.

This is the case with words and expressions such as nous combattons; Voulait détruire le Cameroun; Lutter; S’acharner; (We fight; Wanted to destroy Cameroon; Struggle; Persist.), and so on. Words and expressions are articulated with ethnonyms such as Béti, Bamiléké, political party names and ethno-political toponyms, i.e., designating actors with territorial referents (northerners). This publication also met with a great deal of sympathy from the other members of the discussion group regarding the evaluation methods shown below in the screenshot (Figure 3).

As we can see, no one expressed disagreement, symbolized by the upside-down blue thumb. On the other hand, the right-side-up blue thumb was used 61 times, the remainder of the appreciations leading to the number 73 being distributed between the other forms of appreciation not considered for our analysis. In reading this publication, we go back to Freitag (Dagenals 2003) to say that uses of the Internet contribute to the reinforcement and (re)production of a hierarchy of power. In the case in point, it redraws the identity

cleavages that we already knew from the printed press and the ethnic groupings that Paul Biya (1987, 2018) was already observing in the streets of Cameroonian towns more than thirty years ago before digital social networks. The reality of Cameroonian political events in online discussion forums would therefore be no more than a cybernetic extension of material reality.

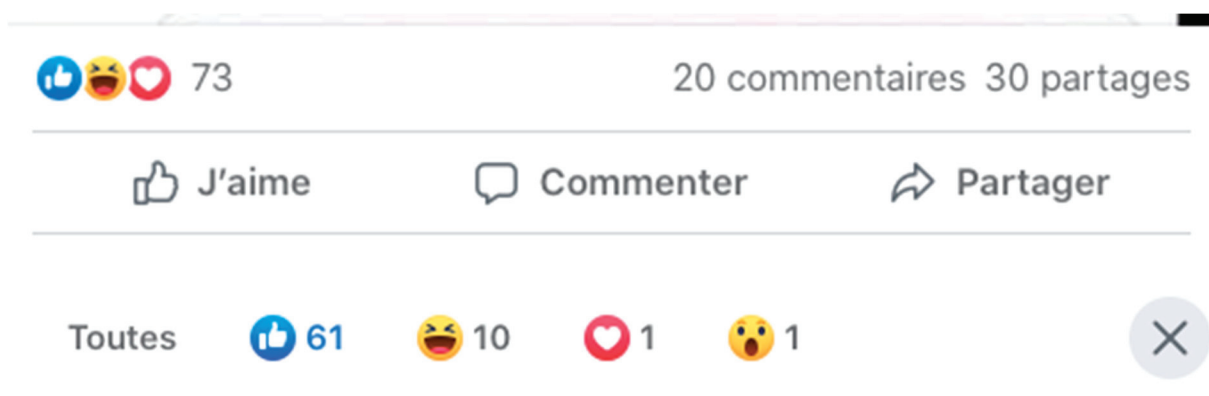


Figure 3. Screenshot of appreciations of the 2 November 2018 publication by Éric le Retour in the Facebook group *Le Cameroun pour tous* (LCPT). 20 January 2023 at 2:39 am.

This clearly shows that journalists have lost their monopoly on defining the meaning of current events to Internet users. What is more, no reference is made to the ethno-political elites of Cameroon's Far North, as in the print media. Allusions to this conflict sooner give way to ethno-political hate speech between Béti and Bamiléké, all against an electoral backdrop. Something that would never have happened in the print media at this level of discursive violence. Cameroon's media regulatory bodies crack down on incitement to hatred. Online, however, it has free rein.

4.3.2. Designation of Actors and Events against the Backdrop of the Béti/Bamiléké Power Struggle

As a result of socio-political cleavages with strong identity roots, the way in which the conflict against Boko Haram is viewed in online content follows the contours of political adversity. This can be seen, for example, in this publication from 1 July 2019 by Mimi Ekosso. In it, she likens the government's current attitude to the conflicts in the country to that of the Béti community. The national army is described as a Bulu militia. In other words, made up exclusively of members of the tribe of the President of the Republic. This is notoriously untrue. For this Internet user, the conflicts Cameroon is experiencing (including the conflict against Boko Haram) are the work of this ethnic militia. In other words, whether it is the Anglophone crisis, the conflict against Boko Haram, or the insecurity in East Cameroon, for this Internet user it is simply ethnic warfare. Any possible new episode or even allusion to the conflict against Boko Haram is used for ideological purposes with an ethno-political aim. Below is a screenshot of his publication (Figure 4).

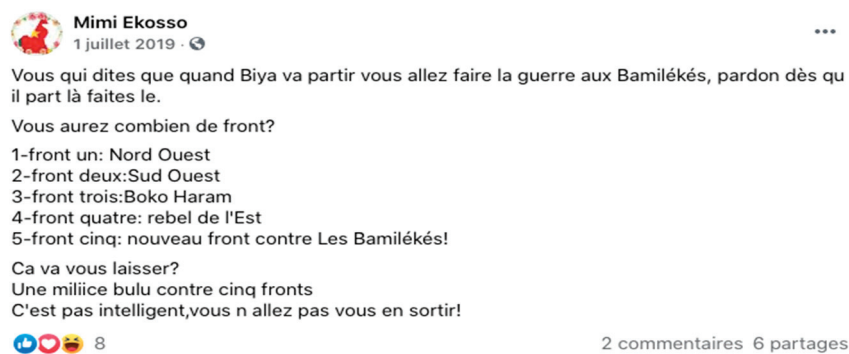


Figure 4. Screenshot of Mimi Ekosso’s 1 July 2019, publication in the Facebook group *Le Cameroun c’est le Cameroun* (LCCLC). 20 January 2023 at 4:55 am. Translation into English: “Those of you who say that when Biya leaves, you will wage war against the Bamileke, please, as soon as he leaves, go ahead. You will have how many fronts: 1- Front one: Northwest 2- Front two: Southwest 3- Front

three: Boko Haram 4- Front four: Rebels from the East 5- Front five: New front against the Bamileke! Do you think you can handle that? A Bulu militia against five fronts. It’s not smart; you won’t get out of it!” Mimi Ekosso, Facebook, 1st July 2019.

This kind of speech would certainly never have been produced in the printed press. Cameroon’s media regulatory bodies would certainly have cracked down on it for inciting hatred. But online he has free rein. For this Internet user, the conflict against Boko Haram is just one of the battles for a change of political regime in Cameroon. A change which, according to her, would be envisaged on an ethnic and military basis. The army itself is a Bulu militia, notably the ethnic origin of the Head of State. This gloomy publication of the future has not aroused much sympathy in view of the assessment methods below (Figure 5).

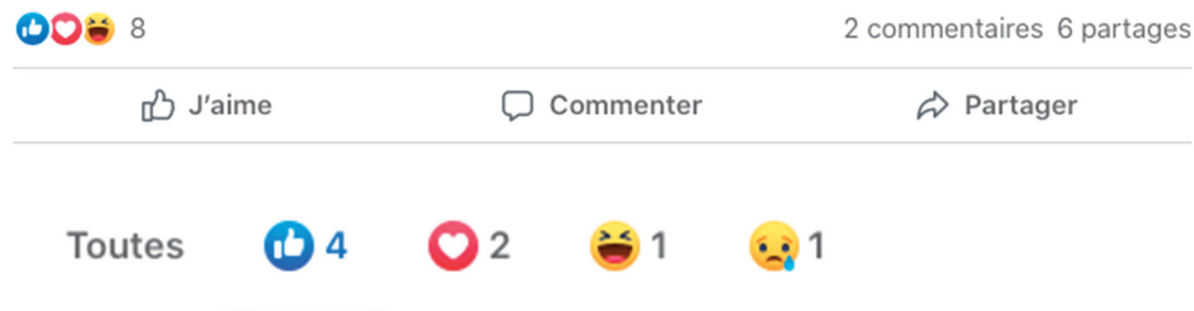


Figure 5. Screenshot of the terms of appreciation of the publication of 1 July 2019 by Mimi Ekosso in the Facebook group *Le Cameroun c’est le Cameroun* (LCCLC). On 20 January 2023 at 4:57 am.

Just four likes and two comments. On the other hand, six Internet users relayed it to other places of visibility. This publication clearly shows the level of radicalism that certain Cameroonian Internet users have reached in the cyber political game. In the controlled environment of the print media, we would certainly never have seen this kind of publication. Ethnonyms are articulated with a warlike vocabulary (Bulu militias, the war against the Bamiléké). This is a sign of a strong gradation of ethnic hatred, in this case exacerbated between the Béti and the Bamiléké.

Yet the directors of this group have set themselves a single rule—that of friendliness and courtesy. However, they left this publication and three years later it is still there. Below is a screenshot of the rules for this group (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Screenshot of the rules of the Facebook group *Le Cameroun c'est le Cameroun* (LCCLC). On 20 January 2021 at 4:59 am. Translation into English: “Be kind and courteous. Creating a warm environment is our responsibility to everyone. Let’s treat everyone with respect. It’s normal to have constructive debates, but it’s essential to remain kind.”

5. Conclusions

In summary, the advent of social media in the dynamics of the Cameroonian media landscape has led to significant changes in journalism practices. It has spurred the emergence of new digital actors who now share the power to interpret news with journalists. This study observed this phenomenon through the analysis of event and actor designations in both print and online publications in our corpus, within the context of the fight against terrorism in Cameroon.

The findings indicate that the rise of social media as new information platforms in Cameroon has transformed the designation of events and actors in the fight against Boko Haram terrorism, intertwining it with the ethnic identity issues of the sociopolitical environment. While this reality was already present in print media, its migration to online content has metastasized into hate speech. This phenomenon, which was once controllable through the actions of state regulatory bodies, now reflects a transition from a press discourse environment regulated by state institutions to a realm where the state has limited control means. Consequently, full censorship and other forms of government repression are challenging to enforce.

Describing the relationship between the media and the state under the old regime (1960–1982) in Cameroon, Thomas Atenga (2004) speaks of an environment where journalists had to primarily be patriots or even development agents who unquestionably adhered to the President’s discourse. Journalists in Cameroon during this period were “conveyors of propaganda, sedative, calming, and soporific information in the name of the imperatives of nation-building, maintenance of public order, and the preservation of good morals. They were dedicated proselytizers, brokers of the ‘father of the nation’s’ speech and the activities of his administration” (Atenga 2004, p. 38). In other words, journalists’ work essentially conformed to a “grammar of flattery” (Atenga 2009, p. 72), where connivance prevailed, blending marketing, propaganda, and political advertising.

With the arrival of Paul Biya’s new regime in 1982 and the liberalization of the press and associative movement in 1990, the Cameroonian state must now learn to deal with a press that can criticize and express opinions on certain decisions. Since the liberalization of the communication sector in the 1990s, establishing a newspaper in Cameroon requires very few administrative procedures.

This did not happen spontaneously. It first involved a nearly five-year struggle to transition from the authorization regime to the declaration regime, which was formalized in January 1996 through the amendment of the 1990 law endorsing freedom of communication. Until then, newspapers still faced the issue of prior censorship, a problem that was also abolished with the amendment of the same law. In this context, the state and the media maintain conflictual, even macabre, relations (Atenga 2004), within a sociopolitical environment described as authoritarian. Given the state apparatus’s limited tolerance for criticism, a new era has emerged, witnessing an intensification of judicial repression against the media and journalists. Over 300 press trials were recorded in the early 1990s–2000s (Atenga 2004, p. 5). “The cumulative infringements on freedom of expression (prior censor-

ship, seizures, suspensions, bans, raids on editorial offices, physical assaults, imprisonment of journalists, fiscal harassment, and various forms of intimidation) have far exceeded 2000" (Atenga 2004, p. 5). "The announcement of a presidential visit abroad or the Chief's vacation destination can lead to a trial for endangering state security, while in democracies, the president's agenda and movements, as well as those of ministers and other personalities, are made public days in advance. . . A journalist can be condemned by a court for the substitution or possession of administrative documents because he dared to present the judge with evidence of his allegations. The penalty is even more severe when he does not have them. In any case, he goes to trial already condemned" (Atenga 2004, p. 10). This helps in understanding the limited maneuvering room in the use of event and actor designations.

However, with the advent of Web 3.0 in journalism, a new type of information relationship is now dominant through digital social networks (DSN). This has resulted in the infiltration of hate speech into the political-identity game in Cameroon. Our research results have sufficiently highlighted this through the uses of actor and event designations by web users. These designations are articulated with political-identity ethnic issues, demonstrating that media designation in Cameroon is a site of power relations.

The theoretical foundations of the relationship between identity and media are rooted in the writings of Hall (2007, pp. 203–14), particularly in "New Ethnicity". According to Hall, the relationship between identity and media's discursive strategy is based on an ideological struggle, raising the question of "representation relationship" (Hall 2007, p. 204). Based on these approaches, the media shape our understanding of ethnicity, suggesting how it should be perceived, understood, and the meanings it conveys. This practice relies on significant effort in media representation. Hall emphasizes that "representation is only possible because enunciation always occurs in codes that have a history, occupying a position in the discursive forms of a specific time and space" (Hall 2007, p. 209). In other words, "we all speak from a place, a particular experience, a specific history, a particular culture. [. . .] And in this sense, we are all ethnically located, and our ethnic identities are crucial to the subjective sense of who we are" (Hall 2007, p. 210).

In the Cameroonian context, this perspective views ethno-regional identities as a source of power in the realm of political competition. In other words, belonging to a specific ethno-regional group would be a political asset. This identity-centric vision of political power is responsible for the transposition of the reading of ethnic identity into the Cameroonian media field. Due to the stakes related to political competition, Cameroonian newspapers are labeled based on ethno-regional identities. Therefore, "the process of determining events and situations does not solely rely on the media and involves a plurality of actors" (Arquembourg 2005, p. 29).

This approach refers to media designations as a mediation site among various actors, stakeholders in a social reality (Garric 2009). In Ricœur's terminology (Ricœur 1983), these are precisely narrative operations in the mimetic process, allowing an understanding of how informative narratives achieve their objectives (Arquembourg 2005).

Therefore, we conceptualize designations as sites of incorporation (Granovetter 1985; D'Hont and Gérard 2015; Le Velly 2002; Laville 2008; etc.) of power relations in society. The representational approach of the media often results from the intertwining or entanglement of various power relations operating in society (Bobo 1995; Collins [1991] 1990, pp. 68–69; Hooks 1992, 1996; Hall 2007). These can be identity-based, religious, cultural, racial, and often economic. Therefore, Le Velly (2002) apprehends incorporation as a sociology of market exchanges at the heart of social construction processes. Applied to the media domain, the logic of incorporation (Granovetter 1985; D'Hont and Gérard 2015; Le Velly 2002; Laville 2008; etc.) accounts for the fact that the interests of media actors and those of economic and political environments form a system. This would result in event coverage based on the agreement model (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; Legavre 2011).

In the Cameroonian sociopolitical context influenced by the philosophy of communitarian liberalism (2018, 1987), this situation reveals various layers/surfaces of incorporation

and power relations that intersect. Particularly, ethnic power relations, often associated with language, region, tribe, etc., further complicate things from an analytical perspective. It becomes challenging to ultimately identify what guides the editorial orientation of newspapers, including online content. Our perspective also considers designations as editorial processes crystallizing current events within frames of ethnic and territorial identity in a sociopolitical environment governed by competition on power issues. In other words, concerning the news studied in this research, designations of actors and events are primarily means of ethnic identification and territorialization in newspapers and online forums. To put it differently, the observed media designations in our corpus are also sites of ethno-political territorialization of the Cameroonian national space. Indeed, the territorialization of the Cameroonian national space is strongly oriented towards the identity diversity (ethnic and linguistic) characterizing the country.

This initiative is part of the state's desire for "territorial differentiation" (Pailliat 2013, p. 278). It is a long-term process, initiated by both the state and the media, aiming not only to designate the multiplication of territorial levels marking the country's map but also, more fundamentally, the movement of differentiation in the social world (Pailliat 2013). In Cameroon, the media heavily relies on the state's policy of territorialization. There are national, regional, departmental, etc., media entities that contribute to mastering territorial differentiation and, by extension, social differentiation. It is in this aspect that we consider the territoriality of the newspaper in the analysis of the designation we conducted. That is, as a movement of differentiation of ethno-regional identity (Abondo Ndo 2022), an approach now strongly contested with the advent of social networks, whose territoriality is global. Thus, they challenge traditional obstacles such as censorship, government repression, and economic pressures, etc.

The way in which Social Media Networks (SMN) permeate the news studied in this research ultimately highlights the issue of media regulation in a multi-ethnic context in Africa. Ethnicity is a crucial variable around which power struggles are organized. Therefore, how should media regulation be reorganized in Cameroon in view of this challenge posed by SMN? Indeed, in addition to SMN, Cameroon is entrenched in a context of the end of a reign of over 40 years at the helm of the state, and where the press unfolds a "tribal war through intermediary newspapers [where] particularisms are thus magnified and defended. These are deviations that are justified, but when taken too far, can prove very dangerous. No longer are ideas or ideologies defended. One defends the tribe through the political party and through the loyal press" (Ndembiyembe 1997, p. 47). We believe that a reorganization of media regulation in Cameroon, considering the results of our study, should more closely align with local socio-political realities. The idea is to reconsider ethical and deontological standards specific to the Cameroonian media environment.

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Notes

¹ *Le Messenger* No.4347 Wednesday, 17 June 2015, p. 3

² *L'Œil du Sahel*, issue no. 692, Monday, 6 April 2015, p. 4.

³ *Cameroon Tribune*, Tuesday, 2 September 2014, p. 6.

⁴ At his accession to power, the Cameroonian president presented himself as the man of Renewal, and the creation of the Far North Region was his first act of territorial and administrative redistricting.

- 5 Cameroon Tribune du mardi 9 Juin 2015, p. 9.
- 6 L'Oeil du Sahel newspaper No. 666 of Monday 5 January 2015, p. 2.
- 7 idem.
- 8 Cameroon Tribune of Tuesday 9 June 2015, p. 9.
- 9 Cameroon Tribune, Tuesday, 9 June 2015, p.9
- 10 Cameroon Tribune of Tuesday 2 September 2014, p. 6.
- 11 Interview conducted in Cameroon Tribune on 20 July 2017.
- 12 Le jour no. 1854, Wednesday 21 January 2015, p. 5; Le jour no. 1870, Friday 13 February 2015, p. 3; Le jour no. 1897, Tuesday 24 March 2015, p. 2; Le jour no. 1888, Wednesday 11 March 2015, p. 3; Le jour no. 1903, Wednesday 1 April 2015, p. 7; Le jour no. 1931, Wednesday 13 May 2015, p. 4.
- 13 Le Messenger n°4298 Tuesday 7 April 2015 p. 4; Le Messenger n°4274 Tuesday 3 March 2015, p. 2.
- 14 L'Oeil du Sahel n°714 of Monday 22 June 2015, p. 11; L'Oeil du Sahel n°697 of Thursday 23 April 2015, p. 2-4; L'Oeil du Sahel n°693 of Thursday 09 April 2015 front cover; L'Oeil du Sahel n°703 of Friday 15 May 2015, p. 11; L'Oeil du Sahel n°704 of Monday 18 May 2015, p. 7; L'Oeil du Sahel n°692 of Monday 06 April 2015, p. 6; L'Oeil du Sahel n°715 of Thursday 25 June 2015, p. 11; L'Oeil du Sahel n°690 of Monday 30 March 2015, p. 9.
- 15 Cameroon Tribune of Monday 30 March 2015, p. 10.
- 16 Ouest Echos n°858 of 27 January to 2 February 2015, p. 10.

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Article

Social Media Campaign Strategies: A Case Study of Political Issue Framing by 2024 Presidential Candidates in Ghana

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Abstract: Despite extensive scholarship on social media political party strategies or intra-party-political campaigns across digital platforms, it remains relatively unexplored how individual presidential candidates adopt social media to frame their messages on key political issues for voter engagement, especially in the West Africa region. To fill this gap, this study examines how the two major presidential candidates in Ghana, John Mahama of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and Mahamudu Bawumia of the New Patriotic Party (NPP), use social media platforms to frame key political issues during the 2024 election campaign. Using framing theory and digital multimodal discourse analysis as the conceptual and methodological frameworks, the study examines content on X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram, with a focus on issues related to the economy and education, while also assessing how platform-specific affordances shape the presentation and visibility of these frames. The findings of the study reveal three core dynamics in the framing strategies of both candidates: (1) contrasting economic narratives ('Resetting Ghana' vs. 'It Is Possible'), (2) competing visions of education (reform vs. continuity), and (3) platform-specific engagement patterns. These findings offer insight into how political actors leverage digital affordances beyond simple messaging tools into structured framing mechanisms and strategically construct narratives to shape public discourse and influence voter engagement.

Keywords: political campaigns; social media framing; Ghana elections; voter engagement; digital media

1. Introduction

Social media has transformed political communication globally by providing new avenues for candidates to engage directly with voters, shape public discourse, and frame political issues. In Ghana, a country in West Africa known for its democratic stability and competitive elections since transitioning to multi-party democracy in 1992, social media platforms have become increasingly central to political campaigns. The fast-growing and changing media landscape of political campaigns in Ghana reflects broader global trends but is also shaped by Ghana's unique socio-political and media environment. While digital media platforms have introduced new dynamics to political communication, these platforms are not the only means through which political messaging circulates in Ghana. Ghanaian campaigns are socially embedded processes where candidates engage directly with constituents through not only mass rallies but also courtesy calls on traditional leaders, occupational group meetings (such as with market associations and fisherfolk), and various forms of interpersonal interactions (Bob-Milliar & Paller, 2023). These face-to-face encounters function as ritualistic and symbolic arenas for political engagement, often

fostering grassroots participation and reinforcing political narratives rooted in Ghana's historical experiences of collective mobilization (Bob-Milliar & Paller, 2023).

Further, the role of pavement media—informal face-to-face discussions in marketplaces, religious spaces, and community gatherings—has been identified as a key link in Ghana's broader media ecosystem. Political information, including misinformation, circulates across digital divides through these everyday communication spaces (Gadjanova et al., 2022).

Building on this broader communicative landscape, social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram have become significant tools for political actors in Ghana, offering new avenues for candidates to amplify their messages, engage with diverse audiences, and frame political issues. The increasing use of social media in Ghanaian politics is partly driven by the rapid growth of mobile telephony and internet penetration, which has expanded access to digital platforms across the country (Moreno et al., 2017).

Early studies noted that political parties in Ghana were slow to recognize and leverage the potential of social media for political engagement (Van Gyampo, 2017). However, recent studies show that by the 2016 and 2020 election cycles, most parties had recognized the strategic importance of social media platforms, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, for mobilization and voter outreach (Dzisah, 2018; Amankwah & Mbatha, 2019; Anson Boateng & Buatsi, 2023). Traditional media, particularly radio, continues to play a crucial role in reaching rural populations and setting the political agenda, while social media is rapidly becoming the preferred platform for political engagement, especially among urban youth and educated demographics (Gadjanova et al., 2019). Studies on the 2016 Ghana elections found that Facebook and WhatsApp were key social media platforms increasingly utilized by political parties (Belley, 2020; Adeiza, 2019; Dzisah, 2018; Boateng et al., 2020).

Interestingly, during the 2020 elections, three political parties—the National Democratic Congress (NDC), the New Patriotic Party (NPP), and the Convention People's Party (CPP)—heavily invested in social media advertisements. From August to December 2020, Candidate Mahama of the NDC spent EUR 109,433 (approximately USD 95,747), Candidate Akufo-Addo of the NPP spent EUR 78,369 (approximately USD 68,823), and Candidate Greenstreet of the CPP spent EUR 1335 (approximately USD 1168) on these platforms (Anson Boateng & Buatsi, 2023, p. 118). The study further identified Facebook and Instagram as the main platforms where these ads were placed due to their broad reach and multimedia capabilities for political engagement.

There is extensive scholarship on the use of social media for political campaigns; however, most studies have focused on European and Western contexts (Fulgoni et al., 2016; Enli, 2017; Jensen, 2017; Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018; Bossetta, 2018; Sahly et al., 2019). In the Ghanaian context, existing studies have primarily examined how political parties use social media platforms for voter mobilization and engagement (Van Gyampo, 2017; Moreno et al., 2017; Dzisah, 2018, 2020; Adeiza, 2019; Amenyewu, 2021; Anson Boateng & Buatsi, 2023).

The goal of this paper, therefore, is to fill this gap and help boost understanding of how individual presidential candidates in Ghana utilize social media to frame key political issues—specifically, the economy and education—during the 2024 election campaign. Drawing on studies by Anson Boateng and Buatsi (2023) and Moreno et al. (2017), which identified Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) as widely used and influential platforms in Ghanaian political campaigns, this study uses multimodal discourse analysis (Stewart et al., 2023; Kress, 2010; Light et al., 2018) and framing theory (Entman, 1993) as the framework to examine content on these platforms with focus on issues related to the economy and education. In doing so, this study aims to reveal how these presidential

candidates adopt social media to frame their campaign messages around the two dominant issues of public interest—economy and education—to engage voters.

1.1. Politics and Media in Ghana: Historical Background

The relationship between media and politics in Ghana dates back to the pre-independence era when the media was key in the struggle for decolonization. Prior to Ghana's independence in 1957, newspapers and radio were central to political campaigns. The colonial and nationalist political movements relied heavily on print media, particularly newspapers, to disseminate information and mobilize support. Newspapers such as *The Gold Coast Leader*, *The African Morning Post*, and *The Ashanti Pioneer* played significant roles in political discourse, shaping public opinion and nationalist movements (Fosu, 2024). Notably, figures like Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first Prime Minister and President, used newspapers such as the *Accra Evening News* to challenge colonial authority and advocate for self-rule (Akpojivi, 2014). Radio broadcasting, introduced in 1935 as a colonial relay station, later incorporated local languages to reach a broader audience (Bourgault, 1995).

Following independence in 1957, Ghana's political landscape saw various regimes, both civilian and military, with varying approaches to media control. Television broadcasting was not established in Ghana until 1965 under the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC). In the immediate post-independence period, the media was largely state-controlled, with successive governments using the press as a tool for nation-building and, at times, political suppression (Twumasi, 1981; Fosu, 2014; Osei-Appiah, 2019).

The Third Republican Constitution, established after a period of military rule, sought to institutionalize press freedom by elevating the media to a crucial role within the constitutional framework (Twumasi, 1981). This marked a significant shift from earlier political regimes, which had used the press as a tool for political control and influence (Fosu, 2014). The democratization processes in Ghana, particularly after the Fourth Republic in 1992, brought renewed attention to the media's role in fostering political participation and accountability (Arthur, 2010). He further notes that media reforms were driven by the need to create an environment conducive to democratic governance (Arthur, 2010). Media liberalization, thus, allowed for the proliferation of private media outlets, which diversified the information available to the public and facilitated more robust political debates (Osei-Appiah, 2019; Twumasi, 1981).

The rise of private media in the mid-1990s significantly transformed Ghana's political communication landscape (Afful, 2016). Before this period, the media environment was predominantly state-controlled, with institutions such as the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) and state-owned newspapers, *The Ghanaian Times* and *Daily Graphic*, dominating the landscape. However, the liberalization of the media market in 1996 allowed for the establishment of over 149 radio stations, 450 newspapers, and multiple television channels, leading to a competitive and dynamic media environment (International Institute for ICT Journalism, 2010).

Private media outlets, particularly private radio stations and newspapers like *Daily Guide* and *Ghanaian Chronicle*, quickly became central platforms for political discourse. These outlets provided alternative viewpoints that often challenged the narratives upheld by state-controlled media, thereby fostering a more diverse public sphere (Afful, 2016). Radio became the most popular medium, with 90% of Ghanaians tuning in at least once in the past seven days, while 69% tuned in at least once a day (Gadzekpo, 2005). Radio also serves as the primary source of information for the electorate, particularly in the Northern part of Ghana, where television and other media forms do not have an extensive reach (Abdulai et al., 2020). They further note that radio's wide accessibility and affordability

make it the most relied-upon medium for political communication, mobilization, and spreading ideologies, especially during elections Abdulai et al. (2020).

While radio, newspapers, and television continue to play significant roles in Ghana's media landscape today, the emergence of social media platforms has introduced a new dimension to political communication.

The two leading presidential candidates in the 2024 Ghanaian election, John Dramani Mahama of the NDC and Mahamudu Bawumia of the NPP present distinct backgrounds and experiences in their campaigns. Mahama, who served as President from 2012 to 2017, initially assumed the presidency as Vice President following the passing of John Evans Atta Mills. With decades of experience, including roles as a Member of Parliament and Minister for Communications, Mahama's campaign draws on his history in public service, positioning him as a leader advocating for change. Bawumia, the incumbent Vice President since 2017, presents a contrasting profile with his background in economics and finance. Before entering politics, Bawumia worked as a central banker and holds a Ph.D. in economics, specializing in macroeconomics and development (Wan Yee, 2016).

This study extends the existing literature by arguing that the framing of key public interest issues, specifically the economy and education (Afrobarometer, 2024), on social media by these presidential candidates in the 2024 election offers new insights into how digital platforms are reshaping political campaign strategies in the country.

1.2. Ghana and Social Media Use: A Brief Overview

Since transitioning to a multi-party democracy in 1992, Ghana is viewed as one of the most peaceful and stable countries in West Africa. In 1957, Ghana became the first sub-Saharan country in colonial Africa to gain independence. Media outlets, particularly radio and television, played a critical role in educating voters and ensuring a smooth electoral process in Ghana (Temin & Smith, 2002). However, they note that with the rise of digital technologies, including social media, traditional media now faces increased competition in shaping public discourse and setting the political agenda.

Survey data from the most recent Afrobarometer Round 10 (2024) confirm that social media is playing an increasingly important role in Ghana's information landscape, particularly among certain demographic groups. According to the survey, 38.7% of Ghanaians report using the Internet every day, with usage significantly higher among urban residents and younger, more educated populations. Additionally, 91.8% of respondents own a mobile phone, and among these, 57.7% have internet-enabled devices, indicating substantial potential reach for digital campaign messages (Afrobarometer, 2025).

In recent years, the Ghanaian government has made significant efforts to bridge the digital divide through various policy initiatives, such as the Digital Ghana Agenda, Mobile Money Interoperability, and Paperless Services in selected government institutions (NCA, 2018). Moreover, Ghana is recognized for having one of the youngest populations in the world, with a median age of 20.7 years, according to the latest housing and population census by the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS, 2021). This youthful demographic is generally more inclined to adopt and use digital technologies.

Building on these developments, Ghana's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector has experienced substantial growth, driven primarily by the widespread adoption of mobile phones and increased internet access. As of 2023, Ghana had approximately 41 million active mobile voice subscriptions, equivalent to about 134% of the population. This penetration rate exceeds 100% because many users hold multiple subscriptions (International Trade Administration, 2023). Additionally, data subscriptions reached a penetration rate of around 78%, indicating a growing market for mobile internet and digital services (International Trade Administration, 2023). Between 2014 and 2023,

Ghana's ICT sector has seen significant changes due to strategic government policies and investments. One major initiative is the Ghana Digital Acceleration Project (GDAP), funded by a credit of US\$200 million from the World Bank. This project aims to improve broadband access, modernize government digital services, and support innovation within Ghana's digital ecosystem (World Bank, 2022). Mobile money has also become important for financial inclusion in Ghana. By 2020, there were about 30 million registered mobile money accounts in Ghana, with transactions valued at more than US\$36 billion. This reflects significant progress in the use of digital technology for financial services (International Trade Administration, 2023).

A study on social media use among university students in Ghana found that a significant majority were both aware of and actively using social media platforms for various purposes (Apeanti & Danso, 2014). Their study revealed that 97.7% of the students surveyed were aware of Facebook, with 76.8% having an account on the platform (Apeanti & Danso, 2014). X (formerly Twitter) and instant messengers (IMs) also showed considerable awareness, though the usage rates were lower.

In his study on social media adoption in Ghana, Van Gyampo (2017) found that political parties turned to platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp to communicate with voters, particularly targeting the youth, who make up over 60% of the voting population. However, he noted that they had yet to fully harness the potential of social media. A year later, Dzisah's (2018) study revealed that most parties had recognized the cost-effectiveness of social media compared to traditional outlets like television, radio, and newspapers.

During the 2016 Ghanaian elections, social media platforms—especially Facebook and WhatsApp—were widely utilized by political candidates to mobilize voters, foster democratic engagement, and monitor electoral processes. WhatsApp, in particular, played a crucial role in organizing political teams, improving communication efficiency, and providing a secure channel for internal discussions (Amankwah & Mbatha, 2019). They also found that students were motivated to engage with online political agendas primarily for surveillance purposes by using the features of these platforms to stay informed and interact with political content.

Despite insights from existing literature, particularly on the use of social media by political parties and the growing adoption of social media in Ghana, there is a gap in understanding how individual presidential candidates utilize these platforms to frame their campaign messages. As of 2024, the two leading presidential candidates have extensively adopted major social media platforms—X, Instagram, and Facebook—to communicate their campaign messages to voters. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How did the two major presidential candidates in Ghana, John Mahama and Mahamudu Bawumia, construct social media discourses to frame issues related to the economy and education during the 2024 presidential election?

RQ2: To what extent did platform-specific affordances shape the framing strategies and voter engagement of John Mahama and Mahamudu Bawumia on Facebook, Instagram, and X during the 2024 presidential election?

2. Materials and Methods

To address the research questions, the study adopts the walkthrough method developed by Light et al. (2018) as a data collection tool and supplemented with multi-modal discourse analysis (Keshavarzian & Stewart, 2025; Stewart et al., 2023; Kress, 2010; Light et al., 2018). Using the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018), interactions between the candidates, the platforms, and their audiences were captured and archived, with a specific focus on framing strategies related to economic and educational policies.

The focus on John Mahama of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and Mahamudu Bawumia of the New Patriotic Party (NPP) reflects the dominance of these two parties in Ghana's electoral politics. Since the return to multi-party democracy in 1992, the NPP and NDC have alternated in power, consistently emerging as the two leading political forces in presidential and parliamentary elections (Fridy, 2007; Bob-Milliar, 2012). Their candidates typically command a majority of the national vote share, making their campaign strategies central to understanding electoral communication dynamics in Ghana.

The social media platforms chosen for analysis—Facebook, Instagram, and X—were selected based on their substantial user bases and high engagement levels in Ghana (Anson Boateng & Buatsi, 2023; Moreno et al., 2017), which are critical for understanding the influence of the candidates' messages. Although WhatsApp is also widely used in Ghana for sharing political information, its encrypted, closed-group format presents significant challenges for systematic data collection and content analysis (Amankwah & Mbatha, 2019; Lynch et al., 2022). Moreover, presidential candidates primarily rely on publicly accessible platforms to broadcast campaign messages to broader audiences, rather than closed intra-party group communication, making Facebook, Instagram, and X the most appropriate for this study.

The selection of economy and education as the focal issues in this study was guided by public opinion data from Afrobarometer Round 10. According to the 2024 Ghana survey results, unemployment (20.4%), management of the economy (13.1%), and rising cost of living (8.4%) were ranked as the most important problems that citizens wanted the government to address, with education also cited by 7.5% of respondents (Afrobarometer, 2025). These findings indicate the salience of these issues in the public sphere during the 2024 election period.

The walkthrough method focuses on the technological affordances of platforms, where researchers systematically engage with app interfaces, noting user interactions and platform mechanisms (Light et al., 2018). Extending this method, the study applies the digital multimodal walkthrough approach introduced by Stewart et al. (2023) to observe and archive multimodal content such as text, images, videos, stories, emojis, and other multimedia elements (see also Keshavarzian & Stewart, 2025). The study collected data from 1 January 2024 to 7 December 2024, covering the entire election campaign period.

To systematically capture the dynamic content, the study used MacBook Pro 15-inch (2017) screen recording software to document the candidates' social media pages: X, Instagram, and Facebook. MacBook Pro screen recording is a free screencast software that enables users to capture any portion of a computer screen through a snipping tool, making it easy to record content. This scrollable video capture method ensures the preservation of ephemeral content, such as Instagram Stories and tweets, before they are deleted or removed (Keshavarzian & Stewart, 2025; Stewart et al., 2023). Video streams were recorded randomly across four to five different days per candidate to ensure a representative sample of their social media activity. Each recording was at least one hour long. The novel use of video capture allows researchers to re-create the multimodal experience by ensuring that the content which is often ephemeral and subject to removal, is preserved for future analysis. This approach enhances the replicability of the study and enables other researchers to access and analyze the same content (Stewart et al., 2023). The table below (Table 1) shows the presidential candidates' political affiliations, their status (former president vs. incumbent vice president), and their follower counts on each platform as of December 2024.

Table 1. Candidates, political party affiliation, and social media followership.

Candidate	Political Party	Status	Platforms and Followers
John Dramani Mahama @JDMahama	National Democratic Congress (NDC)	Former President (24 July 2012–7 January 2017)	Instagram (400 k), X (2.4 M), Facebook (1.5 M)
Mahamudu Bawumia @mbawumia	New Patriotic Party (NPP)	Incumbent Vice President (7 January 2017–7 January 2025)	Instagram (232 K), X (763.1 K), Facebook (1 M)

Facebook was the main social media platform for both candidates, as it had the highest number of followers compared to Instagram and X. These platforms allow for the dissemination of diverse media types, including posts, videos, and stories. Purposive sampling was used to select social media posts that specifically address the themes of economy and education. Purposive sampling is effective in focusing on content that is most relevant to the research questions and allows the study to concentrate on posts that highlight significant framing strategies related to the selected issues (Stewart et al., 2023).

In addition to dynamic content such as stories and videos, static screenshots were captured for any content that could be categorized under the issues of economy and education. This multimodal data was compiled into shareable presentation slide decks using the graphic design platform Canva. Within these decks, significant posts and patterns relevant to the framing strategies were highlighted and bookmarked for detailed analysis. The structure ensures consistent revisitation of material and provides a thorough and replicable analysis of social media interactions (Stewart et al., 2023). The final recordings and screenshots were stored in Microsoft OneDrive, where each platform and candidate were organized into folders categorized by a focus on economic or educational issues.

The digital multimodal walkthrough method provides a more comprehensive representation of social media interactions by preserving content as a continuous stream of information rather than isolated texts or images. This approach enhances the understanding of the dialogical nature of discourse construction and allows researchers to analyze content in its original multimodal context. While individual researchers can curate content, the scrollable video format and shareable presentation slide decks ensure that others can cross-check purposive sampling decisions and discourse analysis, therefore, reducing the potential for bias (Stewart et al., 2023). Additionally, the use of data archiving tools facilitates a structured and collaborative environment and enables researchers to systematically compile, organize, and review material independently or as part of a research team (Stewart et al., 2023).

3. Analysis

After the data was collected using the digital multimodal walkthrough method, multimodal discourse analysis (Keshavarzian & Stewart, 2025; Stewart et al., 2023; Kress, 2010, 2012) was employed to analyze how candidates utilize language, videos, images, and other relevant multimedia content to frame economic and educational issues. The analysis focused exclusively on content from the official, verified accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and X. These accounts serve as the primary channels for public-facing campaign messaging. However, recent studies suggest that official candidate accounts may not fully reflect the range of communication strategies employed in contemporary electioneering. For example, research on Kenya's 2022 presidential election highlights how political campaigns often adopt a segmentation strategy in which official pages focus on positive messaging and policy positions, while more aggressive or negative content is delegated to allied influencers

or unofficial channels (Abboud et al., 2024). Similarly, political communication in Ghana frequently involves the use of closed platforms like WhatsApp for internal organization and message dissemination among party supporters—spaces where forms of messaging not typically visible in official candidate communications may circulate (Lynch et al., 2022). While this study’s focus on official accounts enables a systematic analysis of the framing strategies directly controlled by the candidates themselves, it does not capture the broader ecosystem of political messaging that may operate through affiliated networks or informal channels.

Unlike traditional text-based discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis integrates multiple semiotic resources, including color schemes, hashtags, infographics, images, and videos, to understand how political actors construct narratives and engage their audiences. This approach is particularly useful in digital political communication, where engagement extends beyond textual content (Farkas & Bene, 2021).

The analysis involved identifying recurring discourses related to the economy and education (see Table 2 below). In identifying the recurring discourses from the dataset for analysis, the study employed the rubric and theory application approach used by Yang (2024) and Mchakulu (2011).

Table 2. Rubric for theme identification and multimodal discourse analysis.

Framing Elements	Description	Examples
Problem Definition	Identifies how the candidates define issues related to the economy and education.	“Ghana’s economy is in crisis”, “Our education system is broken”, “Families are struggling to afford quality education”. Images and videos of candidates visiting schools, markets, and economic hubs.
Causal Interpretation	Specifies who or what is credited or blamed as the cause of the issue.	“This government’s policies have caused inflation”, “Our education sector is underfunded”, “Previous administrations failed to invest in youth employment”. Use of hashtags like #ResettingGhana, #FixTheEconomy, #BawumiaMeansBusiness.
Moral Evaluation	Provides judgments or evaluations, often appealing to shared values or ethics to influence voter perception.	“Every child deserves quality education”, “Leaders must be accountable to the people”, “The 24-h economy is necessary to create jobs for the youth”.
Treatment Recommendation	Suggests specific solutions or actions, indicating how candidates plan to address the identified problems.	“We will implement a 24-h economy to boost productivity”, “Invest more in teacher training programs”, “We will stabilize inflation and create job opportunities for graduates”. Use of hashtags like #MahamaForEducation, #BoldSolutionsForJobsAndBusiness.

Table 2 outlines the framework used to identify frames related to economy and education in the candidates’ social media discourse. The categorization of posts was based on their visual, textual, and interactive elements to provide a comprehensive understanding

of how candidates engaged voters. Previous studies have shown that digital political discourse relies on the fusion of these elements to create persuasive narratives (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Keshavarzian & Stewart, 2025).

The coding decisions were informed by prior thematic analyses of digital campaign strategies (Mchakulu, 2011), with attention given to how different framing elements—problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation—were operationalized in the candidates' posts. For example, Mahama's use of structured infographics and real-time discussions was categorized under interactive policy framing, emphasizing two-way engagement, while Bawumia's event-driven updates and documentary-style videos were coded under incumbency-based narrative framing, focusing on reinforcing his government track record. To ensure reliability in coding, the study employed a cross-checking strategy, where campaign materials were reviewed multiple times to validate interpretations. Additionally, thematic comparisons were made across platforms, recognizing that each platform's affordances influenced both the framing strategies and the level of engagement generated.

4. Results

This study examines how Ghana's two leading presidential candidates, John Mahama of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and Mahamudu Bawumia of the New Patriotic Party (NPP), framed issues of economy and education on social media during the 2024 election campaign. By analyzing their messaging strategies on Facebook, Instagram, and X, the study illustrates how their issue-framing strategies engaged voters through platform affordances, visual narratives, and interactive discourse. The findings of the study reveal three core dynamics in the framing strategies of both candidates: (1) contrasting economic narratives ('Resetting Ghana' vs. 'It Is Possible'), (2) competing visions of education (reform vs. continuity), and (3) platform-specific engagement patterns. These findings offer insight into how political actors leverage digital affordances beyond simple messaging tools into structured framing mechanisms and strategically construct narratives to shape public discourse and influence voter engagement.

4.1. Contrasting Economic Narratives: 'Resetting Ghana' vs. 'It Is Possible'

Mahama and Bawumia employed contrasting economic framing strategies, with Mahama positioning himself as the opposition challenger focused on economic recovery through his 'Resetting Ghana' narrative, while Bawumia, as the incumbent candidate, framed himself as an advocate for continuity and progress under 'It Is Possible' slogan.

Mahama's economic discourse was framed around the theme of 'resetting' the economy by employing a crisis-framing strategy that portrayed the current administration as responsible for Ghana's economic hardship. His campaign's dominant hashtag, #ResettingGhana, was consistently used across platforms to reinforce this narrative. By highlighting economic mismanagement, unemployment, and inflation as causal issues, Mahama positioned himself as the leader capable of restoring economic stability.

The '24-h economy' was Mahama's most dominant policy proposal, which he framed as the solution to Ghana's economic crisis. This was consistently reinforced through hashtags (#Mahama4Change, #ResettingGhana #MahamaForPresident), graphic flyers, and videos across Instagram, Facebook, and X. His posts often featured unemployment statistics, policy proposals, and economic comparisons between his tenure and the current administration.

He consistently positioned the '24-h economy' as a game-changing intervention that would create jobs, expand production, and stabilize the economy (see Figure 1 below).

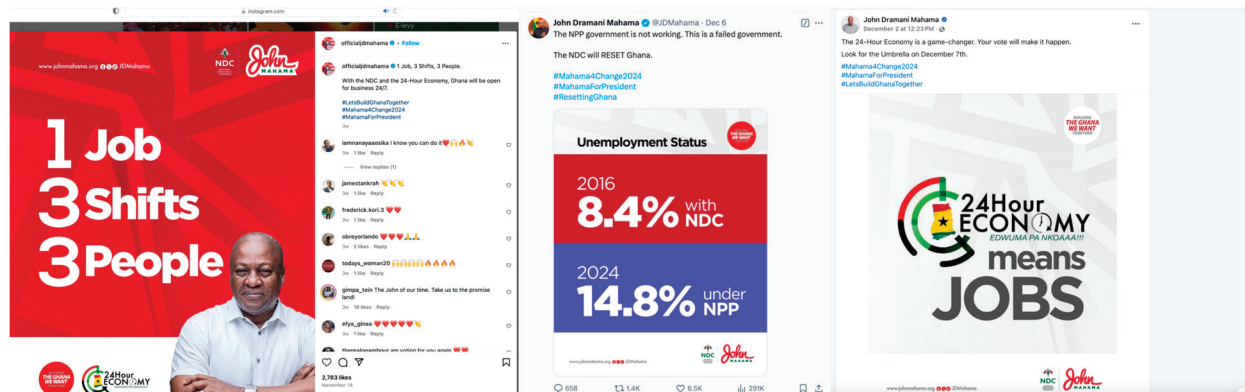


Figure 1. Economic crisis and recovery—Mahama’s 24-h economy and unemployment framing.

Figure 1 illustrates how Mahama frequently frames Ghana’s economic challenges and his proposed 24-h economic solution. The Instagram post (first image from the left) presents his vision for job creation through the 24-h economy policy, using the slogan “1 Job, 3 Shifts, 3 People”. The X post (middle image) compares Ghana’s unemployment rate, showing 8.4 percent during his presidency in 2016 and 14.8 percent under the NPP in 2024. The Facebook post (third image) reinforces his campaign’s central message, presenting the “24-Hour Economy” as a transformative policy that will generate jobs and economic opportunities.

In contrast, Bawumia’s campaign framed the economic narrative around continuity and technological transformation, using #ItIsPossible as a central theme. Rather than directly addressing criticisms of economic hardship, Bawumia’s campaign focused on showcasing his achievements as Vice President, particularly in digitalizing the economy and improving governance efficiency. He presented the economy through a lens of progress and innovation, often depicting Ghana as being on a transformative journey where technological advancements would drive economic prosperity (see Figure 2). His campaign slogan, “It is Possible”, conveyed optimism, forward-thinking leadership, and digital solutions as the foundation for economic growth. Unlike Mahama’s strong opposition framing, Bawumia frequently highlighted his role in modernizing Ghana’s economy through digitalization, referencing initiatives such as the Ghana Card as a national identity and economic tool, Mobile Money Interoperability for seamless digital transactions, e-taxation and e-pharmacy systems, and the introduction of the Ghana Digital Property Address System. Bawumia’s social media posts often framed these policies as foundational to Ghana’s economic future, repeatedly stating that Ghana was already on the path to a digital economy that would drive transformation.

Figure 2 illustrates how Bawumia frequently frames Ghana’s economic future through digitalization and private-sector engagement. The X post (first image from the left) highlights the launch of the ‘CitizenApp’, where he asserts that digital innovation is crucial for improving governance efficiency and public service accessibility. The Instagram post (middle image) showcases his introduction of ‘myCreditScore’, a credit scoring system aimed at improving financial inclusion and access to credit for all Ghanaians. The Facebook post (right image) reinforces his position that the private sector is the foundation of economic growth, as he engages with business leaders to outline tax reforms and policies aimed at fostering entrepreneurship. These posts align with his broader and frequent campaign message of continuity, economic modernization, and technological advancement as key drivers of Ghana’s future development.

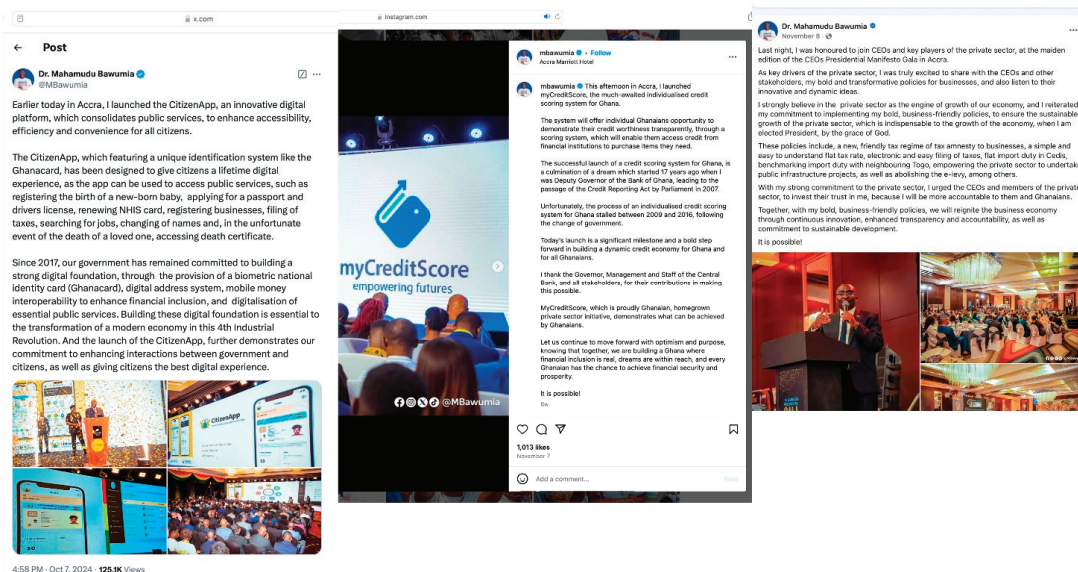


Figure 2. Economic continuity and digital transformation—Bawumia’s framing of the economy.

Notably, unlike Mahama’s structured and visual approach, Bawumia’s economic messaging focused more on achievements and was primarily text-based, with an emphasis on listing the government’s accomplishments. His visuals primarily consisted of images from commissioning events, speaking engagements, and community interactions, rather than infographics that broke down policies. Also, his campaign’s hashtag use was inconsistent, shifting between #Bawumia2024, #BoldSolutionsForOurFuture, and #ItIsPossible, which made his branding less consistent than Mahama’s campaign.

It was observed across the dataset that Mahama did not merely highlight economic struggles across his social media platforms; he positioned himself as a candidate focused on practical solutions by presenting clear and policy-based interventions. His “24-h economy” was the centerpiece of his economic messaging, framed as a transformative policy that would create jobs, expand production, and stabilize the economy. The use of repetition and visual branding, including infographics illustrating job creation policies and proposed tax reductions, strengthened his economic argument. Mahama’s hashtags (#Resetting-Ghana, #Mahama4Change2024, #LetsBuildGhanaTogether) created a unified campaign identity, which ensured that his messaging remained consistent and was easily searchable across platforms.

Additionally, Mahama contextualized the 24-h economy within Ghana’s economic crisis, framing it as a solution to inflation, currency depreciation, and youth unemployment. His infographics provided comparative statistics, such as the claim that unemployment had risen from 8.4% in 2016 to 14.8% under the NPP government, effectively framing his opponent as responsible for economic mismanagement. His strategy was highly interactive and policy-focused, using specific issue frames such as “economic reset”, “24-h economy”, and “job creation” to position himself as a reformer responding to Ghana’s economic crisis.

Bawumia, on the other hand, focused on past achievements rather than outlining a clear vision for the future. His posts frequently highlighted his government’s successes in digitalization but lacked a consistent campaign theme, which made his message less focused and persuasive compared to Mahama. While he used videos and infographics, they were not organized around a strong central message. Also, Bawumia’s inconsistent use of hashtags made it more difficult to reinforce key campaign messages across platforms.

4.2. Competing Visions of Education: Reform vs. Continuity

Across the dataset, the candidates framed education differently, with Mahama advocating for systemic reform and policy expansion under his education agenda, while Bawumia positioned himself as supporting continuity and the existing Free Senior High School (SHS) policy.

Mahama’s social media campaign proposed a series of targeted interventions aimed at reforming and restructuring the education sector. These included the “No-Fees-Stress” policy, which sought to eliminate first-year tuition fees in public universities, the reintroduction of the ‘Student Loan Trust Plus’ to provide financial support for tertiary students, a ‘National Apprenticeship Programme’ to equip young people with technical and vocational skills, and the establishment of a ‘Women’s Development Bank’ to offer financial support for women-led educational initiatives.

Through a series of social media posts, Mahama argued that the Free SHS policy—one of the NPP’s flagship initiatives—was poorly implemented and unsustainable in its current form. To address these challenges, he proposed targeted interventions, including free tertiary education for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) and increased investment in technical and vocational education. His strategy also involved engaging with teacher unions and hosting interactive live sessions on Facebook (“Mahama Conversations”) to discuss these proposed reforms. Other frequent posts focused on teacher welfare, including a proposed 20% salary bonus for teachers who accept positions in rural schools.

His framing of education was structured, highly interactive, and supported by visual representations of his policies (see Figure 3). He used infographics, video clips, and direct Q&A engagements with students to reinforce his arguments. The use of testimonial short reel videos from students, educators, and policy experts strengthened his messaging and created an emotional connection with voters. Also, Mahama’s posts often carried messages such as “Our youth are getting increasingly frustrated with the lack of jobs and education opportunities. We will give them the future they deserve”. He repeatedly used hashtags such as #LetsBuildGhanaTogether and #MahamaForChange to create a unifying digital movement around his educational policies. Additionally, Mahama’s campaign incorporated detailed policy explanations through infographics that outlined budget allocations for education.

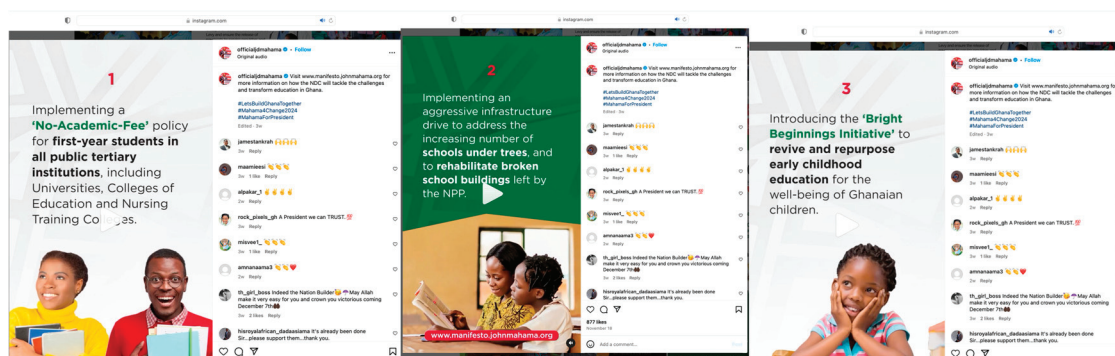


Figure 3. Mahama’s education policy proposals and investment in learning infrastructure.

Figure 3 shows how Mahama frequently centered his education campaign on affordability and infrastructure development. The first Instagram post (left) highlights his proposal for a “No-Academic-Fee” policy, aimed at eliminating first-year tuition fees for public tertiary students. The second post outlines his plan to improve school infrastructure by addressing the issue of schools under trees and rehabilitating abandoned school buildings. The third post promotes the “Bright Beginnings Initiative”, which focuses on strengthening early childhood education.

However, the incumbent Vice President Bawumia centered his education campaign on maintaining and expanding the Free SHS policy, which he presented as the NPP's flagship achievement (see Figure 4 below). His social media posts warned that a Mahama presidency would jeopardize the program.



Figure 4. Bawumia's campaign framing of Free SHS as a policy to protect and expand.

Bawumia framed his education campaign around the continuity and protection of the Free Senior High School (SHS) policy. His social media posts across Instagram, Facebook, and X highlight the government's achievements in providing free education to over 1.8 million Ghanaians. By emphasizing the need to 'protect' Free SHS, this approach created a sense of urgency among voters who had directly benefited from the policy, warning that a change in leadership could put Free SHS at risk. Through the use of bold text, hashtags such as #Bawumia2024 and #VoteNumber1, and long documentary video content featuring classroom scenes, Bawumia's campaign visually communicated his commitment to maintaining and improving the initiative. His social media captions frequently reinforced this message, stating, "We cannot allow Free SHS to be taken away. Vote to protect the future of Ghana's children". While this strategy effectively promoted continuity and leveraged the incumbency advantage, it lacked the detailed policy proposals that characterized Mahama's campaign.

Notably, Mahama's approach was more structured and policy-focused, whereas Bawumia's strategy relied more on long videos and images of students benefiting from Free SHS, featuring testimonials from teachers, parents, and young people. His hashtag use was inconsistent, shifting between #Bawumia2024, #BoldSolutionsForOurFuture, and #ItIsPossible, which weakened the overall branding consistency of his campaign compared to Mahama's. Rather than providing in-depth policy explanations, Bawumia's educational messaging focused on personal stories and visual narratives. His posts often highlighted STEM education, digital literacy, and the expansion of technical training programs, showcasing students using government-provided tablets and ICT tools to emphasize his administration's role in promoting innovation. The debate over Free SHS became a contest between advocating for reform and defending policy continuity. The table below (Table 3) compares the candidates' engagement levels (likes, comments, shares, views) on social media content related to economic and educational policies.

Table 3. Engagement levels on key campaign messages.

Policy Focus	Platform	Mahama (Avg. Engagement per Post)	Bawumia (Avg. Engagement per Post)
Economic Policies (24-h economy, job creation, taxation)	Facebook	4000+ views, 1500+ comments, 2000+ shares	2500+ views, 700+ comments, 1000+ shares
	Instagram	10,000+ likes, 1200+ comments (Reels outperform static posts)	6500+ likes, 600+ comments (Less frequent Reels)
	X (Twitter)	High retweet rate, strong audience discourse, viral tweets engaging in political debate	Moderate retweet rate, lower audience interaction, descriptive tweet threads
Educational Policies (free tertiary education, STEM, apprenticeship programs)	Facebook	3500+ views, 1200+ comments, 1500+ shares	2000+ views, 600+ comments, 900+ shares
	Instagram	7500+ likes, strong engagement on education-themed reels	4800+ likes, mostly event-driven engagement
	X (Twitter)	Live tweet updates from “Mahama Conversations” Q&A sessions; significant debate traction	Tweet summaries of education initiatives, but less engagement in debates

Table 3 shows key differences in how Mahama and Bawumia’s economic and educational policy messages resonated with social media audiences across platforms. Mahama consistently generated higher interaction across Facebook, Instagram, and X, particularly when discussing economic policies such as the 24-h economy, job creation, and taxation. His content was more interactive, with strong engagement through comments and shares, which suggests that his economic framing sparked discourse and audience participation. His Instagram Reels, in particular, outperformed static posts, which indicates that short-form video content played a crucial role in audience engagement.

Bawumia’s economic messaging, while generating significant interaction, trailed behind Mahama, especially in audience discourse on X and comment engagement on Facebook. His campaign leaned more on descriptive tweet threads rather than direct debates, which may explain the lower engagement levels. His Instagram engagement was also lower, which suggests that his content was less optimized for the platform’s visual affordance.

On education, Mahama again saw higher engagement, particularly on Instagram and X, where interactive features such as Q&A sessions (“Mahama Conversations”) facilitated real-time voter engagement. His focus on policy specifics, such as free tertiary education and apprenticeship programs, likely contributed to this traction (see also Table 4). In contrast, Bawumia’s educational posts were more event-driven and less discussion-oriented, leading to comparatively lower audience participation. His messaging largely consisted of summarizing policy achievements rather than actively engaging in debates or Q&A sessions, which may have contributed to the lower engagement on X.

Table 4. Audience Engagement Metrics for Selected Posts by Mahama and Bawumia.

Platform	Candidate	Post Type	View Count	Likes	Comments	Shares/Retweets	Likes (%)	Comments (%)	Shares/Retweets (%)
X	Mahama	Economic Recovery Strategy	30,000	2500	500	350	8.33%	1.67%	1.17%
X	Bawumia	Economic Development Plan	18,000	1500	250	200	8.33%	1.39%	1.11%
Instagram	Mahama	Education Access Initiative	12,000	1200	220	170	10%	1.83%	1.42%
Instagram	Bawumia	Smart Schools Initiative	8500	850	130	100	10%	1.53%	1.18%
Facebook	Mahama	Job Creation Post	15,000	2000	300	250	13.33%	2%	1.67%
Facebook	Bawumia	Job Creation Post	11,000	1000	180	130	9.09%	1.64%	1.18%

Table 4 illustrates the engagement metrics for selected social media posts by Mahama and Bawumia on X, Instagram, and Facebook. The posts were specifically chosen to represent their respective messaging on key topics such as the economy, education, and job creation. The metrics include view count, likes, comments, and shares/retweets. The percentages reflect the ratio of likes, comments, and shares/retweets relative to the total view count.

The table shows that Mahama's engagement metrics were generally higher than Bawumia's, particularly on Facebook, where Mahama's educational posts saw significant interaction. This is likely because Mahama's posts were more interactive, featuring strategies such as Q&A sessions and policy specifics, which encouraged more engagement. In contrast, Bawumia's posts were less interactive and more focused on summarizing achievements, which may have contributed to comparatively lower audience engagement.

4.3. Specific Platform Affordances and Engagement Strategies

Social media platform affordances significantly shaped the ways in which Mahama and Bawumia engaged with voters (see Table 5). Each platform presented distinct opportunities for narrative construction, audience interaction, and strategic message dissemination, influencing the overall effectiveness of their digital campaign approaches.

Notably, Mahama's campaign customized its messaging to match the strengths of each platform (see Figure 5). In contrast, Bawumia's strategy was mostly event-focused, had limited interactive elements, and lacked a clear approach to adapting content for different social media platforms.

On Facebook, Mahama utilized Facebook Live sessions, branded as 'Mahama Conversations', to engage voters directly in real-time discussions about economic and educational policies. This interactive format allowed for two-way communication and reinforced his image as a candidate who was open to public discourse and policy debate. His use of infographics and detailed captions provided voters with clear explanations of his policy proposals and ensured that his messaging was both accessible and informative. Furthermore, his consistent hashtag usage created a coherent digital identity and made his campaign themes easily searchable and recognizable. On the other hand, Bawumia used Facebook primarily for event updates, such as project inaugurations, campaign tours, and past achievements (see Figure 6). His engagement was more one-directional, focusing

on highlighting accomplishments rather than fostering dialogue. Additionally, his inconsistent hashtag usage weakened his campaign message and made it less unified across the platform.

Table 5. Platform-Specific Framing Strategies of Mahama and Bawumia. The table illustrates how the two candidates leveraged platform affordances across Facebook, Instagram and X to frame economic and educational issues.

Platform	John Mahama's Framing Strategy	Mahamudu Bawumia's Framing Strategy
Facebook	Hosted Facebook Live ("Mahama Conversations") for real-time policy discussions and citizen engagement. Used flyers, infographics, and detailed captions to explain policies on the 24-h economy, job creation, and taxation reforms. Consistent hashtag branding.	Primarily event-driven updates, featuring campaign tours, project inaugurations, and past achievements. Lower use of interactive engagement, and inconsistent hashtag usage.
Instagram	Used short-form video reels, emotional testimonials, and branded graphics to visually engage youth voters. Framed economic issues using infographics and structured visual messaging.	Relied on photo-based updates from rallies and community engagements. Less use of structured issue framing. Few infographics or targeted policy messaging.
X (Twitter)	Engaged in real-time debates and policy critiques, using data points, rhetorical questions, and direct confrontation. Emphasized economic statistics and government failures. Consistent hashtags strengthened narrative.	More descriptive and event-focused. Used X Broadcasts for speeches and campaign updates but did not engage in real-time debates. Less structured use of policy-framing techniques.

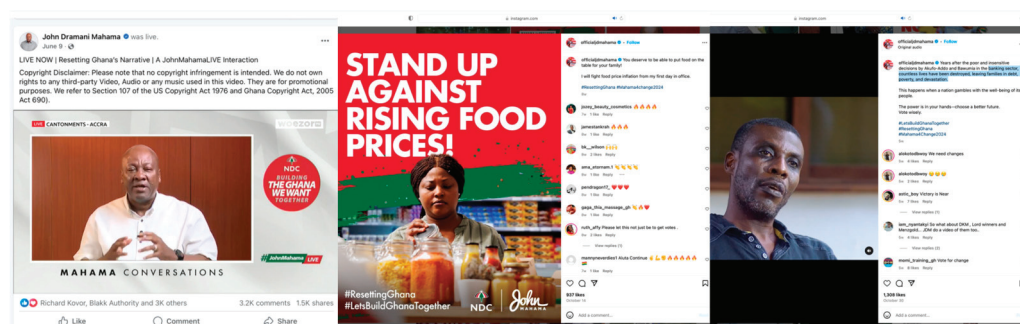


Figure 5. Mahama utilizes Facebook Live for interactive policy discussions, bold Instagram visuals to highlight economic challenges, and personal testimonies to evoke emotional voter responses.

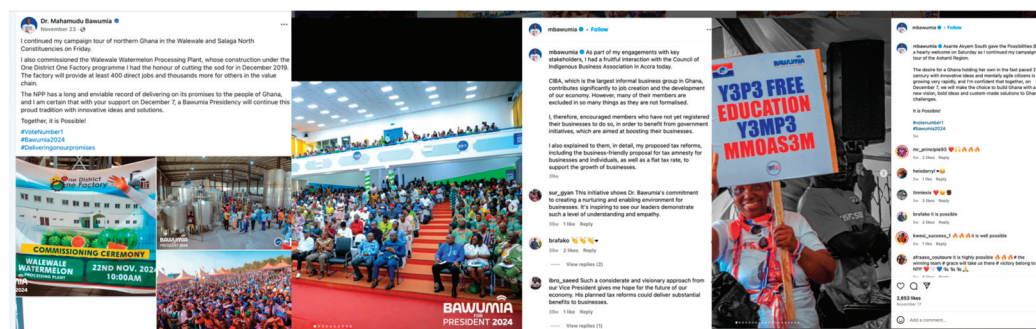


Figure 6. Bawumia's Facebook framing strategy.

On Instagram, Mahama's campaign was engaging and appealing to young voters, using short video reels, emotional testimonials, and well-organized graphics to present his

economic and educational policies. This structured visual messaging made his campaign content more engaging and accessible.

Bawumia relied more on static photo updates from rallies and community engagements. His posts lacked structured issue-based framing, with fewer infographics and minimal direct policy communication.

Bawumia utilized Facebook for event-driven updates and Instagram for economic engagement, showcasing large-scale economic projects, business-friendly policies, and the continuation of Free SHS.

Mahama actively engaged in real-time debates, using data-driven critiques, rhetorical questions, and direct confrontations to challenge his opponent's record. His posts were structured around economic statistics and critiques of government failures. Also, his consistent use of hashtags kept his messages connected and ensured his arguments remained visible and easy to follow in political discussions (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Mahama leverages X platform for direct political confrontation, using bold visuals, economic critiques, and rhetorical questions to challenge the incumbent government.

Bawumia's X activity was more descriptive and event-focused, often summarizing speeches and campaign events rather than directly engaging in policy debates. While he utilized X Broadcasts for speech dissemination, he did not leverage the platform for real-time interaction which reduced his engagement in direct political discourse. His messaging lacked structured issue-based framing and made his digital communication less impactful in shaping political narratives (see Figure 8).

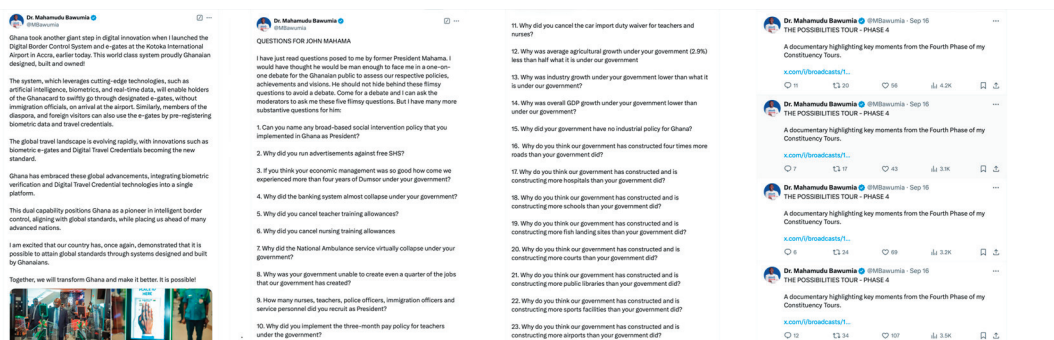


Figure 8. Bawumia utilizes X platform to promote incumbent government achievements, challenge opponents through a structured list of about 50 questions, and document campaign activities with video broadcasts.

Overall, Mahama's ability to adapt his communication style to different platform affordances allowed him to effectively frame economic and educational issues while main-

taining a clear and consistent campaign identity. Bawumia, however, focused more on traditional campaign updates and event-driven communication, incorporating fewer interactive elements and a less structured approach to presenting policy. This difference in digital strategy affected voter engagement with their messages and shaped the overall discourse of the election campaign.

5. Discussion

Social media has become a key platform for political campaigns, where candidates not only communicate policies but also construct narratives that shape public perception. The findings of this study show significant differences in how John Mahama and Mahamudu Bawumia utilized digital platforms to shape discussions around economic and educational policies during the 2024 Ghanaian presidential election. Their strategies reflected broader political positioning, with Mahama, the former president, leveraging social media to present himself as a reformist championing economic recovery and educational reform, while Bawumia, the incumbent vice president, framed his campaign around continuity and technological progress. The findings reveal that the effectiveness of a candidate's political campaign on social media is closely linked to how well they tailor their messaging to the unique features of each platform. Thus, by strategically aligning their content with platform-specific affordances, candidates can maximize their reach and voter engagement.

Across the dataset, it was observed that Mahama's campaign adapted to the affordances of each social media platform, using Facebook Live for interactive Q&A sessions, Instagram Reels for visually engaging policy presentations, and X for real-time debates and direct voter interaction (see Figures 1, 3, 5 and 7). This tailored approach allowed him to create a more engaging campaign space, where voters felt actively involved in discussions about economic and educational policies. In contrast, Bawumia's digital strategy was less structured and relied more on showcasing campaign events, such as rallies, project inaugurations, and public appearances, rather than fostering direct interaction with voters (see Figures 2, 4, 6 and 8). His approach focused more on visibility through social media posts that summarized campaign events and speeches rather than engaging in interactive policy discussions. Notably, his lower engagement across Facebook, Instagram, and X suggests that a passive approach to digital campaigning is less effective in generating voter engagement and fostering meaningful political discourse compared to a strategy that effectively utilizes platform-specific affordances (see Tables 4 and 5).

Meanwhile, engagement in digital platforms is not solely dependent on content strategy. Royal's (2023) product-engagement model offers a useful framework for understanding how engagement is shaped by three key factors: (1) interface affordances (how platforms are designed for interaction), (2) data models (how user activity and preferences are structured), and (3) algorithms (how content is distributed and made visible to users). Mahama's ability to actively engage voters across platforms aligns with this model, as his campaign strategically leveraged the affordances of Facebook Live, interactive comment sections, and hashtag-based discussions on X to create highly visible and participatory engagement spaces.

Interestingly, Mahama framed his economic message around the "Resetting Ghana" campaign slogan, which positioned him as the candidate for economic recovery and reform. His messaging portrayed the current administration as responsible for Ghana's economic hardship while presenting his proposed '24-h economy' policy as the solution for job creation, increased productivity, and overall economic stabilization. His posts frequently used comparative statistics, bold infographics, and testimonial videos to reinforce this argument, which made his economic messaging both data-driven and visually compelling.

On the other hand, Bawumia focused on continuity and technological transformation by frequently posting the NPP's digital governance achievements as evidence of ongoing economic progress. However, his approach lacked structured visual narratives and deep policy explanations which made his messaging less detailed and less interactive than Mahama. This finding supports the argument that framing policies through structured and visually engaging content on social media enhances voter engagement and message retention (Bronstein et al., 2018; Farkas & Bene, 2021).

Similarly, in the discussion of educational policies, Mahama framed his campaign around reform and expansion, promising interventions such as free tertiary education for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) and increased investment in technical and vocational training. His campaign was highly interactive, with live-streamed Q&A sessions, structured infographics, and direct engagements with teacher unions and students, which created a sense of policy transparency and accessibility. However, Bawumia focused on preserving and expanding the Free SHS policy and frequently warned that Mahama's presidency could lead to its reversal. His posts relied more on emotional appeals and testimonial videos from beneficiaries, focusing on the continuation of existing policies rather than proposing new educational interventions. While this approach effectively mobilized supporters who benefited from Free SHS, it lacked specific policy breakdowns and detailed implementation strategies which made it less detailed and comprehensive compared to Mahama's more structured policy discourse.

The findings of the study further highlight the importance of maintaining a clear and consistent message across social media platforms for political campaigns. Mahama used consistent hashtags (#ResettingGhana, #Mahama4Change, #LetsBuildGhanaTogether), which kept his messages searchable, unified, and easily recognizable across platforms. In contrast, Bawumia frequently changed hashtags (#Bawumia2024, #BoldSolutionsForOurFuture, #ItIsPossible), which weakened the overall focus of his campaign and made it harder to establish a central message.

This study argues that political candidates who integrate structured, interactive, and visually engaging social media strategies are more effective in shaping public discourse and mobilizing voter engagement. Mahama's higher engagement levels across platforms suggest that digital political campaigns require more than just content dissemination—they demand active participation, clear messaging structures, and tailored platform strategies to effectively connect with voters.

As social media continues to influence political campaigning, these findings suggest that political candidates must prioritize real-time engagement, data-driven narratives, and visual storytelling to effectively frame policy discussions and shape voter perceptions.

While this study focused on how presidential candidates framed economic and educational issues through their official social media accounts, it is important to acknowledge that broader political and economic contexts may influence how such frames are constructed and received by the electorate. In Ghana, the 2024 elections took place amid ongoing economic challenges, including high inflation, unemployment, and concerns over the rising cost of living—issues that were also reflected as top public priorities in Afrobarometer survey data (Afrobarometer, 2025). These conditions likely shaped public expectations and may have influenced how candidates chose to present their messages, particularly in terms of problem definitions and proposed solutions. Although this study did not conduct a comparative analysis with previous Ghanaian elections, such as the 2016 contest, or with other African cases where economic crises played a significant role in electoral outcomes, these dynamics remain important contextual factors. Future research could explore how incumbency or opposition status may shape framing strategies during periods of economic

difficulty, particularly whether opposition candidates tend to emphasize calls for change and accountability, while incumbents focus on continuity and policy achievements.

Further, the difference observed in how Mahama and Bawumia used social media during the 2024 campaign may also reflect broader patterns seen in other elections in Ghana and across Africa. Previous research found that the NPP was more effective in using social media in the 2016 and 2020 Ghanaian elections, particularly for engaging urban youth and shaping political narratives (Gadjanova et al., 2019, 2022). In contrast, the 2024 election shows a shift, with Mahama, as the opposition candidate, adopting a more structured, interactive, and engaging social media strategy than Bawumia, the incumbent vice president. This has also been observed in other African elections, where opposition candidates have used social media as a tool to mobilize support and challenge incumbents. For example, in Zambia's 2021 election, the opposition party relied on social media to disseminate information and support offline organizing efforts in a media environment that largely favored the incumbent (Lynch & Gadjanovaa, 2022). Similarly, in Kenya's 2022 presidential election, candidates adopted segmented digital strategies by delegating certain types of messaging to affiliated influencers (Abboud et al., 2024). These examples suggest that opposition candidates may often invest more in digital engagement because they face disadvantages in other forms of political communication. Although this study did not directly compare these cases, the similarities highlight how political status—whether a candidate is in government or in opposition—can shape social media strategies.

Table 6 shows summary of the 2024 Ghana presidential election results for the two major candidates (results from 275 out of 276 constituencies) as reported by the Ghana Electoral Commission on 10 January 2025. With Mahama winning the 2024 election with 56.55% of the vote, future research could also examine how social media engagement translates into voter behavior and whether high digital engagement correlates with electoral success.

Table 6. 2024 Ghana Presidential Election Results for the Two Major Candidates.

Name of Candidates	Party Initial	Votes Obtained in Figures	Votes Obtained in Words	Percentage of Votes Obtained	Remarks
John Mahama	NDC	6, 591, 790	Six Million, Five Hundred and Ninety-One Thousand, Seven Hundred and Ninety.	56, 42	ELECTED
Mahamudu Bawumia	NPP	4, 877, 611	Four Million, Eight Hundred and Seventy-Seven Thousand, Six Hundred and Eleven	41, 75	

6. Conclusions

This study examined how the two leading candidates in Ghana's 2024 presidential election, John Mahama and Mahamudu Bawumia, used social media to frame issues related to the economy and education. The findings reveal key differences in their digital campaign strategies and highlight the critical role of platform-specific affordances in shaping voter engagement. Mahama's campaign effectively leveraged interactive and visually compelling content, structured messaging, and consistent hashtags across Facebook, Instagram, and X to frame himself as the candidate for Ghana's economic recovery and educational reform.

His messaging around the “24-h economy” and job creation was reinforced with statistical comparisons, infographics, and real-time voter engagement, which made his campaign more issue-focused and interactive. In contrast, Bawumia’s strategy relied heavily on showcasing past achievements and defending policy continuity, but it lacked the structured engagement and clear thematic consistency seen in Mahama’s campaign. His inconsistent use of hashtags and less interactive approach weakened his ability to sustain a unified digital campaign message.

These findings can also be situated within the broader historical and ideological landscape of Ghanaian party politics, providing additional context for the framing choices observed. Beyond its specific focus on the 2024 Ghanaian presidential election, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how party identities and political traditions may inform contemporary campaign strategies. The framing patterns observed—where Mahama, representing the NDC, positioned himself as a reformist advocating economic recovery and educational reform, while Bawumia, representing the NPP, emphasized continuity and policy preservation—reflect the established political orientations of these parties. Previous research has shown that the NDC generally aligns with social democratic principles, with roots in the post-revolutionary PNDC era under Jerry John Rawlings, often emphasizing social welfare, reform, and redistribution (Bob-Milliar, 2012). In contrast, the NPP has historically drawn on the Danquah-Busia-Dombo tradition, advocating market-oriented policies, private sector-led growth, and constitutional governance (Fridy, 2007). These ideological legacies may help explain the candidates’ framing choices during the 2024 campaign, particularly in how they positioned themselves around issues of economic management and educational policy.

While this study offers insights into the use of social media for issue framing in Ghanaian presidential campaigns, its findings may also be relevant to similar electoral contexts across Africa and other regions where opposition and incumbency dynamics intersect with economic challenges. However, the scope of this research is limited to a single election cycle, two candidates, and selected key issues (economy and education). The analysis was also restricted to official candidate accounts, which may not capture the full spectrum of campaign messaging circulating through affiliated networks or unofficial channels. Further research could explore these dynamics through comparative studies across different electoral contexts or by examining how these framing strategies evolve over time.

Building on previous studies (Van Gyampo, 2017; Dzisah, 2018; Amankwah & Mbatha, 2019), which found that Ghanaian political parties are increasingly relying on digital platforms for mobilization and engaging young voters, this study argues that Ghana’s digital campaign strategies have evolved beyond simple messaging tools into structured framing mechanisms, where presidential candidates strategically construct narratives, debate political issues to shape public discourse and directly influence voter engagement.

The study also suggests that an interactive, platform-adaptive digital strategy can enhance a candidate’s ability to connect with voters, frame policy discussions effectively, and establish a strong campaign identity. Mahama’s victory with 56.55% of the 2024 Ghana electoral vote suggests that his strategic use of social media platforms may have played a significant role in shaping voter perceptions, particularly among younger demographics who dominate digital spaces (see Table 6). Future research should explore the direct relationship between social media engagement and voter behavior to assess whether high online interaction translates into electoral success. Additionally, further studies could examine the role of artificial intelligence, algorithm-driven content distribution, and emerging digital tools in shaping modern political campaigns.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the author on request. The data consist of publicly accessible social media content that was archived during the campaign period.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

CPP	Convention People's Party
PWDs	Persons with Disabilities
NPP	New Patriotic Party
NDC	National Democratic Congress
GBC	Ghana Broadcasting Corporation
GSS	Ghana Statistical Service
NCA	National Communications Authority
SHS	Senior High School
GDAP	Ghana Digital Acceleration Project
PNDC	Provisional National Defence Council

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Article

Language Choice and the Problematics of Ideology in the Pre- and Post-Independence Ghanaian Press: A Historical and Cultural Analysis

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Abstract: This study adds to the existing literature on the history of the Ghanaian press from pre-colonial times to 1992, focusing on language: its choice and ideological, socio-cultural, and political ramifications. While the history of the press has received massive scholarly attention, the same cannot be said of language and its use in historical accounts. Thus, from a historical research perspective, employing an analytical and interpretive study of secondary data sources, and underpinned by cultural theories such as linguistic imperialism and hegemony, this study analyses how language was featured in the press during the research period and the implications thereof. This analysis shows that various institutions and individuals exploited language to foster narrow socio-cultural, ideological, and political agendas in the Gold Coast, later Ghana. This study also revealed that language use and its ideological forces during the pre- and immediate post-independence periods contributed immensely to Ghanaian media's current state and Ghanaians' general language attitudes. This study's significance lies in the realisation that language, as a cultural artifact, and its choice, use, and consumption could have far-reaching consequences for the self-realisation, actualisation, and general progress of a society. Thus, African societies should be mindful of the ideological implications of language choices not just in the press but also in other societal contexts. This study, therefore, invites further studies on language and its use in the media, especially from 1992, for a more comprehensive appreciation of the issues raised in this study.

Keywords: English and indigenous Ghanaian newspapers; Ghanaian press history; ideology and linguistic imperialism; language use; pre- and post-independence Ghana

1. Introduction

The Ghanaian media, as we have it today, began in 1822 when the first newspaper was published in English in the then Gold Coast. Since then, the Ghanaian press and the media industry have had a chequered history and undergone significant developments and changes, and the history has been told and retold. The historical accounts have often come from three perspectives. The first portrays the colonialists as bringing the press to serve their needs and enhance their colonisation enterprise. The second recounts vividly how the indigenous press¹ vigorously supported Ghanaian and other African nationalists to wrestle Ghana's political independence from the British (see, for example, Lindberg 2006; Nyamnjoh 2005; Ake 2000; Bourgault 1995; Karikari 1996). And the third focuses on how the press evolved thereafter (see, for example, Karikari 2007; Hasty 2005; Gadzekpo 1997). These perspectives capture the pre-independence period, the immediate post-independence era until 1992, and the period after 1992, respectively. The first two periods usually present the struggles of the press against suppression and muzzling by the colonial government and later by various indigenous political regimes, while the third focuses on the liberalisation and diversification of the press from 1992. The current state of the Ghanaian media was shaped by the positive and negative experiences of these periods.

Yet, it is remarkable that the historical narratives, detailing how the press began, its vicissitudes and travails, and its developments over the years, have found little space for crucial sociocultural imperatives that should not be overlooked in a portrayal of the historical development of the Ghanaian press. For example, Gadzekpo (2005) berated the near-silence about women and their socio-cultural and historical roles in historical narratives in the press. The author argued for a proper representation of women and their roles in the historical construction of the Ghanaian press. Also subdued in literature is language, its choice and use, and the ideological, socio-cultural, and political ramifications thereof. It must be pointed out that available literature on the language of the press occurs mostly outside of the historical perspective to deal with, among others, language imperialism (Edu-Buandoh 2016; Agyekum 2013), newsroom cultures (Wumpini 2019; Fosu and Akpojivi 2015; Adedeji 2015), ideology and power relations (Anyidoho 2008), and political economy (Owolabi 2021). It is therefore reasonable to say the historical narratives have been incomplete without acknowledging and investigating language and its role in the various accounts. An exception is Anyidoho (2008, 2016), whose ethnographically focused research has produced seminal works: *Ethnography of Print and Broadcast Media in Ghana* (2016) and *Ideologies of Language and Print Media in Ghana* (2008).

Consequently, this desk study adds to existing knowledge about the evolution of the press in Ghana with a focus on language. The specific objective is to investigate the use of language and its ideological, socio-cultural, and political implications in the evolution of the press. In this study, media and press may be understood as interchangeable, referring to news media of newspapers, radio, and television. In terms of scope, this study covers the pre-independence and post-independence periods to 1992. It refers to both printed and broadcast news media (as may apply) from a historical perspective and adopts a critical approach that draws on relevant linguistic, press, and cultural theories.

This analysis, covering from the 19th century through independence to 1992, shows that the choice and use of language in the news media in Gold Coast, later Ghana, were inspired by socio-cultural, ideological, and political considerations with far-reaching consequences.

2. Language Ideologies and Their Socio-Cultural Ramifications

Language primarily functions as a means of communication, enabling people to access information, express themselves, and give directives, including sharing aesthetic, phatic, and personal feelings, opinions, values, and experiences. Finegan (2012, p. 5) argued that language is an instrument of knowledge, a “vehicle of thought, a system of expression that mediates the transfer of thoughts from one person to another”. Thus, language makes it possible for society to generate and appreciate information about social life, culture, and reality.

Language is strongly linked to ethnicity and culture (Wumpini 2019; Obeng and Adegbija 1999). It is not easy to pin down “culture” in a definition (Mahadi and Jafari 2012), but suffice it to say that it may encapsulate the totality of what uniquely identifies a group of people (Obeng and Adegbija 1999): their language, epistemologies, dressing, music, work, arts, religion, dancing, social norms, taboos and values, and so on. Mahadi and Jafari (2012) and Bodomo (1996) have explained how central language is to the establishment and maintenance of cultural manifestations. The cultural genes of a people are generated and expressed through language, thereby making language indispensable in the cultural advancement of any society. The ominous implication is that a society that loses or de-emphasises its language risks obliterating its identity and stunting its cultural development.

Beyond its uses, functions, and cultural underpinnings, language is also an important carrier of ideology. Ideology, as a shared system of knowledge (Woolard 2021), is ordinarily a neutral concept. However, it rarely occurs in a neutral sense but often constructs a pejorative connotation or a false sense of language-based awareness of reality. And this often occurs insidiously, frequently carrying moral and political meanings. Through language use, ideology overtly or discreetly manufactures differentiation in social life often

leading to the domination of some languages and speakers over others. Thus, ideologies motivate people's choice of language and the way they use it.

The choice of language in communication occurs as a function of language ideologies in society (Perullo and Fenn 2000). Language ideologies imply the beliefs and interests people have when they choose a particular language for communication. Language ideologies, in this sense, may impose value differentiation among people based on the type and nature of language used. People who use some languages or a form of a language may enjoy some recognition more than others who use a different language or form of that language. For example, in Ghana, the introduction of English as part of the imperial project, together with colonisation, partly accorded the (English) language and its culture a preeminent status in the multilingual Gold Coast/Ghanaian society. That is why Ghanaians may prefer English to be used in formal public spaces to an indigenous language (Guerini 2007). It is common knowledge in the media space in Ghana that English medium radio stations like *Joy FM* and *Citi FM* are seen as serious stations for educated journalists and consumers, while the indigenous language radio stations are regarded as stations for "ordinary" people. Thus, language ideologies can turn some participants' practices into symbolic capital with socio-economic rewards and status differentiation.

From an African perspective, scholars, such as Agyekum (2013) and Edu-Buandoh (2016) have explained how language and its use can create ideological and power relations. These researchers explain how colonialism provides a good example of how a language could assume a perceived superior relationship with other languages. The language of the powerful or coloniser assumes a perceived superior posture to dominate the language(s) of the colonised, often with the tacit complicity of the colonised.

Edu-Buandoh (2016) saw colonialism and imperialism as interchangeable concepts. The author argued from a linguistic perspective that *imperialism* is mostly ideological and thrives on dominating other cultures and political structures mostly through language (Edu-Buandoh 2016). For example, and arguably, colonisation has induced many African societies to privilege foreign languages such as French, English, and Portuguese over their native languages (Guerini 2007). According to Phillipson (2009, p. 780), "Linguistic imperialism is the notion that certain languages dominate others internationally. It is the way nation-states privileged one language, and often sought actively to eradicate others, forcing their speakers to shift to the dominant language". Agyekum (2013, pp. 87–88) provides a description of imperialism that speaks directly to the Ghanaian context:

[A] linguistic situation where the indigenous people are gradually conscientised to shun their indigenous languages and adopt foreign languages because of the benefits they expect to derive from them. They are made to believe that their languages cannot be used in any transaction in education, economics, science and technology but instead, a foreign language is the best.

Thus, Agyekum raises issues about how Africans are manipulated to form certain language-based (un)desirable attitudes and tastes for the colonisers' language. The supposed functional superiority of the colonisers' languages to indigenous African languages has been contested in arguments eloquently expressed by Edu-Buandoh (2016). Nevertheless, the impact of English in the socio-economic and political space of Ghana leaves little doubt about the imperialistic positioning of English in Ghana. This situation began in the colonial era with the news media playing a key role therein.

According to Conboy (2007, p. 12), news carries social and political power and is crucial in helping to construct a normative view that regulates the interaction of people in society. Ideology is inherently associated with the press as an institution of information production and dissemination. An understanding of language issues related to the press, particularly during the pre- and immediate post-independence era of Ghana, should shed light on the contestations that marked the choice and use of language in the press at the time and the possible consequences beyond those times. It follows from a view that the press and its language represent one of the major means by which some ideologies are

formed and consumed. The language selected to present news is inseparable from the ideologies implied by the news since the ideology occurs in the language.

Scholars have also taken a more radical view of the ideological role of the press beyond the innocent reproduction of power and dominance. Conboy (2010, p. 10) argued that the press has not been an unwilling tool in the hands of the powerful in society but has been involved in using language to create various ideas that often insidiously influence people's beliefs and attitudes. This means the press, through its choice of language in, particularly, a multilingual environment, may consciously or unconsciously construct relations of power, dominance, and social inequality (Matheson 2005).

3. Methods

This study employed historical research (Hassan 2024) and depended on secondary sources for data. Thus, published works on language choice and use in the Ghanaian press covering the research period were analysed and interpreted to understand the overt and covert influences and motivations in the language choices and uses and the overall implication on the development of the press and Ghanaian society. The analysis depended on secondary sources that have (a) investigated and/or presented the history of the Ghanaian press, (b) described the language situation in Ghana, (c) discussed ownership of the press, (d) discussed language attitudes, (e) discussed language ideologies about Ghana, and (f) discussed linguistic imperialism. An extensive search for references for the critical data on newspapers, ownership, and language choices during the research period yielded an absence of comprehensive studies on these areas except for Anyidoho (2008, 2016), Owusu (2011), Bourgault (1995), and Jones-Quartey (1975), which were used. These references are the most authentic published sources on the pre- and immediate post-independence newspapers in Ghana. The analysis yielded themes around the language situation in Ghana over the research period, the pre-English and indigenous medium newspapers, the immediate post-independence newspapers and language use, and the language ideologies and literacy in the press. These themes constructed the rest of the discussion in the subsequent sections.

4. The Language Situation in Ghana before and after the Arrival of the Press

The language situation in Ghana from pre-colonial times has received much research attention. Writers like Bodomo (1996), Kropp-Dakubu (1988), and others have provided detailed analyses of the language situation of now-Ghana, covering societies in the northern and southern parts of the country. According to Boahen (1975), the pre-Gold Coast settlers were made up of two language subfamilies, the Gur and the Kwa that settled in the northern and southern parts of the Volta River, respectively. The writer submitted further that these two main language subfamilies reflected the dominant ethnic groups with further subdivisions in the territory. For example, the Kwa "mother" language, had three subcategories: the Akan, the Ga-Adangbe, and the Ewe, each of which had further sub-ethnic and dialect divisions. The Gur, towards the north, also had three main linguistic subgroups: the Gurma, Grusi, and Mole Dagbani. These settlements and linguistic patterns have remained up to contemporary times. Indeed, researchers are unanimous that before Europe made its first contact with the then-Gold Coast, the various people of the area, now identified as Ghana, were living as defined states and as distinct ethnic linguistic groups (Obeng and Adegbiya 1999; Bodomo 1996).

Language is fundamental to these groups, and it functioned as a major element that identified and bound the people into autonomous cultural groups. As Wumpini (2019, p. 237) noted, "[Today,] language remains one of the most important aspects of ethnic identity articulation in many African countries". Through their languages, the various groups expressed their unique cultural values and saw themselves as the same people. Existing literature identifies various patterns of the ethnic groups and their languages, but Bodomo (1996)'s classification could offer a close approximation of the precolonial period, which may largely reflect the current situation. This author categorised the languages into

ten language subgroups with their corresponding languages or dialects as follows (see Table 1).

Table 1. Major ethnic groups and their sub-groups and/or languages (Bodomo 1996).

Major Groups	Languages
Akan	Agona, Akuapem Twi, Akyem, Asante Twi, Brong, Fante, Kwahu, and Wasa
Mabia	Dagbane, Dagaare, Gurenne, Kusaal, Mampruli, Buli, Waale, Talni, Birifor, Nanuni, Nabit, Konni, and Hanga-Kamara
Gbe	Ewe, Fon, Aja, and Mina
Ga-Dangbe	Ga, Dangbe, Ada, Shai, Krobo
Gurma	Konkomba, Moba, and Bassari
Guang	Gonja, Gichode, Nchumburu, Krachi, Nkonya, Anum-Boso (Gwa), Kyerepong (Okyere), Larteh, Awutu-Efutu, and Nawuri
Nzema	Nzema, Sehwi, Anyi (Aowin), Ahanta, and Anufo (Chakosi)
Grusi	Kasem, Isaaleng, Chakali, Tampilma, Vagla, and Mo
Buem	Adele, Lelemi, Bowiri, Sekpele, Siwu, Santrokofi, Logba, and Avatime
Nafaanra	Nkuraeng, Nafaanra, and Ntrubo-Chala

These languages are broad categories with various sub-languages and dialects.

Concerning speakers, Akan and its various sub-languages had the most speakers in the territory in terms of native speakers and those who spoke it as a second language (Ansah 2008; Guerini 2007; Bodomo 1996). Ansah (2008) relied on Ghana's population census to classify the languages into six broad groups in order of high to low speakers as follows: Akan, Mole-Dagbani, Ewe, Ga-Adangbe, Guan, and others. This trend is replicated in the results of the Ghana 2021 Population and Housing Census (Ghana Statistical Service 2021, pp. 36, 50), which identifies the following groups with a corresponding percentage of native speakers of the language(s) associated with each group.²

ETHNIC GROUP	PERCENTAGE
Akan	46
Mole-Dagbani	19
Ewe	12
Ga-Adangbe	7
Gurma	6
Guan	3
Grusi	3
Others	4

This was the linguistic context in which the English language came to contest for a foothold, and this trend persisted until the arrival of the press and to current times with no indication that the situation would change any time soon. Thus, the evolution of the press in Ghana is strongly and intricately implicated in a passionate multilingual environment that should inform any serious discussion of the history of the media in Ghana.

5. The Pre-Independence English Newspapers and Language Use

It is common knowledge that modern technologically driven mass media began with newspapers. Following the same trend, the newspaper was the first of such mass media in the territory known as the Gold Coast. Before the arrival of the newspaper, people of the territory were already engaging in mass communication in their languages, using traditional forms such as talking drums, fire, gong-gong, etc. Consequently, references to the newspaper as the first mass medium in Africa could only apply to modern technologically driven mass media forms.

Concerning the introduction of the press in sub-Saharan Africa, Karikari (2007, p. 13) provides four sources: “The colonial state, the European settlers, the Christian missionary institutions, and the early African educated elites”. The first newspapers came through the first three sources and occurred between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The first Anglophone newspapers in sub-Saharan Africa were *The Royal Gazette and Sierra Leone Advertiser* (1801) in Sierra Leone, *The Royal Gold Coast Gazette and Commercial Intelligencer* (1822) in Gold Coast, and *Liberia Herald* (1826) in Liberia. Thus, newspapers, and for that matter modern mass communication, began in the sub-region long before Gold Coast came under complete control of the British in 1902. *The Royal Gold Coast Gazette and Commercial Intelligencer*, like *The Royal Gazette and Sierra Leone Advertiser*, was owned by the colonial government, while the *Liberian Herald* was owned by Charles Force (Mytton 1983), a Western-influenced ex-slave from America. As would be expected, these newspapers were written in English and were established purposely to benefit the White settlers who required information about happenings back in their home country as well as in their new “home”. Therefore, the newspapers mainly carried perspectives of the Empire, leaving out African views and concerns (Nyamnjoh 2005; Bourgault 1995).

It must be emphasised that the choice of English as the language of this early newspaper occurred naturally since there was no other choice available. The Whites, most of whom were from England, spoke English, so it was a matter of course for the newspaper to be published in a language understandable by the news producer and targeted readers.

It must be noted that the technologically driven means of mass communication, such as newspapers, were introduced in the colonised territories of the empire at the time in colonial languages such as English, French, and Portuguese as a natural consequence of the history of the printing press (Karikari 2007). As such, newspapers came to the Gold Coast as a colonial and imperial transplant into cultural and linguistic environments lacking such forms of communication. The argument can therefore be made that the use of English in the early newspapers might have been initially without any ulterior motive. *The Royal Gold Coast Gazette and Commercial Intelligencer* operated for a few years and went out of circulation.

Other newspapers were established thereafter between 1833 and 1957 by the colonial government and private ownership (see Sections A and B). The private owners were mostly missionary groups and individuals. As reported by Anyidoho (2016), the pre-independence governments produced *Gold Coast Assize* (1883), *Gold Coast News* (1884), and *Gold Coast Pioneer* (1921) in English in line with the tradition of the first newspaper (see Appendix A). Some religious groups also started English-medium newspapers for evangelistic rather than political purposes. For example, the Methodist Mission established the *Christian Messenger* (1857), *Christian Report* (1857), and *Gold Coast Methodist* (1886). The Catholic Mission also produced the *Gold Coast Catholic* (later *Catholic Standard*) in 1926 (Appendix A). These Christian publications targeted the native people more than the British settlers.

This brings to the fore the issue of literacy because, whether written in English or an indigenous language, such documents require the ability of the consumer to read and understand them. Therefore, the government and missionaries became interested in the literacy of the indigenous people. They established schools to teach learners English and the indigenous languages so that the natives could access information from the Bible and other Christian scriptures, including the newspapers of the missionaries and government. The first such school was opened in the Elmina Castle early in 1572 by Catholic missionaries (Nsiah 2020). Later, the colonial government also opened some schools to train the natives to work as clerks in government offices and White-led private businesses. This began the inclusion of native Gold Coasters in the reading culture in a hitherto oral society of the territory.

Later, individual native Ghanaians, who had benefited from the missionary and government schools, entered the newspaper industry, initially as amateurs and later as commercial journalists (Anyidoho 2016). Their productions provided an alternative to the government newspapers, and this yielded many newspapers up to 1927 and beyond

(Anyidoho 2016, p. 105). From the titles, it is noticed the newspapers were published in English while also indicating the socio-cultural and political situation at the time (Appendix A). Anyidoho (2016, p. 105) notes rightly that: “the names of the newspapers such as *pioneer*, *royal*, *echo*, *people*, and *leader* suggested the involvement of socio-political interest groups and advocates as well as various initiatives in media production during this phase of journalism”. The publications were meant to spread nationalist information among the natives and politically empower them to agitate for independence. Thus, although published in English, such newspapers adopted a hostile posture towards the colonial government leading to antagonism between the colonial administration (the state) and the African press (the private press), which invited repressive laws from the government to control the press (Anyidoho 2016). This antagonistic relationship between the early pre-independence Ghanaian governments and the private press was to persist into post-colonial confrontations between the state and private media.

6. The Pre-Independence Indigenous Language Newspapers and Language Use

It must be pointed out that researchers on the history of the Ghanaian press have not done justice to newspapers published in indigenous languages. This observation is not just within the pre-independence period, but also throughout the history of the press in Ghana. As indicated earlier, most research on the Ghanaian media has ignored indigenous language newspapers outright or just provided sweeping statements about the existence of some local language newspapers without specific discussion of any.

However, the available literature indicates that many indigenous language publications circulated during the pre-independence period as captured in Appendix B. Some of them, as indicated by Anyidoho (2016, p. 105), included the Basel Evangelical Missionary Society’s *Sika Nsona Sanegbalo* (Christian Messenger for the Gold Coast) in 1859, the Catholic Mission’s *Mia Holo* (Our Friend) in 1894, and *Nutifafa Na Mi* (Peace Be with You) in 1903 by the Basel Mission. Remarkably, all these newspapers were published by the colonial government and missionaries. Ironically, the indigenous people themselves, whose languages were used in such publications, appeared not to be interested in publications in their own languages. They rather published in English, thereby making a crucial statement about their attitude to their languages and cultures, at least from the perspective of the press.

Contrary to findings that indigenous language media were viable in some African countries (Ogundimu 1996), these Ghanaian indigenous language newspapers, like most of the English language variants, were not successful. Attempts to run a local language newspaper continued even until the 1990s, but none succeeded (Anyidoho 2008). Various explanations have been provided in the literature about why the local language newspapers failed. Although funding problems and limited readership could be factors (Bergen 2018), Anyidoho (2008) ascribes this to peculiar language ideologies in Ghana that make people prefer English publications to those in the local languages. But overall, as was the case before independence, the postcolonial press, both in English and native languages, contributed little to the cultural traditions, norms and mores, and identities of the natives perhaps because of the appeal of English, as explained by Edu-Buandoh (2016).

7. Broadcasting during the Pre-Independence Era

Broadcasting in the territory began with radio in 1935, over a century after the first newspaper was launched. It began with a relay station called ZOY (later to become Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC)), which transmitted news in English from London to Accra (Bourgault 1995). With time, more relay stations were set up in Kumasi, Koforidua, and Sekondi (Bourgault 1995). Gadzekpo et al. (2020, citing Ansah 1985) argued that broadcasting was introduced in the Gold Coast, like other colonised territories, to serve a propaganda purpose of educating the public about policies and events of the British Empire. The intention was to use radio to perpetuate an imperialistic agenda (Edu-Buandoh 2016) and not to include the natives in national affairs (Gadzekpo et al. 2020). The radio programmes were usually produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which ensured that the

productions served the ideological intentions of the government (Gadzekpo et al. 2020). The exclusive use of English on radio projected the English language as the preferred and civilised language and culture, which the natives must imbibe.

However, the colonial government soon realised that beyond the public service function of the radio, propaganda could be produced insidiously to the people through their own languages via radio for a better imperialistic effect. According to Blankson (2005, p. 6), this shift to indigenous broadcasting was because the government realised that radio broadcasting “must use vernacular languages if the programmes were to be understood by the natives”. From 1939, broadcasting began in Hausa, Akan, Ewe, and Dagbani (Jones-Quartey 1968). Local language radio broadcasting could have been introduced at the time for war mobilisation purposes since the Second World War (WW2) began at the time. The overarching purpose of the use of indigenous languages was to reach and influence many natives in ways that could serve the interest of the coloniser (Gadzekpo et al. 2020). Even so, only a little time was allocated to indigenous language broadcasting with all media attention on English as the bearer of important and serious information. Not surprisingly, overt imperialistic tendencies began to show at the time since it became fashionable among the natives to be able to speak and write English the way it was heard on the radio. Therefore, the pre-independence radio contributed immensely to the processes that established a hegemonic and imperialistic power of English as we have it today.

8. The Immediate Post-Independence Press and Language Use

The immediate post-independence press until 1992 also presents noteworthy language dynamics. As indicated earlier, the run-up to Ghana’s independence in 1957, particularly from 1930, witnessed many newspapers being established by indigenous people to spur the agitation for independence (See Sections A and B). However, by independence, most of these newspapers had folded up, with only four active newspapers remaining to provide political information. They were the *Ghanaian Times*, *Accra Evening News* (which were already under the control of the President), *Daily Graphic*, and *Ashanti Pioneer* (based in Kumasi). The others had collapsed possibly because they were established to contribute to the independence struggle, and once that was achieved, the newspapers became redundant or lost their *raison d’être*.

Thus, by the time Dr. Kwame Nkrumah assumed power as Ghana’s first President, the ground was fertile for the state to capture and use the press to advance personal and national political interests. By then, some journalists of the private press and not-so-effective private newspapers had joined either the *Daily Graphic* or the newspapers of the Convention People’s Party (CPP), the party of the Nkrumah-led Government. Karikari (1992) argued that the emergence and success of the *Daily Graphic* at the time had thrown many of the African-owned newspapers out of the press market or weakened them significantly. Thus, Dr. Nkrumah took advantage of the situation to capture and control the press. He bought the *Daily Graphic* in 1964, adding it to the stable of the state press. The only surviving private and alternative press at the time was the *Ashanti Pioneer*. However, the editor was arrested and jailed in 1962 under the Preventive Detention Act (PDA) for “publishing subversive information” leading to the collapse of the newspaper. Remarkably, the surviving newspapers were published in English.

Quite apart from the desire to put the press under state control, which provided a reason for openly discouraging private ownership and participation (Gadzekpo 1997), the ideology suggested that the government would use the press to restore the language and cultural heritage of Ghana. This would be by elevating the indigenous languages and de-emphasising the dominant use of English in official public spaces, including the press. However, disappointingly, all the prominent newspapers remained published in English. Nkrumah’s regime made it known that English was the foremost language of international integration and other opportunities, thereby putting an official stamp of premium on competency in English. Even the country’s educational policy at the time generally favoured English: from 1957 until Nkrumah was ousted in 1966, English was

the only language of instruction from primary one to university (Owu-Ewie 2006, p. 77). Thus, the immediate post-independence period lacked an enabling socially and nationally supportive impetus for the development of the native languages.

This is not to suggest that attempts were not made to establish local language newspapers at this stage. According to Owusu (2011), between 1950 and 1960, the government set up some newspapers, eight of which were in various indigenous languages (see Appendix B) to foster adult literacy in a government's non-formal education initiative. Agyekum (2013) also mentions a newspaper published in Akan called *Nkwantabisa*, while *Graphic* also started an Akan newspaper called *Graphic Nsempa* in the 1990s, although it did not last. From 1960 until 1992, a few more attempts were made: three newspapers, *Kpodoga* (Government), *Wonsuom* (UNESCO) (Obeng-Quaidoo 1988), and *Atumpani* (Government) were published in 1976, 1983, and 1989, respectively. But since all the attention was on the English medium newspapers, these indigenous ones suffocated and went out of operation.

After Nkrumah, other political regimes, cutting across authoritarian and democratic, came and went until 1992. Yet, the language situation for newspapers remained as it was at independence. The state controlled the press and proscribed private ownership, which made sure the status quo that privileged English in the printed press remained. This was coordinated with the general sociolinguistic situation where English continued to enjoy dominance and was used in all the critical sectors of the political economy with the local languages relegated to bearing trivial and popular content.

After independence, radio continued to broadcast predominantly in English alongside some of the indigenous languages. GBC, by the late 1960s, operated GBC Radio 1 and 2. Radio 2 began in 1968 as a commercial service and broadcast exclusively in English, while Radio 1 continued to broadcast in some indigenous languages. In the 1960s, GBC broadcast national and regional programmes in five native languages on Radio 1: Akan, Ga, Ewe, Dagbani, Hausa, and Nzema, while Dagaare, Gurune, Kusaal, Buile, Sisaal, and Gonja were added later in the 1980s (Ansah 1979). Thus, until the deregulation of the airwaves in the mid-1990s, GBC Radio 1 continued to ration national and regional news in some of the local languages, with no stand-alone station broadcasting in an indigenous language.

The broadcasting trends in Ghana changed slightly from 1965 with the addition of television (TV), which was managed by GBC as Ghana Television (GTV). Until 1992, it was also controlled by the state with almost no room for private participation, thereby suffering the fate already discussed regarding radio. From its inception, GTV gave a huge portion of its air space to broadcasting programmes in English and accorded little space to the local languages.

9. The Pre-1993 Press, Language Ideologies, and Literacy

To better appreciate the language underpinnings and implications of this study's discussion, it is important to examine more closely the language and ownership situation of the pre-and post-independence newspapers, the literacy contexts of the research period, and some ideological implications. This is because of the important place of newspapers in the development of the Ghanaian press and the relatively structured significance and advantage of newspapers in knowledge production and maintenance. Sections A and B present a good impression of the linguistic and ownership patterns of the newspapers published over the research period. Forty-eight newspapers were published, thirty in English and eighteen in the indigenous languages (these numbers may not be exhaustive because of the dearth of systematic literature on the issue.) Nearly all these occurred before independence in 1957; in fact, only two English and three indigenous language newspapers were added after independence. The tables below provide some insightful information on the language and ownership patterns of the publications.

Of the publications in English, as indicated in Table 2, 80% were private/personal and government ownership; the former was 60%. As indicated earlier, most of the private owners were African nationalists who established the newspapers to support the independence struggle. Indeed, the two "unknown" items in the Table 2, *Liberator* and *New Nation*, could

belong to the private/personal group because of the agitative overtones of the titles. A total of 72% of the pre-independence private/personal newspapers were politically oriented and owned by African nationalists, while the remaining 20%, such as the *Daily Graphic*, were apolitical. The data indicate that before independence, government and Christian newspapers constituted only 28% (14% each). These findings, thus, support the drama, tensions, and contestations in the literature between the colonial government and nationalists for political power. Four newspapers operated immediately after independence from 1957, three of them (*Daily Graphic*, *Accra Evening News* [later *Ghanaian Times*], and *Ashanti Pioneer*) surviving the transition to the post-independence period, with government controlling all, except the *Ashanti Pioneer*.

Table 2. English medium newspapers (ownership).

Ownership	No.
Government	6
Christian	4
Private/Personal	18
Unknown	2
TOTAL	30

Table 3 indicates that newspapers were published in six indigenous languages with Akan (44%) and Ewe (24%) being the dominant languages. This reflects the general population trends and written productions in the indigenous languages at the time. Regarding ownership, many of the newspapers (56%) were established by the government, indicating the government's efforts at reaching the indigenous people with its messages. Many of these government publications occurred from 1951 in the government's efforts to enhance adult literacy in the indigenous languages (Bergen 2018). Christians also commanded 22% with the remaining private/personal newspapers run by NGOs and other individuals who had purposes other than politics (Bergen 2018), leaving the African nationalists with almost no participation in this space.

Table 3. Indigenous language medium newspapers (languages and ownership).

Language	No.	Ownership	No.
Akan	8	Government	10
Ewe	5	Christian	4
Ga	2	Private/Personal/NGO/	None
Dagbani	1	UNESCO	4
Kasem	1		
Nzema	1		
TOTAL	18	TOTAL	18

One cannot ignore revealing issues in the language and ownership patterns. As expected, each owner should have had a readership in mind and chose a language to reflect the socio-cultural and ideological orientation of that intended reader. Yet, interestingly, almost all the native-owned newspapers before 1931 were published in the colonial language, a language spoken by a few indigenous (educated) Africans. It must be stated that a few native-owned newspapers, such as *Asenta* (meaning, *News*) (1935), *Amanson* (meaning, *People*) (1937), and *Amansuon* (meaning, *All Nations*) (1943), all in Akan, were published later from 1935 (Anyidoho 2016), but they were apolitical and failed, leaving English as the dominant language of the press.

The above picture should raise questions about the supposed influence of the indigenous press in the independence struggle as has been commonly touted in historical narratives. The argument is that very few of the native Ghanaians could understand English at the time, meaning the newspapers could not be directly speaking to many of

the natives principally for whom the newspapers were published (Fosu 2014). Possibly, few African elites read the newspapers and used the two-step-flow approach to draw the support of the illiterate population. Additionally, the use of English meant the newspapers contributed little to the development of the indigenous languages and cultures.

The analysis suggests an instrumental and ideological use of language to achieve narrow and factional interests. The governments used English and the indigenous languages to produce hegemonic and imperialist ideologies targeting both the African-educated (mostly European-sponsored) elites and the illiterate populations. This is supported by the meanings of the names of the newspapers. Titles such as *Gold Coast Assize*, *Gold Coast Pioneer*, and *Gold Coast Weekly Review* indicated the owner's attachment to the territory, the owner's leading role, and keen observation of events. Similarly, the government indigenous newspapers had titles such as *Akan Akwansosem* and *Akan Nkwantabisa* implying "Akan news" and "asking for directions in Akan", respectively, which shows the owner's desire to inform the people to shape their decisions and actions. The African nationalists also appropriated English as a weapon of war to reach the government, the educated natives, and the world at large to register their demand for political power. The nationalist newspapers had titles such as *Western Echo*, *Gold Coast People*, *Ghana Statesman*, and *Liberator*, among others, collectively indicating their differential pride as natives fighting for the freedom of their people. As history would show in the immediate post-independence period, this demand was for personal gratification. And the missionaries also used both English and the indigenous languages to reach all categories of the natives with religious and "civilising" messages. Titles such as *Catholic Voice* and *Christian Messenger Mia Holo* (Our Friend), *Nutifafa Na Mi* (Peace onto you), and *Akan Kyerema* (Akan notifications) palpably show the Christian background of friendship, peace wishes and good news.

The language issues being interrogated would be further understood within the literacy context of the time. As indicated earlier, newspaper readership and information access in English would necessitate the ability to read and/or understand English. Thus, the missionaries and colonial government found it necessary to provide literacy education to the natives. This began as formal education in 1572 when Catholic missionaries started teaching native children reading, writing, and catechism (Nsiah 2020) initially in English. Other missionaries, such as the Basel, Wesleyan, African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME Zion), Anglican, and others, later opened schools in various parts of the territory and included some of the native languages such as Akan, Ewe, and Ga (Nsiah 2020). With the efforts of acclaimed people such as Wilhelm Johann Muller, Rev. Westermann, and Johannes Christaller, among others, the schools radically began spreading literacy in the country. The schools helped to develop these native languages thereby shaping the literary enlightenment of the Gold Coast (Nsiah 2020).

The print media also contributed to this revolution. As Nsiah (2020) notes, some of the missionaries established press houses that published newspapers and other forms of literature in the native languages. For example, the Basel Mission set up a printing press in Akropong to publish the *Christian Messenger* and other publications. A book on Ga fables by C. P. Moir and *Twi Pilgrim's Progress* by R. R. Watt (Nsiah 2020) are some publications by Christian missions, all of which contributed immensely to the spread of literacy in the territory before and after Ghana's independence.

That was how the English language insidiously accrued legitimacy as the most important language in the multilingual environment of the territory. The introduction of English as part of the imperial project, together with colonisation, partly accorded the (English) language and its culture a preeminent status in the multilingual Gold Coast/Ghanaian society. As Obeng and Adegbiya (1999) noted, the colonialists and their missionary counterparts succeeded in imposing English on the territory as the official language, making it the language of choice, leading to its formalisation and use as the language of instruction in education, business, government and almost all serious and official spaces. An implication is that language attitudes are constructed to favour English. This set the tone for the

marginalisation of the native languages, which were outlawed in schools and other official and political spaces (Nsiah 2020).

Various reasons have been offered to justify the elevation of English in the territory, the most popular being the need for English to serve as a neutral language to bring harmony and cohesion among the different ethnic and political groups in the territory (Nsiah 2020; Guerini 2007; Obeng and Adegbija 1999). Boadi (1971) was of the view that the colonial government and subsequent post-independence governments saw English as a symbol of national unity and development to eliminate the divisive, sentimental, and jealous feelings that could breed in-fighting if one indigenous language was chosen as the official and/or national language. This popular view was held in other African countries that depended on external languages such as French, Portuguese and Arabic as their official language (see Eribo and Jong-Ebot 1997).

However, behind this veil of what seems reasonable for English to be the official language in the territory is a subtle and deliberate ideology to subdue the linguistic and cultural force of the native population. This was particularly led by the colonial government from the early 1900s as cogently expressed by Owusu-Ansah and Torto (2013, p. 66):

The impact of some of the various social, political, and administrative institutions that were established by British Colonial Governments on the spread and influence of the English language was immense. . . . By 1824, English was the only language spoken in the Cape Coast Castle School. This aligned with the report by the Education Committee of the Privy Council to the Colonial Office in 1847 which, among others, emphasised the need to disseminate grammatical knowledge of the English language as the most important agent of civilisation.

The above effectively sums up how the natives began to largely associate their status with the ability to speak and write good and complicated English and not their native languages. English then assumed a hegemonic or imperialistic posture (Edu-Buandoh 2016; Agyekum 2013) to the extent that the youth began looking down on their languages and cultures and preferred using English like the British (Guerini 2007; Newell 2002; Boadi 1971).

Fosu (2016) has demonstrated how the language of the English newspapers in Ghana has been complicated and difficult to read and understand, although that is what a significant number of the indigenous people admire and prefer for public communication. Stephanie Newell (2002), in her seminal ethnographically focused work, *Literary Cultures in Ghana: How to Play the Game of Life*, vividly captured how in the late 1800s, people of the Gold Coast strived to be literate in English because of its economic, social, and political power. Thus, the people immersed themselves into a reading culture that arose through:

literary networks which revealed the dynamic way in which local readers appropriated and utilised English language text for their immediate ends using literature to express their own social and economic aspirations within the rapidly changing and highly charged atmosphere of the colonial society'. (Nsiah 2020)

Several reading clubs and social groups sprang up to empower the youth to read material published in English. Newell (2002) listed over fifty-one such clubs in the territory from the 1830s to 1950 (Newell 2002, pp. 33–35; Nsiah 2020). Cape Coast became the hub of prominent literary clubs, whose members included early nationalist politicians like J.E. Casely Hayford and J.P. Brown (Nsiah 2020).

The above situation explains the toll English had on the development of the indigenous language press from pre-independence to contemporary times. The use of English as the major medium of the printed and broadcast press also added to the prominence and dominance of English, thereby contributing to its appeal to the natives to the detriment of their local languages and cultures. The press is a powerful social institution; it confers symbolic power to those who are positively framed in the news. The continuous use of English in the press served to confer power and social capital on the political and business elites who usually receive coverage in the government-controlled press. Thus, it was in the interest of such privileged people for the press to continue publishing in English.

Meanwhile, the indigenous people had been swayed by the appeal of English, resulting in their detachment from newspapers published in native languages. This attitude adds to explain why, especially, the politically focused indigenous language newspapers that came onto the scene, especially from the 1920s to 1950s and beyond, did not do particularly well.

10. Conclusions

This historically focused analysis of the Ghanaian press highlights the significant role language played in constructing different relational ramifications during the pre-independence times until 1992. The literature has largely ignored this aspect of the history of the Ghanaian press. The analysis has strongly established that the choice and use of language by various individuals, governments, and groups over the study period in both print and broadcasting were consciously informed by narrow socio-linguistic, cultural, ideological, and hegemonic motives and considerations. The language of the press became grounds for cultural, ideological, and imperialistic contestations among various groups and individuals with vested interests. The White colonialists and missionaries exploited the power, subtleties, and ideologies of language to help establish a hegemonic and imperialist position for English in the multilingual society of the Gold Coast and later Ghana. Native Ghanaians, in tune with imperialistic principles (Edu-Buandoh 2016), published news exclusively in English to further accentuate the socio-political and cultural dominance of English in the territory. Although the White colonialists and missionaries, as well as some of the post-independence governments of Ghana, published newspapers in the local languages, that was not enough to enhance the languages and cultures of the various ethnic groups. Throughout the study period, broadcasting was monopolised and controlled by the governments for their narrow interests. As Akpojivi and Fosu (2020, p. 209) have noted, a media system that does not produce content that reflects the real circumstances and edification of the audience, but is meant to control the people, may not be seen as indigenised media or press.³ The ideological repercussions of language use in the press right from the pre-colonial times to the late 1980s could have contributed significantly to over-emphasising English and its cultural baggage in the printed press from the 1990s to contemporary times. The over-reliance on English by both White colonialists and Natives for political capital seriously impinged the indigenous languages negatively, leaving a lesson that if Ghanaians, and for that matter Africans, want their language, cultures, and society to advance, they must project their languages in the press and other social contexts.

Therefore, this study invites further studies on the history of the Ghanaian press towards a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Researchers may focus on areas the literature has ignored, such as the role of women, education and training, and sustainability issues, among others. Specific to language use, researchers may explore linguistic issues in historical accounts from 1992 to contemporary times.

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Appendix A

Pre- and Post-Independence English Language Newspapers of Ghana up to 1992.

Newspaper Name/Title	Ownership	Year
Pre-Independence		
Royal Gold Coast Gazette	Government	1822
Gold Coast Assize	Government	1833
Christian Messenger	Christian	1857
Christian Report	Christian	1857
Western Echo	Personal	1885
Gold Coast Methodist	Christian	1886
Gold Coast Echo	Personal	1888
Gold Coast People	Personal	1891
Gold Coast Express	Personal	1897
Gold Coast Leader	Personal	1902
Gold Coast Pioneer	Government	1921
Gold Coast Catholic/Catholic Voice	Christian	1926
Gold Coast Spectator	Personal	1927
West African Times	Personal	1931
African Morning Post	Personal	1939
Ashanti Pioneer	Personal	1937
Gold Coast Weekly Review	Government	1939–40
Ashanti Times	Private Institution	1947
Accra Evening News	Personal	1947
Ghana Statesman	Personal	1948
Ghana Evening News	Personal	1948
Morning Telegraph	Personal	1949
Daily Graphic	Private British-trained press	1950
Sunday Mirror	Private British-trained press	1953
Daily Mail	Personal (British)	1955
Liberator	NLM Party	1955
West African Worker	Personal	1956
New Nation	Unknown	1956
Post-Independence		
Daily Graphic	Government	1950
Ghanaian Times	Government	1958
Weekly Spectator	Government	1963
Ashanti Pioneer	Private	1937

Source: Anyidoho (2008, 2016), Owusu (2011), Bourgault (1995), and Jones-Quartey (1975).

Appendix B

Pre- and Post-Independence Indigenous Language Newspapers in Ghana and their Details up to 1992.

Newspaper Name/Title	Language	Ownership	Year (s)
Pre-Independence			
Sika Nsona Sanegbalo	Ga	Christian	1859
Mia Holo	Ewe	Christian	1894
Nutifafa Na Mi	Ewe	Christian	1903
Asenta	Akan	Personal	1935
Amanson	Fante	Personal	1937
Amansuon	Fante	Personal	1943
Akan Kyerema	Akan	Christian	1948
Akan Akwansosem	Akan	Government	1951
Akan Nkwantabisa	Fante, Akuapim, Asante	Government	1951
Motabiala	Ewe	Government	1951
Lahabali Tsunu	Dagbani	Government	1951
Mansralo	Ga	Government	1951
Labaare/Labaari	Kasem	Government	1951
Kakyerole	Nzema	Government	1951
Duom	Akuapim-Twi	Government	1953
Post-Independence			
Kpodoga	Ewe	Government	1976
Wonsuom	Fante	UNESCO	1983
Atumpani	Ewe	Government	1989

Source: Anyidoho (2008, 2016), Owusu (2011), Bourgault (1995), and Jones-Quartey (1975).

Notes

- ¹ Indigenous press here refers to newspapers owned or established by indigenous Gold Coasters or Ghanaians.
- ² See Table 5.5: Ghana by major ethnic group, sex, and region, p. 50. Available online: https://census2021.statsghana.gov.gh/gssmain/fileUpload/reportthemesub/2021%20PHC%20General%20Report%20Vol%203C_Background%20Characteristics_181121.pdf (accessed on 5 October 2023) (Ghana Statistical Service 2021).
- ³ Indigenised press or media in this instance refers to press institutions owned by natives of Africa and used to serve the public interest of the African people.

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Article

Knowledge and Use of the 2011 Freedom of Information Act among Journalists in Nigeria

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Abstract: This study examined the knowledge and use of the 2011 Freedom of Information Act among journalists in Nigeria. The hierarchy of influences model provided the theoretical lens, which guided the study. Through a survey of 313 Nigerian journalists, the study found that there was a high level of knowledge of the Act among Nigerian journalists. Nigerian journalists perceived the Act as a useful journalistic tool, and they often used it for such purposes as confirming facts, writing controversial topics and to gain insight into the inner working of government. The study showed that, in the use of the Act in journalistic duties, Nigerian journalists were confronted with the challenges of non-integration of the provisions of the Act in the operations of government agencies, adversarial disposition of government institutions towards journalists and the pervasive culture of secrecy. The study established that knowledge of the Act positively correlated with its use. The implications of the findings were discussed.

Keywords: FOI Act; journalists; Nigeria; information; hierarchy of influences model

1. Introduction

On 28 May 2011, Nigeria achieved a milestone in its quest towards entrenching democratic structures, which will ensure good governance, when the then President Goodluck Jonathan signed the Freedom of Information (FOI) bill into law. The Act, among other things, seeks to “make public records and information more freely available, provide for public access to public records and information, protect public records and information to the extent consistent with the public interest” (Dunu and Ugbo 2014, p. 1). By this action, Nigeria joined the league of a few African nations, such as Ghana, Malawi, Senegal, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Ethiopia, South Africa, Madagascar and Tanzania, which have clear and specific guarantees of the right to information entrenched in their constitution (Ojo 2010). The push towards the introduction of FOI laws around the globe is underpinned by growing evidence, which supports the notion that there is a direct relationship between the level of freedom the press exercises and the level of corruption in society (Brunetti and Weder 2003; Solis and Antenangeli 2017). A free press is one of the most potent antidotes to bureaucratic corruption (Solis and Antenangeli 2017). The current global movement towards improved access to government-held information is premised on the longstanding notion that freedom of information brings about transparency, which curtails corruption (Ogunniran 2016). Writing within the context of commonwealth nations, Paterson and McDonagh (2017) describe the continued spread of FOI laws as a welcome development, stressing that it demonstrates the acknowledgement of the import of transparency, both in strengthening democracy and discouraging financial misapplication and graft in governments. Scholars have established a relationship between poverty and corruption. Corruption inhibits growth (Mauro 1995), whereas corruption itself negatively impacts income and education (Glaeser and Saks 2004). It is argued that confronting bureaucratic corruption could result in improved service delivery programme, which will ultimately reduce poverty (Francken et al. 2009).

While there are statutory institutions saddled with the responsibility of fighting corruption, Francken et al. (2009) argue that they may not be effective, as these institutions

seem to be equally corrupt, particularly in countries with a high prevalence rate of capture of public funds. A more effective approach could be strengthening the media, through the FOI Act, to carry out their monitorial role. The performance of the press' watchdog role is contingent on the degree to which the government is willing to permit media scrutiny (Márquez-Ramírez et al. 2020; Kalogeropoulos et al. 2022). A key test for measuring such willingness is the introduction of FOI law. With the passage of the FOI Act in Nigeria, there is a compelling need for an appraisal of journalists' use of the FOI Act in their journalism practice.

Several reasons render this study imperative. First of all, the news media in most young democracies are struggling to assert their independence from state control (Freedom House 2014). As a result, investigating the process, which enables or undermines this process, is pertinent because of the critical role of independent media in democracy and development (Camaj 2015). Secondly, the proponents of transparency see FOI laws as an advantage with teleological expectations, which spread to other socio-democratic rights for the wider citizenry (Calland and Bentley 2013). Since journalists are more likely to use FOI laws than individual citizens (Smolina 2005), it is important to investigate how the FOI Act has affected journalism practice in Nigeria. Thirdly, the majority of FOI adopters are found in developing nations with limited resources, largely unstable political environments, as well as weaker administrative and legal systems than the earlier adopters in the West (Roberts 2006). It is noted that the uptake in FOI laws' adoption around the world coincided with the third wave of democratisation (Kato and Tanaka 2019), which took place in Africa. Some studies have shown that adoption of the FOI Act in some countries was performed as a ploy to bolster their democratic credentials (Michener 2011; Paterson 2008). Most studies have focused on legal analysis, examining the interpretation and functionality of FOI laws (Paterson 2005; Snell 2004), while their practical effects on journalism have not been given much attention in the developing world, particularly in Nigeria. Fourthly, early studies conducted on the FOI Act and journalism in Nigeria paid greater attention to journalists' perception of the Act in terms of its workability, how it will affect journalism practice and its capacity to enhance journalism practice (Dunu and Ugbo 2014), with little effort being devoted to investigating its actual use by journalists. This is why the present study builds on this line of research by investigating journalists' knowledge of the Act, journalists' perception of the Act as a useful journalistic tool, the circumstances and the extent to which Nigerian journalists use the Act in their journalism practice, as well as the challenges faced by Nigerian journalists in the application of the FOI Act in journalism practice. Again, since some of these studies were carried out shortly after the passage of the Act, such assessment may be premature, given that journalists, the media and the government may still be coming to terms with the new FOI Act environment. Therefore, studying how journalists use the Act in their profession more than a decade after the passage of the bill into law presents ample opportunity to make a valid judgement regarding FOI Act usage among Nigerian journalists. In what follows, we discuss the FOI Act and the news media, outline the theoretical frameworks guiding the study and review the relevant literature. We outline the methodology adopted in the study, present our findings, discuss them and conclude the study.

2. FOI Act and News Media

Normatively, the FOI Act was mainly fashioned by journalists, for journalists and with a specific intention that journalists would utilise the access to government information in order to provide knowledge for the citizenry, which will, by extension, facilitate citizens' effective participation in the democratic process (Kwoka 2013). Although some scholarly works have pointed to the centrality of journalists both to FOI Act enactment and its expected use (Silver 2016; Camaj 2015; Paterson 2008; Lidberg 2002), the available evidence indicates that global FOI laws have not been able to meet the expectations of the news media (Dunu and Ugbo 2014; Snell 1998; Fajans 1984). Silver (2016) admits that the most notable criticism of the FOI Act lies in its inability to meet the information needs of the

news media. The reasons for failure of the FOI Act to meet the news media's information needs are to be found in two entities: the law itself and its handlers.

Concerning the law itself, some FOI laws can be counterproductive. Michener (2011) observes that FOI laws in Zimbabwe and Paraguay were so twisted that they ended up limiting access to information previously available and restricting freedom of expression. Even when the law does not limit free expression, some provisions of the FOI Act constitute hindrances to the efficient use of the Act. First, there are time limits within which the information required can be supplied (Paterson 2008). This is at variance with the journalistic norm of immediacy (Deuze 2005). Hence, the law does not lend itself to some journalistic types, except investigative reports, where journalists will have ample time to wait for long. Non-investigative journalists may be inclined to seek information through options, which give faster responses than FOI requests (Hayes and Silke 2019; Cuillier 2010). Second, in some FOI laws, and in particular in Nigeria's FOI Act, there are charges to be borne by the requester. Paterson (2008) notes that the cost of access is a deterrence to media usage of FOI law. Silver (2016) states that economic considerations may affect FOI Act requests by members of the news media. Rydell (2011) shares the same view, arguing that with declining revenue in the media, journalists' FOI Act requests and contests for FOI refusal may be waning. For Kreimer (2008), challenging denials in courts is not only costly and time consuming but puts pressure on resources, which are in short supply in the media. The third issue related to application of the FOI Act among journalists is that some FOI laws have contentious categories of exemptions, which protect deliberative processes in government agencies (Paterson 2008). Such exemptions, Paterson (2008, p. 8) explains, are critical for journalists in the performance of their watchdog role, as these documents are needed to shine a light on the "thinking processes", which underpin government decision making. Furthermore, they illuminate what particular advice was being followed in reaching an important policy decision.

Government Secrecy

In considering the socio-political factors affecting the use of FOI law by journalists, it is pertinent to observe that "governments everywhere have a natural inclination towards secrecy" (Paterson 2008, p. 3). Although the rapid spread of FOI laws has made enactment of the Act fashionable for nation states, the evidence suggests that in some countries, there is little or no political or bureaucratic capacity to implement the Act. The fact that FOI law has been enacted, Michener (2011) explains, makes a political leader appear good, and the international community feels pleased, notwithstanding the legal quality of what was passed. Consequently, Michener (2011) cautions that, regardless of FOI laws' merits and the prevailing drive for transparency, many encumbrances could render these laws ineffectual. First, there is less likelihood that states whose enactment of FOI law is predicated on political exigency will muster the political will required to drive its implementation. Calland and Bentley (2013) observe that several studies on the effectiveness of different FOI Acts share common characteristics of impediments, which include political will, infrastructural inadequacy, deficits in records management, procedural defects hindering responsiveness and institutional culture of secrecy. With regard to the culture of secrecy, there exists a tension between governments—the bureaucracy in particular—and the news media in the use of the FOI Act in journalism practice. The two are opposed to each other, with one interested in concealing information and the other being focused on exposing it. Michener and Worthy (2015) explain that the motivation of the FOI requester triggers two *prima facie* motivations—that is, to probe the government or to be informed—as a pre-political act. They conclude that FOI laws are a public service, which assumes government responsibility, which seems to prompt defensive speculation on the part of government officials. Such reaction is to be expected, and rightly so, when the identities of FOI scholars and advocates are considered (Michener and Worthy 2015). The authors note that political narratives appear to dominate other interpretations of FOI use. This defensive speculation is further heightened when the requesters are identified as journalists or media organisations. The

implementation of FOI law is a capital-intensive venture, which requires both monetary investment and training of staff to handle such requests (Obayi et al. 2020). Regrettably, many countries stop their journey to open government at the point of FOI passage, thereby missing the potential benefits of the Act. The extent to which this can be said of Nigeria has not been empirically verified; hence, this study investigates the knowledge and use of the FOI Act among journalists in Nigeria.

3. The Hierarchy of Influences Model

The present study uses the hierarchy of influences model to examine Nigerian journalists' knowledge and use of the FOI Act in their journalism duties. This model is particularly useful, in that it explores the factors enabling as well as inhibiting journalists' knowledge and use of the Act by shining a light on five levels of influences on journalistic content, namely the individual, routine, organisational, extra-media and social institution (formerly known as ideological) levels.

3.1. Individual Level

The individual level relates to the biological, psychological and sociological characteristics of an individual social actor. Here, the attitudes, training and background of the journalist (or media worker more generally) are seen as influential (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Empirical evidence viewed the demographic characteristics of journalists as the sources of individual-level influences (Relly et al. 2015).

3.2. Routine Level

The routine level involves the patterned, recurring practices and guidelines, which journalists apply in the performance of their work. Reese and Shoemaker (2016, p. 399) elucidate that "the routines level is concerned with those patterns of behaviour that form the immediate structures of media work . . . including unstated rules and ritualized enactments that are not always made explicit". Hanitzsch et al. (2010) and Hanitzsch and Mellado (2011) argue that policies, conventions and customs wield strong influence on journalistic practices globally. However, in some cases, journalists become used to problematic behaviour. For example, Relly et al. (2015) found that most journalists in Ba'athist Iraq did not have any ethical issues with regard to paying a source for information.

3.3. Organisational Level

The organisational level refers to the policies, rules and economic considerations within media organisations, which affect media content. Here, the profit orientation shared by private media companies, combined with their hierarchical structure, in general, shape the content in line with the ownership's interests (Hackett and Uzelman 2003). Editorial policy, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) explain, allows the organisation to determine which stories are deemed newsworthy, how they are prioritised and how they are represented.

3.4. Extra-Media Level

The extra-media level relates to the norms, individuals and organisations, which function outside a given media outlet. This represents the meso-level environment for the media, that is, the interrelationships of economic, political and cultural factors lying between the organisation and the society in general. At the extra-media level, consideration is given to those influences emanating principally from outside the media organisation. This perspective recognises that the power to shape content is not entirely that of the media, but it is shared with a variety of institutions in the society, including the government, advertisers, public relations, influential news sources, interest groups and even other media organisations (Shoemaker and Reese 1996).

3.5. Social Institution Level

The ideological level refers to the symbolic frameworks or customs, ideals and theories, which exist at the societal level. Ideology not only shapes the news; it is extended, renewed and reproduced through the agency of media content. In this context, we are interested in how the media's symbolic content is related to larger social interests and how meaning is mobilised in the service of power. This necessarily leads us to consider how each of the previous levels operates in order to add up to a coherent ideological result (Shoemaker and Reese 1996).

Although the model was developed to account for patterns of media coverage, it has been adapted to the study of journalists' attitudes and perceptions (Berkowitz and Limor 2003; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996). The hierarchy of influences model is relevant to this research, as it provides a useful analytical framework through which journalists' knowledge and use of the FOI Act in journalism practice can be interrogated. This is so because the model moves from the individual to the social institution level, which recognises both the agency (individual) and the structure (organisational and extra-media) in the use of the FOI Act. For instance, at the individual level, we are interested in understanding how journalists' knowledge and perception of the Act affect their use of the legislation. In terms of routine, the type of job a journalist performs can influence their knowledge and use of the FOI Act. For instance, investigative journalists may use the Act to greater effect than non-investigative journalists. We may be interested in understanding how the news routine of reporting events as quickly as possible affects the use of the FOI Act by journalists. In terms of the organisational level, variations in the editorial policy concerning the FOI Act in a media house can have a far-reaching effect on how journalists use the Act in their work. For example, a supportive media organisation may inspire increased use of the Act and vice versa. At the extra-media level, journalists who meet bureaucrats who are resistant or uncooperative while trying to access government-held information may not be willing to use the Act in the future, or if the culture of secrecy is pervasive, this can result in discontinuation of the use of the Act or exploration of other means of accessing government-held information, e.g., tipping government officials for such documents. At the social institution level, the prevailing belief can impact how journalists use the Act in their work. For instance, if the influence of the transparency movement leading to enactment of the FOI Act within a society was borne out of a desire to launder a regime's image, the state may not provide all the tools, which enable smooth implementation of the FOI Act. This can affect the way the Act is used by journalists in a particular locale. Some studies have shown that adoption of the FOI Act in some countries was carried out as a ploy to bolster their democratic credentials (Michener 2011; Paterson 2008).

4. FOI Act in Journalism Practice

4.1. Knowledge of the FOI Act among Journalists

Since the passage of the FOI bill into law in 2011, various stakeholders have made efforts at educating Nigerians, particularly journalists, on the provisions of the Act. Non-governmental organisations—the Media Rights Agenda (MRA) and International Press Centre (IPC)—have consistently trained journalists on how to use the Act (Dunu and Ugbo 2014; Adeyemoye 2020). It is suggested that knowledge of the Act will facilitate its use. Knowledge is identified as a major first stage in the process of adopting an innovation (Vejlgaard 2018). Within the context of the use of the FOI Act in journalism practice, knowledge of the Act among journalists has been of particular interest among journalism scholars.

Apuke (2017), who examined the level of knowledge of the provisions of the FOI Act among journalists in Jalingo, Taraba State, found that most journalists had an impressive level of knowledge of the Act. A study by Egielewa and Aidonojie (2021) revealed that there was poor knowledge of the Act among the journalists in Edo State. For their part, Obayi et al.'s (2020) study used the contents of the Act to test the journalists' knowledge level and found that there was a high level of knowledge of the provisions of the FOI Act

among journalists in Imo State. For their part, Nnadi and Obot's (2014) study showed that 65.1% of journalists in Akwa Ibom State have not read the FOI Act and, by extension, were not knowledgeable on the provisions of the Act. This result should be interpreted in light of the fact that the study was conducted three years after the passage of the FOI Act. It is logical to expect more journalists to have read the Act over time.

4.2. Journalists' Perception of the FOI Act

Scholars (Vu et al. 2017; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Van Dalen et al. 2011) have established a connection between journalists' perceptions and actions. For instance, Vu et al.'s (2017) study found that journalists in Vietnam perceived male sources as being more agentic than female sources. A content analysis of the stories written by these journalists reflected their perception of their sources, in that male sources were depicted as possessing stronger work-oriented and agentic traits, whereas their female counterparts were framed as being more socially oriented and communal. A large body of knowledge on role conception is premised on the notion that the way in which journalists perceive their role affects how they perform it (Mellado et al. 2020; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). In line with this view, examining how journalists perceive the FOI Act becomes a legitimate enterprise to investigate.

Egielewa and Aidonjio (2021) found that most respondents perceived the Act as capable of facilitating easier retrieval of information from public institutions. Obayi et al. (2020) investigated the perception of the FOI Act among journalists in Imo State. The result of the study showed that journalists in Imo State had a positive perception of the Act. Uche (2017) assessed the perception of the FOI Act among journalists in Awka, Anambra State, and found that the respondents perceived the Act as capable of making journalism practice easier, as well as guaranteeing a free and responsible press in Nigeria. Similarly, Aliyu's (2017) study showed that journalists perceived the Act as a tool, which will advance professionalism in journalism. Abone and Kur (2014) found that 77.6% of the journalists in Anambra State perceived the Act as having the potential to improve journalism practice in the country. However, in their study of journalists' perception and use of the FOI Act, Ezinwa et al. (2014) found that more than 70% of the respondents disagreed with the idea that the FOI Act is an important legal document, which could support investigative reporting in the country.

4.3. The Use of the FOI Act by Journalists

One of the arguments made in favour of the passage of the FOI Act into law was that it would enhance the practice of journalism in the country. In fact, some experts averred that it would revolutionise the journalism practice in Nigeria. As Ahmad et al. (2022, p. 2) argue, "Laws on their own do not bring change until they are used". Consequently, some studies have investigated the degree of use.

Arguably, one of the earliest comparative studies assessing the degree of use of the FOI Act within the journalism industry could be traced to Waters' (1999) study, which indicated a relatively low-level use of the FOI Act among Australian journalists compared to their American counterparts. Similarly, Lamble (2004) compared media use of FOI law among US, Canada, New Zealand and Australian journalists. The result showed that New Zealand journalists were the heaviest users of FOI law in the English-speaking world. Additionally, New Zealand journalists made more lodgements than their US counterparts. However, the study showed that US journalists used FOI law to better effect than the rest. The author attributed frequent use of the FOI Act in journalism practice in New Zealand to the conducive FOI regime in operation in the country.

In Nigeria, a 2018 study by Agba, Ogri and Adomi showed that journalists in Calabar were yet to use the Act to hold public officials accountable to the people. In a ten-year study of the use of the FOI Act in journalism practice in Nigeria, Asogwa et al. (2021) found that there was low use of the FOI Act in journalism practice in the country. A related study by Nnadi and Obot (2014) found that just 22.3% of the journalists included in the study had ever filed an application for information based on the provisions of the Act. Among

the number that applied, 78.4% of the applications were denied. Hence, it was concluded that there was poor utilisation of the FOI Act in journalistic practice. Gamji and Abdul (2019) investigated the influence of the FOI Act on journalistic practice and found, among other things, that the use of the FOI Act by journalists in their profession was low due to subsisting anti-press laws.

4.4. Challenges

In the use of the FOI Act in their profession, journalists face many challenges. This fact has maintained the interest of scholars working in the transparency field. A study by Abone and Kur (2014) identified the continued existence of other anti-press laws—such as the Official Secret Act, Penal Code and Criminal Code—the cost and time spent on litigation in the event of denial, the absence of a supervisory body, a culture of secrecy and disregard for the law as challenges to utilization of the FOI Act in journalism practice. Similarly, Agba et al. (2018) identified ignorance on the part of requesters, denial of access to public information by public officers, executive immunity and rigid legal procedures as challenges militating against the use of the FOI Act in journalism practice. Exploring journalists' access to and constraints in applying the FOI Act in Rivers State, Ituma et al. (2019) found that government policies topped the factors, which impeded journalists' access to information. Other constraints included fear of being killed, the policy of the media organisation and poor record keeping in Nigeria. Madubuike-Ekwe and Mbadugha (2018) found non-compliance by government or public officials with provisions of the Act, a pervasive culture of secrecy among government institutions, poor record keeping and non-domestication of the FOI Act as impediments to implementation of the FOI Act. Silver (2016) found delays and processing inefficiencies related to access requests as major reasons for the law failing journalists.

In light of the above, the following research questions formed the thrust of the study:

1. What is the level of knowledge of the FOI Act among Nigerian journalists?
2. How much do Nigerian journalists perceive the FOI Act as a useful journalistic tool?
3. Under what circumstances and to what extent do Nigerian journalists use the Act in their journalism practice?
4. What are the challenges faced by Nigerian journalists in the application of the FOI Act in journalism practice?
5. What is the relationship between journalists' use of the FOI Act and their knowledge of the Act?

5. Methods

In order to answer the central question of this research, the study undertook a national survey of Nigerian journalists from 15 October to 15 December 2021. The study used the multi-stage sampling technique. First, Nigerian journalists were stratified into six geo-political zones. Nigeria consists of six geo-political zones, and in order to achieve representativeness of journalists in Nigeria, respondents needed to be drawn from every geo-political zone. In the second stage, the researchers used the purposive sampling technique to select one chapter of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) from each of the six geo-political zones because these states are media hubs in their respective zones. In the third stage, four corresponding chapels (the smallest unit of the NUJ, which is located in a media house) were selected using the random sampling technique. In the fourth stage, we employed the random sampling technique to administer copies of the questionnaire to journalists in the selected correspondent chapels.

The NUJ was used as the basis for sampling because it is a union, which houses all journalists in Nigeria and has a register from which a sample can be drawn. Hence, the population of the study totalled 4299 journalists, with the population of each chapter represented in the following order: Lagos State = 2236; Abuja = 1267; Enugu State = 192; Rivers State = 202; Kaduna State = 221; Sokoto State = 181 journalists. Using Wimmer and Dominick's online sample size calculator with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of

error, we obtained a sample size of 353 journalists. We used Bowley's sampling technique in allocating questionnaires to the selected chapters, as follows: Lagos State = 184; Abuja = 104; Kaduna State = 18; Enugu State = 16; Rivers State = 16; and Sokoto State = 15 journalists. Furthermore, the accidental sampling technique was used in the administration of the questionnaire to the respondents. A total of 313 questionnaires were completed and found useful for analysis, representing an 88.7% return rate.

The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised two sections: A—demographic section and B—psychographic section. All items in the psychographic section were measured using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4). In order to validate the instrument, the questionnaire was subjected to face validity by research experts in the field of journalism. The test–retest reliability of the measurement instrument was assessed by administering the instrument to a sample of 60 members of the NUJ Anambra State chapter on two different occasions, with a two-week interval between these administrations. The scores obtained from both administrations were then compared using the interclass correlation coefficient (ICC). ICC (2, 1) was chosen, as it is suitable in situations where there is a single rater or where the focus is on the consistency of ratings across administrations. The ICC value was found to be 0.83, showing a high level of agreement and consistency between the two administrations. This suggests that the measurement instrument demonstrated good stability over time.

Data obtained from the field were sorted, coded and screened using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer-based statistical software, version 26.0. The demographic variables were analysed using frequency and percentage. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while ANOVA was used for testing all null hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance.

6. Results

The result of the study, as presented in Table 1, shows the demographic information of respondents by gender, age, educational qualification, marital status, length of service and the medium they work for. The result shows that the majority of respondents were male, representing 60.1%, while 39.9% were female respondents. The majority of respondents were between 30 and 39 years of age, had a HND/BSc qualification, were married, had spent 11–15 years in journalism and worked in a radio station.

Table 1. Demographic information of respondents.

SN	Gender	Frequency	Percentage
1	Male	188	60.1%
2	Female	125	39.9%
	Total	313	100%
SN	Age Range	Frequency	Percentage
1	20–29 Yrs	25	8.0%
2	30–39 Yrs	69	22.0%
3	40–49 Yrs	111	35.5%
4	50–59 Yrs	79	25.2%
5	60 and above	29	9.3%
	Total	313	100.0%
SN	Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
1	OND	27	8.6%
2	HND/BA/BSc	179	57.2%
3	MA/MSc	97	31.0%
4	PhD	10	3.2%
	Total	313	100.0%

Table 1. *Cont.*

SN	Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage
1	Single	70	22.4%
2	Married	209	66.8%
3	Divorced	15	4.8%
4	Widowed	19	6.1%
	Total	313	100.0%
SN	Yrs in Service	Frequency	Percentage
1	1–5 Yrs	81	25.9%
2	6–10 Yrs	73	23.3%
3	11–15 Yrs	79	25.2%
4	16–20 Yrs	39	12.5%
5	21 Yrs and above	41	13.1%
	Total	313	100%
SN	Medium of Work	Frequency	Percentage
1	Television	67	21.4%
2	Radio	93	29.7%
3	Newspaper	91	29.1%
4	Magazine	24	7.7%
5	Online	38	12.1%
	Total	313	100.0%

Ordinary National Diploma (OND); Higher National Diploma (HND).

- RQ 1: What is the level of knowledge of the FOI Act among journalists in Nigeria?

The finding of the study, as presented in Table 2, shows the frequency, mean and standard deviation of respondents regarding the level of knowledge of the FOI Act among journalists in Nigeria. The result shows that the majority of journalists have good knowledge of the FOI Act in Nigeria. This is because the respondents agreed with the following statements: “A public institution shall update and review the information required to be published under this section periodically, and immediately, whenever changes occur” ($\bar{x} = 3.23$, $SD = 0.89$) and “Where a case of wrongful denial of access is established, the defaulting officer or institution commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of N500,000” ($\bar{x} = 2.91$, $SD = 0.84$), among others. This is because the mean ratings are above 2.50, which was set as a criterion for accepting an item. A cluster mean of 3.04 with a standard deviation of 0.85 implies that journalists in Nigeria have good knowledge of the FOI Act.

Table 2. Mean and standard deviation of the level of knowledge of the FOI Act among journalists in Nigeria.

SN	Item Statement	Criteria	$\bar{x}$	SD	Decision
1	A public institution shall update and review the information required to be published under this section periodically, and immediately, whenever changes occur.	+2.5	3.23	0.89	A
2	Where a case of wrongful denial of access is established, the defaulting officer or institution commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of N500, 000.	+2.5	2.91	0.84	A
3	A public institution may deny an application for any information the disclosure of which may be injurious to the conduct of international affairs and the defence of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.	+2.5	3.00	0.91	A
4	A notification of denial of any application for information or records shall state the name, designation and signature of each person responsible for the denial of such application.	+2.5	3.02	0.79	A
	Cluster Mean	+2.5	3.04	0.85	A

The criteria consist of a benchmark or cut-off point on the basis of which a statement is accepted or rejected.

- RQ 2: How much do Nigerian journalists perceive the FOI Act as a useful journalistic tool?

The finding of the study, as presented in Table 3, shows that journalists believe the FOI Act will improve journalism practice in Nigeria ($\bar{x} = 3.60$, $SD = 0.60$), and they feel confident when using the FOI Act to carry out their journalistic duties ($\bar{x} = 3.38$, $SD = 0.70$). However, journalists disagreed about the FOI Act being a useless piece of legislation, which will make the practice of journalism complex ($\bar{x} = 1.99$, $SD = 1.01$) and about the Act diverting journalists' attention from the core issues affecting their profession ($\bar{x} = 2.10$, $SD = 1.00$). A cluster mean of 2.77 with a standard deviation of 0.80 implies that journalists in Nigeria agreed that the FOI Act is a useful journalistic tool.

Table 3. Mean and standard deviation of the perception of the FOI Act among Nigerian journalists as a useful journalistic tool.

SN	Item Statement	Criteria	$\bar{x}$	SD	Decision
1	I believe the FOI Act will improve journalism practice in Nigeria.	+2.5	3.60	0.60	A
2	I feel confident when I use the FOI Act to carry out my journalistic duties.	+2.5	3.38	0.70	A
3	I consider it a useless piece of legislation, which will make the practice of journalism complex.	+2.5	1.99	1.01	D
4	It diverts journalists' attention from the core issues affecting our profession.	+2.5	2.10	1.00	D
	Cluster Mean	+2.5	2.77	0.80	A

- RQ 3: Under what circumstances and to what extent do Nigerian journalists use the Act in their journalism practice?

The result in Table 4 shows that, to a high extent, journalists employ the Act whenever they want to write anything controversial ($\bar{x} = 2.56$, $SD = 1.03$); journalists use the Act to gain access to documents exposing them to the inner workings of government ($\bar{x} = 2.73$, $SD = 0.97$); and they also use the Act as a confirmatory mechanism ($\bar{x} = 2.79$, $SD = 0.92$). However, the result shows that making FOI Act requests as a journalistic routine is low ($\bar{x} = 2.39$, $SD = 1.02$). A cluster mean of 2.62 with a standard deviation of 0.94 implies that journalists in Nigeria use the FOI Act in their journalism practice to a high extent.

Table 4. Mean and standard deviation of respondents on the extent journalists use the FOI Act in their journalism practice.

SN	Item Statement	Criteria	$\bar{x}$	SD	Decision
1	I employ the Act whenever I want to write anything, which is controversial.	+2.5	2.56	1.03	HE
2	I use the Act to gain access to documents, which expose me to the inner workings of government.	+2.5	2.73	0.97	HE
3	I use the Act as a confirmatory mechanism.	+2.5	2.79	0.92	HE
4	Making FOI Act requests has become routine for me.	+2.5	2.39	1.02	LE
	Cluster Mean	+2.5	2.62	0.94	HE

- RQ 4: What are the challenges faced by journalists in the application of the Act in their practice?

The result in Table 5 shows that the following are challenges faced by journalists in the application of the Act in their practice: Government institutions are yet to integrate the provisions of the FOI Act in their operations, as there are no information officers responsible for FOI requests, nor do they make certain information publicly available ($\bar{x} = 3.02$, $SD = 0.91$); Some government agencies believe that the FOI Act does not apply to them, and so, they do not honour any requests based on the Act ($\bar{x} = 3.07$, $SD = 0.83$); Some government agencies still adopt an adversarial disposition towards journalists making requests for information ($\bar{x} = 3.25$, $SD = 0.75$); Obtaining information is difficult, as the culture of secrecy is still heavily entrenched in government business ($\bar{x} = 3.44$, $SD = 0.66$).

A cluster mean of 3.20 with a standard deviation of 0.78 means that the respondents agreed that journalists in Nigeria have been facing some challenges in the application of the FOI Act in their practice.

Table 5. Mean and standard deviation of respondents on the challenges faced by journalists in the application of the Act in their practice.

SN	Item Statement	Criteria	$\bar{x}$	SD	Decision
1	Government institutions are yet to integrate the provisions of the FOI Act in their operations, as there are no information officers responsible for FOI requests, nor do they make certain information publicly available.	+2.5	3.02	0.91	A
2	Some government agencies believe that the FOI Act does not apply to them, and so, they do not honour any request based on the Act.	+2.5	3.07	0.83	A
3	Some government agencies still adopt an adversarial disposition towards journalists making requests for information.	+2.5	3.25	0.75	A
4	Obtaining information is difficult, as the culture of secrecy is still heavily entrenched in government business.	+2.5	3.44	0.66	A
	Cluster Mean	+2.5	3.20	0.78	A

- RQ 5: What is the relationship between journalists' use of the FOI Act and their knowledge of the Act?

Pearson's product correlation of knowledge of the Act and its use was found to be weakly positive and statistically significant. This shows that as journalists' knowledge of the Act increases, more journalists tend to use the Act in their work ($r = 0.278$, $p = 0.05$).

7. Discussion of Findings

This paper examined the knowledge and use of the FOI Act in journalism practice in Nigeria. This study is pertinent, given that the Act has been in use for more than a decade. The result of the study indicated that respondents had a high level of knowledge of the Act, in that the majority of them could correctly identify the provisions of the Act. This finding is consistent with previous studies. For instance, Apuke (2017) found that there was a high level of knowledge of provisions of the FOI Act among journalists in Taraba State. Similarly, Obayi et al.'s (2020) study showed that journalists in Imo State had a high level of knowledge of the Act. However, the result of the present study is at variance with a study by Egielewa and Aidonojie (2021), who found that there was poor knowledge of the Act among journalists in Edo State. Based on the hierarchy of influences model, an analysis of journalists' knowledge of the Act can be pursued on three levels, namely the individual, routine and organisational levels. At the individual level, a journalist who likes to be conversant with developments in their field may experience the need to become acquainted with the Act, knowing that such knowledge will help them operate efficiently within the journalistic field. In terms of influences based on routine, it is expected that a journalist who wants to engage in investigative reporting will be keen on acquiring knowledge of the Act in order to function well, as they are routinely seeking to uncover what some people want to be kept from the public (Suntai and Shem 2018; Pollack and Allern 2018). Thus, we contend that the demands of one's routine will either motivate or discourage one from acquiring knowledge of the Act. The interest shown by an investigative reporter in the FOI Act will not be the same as that of an entertainment journalist. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) note that media organisations wield particular influence on media content. In the context of this study, the editorial policy of a media organisation can encourage or discourage the acquisition of knowledge of the FOI Act among journalists. A medium, which prioritises the monitorial role of journalism, will encourage its journalists to read and study the FOI Act in order to function well in the area of holding the government to account.

Our finding showed that journalists perceived the FOI Act as a useful journalistic tool. Most journalists thought that the Act would improve the journalism practice in Nigeria and felt confident when they used the Act to carry out their journalistic duties. Again,

most journalists did not agree that the Act was a useless piece of legislation, which would make journalism practice complex, nor that the Act diverted journalists' attention from the core issues affecting their profession. This positive perception of the FOI Act as a useful journalistic tool mirrors existing studies. Abone and Kur (2014) found that nearly 80% of journalists in Anambra State perceived the Act as having the capacity to enhance journalism practice in the country. Aliyu's (2017) study showed that respondents perceived the Act as a tool, which will further professionalism in journalism. A study by Obayi et al. (2020) indicated that journalists in Imo State had a positive perception of the Act. However, the result of the present study runs contrary to a study by Ezinwa et al. (2014), which revealed that 70% of journalists did not perceive the Act as an important legal document, which could facilitate investigative reporting in Nigeria. Based on the hierarchy of influences model, an analysis of the perception of the FOI Act as a useful journalistic tool could be explored at two levels. At the individual level, a journalist's perception of the usefulness of the Act as a journalistic tool may be informed by their attitude towards the Act. This attitude is also shaped by the experiences of journalists attempting to use the Act. In a situation where they frequently and successfully make use of the Act in the discharge of their duties as a journalist, they will perceive the Act as useful, and vice versa. At the extra-media level, the disposition of government agencies towards the FOI regime could shape the perception of journalists regarding the utility of the Act in journalism practice. At this level, there is an assumption that the media operate in organised relationships with other institutions, which work to shape media content. A further supposition is made that these relationships can be coercive but are more often voluntary and collusive (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). In the event of a culture of secrecy, uncooperative attitude of government officials and unnecessary delays dominating the administration of the FOI Act, the perception of its usefulness may be dimmed on account of such behaviour.

The extent and the circumstances under which journalists use the FOI Act in their work—according to our finding—showed that respondents used the Act whenever they want to write anything controversial, to gain access to documents exposing them to the inner workings of government and as a confirmatory mechanism. However, the result showed that the routinisation of FOI-Act-enabled requests in journalism practice among Nigerian journalists has been achieved to a low extent. Therefore, the result indicated that, although journalists in Nigeria use the FOI Act in their journalism practice to a low extent, the circumstances under which they use the Act diverged along writing on controversial topics, as a confirmatory mechanism and as a way of gaining insight into government's operations. This result echoes previous studies (Asogwa et al. 2021; Gamji and Abdul 2019; Nnadi and Obot 2014; Dunu and Ugbo 2014; and Agba et al. 2018), which found a low use of the FOI Act in journalism in Nigeria. However, the current result is at variance with that of Chukwu and Ihejirika (2018), who found that journalists in Lagos State used the Act to access information to a high extent. Drawing from the hierarchy of influences model, we argue that the circumstances under which the FOI Act has been deployed in this study may be interrogated at two levels, namely the routine and ideological levels. At the routine level, journalists are socialised into the culture of verification. It is the responsibility of journalists to confirm that the information at his or her disposal is correct and verifiable. The FOI Act offers an opportunity to achieve that in the current study. Relatedly, delving into controversial topics demands that the journalist provides evidence to back up their claims, and this is what journalists in this study were doing. At the ideological level, although the essence of the FOI Act is to make government information publicly available, what was often encountered is that a request had to be made before information could be released. This speaks to the influence of the transparency movement in the adoption of the FOI Act. If the FOI Act is adopted in order to bolster the democratic credentials of a country, the effect is that journalists and other citizens interested in government-held information may have to request the information before it is made available. This may also manifest itself in the non-appointment of information officers for handling FOI Act requests.

The challenges faced by journalists in utilization of the FOI Act in their profession include non-integration of the provisions of the FOI Act in the operation of government institutions, government agencies' attitude that the Act does not apply to them—and, as a result, not honouring any requests based on the Act—adversarial disposition of government institutions towards journalists requesting information using the FOI Act and the difficulty in obtaining government-held information occasioned by a pervasive culture of secrecy in government business. This finding is supported by previous studies. For example, this study identified that the failure of government institutions to integrate the provisions of the FOI Act in their operations—as evidenced in no information officers being charged with FOI requests—coheres with the absence of a supervisory body charged with the responsibility of responding to FOI Act requests found in Abone and Kur's (2014) study. Adversarial disposition towards journalists making a request using the FOI Act was found to be common in some government agencies. This is in tandem with previous studies (Agba et al. 2018; Dunu and Ugbo 2014), which identified uncooperative disposition of government agencies as an impediment to application of the Act by journalists. This study also found that a culture of secrecy is still pervasive in government business. This result is consistent with previous studies (Madubuike-Ekwe and Mbadugha 2018; Obayi et al. 2020; Abone and Kur 2014), where a culture of secrecy in government institutions was identified as a challenge to utilization of the FOI Act in the discharge of journalistic duties. In the context of the hierarchy of influences approach, our result showed that the major challenge to the use of the FOI Act in journalism practice revolved around government and its agencies, which represents the extra-media level. An enabling environment, which will facilitate the FOI regime, such as the appointment of information officers saddled with the task of responding to requests, is largely non-existent. Some government agencies seem to arrogate to themselves the status of being not answerable to the FOI regime in Nigeria, and thus, they do not honour requests for documents made through the FOI Act. We argue that the adversarial disposition of government agencies towards journalists making FOI requests would adversely affect their capacity to maximise the benefits of the Act to journalism, just as a culture of secrecy would. In the event where journalists cannot access the information they require to fulfil their role in the society, they may altogether abandon the task of holding the powerful to account. As noted earlier, the FOI Act is mostly used as a confirmatory mechanism; in a situation where journalists cannot perform such confirmation, their reportage will be based on tips or unverified anonymous sources. The overall effect is that their reports could be easily discounted as unreliable stories. This problem may be surmounted by establishing relations with government officials, taking part in advocacy campaigns to champion the implementation of the FOI Act and fashioning legal strategies to challenge government agencies, which fail to comply with the FOI Act.

The present result showed that knowledge of the Act correlated with the use of the Act by journalists. This study highlights the importance of knowledge in facilitating the use of the FOI Act in journalism practice. It is little wonder that one of the participants in a study by Mohammed et al. (2023) questioned how he could use the Act when he does not know its content. It is for this reason that journalists have been trained consistently on how to use the Act (Dunu and Ugbo 2014; Adeyemoye 2020). Informed by the hierarchy of influences model, knowledge of the Act may be interrogated at the individual and extra-media levels. At the individual level, the attitude of the journalist plays a role in determining how well a journalist learns and understands the Act. A journalist who believes that the enactment of the Act was predicated on boosting the democratic credentials of a government may not pay much attention to studying the Act. At the extra-media level, some organisations, such as the Media Rights Agenda (MRA) and International Press Centre (IPC), believe that by training journalists on how to use the Act (that is, increasing their knowledge of the Act), they can encourage the use of the Act among journalists in Nigeria.

8. Conclusions

This paper examined the knowledge and use of the FOI Act among Nigerian journalists. Given the promise of revolutionising the journalism practice, which the Act was said to engender, it is important to assess the knowledge and use of the Act among journalists. A high level of knowledge of the Act among journalists in Nigeria is indicative of the fact that they are well informed of their right to access information and can potentially use it in the discharge of their work. The general positive perception of the Act among journalists shows that it is a valuable asset for journalists in Nigeria and can contribute to the enhancement of the journalism profession in the country. With the deployment of the FOI Act as a confirmatory mechanism, tips or information received from anonymous sources can be confirmed or refuted through the Act, thereby improving the journalism profession through accurate and reliable reportage of events. The use of the FOI Act has not become routine among journalists in Nigeria; instead, they use the Act in certain circumstances, e.g., as a confirmatory mechanism, to write controversial stories and to gain insight into the inner workings of government. The challenges journalists face in their use of the FOI Act in journalistic duties are many, but they essentially revolve around the adversarial disposition of government towards journalists requesting information. This can have serious implications for journalists' performance of their monitorial role.

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Article

Sòrò-Sókè: A Framing Analysis of Creative Resistance During Nigeria's #EndSARS Movement

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Abstract: This study examines the role of creative resistance, or “activism”, in Nigeria’s #EndSARS movement, a youth-led campaign against police brutality that peaked in October 2020. Drawing on Robert Entman’s Framing Theory, it analyzes how different art forms reframed public perceptions of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and countered government efforts to delegitimize the protests. Using a qualitative approach, the research employs purposive sampling of Twitter-sourced art forms to explore how these pieces exposed systemic injustice, amplified protester voices, and mobilized local and global support. Findings reveal that activists personalized SARS brutality, dismantled narratives portraying protesters as criminals, and invoked moral urgency through evocative symbolism, leveraging social media’s virality to sustain the movement’s momentum. The study highlights SARS’ paradoxical role as a state-sanctioned yet reviled entity, demonstrating how creative expressions clarified this ambiguity into a clarion call for reform. By situating #EndSARS within Nigeria’s protest legacy, this analysis underscores art’s transformative power in digital-age activism, offering a blueprint for resistance against oppression. It contributes to scholarship on social movements by illustrating how art and technology intersect to challenge power, preserve collective memory, and demand accountability, with implications for future struggles in Nigeria and beyond.

Keywords: #EndSARS; activism; Framing Theory; police brutality; social movement; creative resistance; digital media

1. Introduction

Nigeria’s sociopolitical landscape has long been shaped by a robust tradition of protests and grassroots resistance, reflecting the resilience and determination of its people in confronting oppression and demanding justice. This legacy traced back to the colonial era with revolutionary events such as the Aba Women’s Riot of 1929, where women challenged unfair colonial tax policies, and the Abeokuta Women’s Revolt of 1947 led by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, which resisted an exploitative taxation system (AHA, 2004; Byfield, 2003). Other notable uprisings within the period include the Lagos Market Women’s Protests of 1932 and 1940 under Alimotu Pelewura and the 1945 Nigerian General Strike by railway workers, which all signaled widespread discontent with colonial rule (Akoleowo, 2022; Oyemakinde, 1975). The 1949 Enugu Colliery Massacre (Iva Valley Shooting), where striking coal miners were killed by colonial forces, further incited resistance against systemic exploitation (Jaja, 1982).

This spirit of defiance persisted into the post-independence period. The 1978 “Ali Must Go” student protests against educational fee hikes, the 1989 Anti-SAP (Structural Adjustment Program) riots opposing economic austerity, and the 1993 June 12 protests challenging electoral annulment marked critical junctures in Nigeria’s democratic struggle (Odion-Akhaine, 2009; Okorie, 2020). More recently, movements like the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protests against fuel subsidy removal, the 2014 Bring Back Our Girls campaign for abducted Chibok schoolgirls (Busari, 2012; Ansari & Brueggeman, 2014), and the 2024 End Bad Governance demonstrations against unfavourable economic policies have reaffirmed Nigerians’ enduring commitment to accountability and reform.

Within this continuum, the 2020 *Sòrò-Sókè* movement, translated from Yoruba as “Speak Up” or “Speak Louder”, emerges as a revolutionary chapter in Nigeria’s protest history. The movement, which was sparked by outrage over the Nigerian Police Force’s Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit notorious for brutality, extrajudicial killings, corruption, and arbitrary detentions, take on long-standing grievances against systemic injustice.

Initially ignited on Twitter (now X) in 2017, #EndSARS gained unprecedented momentum in October 2020, fueled by viral hashtags and distressing personal accounts of police violence. Early government attempts to dismiss it as a “Yahoo Boys” movement—a label for internet fraudsters—failed as it evolved into a broader youth-led demand for justice, police reform, and governance accountability. Notably, during the first month of the COVID-19 lockdown, police killings (18) outpaced virus-related deaths (12), intensifying public outcry (BBC, 2020).

What distinguishes #EndSARS from prior movements is its seamless integration of physical protests with digital activism and creative resistance, or “artivism”. Nigerian youths harnessed visual art, music, skit, poetry, performances, and digital media not merely as expressive outlets but as potent tools for mobilization and solidarity. This creative ingenuity redefined Nigeria’s protest culture, blending traditional dissent with contemporary forms of expression and leveraging social media, particularly Twitter, to organize, inform, and counter state narratives (Dambo et al., 2022). Hashtags, viral videos, and real-time updates amplified testimonies of police brutality, dismantled the ambiguous perception of SARS as both a feared oppressor and a supposed crime-fighting necessity, and garnered global attention.

This study situates #EndSARS within Nigeria’s rich history of resistance, focusing on how creative resistance shaped its framing and sustained its momentum. Through a framing analysis grounded in Entman’s Framing Theory, it explores the interplay of artivism and activism, examining how these elements amplified marginalized voices, challenged oppressive systems, and redefined public discourse. Specifically, this research addresses the following questions: (1) How did artistic expressions during #EndSARS utilize Framing Theory to reframe public perceptions of police brutality and counter government narratives delegitimizing the protests? (2) In what ways did #EndSARS art forms amplify marginalized voices, expose systemic injustices, and mobilize local and global support for justice and reform? (3) How did the interplay of digital media and creative resistance shape the narrative and momentum of #EndSARS within Nigeria’s broader protest legacy? By exploring these questions, this study contributes to scholarship on the transformative role of art in social movements, positioning #EndSARS as both an extension of Nigeria’s protest legacy and a model for future resistance.

In a nation where youth face systemic disadvantages, the movement’s use of creative expression to narrate struggles and counter official misinformation highlights art’s power as a catalyst for social change. Following this introduction, the paper examines the historical and contextual background of #EndSARS, outlines its objectives, and discusses the theoretical and methodological approaches that underpin the study. It then analyzes three

selected art forms to illustrate their role in reframing narratives and mobilizing support. The findings of the analysis are critically discussed before concluding with reflections on activism's legacy in the Sòrò-Sókè movement and its implications for future resistance.

2. Brief Background to the Study

The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was established in Lagos in 1992 as a tactical unit to address Nigeria's rising insecurity like armed robbery, kidnappings, and contract killings, all of which emerged from the country's turbulent political landscape, marked by prolonged military rule. In response, SARS was conceived as an elite force tasked with handling these violent crimes, conducting covert operations, and dismantling criminal networks. To enhance operational efficiency, SARS officers were granted autonomy, operating without uniforms or marked vehicles to maintain an element of surprise (Omeni, 2022, p. 243). However, lack of oversight and accountability soon led to widespread abuses, and over time, SARS became notorious for extortion, torture, extrajudicial killings, and arbitrary arrests, particularly targeting young Nigerians perceived as affluent based on their appearance or possessions. Despite repeated calls for reform, the unit continued to operate with impunity, becoming a symbol of state-sanctioned violence and oppression.

The pervasive injustices inflicted by SARS after its expansion across the country in 2002 inevitably sparked resistance, which led to a social media campaign in 2017 under the hashtag #EndSARS, driven by activists such as Segun Awosanya (Segalink), Damilare Olabode (Letter_to_Jack), Michael Ugochukwu Stephens (Ruggedman), Abdul Mahmud (Great Oracle), Harrison Gwamnishu, and Oluyemi Fasipe (Yemie Fash) and organizations like Citizen Gavel (Tech4justice), among others. Through this platform, thousands of Nigerians shared personal testimonies of SARS brutality, which intensified demands for the unit's abolition.

The movement gained momentum as it highlighted systemic issues within the Nigerian Police Force, including extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary detention, and deep-rooted corruption. A turning point came on 3 October 2020, when a video alleged that SARS operatives had killed 22-year-old Joshua Ambrose in Ughelli, Delta State (Agbo, 2021). This incident, coupled with the killing of Jimoh Isiaq by police on 10 October 2020, in Ogbomosho, Oyo State, escalated public outrage and triggered nationwide protests (Uwalaka, 2024).

The #EndSARS protests, which began on 7 October 2020, were initially peaceful but were later marred by violence. On 20 October 2020, the movement reached a tragic climax when unarmed protesters were massacred at the Lekki Toll Plaza in Lagos, allegedly by security forces and criminal elements hired by government officials (Ezeugwu et al., 2021). Despite this repression, the movement unified Nigerians in a historic demand for justice, accountability, and an end to police brutality.

Twitter, in particular, played a pivotal role, serving as a dynamic tool for coordination, real-time documentation of abuses, and global outreach, thereby sustaining the movement's momentum (Dambo et al., 2022). Meanwhile, artists across disciplines crafted contents that amplified protester voices, reframed narratives, and galvanized international solidarity. This synergy distinguished #EndSARS from prior Nigerian movements, empowering grassroots activists to shape discourse independently of traditional power structures (Kelvin & Tsegwu, 2022).

Though the movement was violently suppressed, its legacy endures as a catalyst for a new generation of activists, demonstrating the transformative potential of digital media and art in confronting entrenched institutions. The movement's significance extends beyond its immediate outcomes by offering a model of resistance in the digital age.

3. Objective of the Study

This study aims to conduct a critical analysis of art forms that emerged from Nigeria's #EndSARS movement, examining their role as instruments of creative resistance and narrative reframing. Specifically, it investigates how these artistic expressions countered government efforts to delegitimize the protests—often by portraying them as criminal or frivolous—while foregrounding systemic injustices, particularly police brutality. By unpacking the layered meanings embedded in these works, the research illustrates how art served not only as a medium of dissent but also as a powerful catalyst for shaping public discourse around policing in Nigeria.

A key focus is the paradoxical role of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a state-sanctioned unit established to combat violent crime yet widely reviled as a perpetrator of terror and oppression against citizens. Despite long-standing public distrust, SARS' abuses gained critical visibility through the #EndSARS movement, amplified significantly by artistic and visual protest forms. This study evaluates how these art forms dismantled government narratives, exposed the unit's brutality, and galvanized collective demands for justice and systemic reform. By so doing, it highlights the transformative capacity of art to unify voices, challenge power, and reframe perceptions of a deeply contested institution, contributing to broader understandings of creative resistance in social movements.

4. Framing Theory

Robert Entman's Framing Theory provides a robust lens for analyzing how information is selectively presented to shape perceptions of reality. Entman posits that frames are cognitive schemata that organize experience by highlighting certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others, thereby influencing attitudes, beliefs, and actions (Entman, 1993). According to him, framing operates through four key functions: "*define problem*" (*Problem Identification* of the issue and why it matters), "*diagnose causes*" (*Causal Interpretation* refers to explaining what or who is responsible for the issue), "*make moral judgments*" (*Moral Evaluation*, that is, assigning ethical judgements to the situation or involved parties), and "*suggest remedies*" (*Treatment Recommendation* involves suggesting solutions or actions to address the issue) (Entman, 1993, p. 52). These functions guide how individuals interpret complex phenomena and make decisions, making the theory particularly suited to dissecting the role of art in social movements.

In the context of Nigeria's #EndSARS movement, Framing Theory reveals how artistic expressions served as tools to reframe public narratives around police brutality, counter government disinformation, and mobilize collective action. This study applies Entman's framework to analyze sampled art forms, demonstrating how they strategically communicated the movement's demands and reshaped discourse about the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Below, each framing function is explored with specific examples from the #EndSARS activism.

4.1. Problem Identification: Exposing Police Brutality and Systemic Injustice

The #EndSARS movement used various art forms to consistently frame police brutality as a critical and pervasive issue in the Nigerian society. Paintings, posters, murals, songs, and performances employed visual elements like bloodied fists, broken chains, and victim silhouettes to spotlight SARS' oppressive actions (see Figure 1). Through this framing function, activists served two purposes with their works; the first is they *raise awareness* by visually representing the brutality and injustice, and by that, they helped bring attention to issues that were often ignored or normalized. And secondly, it *humanizes victims* by constantly presenting portraits of individuals who suffered at the hands of SARS, thereby creating emotional connections that encouraged the populace to empathize with the victims.

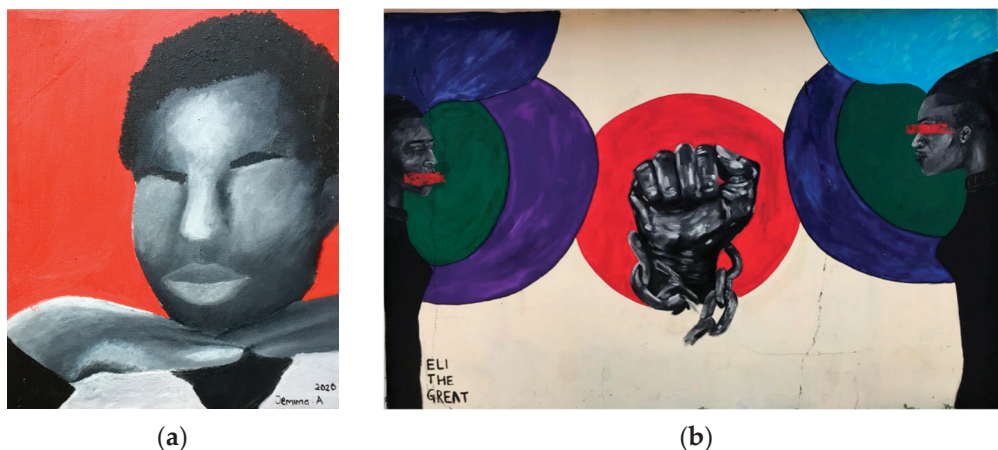


Figure 1. Samples of #EndSARS artworks framing police brutality as systemic injustice. (a) For Tina, Artist: Jemila Arayela; (b) Untitled, Artist: Elaebi Amaremo (Eli the Great).

4.2. Causal Interpretation: Identifying Systemic Roots

Through the lens of Framing, artists like Darlington Okoduwa and Laolu Senbanjo framed the issue of SARS as a symptom of deeper systemic corruption within Nigeria's government and police force. Okoduwa's 3D piece, with its phrase "Serve the people, not the government", and Senbanjo's depictions of entrenched corruption, presented the problem as an institutional issue rather than an isolated incident (see Figure 2). By exposing SARS as a threat to citizens rather than a crime-fighting necessity, these works challenged public indecision—as some feared a society without SARS—while urging critical scrutiny of state power and demands for accountability.

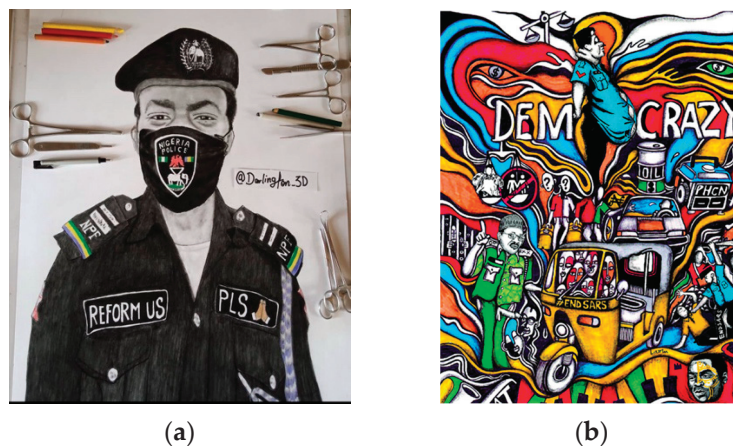


Figure 2. Samples of #EndSARS artworks exposing systemic corruption as the root of SARS's brutality. (a) Brain Surgery, Artist: Darlington Okoduwa (Darlington 3D); (b) DEMOCRAZY, Artist: Laolu Senbanjo.

4.3. Moral Evaluation: Advocating Justice and Human Rights

The moral dimension of #EndSARS activism emerged through cultural and religious motifs that highlighted ethical violations. The viral photograph of Aisha Yesufu, dubbed Nigeria's "Statue of Liberty" (captured by Victor Odiba), alongside works like Bakare Omodara's call to "face the truth", invoked shared values of fairness and community (see Figure 3). This framing transcended ethnic and class divides, uniting Nigerians in a collective stance against oppression and reinforcing SARS' illegitimate actions as a moral outrage.



Figure 3. Samples of #EndSARS artworks advocating justice and human rights through moral outrage. (a) Protest Image of Aisha Yesufu, Artist: Victor Odiba; (b) Statue of Liberty, Artist: Tunde Lasisi; (c) Untitled, Artist: Bakare Omodara.

4.4. Treatment Recommendation: Mobilizing for Change

Beyond critique, these art forms offered actionable solutions, embedding phrases like “End SARS Now”, “Reform the Police”, and “Justice for All” in pieces by Sabina Silver, Bakare Omodara, and many more (see Figure 4). These calls transformed passive discontent into active participation, encouraging protests, petitions, and social media amplification. By presenting tangible steps, the art fueled the movement’s momentum, empowering individuals to envision and pursue systemic reform.

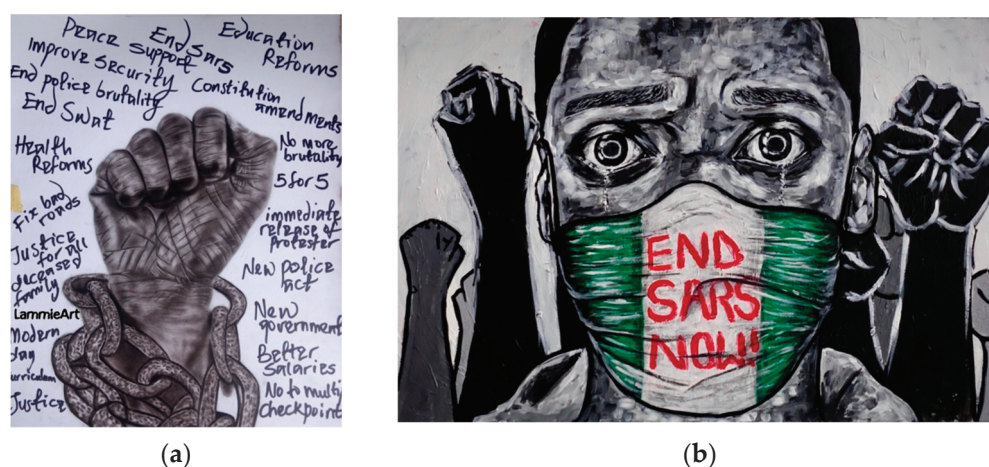


Figure 4. Samples of #EndSARS artworks mobilizing for systemic reform. (a) ENDSARS, Artist: Bakare Omodara; (b) We No Go Gree, Artist: Sabina Silver.

In contrast, government and pro-establishment narratives framed #EndSARS as a national security threat, alleging foreign interference and portraying activists as unpatriotic to justify repression. Activists countered this delegitimization by leveraging Entman’s framing functions to expose brutality, attribute systemic causes, invoke moral urgency, and propose solutions. This strategic use of art not only mobilized local and global solidarity but also positioned #EndSARS within Nigeria’s broader struggle for democratic accountability.

Framing Theory thus reveals the pivotal role of #EndSARS activism in communicating complex issues accessibly and impactfully. By redefining SARS from a necessary evil to a symbol of injustice, these art forms amplified calls for change, offering a blueprint for how creative expression can drive social movements in the digital age.

5. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze artistic expressions from Nigeria's #EndSARS movement, with data primarily sourced from Twitter (now X), as it was a key platform for the movement's digital ar(c)tivism. A purposive sampling method was utilized to select data, guided by criteria aligned with the study's objectives of examining art's role in framing resistance and countering false narratives. To ensure methodological rigor, the search process, time frame, and selection criteria are detailed below, followed by the analytical approach.

The search for various art forms was conducted on Twitter using a combination of hashtags and keywords central to the #EndSARS movement. Primary search terms included #EndSARS, #EndPoliceBrutality, #LekkiMassacre, #EndInjustice, and #SoroSoke, which were prevalent during the protests and associated with digitally shared contents. Additional keywords such as "art", "painting", "skit", "illustration", "drawing", and "photograph" were used to filter for creative expressions. The search time frame spanned 3 October to 31 October 2020, covering the peak of the #EndSARS protests, including key events like the protest art event on 17 October and the Lekki Toll Gate massacre on 20 October 2020. This period was chosen to capture the diverse art forms created and shared during the movement's peak, ensuring relevance to the study's focus on real-time digital activism.

From this search, approximately 60 diverse art forms were retrieved, encompassing a range of forms such as paintings, photographs, skits, posters, music, illustrations, and performances shared via tweets, retweets, or replies. The pool included viral images, protest art paintings, and activist-driven content, identified through Twitter's search functionality and engagement metrics (e.g., retweets, likes, quotes, and mentions). To narrow the selection, retrieved data were evaluated based on their prominence, measured by social media engagement (e.g., retweets exceeding 1000 or likes exceeding 2000) and their ability to advance the #EndSARS campaign's themes—challenging false narratives, exposing systemic injustices, mobilizing support, amplifying protester voices, and highlighting hidden abuses. From this process, three significant art forms were selected for in-depth content analysis: Debo Adebayo's skit "End SARS Now! E Fit Be You Next", Chigozie Obi's painting *Ezu River*, and the uncredited photograph *The Blood-Stained Flag*. These were chosen for their high engagement, diverse artistic forms (performance, visual art, and photography), and alignment with Framing Theory's functions, as detailed in Section 4.

The content analysis involved a close reading of each sample's visual and textual elements, such as symbolism, color, composition, and accompanying captions or hashtags, to uncover how they construct meaning within the #EndSARS context. Guided by Entman's Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), the analysis applied the four functions—problem identification, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation—to dissect how these artworks shaped perceptions of police brutality and mobilized support. The selected art forms were examined to assess their role in achieving the study's objectives:

1. **Challenging False Narratives:** Countering government portrayals of victims and protesters as criminals or threats, thereby reframing their identities and struggles.
2. **Exposing Systemic Injustices:** Revealing deep-rooted abuses perpetrated by the Nigerian Police Force, particularly the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), as institutional rather than isolated acts.
3. **Mobilizing Public Support:** Galvanizing local and global participation in the movement through emotional resonance and calls to action.
4. **Amplifying Protester Voices:** Elevating marginalized perspectives to center the experiences of those affected by SARS brutality.

5. **Highlighting Hidden Injustices:** Bringing to light abuses that might otherwise have been obscured or ignored, ensuring visibility for systemic issues.

This method allowed for a deep exploration of how activism intersected with digital platforms to drive the movement's narrative and influence collective action. By focusing on these purposively selected samples with significant Twitter engagement, the study provides a focused yet rich understanding of creative resistance during the Sòrò-Sókè protests.

6. Analysis of Selected Samples

6.1. "End SARS Now! E Fit Be You Next" by Debo Adebayo (Mr. Macaroni)

Debo Adebayo, widely known as Mr. Macaroni, is a Nigerian comedian and actor who emerged as a key activist during the #EndSARS movement. Leveraging his substantial social media platform, he transitioned from just a pure entertainer to social commentator, using satire to spotlight police brutality and systemic injustice. His skit "End SARS Now! E Fit Be You Next", a 2-min-25-s dramatic piece shared on various social platforms, including Twitter on 11 October 2020, exemplifies this shift. Despite his arrest after the major protests, Adebayo persisted in advocating for police reform, making this work a resonant contribution to Sòrò-Sókè's agenda. This satirical skit was selected for its performative power in humanizing SARS' victims and critiquing societal complicity, as well as its social media engagement, evidenced by its widespread reach on Twitter with over 112,000 retweets, 133,000 likes, and over 674,000 views, reflecting its role in mobilizing online and offline protesters.

The skit features Mr. Macaroni as the "Daddy", a dismissive father representing older-generation skepticism toward the #EndSARS protests, alongside his daughter Motunde, who seeks to join the movement, and his son Richard, who becomes a victim of SARS brutality (see Figure 5). The narrative unfolds as Mr. Macaroni mocks the protesters, labeling them "criminally minded" youths flaunting wealth without "9–5" jobs, while casually greeting SARS officers who reinforce his views. The tone shifts dramatically when the officers reveal a slain "criminal" in their truck, identified by Motunde as her brother, Richard. A flashback revealed Richard's fatal encounter with SARS, triggered by his "shiny jewelry", exposing the arbitrary violence Daddy had denied. Stricken, Daddy confronts the officers, holding his son's body in a wrenching reversal of his earlier stance (see Appendix A for the full transcript).



Figure 5. Still from *End SARS Now! E Fit Be You Next* by Debo Adebayo, showing Daddy's grief over Richard's SARS-inflicted death. Source: Artist's Twitter page.

Applying Entman's Framing Theory in dissecting how the skit reframes police brutality, we analyzed the four framing functions as follows: **Problem Identification**—the skit

vividly defines police brutality as an urgent crisis, using Richard's death to personalize SARS' violence. The flashback, which showed officers harassing and shooting Richard for his appearance, mirrors countless real-life testimonies shared during #EndSARS, making the issue tangible and relatable. The title, "E Fit Be You Next", stresses the universal threat, challenging apathy among viewers. **Causal Interpretation**—SARS is framed as the root cause, not merely as rogue actors but as a symptom of systemic failure. Daddy's initial defense of the officers, reinforcing government narratives that SARS protects society, crumbles when his son becomes a victim, implicating state-sanctioned impunity. The skit critiques societal complicity, as Daddy's elitism blinds him until the tragedy strikes him. **Moral Evaluation**—the piece invokes a moral awakening, shifting from Daddy's callous endorsement of SARS to anguished outrage. Cultural motifs, like the familial bond between Daddy and Richard, appeal to shared values of justice and protection, uniting viewers across generations. This ethical reframing delegitimizes SARS' actions, exposing their brutality as a violation of human rights. **Treatment Recommendation**—the skit implicitly calls for action through various hashtags—#EndSARS, #EndPoliceBrutality, and #ReformPoliceNG—urging viewers to reject passivity and demand reform. Daddy's transformation from skeptic to mourner models a shift from indifference to activism, encouraging collective resistance.

The skit counters government narratives that branded protesters as criminals or foreign agitators, a stance Daddy initially parrots. By revealing Richard—a presumed "criminal"—as an innocent son, it dismantles these falsehoods, humanizing victims and aligning with the study's aim to challenge delegitimizing rhetoric. Its satirical tone, paired with a tragic climax, amplifies protester voices, mobilizes support, and exposes hidden injustices, resonating widely due to Adebayo's over 1.5 million followers at the time.

"E Fit Be You Next" exemplifies activism's power within #EndSARS, blending humor and drama to reframe police brutality as a systemic, personal, and moral crisis. Its viral impact, evidenced by the post interactions, underscored its role in raising awareness and inspiring action, cementing Adebayo's skit as a cornerstone of the movement's creative resistance.

6.2. *Ezu River* by Chigozie Obi

Chigozie Obi, a Nigerian visual artist, contributed to the #EndSARS movement through her involvement in the Protest Art Live Painting event at Lekki Toll Gate on 17 October 2020. Organized by the art community led by herself, Ayo Sanusi, and Kehinde BB, other artists who participated in the session include Tunde Lasisi, Donna Duke, Jemima Arayela, Oluwaseun Akinlo, Julius Agbaje, Sotonye Jumbo, Ken Nwadiogbu, and others. This initiative invited artists to create works on-site to raise awareness and funds for the cause. Obi's oil-on-canvas painting *Ezu River* was one of the event's emotive pieces as it depicts a young boy floating lifelessly in a blood-red river, his pale form and unblinking eyes stark against the gory expanse (see Figure 6). The proceeds from the sale of the artwork, along with those from other works created during the live session, supported legal aid for protesters and SHquseNG, an organization that aids queer activists (Sanusi, n.d.). This highlights art's dual role as both expression and action.

Art X Lagos, a prominent international art fair in West Africa, shared the artwork, along with three others created at the event, on their official social handles. This was part of their discussions and virtual showcase after the 2020 fifth edition of the fair was recalibrated to highlight the protests. The exhibition featured a visual archive of over 100 artists, filmmakers, and photographers who were at the forefront of documenting the #EndSARS protests. The piece garnered over 2000 retweets and 3000 likes across platforms, indicating significant online visibility.

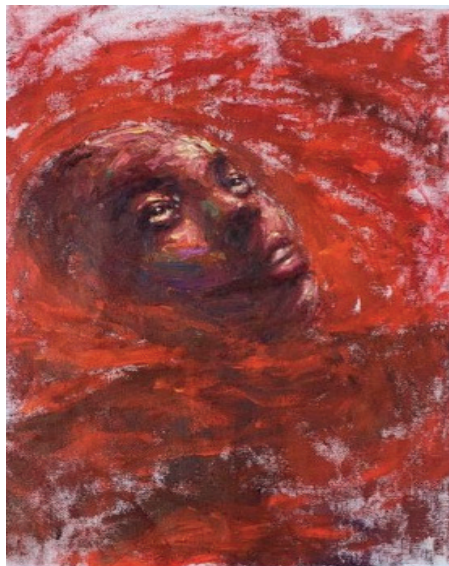


Figure 6. *Ezu River* by Chigozie Obi, painted during #EndSARS protests, depicting a boy's death in a blood-red river. Source: Artist's Twitter page.

The painting was inspired by the Awkuzu atrocities in Anambra State, where SARS operatives were allegedly accused of dumping victims' bodies into the Ezu River. It depicts the 2013 discovery of approximately 35 corpses that were linked to officer James Nwafor and his men (Sahara Reporters, 2020). Obi personalizes this horror through the story of Chijioke Iloanya, a 20-year-old arrested by SARS, whose father endured extortion and waded through corpses in a futile search for his son's body. The boy's serene yet haunting posture, submerged in a calm, blood-filled river, juxtaposes innocence with the brutality that claimed his life, documenting the systemic violence of SARS.

Ezu River reframes narratives by shedding light on the injustice of SARS brutality. The Entman's framing functions manifest in the following manners: **Problem Identification**—the blood-filled river defines police brutality as a pervasive crisis, with the boy symbolizing victims like Chijioke Iloanya. The overwhelming red, dominating the canvas, mirrors the scale of bloodshed, while the title *Ezu River* ties it to a documented atrocity. Created amid the Lekki protests, the painting inherently demands attention to abuses often obscured by official silence. **Causal Interpretation**—Obi implicates SARS, systemic corruption, and government impunity as the root causes, the river serving as a metaphor for state-sanctioned violence. The calm surface belies the chaotic brutality preceding the boy's death, critiquing the chilling detachment of these acts, recalling the father's harrowing search to highlight systemic failure. This framing dismantles narratives justifying SARS as a crime-fighting necessity, rather exposing it instead as a perpetrator of terror against the youth it was meant to protect. **Moral Evaluation**—the boy's ghostly pallor and unblinking eyes invoke a moral outrage, reflecting the innocence lost to senseless violence. Anchored in the Ezu River, a site of mass murder and national memory, the painting appeals to shared values of justice and humanity, uniting audiences across divides. Its motionlessness intensifies the ethical violation, framing SARS' actions as utterly unconscionable. **Treatment Recommendation**—as a live protest artwork, *Ezu River* implicitly calls for justice and reform. Its creation at Lekki Toll Gate embed in it a demand for action. Its fundraising role further transforms grief into tangible support for resistance, fueling and sustaining the movement's momentum. The visual impact—red as a cry for attention, sacrifice, and anger—compels reflection and urges viewers to act.

Obi counters government narratives dismissing #EndSARS as unpatriotic by rooting her work in the undeniable Ezu River tragedy and Chijioke's story, humanizing victims

falsely labeled criminals. The painting amplifies silenced voices, notably the father's anguish, and unearths hidden injustices, resonating with Siyanbola et al. view of art as a spotlight for societal issues (Siyanbola et al., 2023, p. 21). Its protest context and emotional weight incited outrage, fueling the Sòrò-Sókè call for accountability.

Ezu River emerges as a powerful artifact of #EndSARS activism, merging memorialization with resistance. It immortalizes victims' suffering, critiques systemic oppression, and sustains the movement's momentum through its practical contributions. Obi's work exemplifies art's transformative role, reframing SARS brutality as a personal and collective crisis demanding justice.

6.3. *The Blood-Stained Flag (Uncredited)*

The Blood-Stained Flag, an uncredited viral image from the Lekki Toll Gate massacre on 20 October 2020, is a striking and enduring visual symbol of the #EndSARS movement. The image, which was captured by an anonymous protester at nighttime, shows a Nigerian flag with its green and white stripes smeared with vivid red blood, held up closely by another protester, their face partially visible against the dark backdrop (see Figure 7). The image, which was widely circulated on Twitter that night, captured the violence unleashed on peaceful demonstrators. This turned a national emblem of unity and peace into a glaring testament to state betrayal. While the exact metrics are scarce because the image cannot be attributed to any original author, it has been shared and retweeted countless times, garnering millions of engagements. Rihanna's post of the image alone garnered over 550,000 engagements and millions of impressions on Twitter, while her Instagram post received over 1.3 million engagements.



Figure 7. *Blood-Stained Flag* (uncredited), capturing a blood-smeared Nigerian flag from the Lekki massacre. Source: Twitter.

The background context intensifies the weight of this visual. After days of #EndSARS protests, Lagos State Governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu declared a 24 h curfew on 20 October 2020, announced at 1:00 p.m. and initially set to begin at 4:00 p.m., but later postponed to 9:00 p.m. Despite this curfew, peaceful protesters at Lekki Toll Gate chose to stay, exercising their constitutional right to peaceful assembly and protest. However, around 7:00 p.m., the Nigerian Armed Forces accompanied by the Nigerian police officers arrived at the protest ground. The protesters, on the other hand, believing that if they sang the national anthem and waved their flags, they would be safe. In doing so, the demonstrators knelt and sang in defiance. Yet, the officers opened fire on the protesters, staining the flag with blood. A

popular Nigerian disc jockey, DJ Switch, who was at the venue, livestreamed the event on her Instagram page. The livestream captured this horror, which provided crucial evidence of the attack and was vital in countering government denials of the massacre. In parts of her stream, protesters were seen trying to remove a bullet from a man's leg and using the flag to stem the bleeding leg (Olonilua, 2020).

In the aftermath, with all the overwhelming evidence all over the media, the government attempted to deny the events. Government spokespersons claimed that security forces did not kill protesters, stating that they only used blank bullets in an attempt to disperse them. Governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu was also at the center of this misinformation, as he initially denied that no one was killed at Lekki, but later tweeted the same day that only one person died in the hospital from blunt force trauma and that the connection to the shooting was still under investigation (McSweeney & Busari, 2020). The Nigerian military also, as usual, denied responsibility, labeling various media reports as "fake news".

The precise number of casualties from the Lekki Toll Gate massacre remains uncertain due to conflicting reports and government denials. Amnesty International documented 38 deaths, SBM Intelligence estimated 46, and the 2021 Lagos Judicial Panel officially confirmed 9 fatalities. Additionally, a leaked memo in 2023 revealed the Lagos State Government's plans for the mass burial of 103 victims, suggesting a higher death toll (Amnesty International, 2021; SBM Intelligence, 2020; Olabimtan, 2021b; Channels TV, 2023).

We apply Framing Theory to examine how the image counters narratives and denials of a tragic event that would otherwise have been swept under. The framing functions are as follows: **Problem Identification**—the bloodied flag defines state-sponsored violence as a crisis, its red stains on the white stripe, which should ideally symbolize peace, essentially conveying the massacre's toll. The image, tied to Lekki's documented brutality, immerses viewers in the loss of lives, further intensified by DJ Switch's footage of a flag being used as a makeshift bandage. It demands recognition of a tragedy the state sought to erase. **Causal Interpretation**—The blood suggests involvement of security forces and government complicity, as the flag, intended to be revered by the state, is defiled, exposing a systemic failure. The government's initial denials were shattered by the Judicial Panel's ruling, which found Nigerian military culpable in the massacre and the 2023 leaked memo (Egbejule, 2021; Channels TV, 2023). This framing exposes a state that assaults its citizens, contradicting its protective mandate. **Moral Evaluation**—the image invokes moral outrage by subverting the flag's ideals of justice, peace, and unity. The blood evokes martyrdom, resonating with Adeniyi's lament that *"to be shot . . . while protesting is a stain on the conscience of any nation"* (2020). Set against Nigeria's history of state violence, such as the 2015 Zaria massacre and the 2018 attack on Shiite Muslims, the image unites viewers in condemning this ethical breach (Amnesty International, 2016, 2018). **Treatment Recommendation**—as a viral state violence symbol, the flag demands accountability and reform. The image gained global attention after foremost celebrities like Rihanna, Anthony Joshua, Beyoncé, Burna Boy, Nicki Minaj, Viola Davies, Kanye West, Odion Ighalo, and many others retweeted and reacted to it on their social media platforms (Aderoju, 2020; ITV News, 2020). Its impact was further amplified through creative recreations, such as Victoria Chiamaka's incorporation of the bloodied flag imagery into her outfit at the 2021 Miss Africa in Russia and Bovi Ugboma's symbolic reference to it during his 2021 Headies award ceremony performance in Nigeria (Princewill, 2021; Olabimtan, 2021a). These actions transformed the image into a global call for justice, intensified pressure on the government, and further fueled solidarity protests worldwide.

The image directly contradicts the government's narratives denying the massacre. Its bloodied flag, used in both defiance and desperation, refutes claims of "blank bullets". It

amplifies silenced voices, from livestreamed victims to the 103 individuals buried, and exposes injustices concealed by official falsification. Drawing parallels with global protest imagery, such as Hong Kong's bloodied and defaced flags during the 2019–2020 protests against mainland China, #EndSARS positions itself as a universal struggle against oppression.

The Blood-Stained Flag completely refutes government narratives that portrayed protesters as threats, instead portraying them as victims of state aggression. This embodies activism's power to reframe systemic violence. Its emotional charge, fueled by its tragic and historical significance, made it a rallying cry for justice. Its stark contrast of blood on white, reinforced by real-time evidence and subsequent revelations, indicts state brutality while honouring the sacrifices of the victims. As the image spread across social media, it bridged the local tragedy with global outrage, sustained the movement's momentum, and solidified its place as a haunting yet enduring call for reform. As a rallying cry for justice, its emotional resonance and global reach ensure its enduring legacy as a testament to the #EndSARS struggle for reform.

7. Discussion of Findings

This study analyzes three #EndSARS art forms—Debo Adebayo's satirical skit, Chigozie Obi's *Ezu River* painting, and *the Blood-Stained Flag* photograph—to reveal activism's transformative power in reframing police brutality, countering government narratives, and mobilizing collective action through digital media. By operationalizing the four framing functions, these creative works address the research questions, revealing how visual, textual, and contextual elements amplify the #EndSARS movement's impact. This discussion synthesizes the findings, situates them within global protest art scholarship, and highlights their unique contributions to Nigeria's protest legacy, drawing parallels with movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM), the Polish Women's Strike of 2020, and Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement of 2014.

7.1. Problem Identification

The three art forms collectively frame police brutality as an urgent, systemic crisis rooted in state violence, aligning with Framing Theory's problem identification function. Each piece employs distinct artistic strategies to humanize victims, expose abuses, and counter official attempts to portray protesters as mere criminals (Erunke, 2017). Adebayo's skit, for example, brings the violence of SARS into focus through the story of Richard, whose narrative mirrors countless real-life testimonies. The tagline "E Fit Be You Next" ("You might be next") universalizes the threat, reminding viewers that no one is safe from SARS' unchecked power. Obi's *Ezu River* painting confronts viewers with the 2013 Awkuzu SARS atrocities, depicting a lifeless boy floating in a blood-red river. The stark imagery unearths hidden abuses, forcing audiences to confront the scale of state violence. *The Blood-Stained Flag*, smeared with the blood of protesters killed during the Lekki Toll Gate massacre, stands as a symbol of state-sponsored brutality, transforming Nigeria's national emblem into a cry for justice.

Comparative scholarship highlights art's power to diagnose systemic injustices across global movements. Adiwu (2022) explores #EndSARS songs and artworks, like Chike's "20.10.20", which memorializes the Lekki massacre, and Laolu Senbanjo's "DEMOCRAZY", a searing critique of government corruption. These works frame SARS brutality as part of a broader web of systemic failures. Similarly, Mobaraki (2021) examines BLM's protest art, including graffiti on the Robert E. Lee statue, which visualizes systemic racism and police brutality as intertwined crises. In Poland, Kadrzycka (2022) highlights how Women's Strike posters, such as Marta Frej's image of a woman gagged by a Polish flag-coloured hand and Misior's depiction of a woman crushed by a giant foot, frame abortion restrictions as

structural violence. Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, as explored by Patsiaouras et al., used yellow umbrellas and the Lennon Wall's Post-it notes to visualize electoral restrictions as threats to democratic autonomy (Patsiaouras et al., 2018).

These global examples demonstrate how art names and visualizes systemic issues rooted in their socio-political contexts. #EndSARS art forms, like others, had deep ties to Nigeria's socio-political context, drawing on local symbols and stories such as the bloodied flag or the Ezu River. They also leveraged digital platforms like Twitter to amplify their reach. For instance, Mobaraki (2021) highlights how BLM murals, like those honoring Marcus-David Peters, who was killed by police, personalize systemic racism by centering victims' stories, similar to the *Ezu River* memorializing Chijioke Iloanya. Both movements repurpose public symbols to identify the root problem and demand accountability. #EndSARS also leans into Nigeria's oral and visual traditions, using satire and vivid imagery to make the crisis relatable to a broad audience. In Hong Kong, yellow umbrellas and Lennon Wall transformed urban spaces into platforms for dissent, visualizing resistance against China's electoral restrictions (Patsiaouras et al., 2018). Similarly, the #EndSARS movement uses art forms to transform physical and digital spaces into sites of resistance, bridging local and global audiences through Nigeria's robust digital engagement.

Across these movements, art serves as a diagnostic tool, making systemic issues like police brutality, racism, electoral oppression, and reproductive injustice visible and urgent. The #EndSARS movement, for example, used Twitter to globalize local grievances, further amplifying their impact. This positioning not only reflects Nigeria's resistance traditions but also constitutes a bold contribution to global protest art.

7.2. Causal Interpretation

Far from merely highlighting police brutality as a crisis, the three #EndSARS art forms dig deeper to expose its roots in systemic corruption and state impunity, aligning with Framing Theory's causal interpretation function. Each piece strategically attributes blame to SARS and the Nigerian government, dismantling narratives that portray SARS as an essential crime-fighting unit. By weaving together local symbols, documented evidence, and the amplifying power of digital platforms, these works redirect the focus from victims or protesters' misconduct to institutional failure, decisively challenging official denials and justifications.

Adebayo's skit masterfully critiques societal complicity alongside state failure. Through the character of Daddy, who initially defends SARS as a necessary shield against crime, the skit dismantles the flawed logic that underpins such defenses. However, when Daddy's son, Richard, falls victim to SARS' violence, the story shifts, revealing how state impunity shatters even those who buy into its rhetoric. This personal tragedy, echoing countless real-life accounts shared on Twitter during the protests, highlights the devastating reach of SARS' unchecked power. Obi's painting, *Ezu River*, depicts a blood-red river cradling a lifeless boy's body. This striking image serves as a powerful metaphor for systemic corruption. The painting connects the 2013 Awkuzu SARS atrocities committed by officers like James Nwafor to a broader pattern of institutional violence (Sahara Reporters, 2020). By transforming an individual tragedy into a damning indictment of the system, the painting effectively critiques the underlying issues. The "Blood-Stained Flag", soaked in the blood of protesters killed during the Lekki Toll Gate massacre, directly implicates the military and police. Its accusations are supported by the 2021 findings of the Lagos Judicial Panel and a 2023 leaked memo confirming mass burials (Egbejule, 2021; Channels TV, 2023). These artworks debunk government claims of "blank bullets" or "fake news", anchoring their critique in concrete, verifiable evidence.

Comparative scholarship reveals how protest art across movements attributes blame to systemic oppression, drawing parallels to the approach of #EndSARS. Adiwu (2022) notes that #EndSARS artworks connect police brutality to government corruption, similar to Obi's painting and *The Blood-Stained Flag*, which expose state complicity. Mobaraki (2021) explores how BLM's graffiti on Confederate statues and storytelling at ACLU town halls shed light on systemic racism and police impunity, rejecting state narratives that sanitize historical oppression. Kądrzycka (2022) examines Polish Women's Strike art, such as Karolina Misior's image of a woman crushed by a giant foot, which blames abortion restrictions on the authoritarian Law and Justice Party. Patsiaouras et al. (2018) analyze Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, where banners caricaturing Chinese politicians and the Lennon Wall's pro-democracy messages attribute electoral restrictions to China's authoritarian grip. These movements all employ art to redirect blame from marginalized groups to oppressive systems, but #EndSARS stands out for its precise focus on documented atrocities and its use of digital media to broadcast this blame to a global audience.

Unlike *problem identification*, which frames police brutality as an urgent crisis, *causal interpretation* emphasizes its systemic roots in corruption and impunity. This approach goes beyond naming the issue, exposing its persistence and offering a sharper critique of institutional failures. While *problem identification* draws parallels with global movements to highlight art's diagnostic role, *causal interpretation* focuses on how movements like #EndSARS use art to attribute causation. #EndSARS uniquely leverages digital platforms to globalize its message, and by grounding their accusations in specific, evidence-backed events, these art forms challenge state narratives and demand accountability on a world stage. This clarity and reach set #EndSARS apart.

7.3. Moral Evaluation

The three art forms go beyond exposing systemic corruption to ignite a deep moral outrage, aligning with Framing Theory's moral evaluation function. Through gripping narratives, evocative imagery, and the subversion of cherished symbols, these works frame SARS' violence as a profound betrayal of justice, uniting Nigerians across ethnic, generational, and class lines. By anchoring their messages in universal values like family, innocence, and national pride, they cast state violence as not merely unjust but morally reprehensible, fueling a collective demand for change.

Adebayo's skit taps into the universal bond of family to evoke deep emotional resonance. Daddy's journey, from defending SARS as a necessary force to grieving his son's death at their hands mirrors the betrayal felt by countless Nigerians. This personal tragedy, rooted in the shared value of parental love, bridges generational divides, rallying both young activists and older citizens in a unified call for justice. Obi's *Ezu River* painting captures the destruction of innocence by SARS' brutality. The "Blood-Stained Flag", soaked in the blood of protesters slain at the Lekki Toll Gate, transforms Nigeria's emblem of unity into a symbol of martyrdom. This image evokes Nigeria's shared trauma from state violence, such as the 2015 Zaria massacre, where hundreds were killed by security forces (Amnesty International, 2016). Its raw depiction of loss transcends ethnic boundaries, stirring a collective sense of moral violation. As commentator Segun Adeniyi wrote, such violence is "a stain on the conscience of any nation", framing SARS' actions as an unforgivable moral failing that demands a national reckoning (Adeniyi, 2020).

Protest art scholarship globally reveals how movements employ similar strategies to provoke moral indignation. For instance, Mobaraki (2021) explores how Black Lives Matter (BLM) murals, such as the projection of John Lewis' image onto the Robert E. Lee statue, frame systemic racism as a moral violation. Similarly, Kądrzycka (2022) highlights Polish Women's Strike art that casts abortion restrictions as assaults on human dignity, uniting

protesters from diverse backgrounds. Patsiaouras et al. (2018) analysis demonstrates how Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement art invoked democratic values to inspire collective resistance. These movements, like #EndSARS, aim to condemn systemic issues through art, exposing betrayal of public trust and transforming them into urgent ethical imperatives.

Distinct from *problem identification*, which identifies police brutality as a systemic crisis, and *causal interpretation*, which traces its causes to corruption and impunity, *moral evaluation* focuses on the moral weight of these failures. The art forms do not just diagnose or explain the problem; they judge it, framing SARS' actions as a violation of shared human values. *Moral evaluation* highlights how #EndSARS art fosters emotional unity and moral clarity. They not only condemn state violence but also galvanize a diverse populace to demand justice, making the moral case for resistance both universal and uniquely Nigerian.

7.4. Treatment Recommendation

Each piece does more than expose systemic injustices and spark moral outrage; they channel these emotions into actionable solutions, aligning with Framing Theory's treatment recommendation function. By embedding calls to action, raising funds for justice, and fostering global solidarity, these works transform collective grief and anger into concrete steps toward systemic reform. Harnessing Nigeria's dynamic digital landscape, particularly Twitter, they amplify these demands, connecting local struggles to international support and making #EndSARS a powerful example of digital-age activism.

Adebayo's skit integrates hashtags like #EndSARS and #ReformPoliceNG into its narrative, urging viewers to join protests, sign petitions, and demand transformative changes, such as the dissolution of SARS and comprehensive police reform. This direct call to action resonates with Nigeria's youth, who fueled the movement's momentum through protests and online campaigns. Obi's *Ezu River*, created during the live protest art session and auctioned to fund legal aid for arrested protesters, turns artistic expression into practical support (Sanusi, n.d.). Its creation process and purpose embody collective resistance, channeling the pain of loss into resources for justice. *The Blood-Stained Flag*, amplified by activists and re-created in solidarity across Nigeria and abroad, became a viral symbol of accountability. With over millions of Twitter engagements, it inspired solidarity protests in cities like New York, London, Toronto, and Berlin, intensifying pressure on the Nigerian government to address state violence.

Comparative scholarship highlights how protest art advocates for solutions to systemic oppression. Adiwu (2022) notes that #EndSARS songs and artworks push for SARS' abolition and accountability, echoing demands for structural change. Mobaraki (2021) describes BLM's graffiti and photography, such as murals in Richmond, Virginia, spurred calls for removing Confederate statues and establishing civilian review boards to oversee police conduct. Kądrzycka (2022) highlights Polish Women's Strike posters and songs, which advocate reproductive rights and foster solidarity among diverse groups. Patsiaouras et al. (2018) analyze Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, where study corners and Lennon Wall's pro-democracy messages promoted electoral reform and civic engagement. These art forms do not stop at diagnosis, causation, or condemnation; they propose and inspire tangible steps toward reform through *Treatment recommendations*.

8. Conclusions

Reframing Resistance: Activism and the Legacy of Sòrò-Sókè

This study critically analyzed three pivotal art forms from Nigeria's #EndSARS movement: Debo Adebayo's skit "E Fit Be You Next", Chigozie Obi's painting *Ezu River*, and the uncredited photograph of *The Blood-Stained Flag*. These art forms demonstrated how creative expressions amplified protesters' voices, countered government delegitimizing

narratives, and mobilized resistance. The Nigerian state attempted to undermine the movement by framing protesters as fraudsters, criminals, or a radical minority unreflective of the broader populace. However, these art forms delivered compelling counter-narratives rooted in justice, resistance, and collective agency. Through satire, evocative imagery, and symbolism, they redirected public discourse, affirmed the movement's legitimacy, and offered a global audience an unfiltered glimpse into the aspirations and grievances of Nigerian youth.

Central to this analysis is the paradoxical role of SARS, a government-sanctioned unit tasked with combating crime yet widely reviled for its brutality, corruption, and extrajudicial violence. This duality fueled societal ambivalence, with some viewing SARS as a "necessary evil" for security, complicating calls for its abolition. The analyzed art forms resolved this tension by reframing SARS from an ambiguous protector to a clear oppressor. Adebayo's skit shattered apathy with personal tragedy, Obi's painting memorialized victims like Chijioke Iloanya to indict state impunity, and *The Blood-Stained Flag* transformed a national symbol into a global cry against betrayal. Together, these works bridged individual experiences with collective outrage, dismantling the government's justificatory rhetoric, and exposing the human cost of systemic abuses.

The significance of this case study lies in its demonstration of digital activism's transformative power within social movements. Unlike traditional protest methods, #EndSARS leveraged Twitter's real-time engagement to globalize local grievances, a strategy that sets it apart from Nigeria's previous protests and connects it to other global movements. BLM used murals and graffiti to localize resistance in cities like Richmond, Virginia (Mobaraki, 2021); similarly, Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement relied on spatial aesthetics like the Lennon Wall to transform urban spaces (Patsiaouras et al., 2018), whereas #EndSARS fused physical symbols with digital platforms to bridge local and global audiences. The Polish Women's Strike, with its localized street protests, songs, and posters (Kądrzycka, 2022), shared similarities with #EndSARS but emphasized digital activism in a resource-constrained context. Twitter data from October 2020 revealed that the hashtag #EndSARS garnered over 28 million engagements globally, illustrating its ability to transform local grievances into a global conversation (Kazeem, 2020). These distinctions highlight #EndSARS as a uniquely digital movement, yet its shared reliance on art to diagnose issues, attribute blame, evoke outrage, and propose solutions aligns it with global protest activism.

Beyond countering narratives, these works served as both mirrors and catalysts within the Sòrò-Sókè movement. They reflected the lived experiences of police brutality while galvanizing local and global support, transforming passive outrage into sustained resistance. Their emotional resonance, amplified by digital platforms, underscored activism's ability to connect personal grief with communal resolve. Practical contributions, such as Obi's painting funding legal aid, further illustrate art's role as an active force in social change. By situating #EndSARS within Nigeria's protest legacy, from the 1929 Aba Women's Riot to 2024's #EndBadGovernance protests, this study positions it as both a continuation of historical resistance and a blueprint for leveraging creative expression against systemic oppression.

The universal lessons from this case study resonate far beyond Nigeria. By studying digital activism in movements like #EndSARS, scholars and activists gain insight into how marginalized groups articulate deep-seated grievances against political, economic, and social exclusion. The art forms analyzed here reveal the discontent of Nigerian youth, who are systematically disadvantaged yet empowered through creative resistance to demand accountability. This mirrors global struggles, such as BLM's fight against systemic racism, Poland's resistance to reproductive oppression, and Hong Kong's push for democratic autonomy. In these struggles, art becomes a voice for those excluded from elite privileges.

These studies illuminate the power of creative expression to humanize systemic injustices, foster solidarity, and preserve collective memory, offering a framework for understanding and supporting resistance worldwide. As historical artifacts, #EndSARS art forms not only preserve the movement's spirit but also inspire future struggles, proving that art, amplified by media technology, can pierce denial and apathy to forge a path toward justice.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

BLM	Black Lives Matter
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
SARS	Special Anti-Robbery Squad

Appendix A

Skit Transcript: “End SARS now! E fit be You Next” by Debo Adebayo (Mr. Macaroni)

Characters:

Mr. Macaroni: Daddy
Motunde: Mr. Macaroni's Daughter
Richard: Mr. Macaroni's Son
SARS Officer 1: Police officer
SARS Officer 2: Police officer
SARS Officer 3: Police officer

{Mr. Macaroni steps out of his home onto the street, engaged in a phone call.}

Mr. Macaroni: (Speaking on the phone) Let's go.

Motunde: (Rushing out to speak with her father) Daddy, you are the one I'm talking to.

Mr. Macaroni: You are talking to me that what?

Motunde: Daddy, I want to go and join the protest.

Mr. Macaroni: What protest are you joining?

Motunde: EndSARS now.

Mr. Macaroni: Shut up your mouth! What do you know that is the meaning of EndSARS? (Motunde displays discontent.) Okay, all these youths that are shouting EndSARS, what

job are they doing that they are driving big Benz?

Motunde: (Surprised) Ah, Daddy!

Mr. Macaroni: (Interrupting) What job are they doing? That's why I called my friends now, all the religious leaders, the pastors, the imam, all of them. They are not saying anything. I don't want to say we are jealous, but I'm concerned. During my own time, if you've not done 9–5, you cannot have money. You cannot have good money; you cannot live a good life. That's why the government is not saying anything because they know that the youths will talk a bit and get tired.

Motunde: (Expressing disagreement) It's not supposed to be like this. Daddy, we are supposed to . . .

Mr. Macaroni: (Cutting her off) Shut up your mouth! Are you suffering from SARS?

Motunde: Daddy, is it until they catch me that I'll suffer from them?

Mr. Macaroni: (Interrupting) Shut up your mouth! Don't worry. I will take you to my Ikoyi residence, the way my friends are doing. When your brother comes now, I will fly you abroad so no evil can come to you, no SARS can disturb you.

{A police truck passes by; officers hail Mr. Macaroni.}

SARS Officer 1: Ah baba!

Mr. Macaroni: How are you? (Addressing the officer) SARS, well done, well done! Scorpion, the real Scorpion.

SARS Officer 1: Na, you nah.

Mr. Macaroni: (Referring to protesters) You see all these people shouting EndSARS? They are criminally minded.

SARS Officer 1: They are criminals!

Mr. Macaroni: Yes.

SARS Officer 1: They are shouting EndSARS. In two or three days time, they'll tired. {Motunde looks dismayed.}

Mr. Macaroni: They will be tired; they will be tired, my brother.

SARS Officer 1: You know why?

Mr. Macaroni: Yes.

SARS Officer 1: Government! Did they talk?

Mr. Macaroni: Of course not.

SARS Officer 1: Powerful people like you . . .

Mr. Macaroni: That we should be talking. We are not dying anything. We don't care.

SARS Officer 1: In fact, as we are talking now, we just wasted one of them.

Motunde: (Exclaiming) Hah!

Mr. Macaroni: Okay, a criminal is there now?

SARS Officer 1: We killed the criminal.

Mr. Macaroni: Motunde, come so that you will know what this people are fighting for; they are protecting us from criminals like this.

{Officers reveal the victim in the truck, shocking Motunde and Mr. Macaroni.}

Motunde: (Exclaiming) Brother Richard! (Turning to her father, Mr. Macaroni) Daddy, see what I'm talking about. Brother Richard. Daddy, see! (Starts weeping)

{Mr. Macaroni slaps and lashes out at the officers.}

Mr. Macaroni: Who is a criminal? This is my son now. Richard, Richard! (Mr. Macaroni clinched to his son's body and was crying.)

{A flashback reveals the events leading to Richard's demise.}

Richard: (In pain) Please . . .

SARS Officer 3: Are you mad? (Harassing Richard)

SARS Officer 1: Get down! (Continues the assault) I said get down! We don't use shiny jewelries; you are using shiny jewelries.

Richard: Oh my God! What have I done? What have I done? (Desperate) Can I call my father?

SARS Officer 1: It will not be well with your father!

SARS Officer 2: (Commanding his colleagues) Waste this boy for me there now. {The officers fatally shoot Richard and carry his body.}

SARS Officer 1: Anybody that's fresh like this is a criminal.

SARS Officer 2: Waste him.

SARS Officer 3: It will not be well with you

{They place Richard's body in the truck}

{Scene fades out}

#EndSARS #EndPoliceBrutality #ReformPoliceNG

(The End)

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