

Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa



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School of Communication
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Communicare

Journal for Communication Studies in Africa

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ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa facilitates scholarly discussion on communication phenomena in Africa and how these are in conversation with other regions. *Communicare* is a non-profit, open-access journal, in existence since 1980, published biannually by the School of Communication, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. *Communicare* uses a double-blind peer review system and is accredited by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training and listed on the Directory of Open Access Journals.

Communicare aims to serve as a point of reference for continental academic debate and geo-specific theorising. It thus invites articles that complement, test, refine or counter global theoretical perspectives by amplifying and consolidating African research and scholarship. The journal publishes original theoretical-conceptual and empirical articles regardless of paradigm, perspective or context and welcomes a wide range of methodological approaches. *Communicare* publishes articles in a broad spectrum of communication sub- and related disciplines, including organisational communication, strategic communication, marketing communication, corporate communication, development communication, social change, political communication, gender communication, health communication, postcolonial studies, identity politics and politics of everyday life, celebrity studies, visual communication, internet studies, gaming, digital communication, digital media, film studies, media studies, cultural studies, popular culture, and journalism. *Communicare* also publishes generic (non-region specific) research articles on topics relevant to scholarly conversations on communication in Africa.

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More than two authors (Kujala et al., 2017:16)

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Aziz, Z.A. (2021). The influence of communication on project success: a survey of the SANRAL Gauteng e-tolling project in South Africa. *Communicare*, 40(2):101-128.

Frassinelli, P.P. (2019)a. *Borders, media crossings and the politics of translation*. London: Routledge

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Johnson, L. [n.d.]. *Will technology save the education system?* Available from: <http://www.netscape.com/users/johnl/save.html>

Kujala, J., Lehtimäki, H. & Myllykangas, P. (2017). Value co-creation in stakeholder relationships: A case study. In R. Freeman, J. Kujala & S. Sachs (eds.). *Stakeholder engagement: Clinical research cases*. Issues in Business Ethics, Book 46. Cham: Springer, 15–30.

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Ramphela, L. (2017). Three of SA's big banks accused of collusion. *Cape Talk*, 16 February. Available from <http://www.capetalk.co.za/articles/245059/three-of-sa-s-big-banks-accused-of-collusion>

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Wolf-Brenner, C. (2021). *Make us smile! AI and the violation of human intentions*. Paper presented at 34th Bled Conference, June 27 – 30 (online).

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EDITORIAL

The current issue of *Communicare* reminds us about the powerful role communication plays in addressing a wide range of societal concerns. It is a powerful catalyst for shaping opinions, coordinating actions, influencing policies and driving innovation. Effective communication helps societies adapt to new realities, respond to crises and disasters and contribute to building social institutions and strengthening organisations.

As the shadows of the COVID-19 pandemic fade away, we are reminded of the importance of media when dealing with a major crisis. **Ntem and Tyali** studied how four major Ghanaian news portals covered the COVID-19 pandemic between March 2020 and March 2021. They found that government officials, medical experts, and international media played key roles in shaping public understanding. The study also identified a five-phase media approach, with evolving frames that reflected shifts in the pandemic and contributed to meeting the audience's changing information needs.

Considering the role of communication in climate change adaptation, **Turere and Nyaga** investigated how risk communication influenced climate change adaptation during floods in Kenya's Lake Naivasha basin. Participants understood climate change but found the risk communication systems ineffective due to unclear warnings before the floods.

Kula and Blose assess how the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has responded to liberalisation and competition, focusing on programming diversity and scheduling. They challenge claims that commercialisation undermines public service broadcasting, showing that SABC maintains high local content and diverse programming. The study highlights how SABC promotes the "rainbow nation" ideal, using creative strategies and regulation to balance commercial pressures with its public service mandate.

Maziriri, Chuchu and Mapuranga studied how game-based tools facilitate the development of entrepreneurial skills among children in South Africa's Eastern Cape. Their findings indicate that gamified platforms promote competencies such as strategic risk-taking, creative problem-solving, and financial decision-making. The research underlines the potential of gamified learning to address youth unemployment and social inequality by adapting digital methodologies to local contexts.

By examining how Nigerian parents interpret Disney's portrayals of women in animated films

Ononiwu and Uzuegbunam highlight the role of media and parenting in shaping children's gender attitudes within cultural contexts. The findings indicate that parents recognised both gender stereotypes and empowering messages in Disney films and used strategies like co-viewing and open discussions to guide their children.

In their article, **Pieterse and Holtzhausen** evaluate the corporate reputation of North-West University in South Africa. Focusing on staff members as a key stakeholder group, the study uses interviews and surveys to assess their perceptions. Findings reveal that employees view the university's reputation as average, highlighting the need for improved reputation management and the development of a formal strategy to enhance it.

Anna Oksiutycz
Editor-in-Chief



Unveiling the Voices and Examining the Phases of Reportage in Online News Stories of the Coronavirus Pandemic in Ghana

Abstract

This article examines media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic in Ghana, specifically focusing on four selected Ghanaian news portals (myjoyonline.com, citinewsroom.com, peacefmonline.com and gna.org.gh) from 12 March 2020 to 24 March 2021. The study underpinning the article examined news sources, attributions and reportage phases. The study was guided by the Agenda Setting and Framing theories within a content analysis approach that sampled and analysed 208 news stories. The findings highlight the central role of various sources, including government officials and politicians, medical experts, health organisations, affected communities, corporate executives and international media in shaping the media narrative about the pandemic. These sources provided information, insights and perspectives that informed the media's reporting and helped disseminate crucial information to the public. In addition, the study underpinning the article unveiled a five-phased approach adopted by the media, from early responsiveness to resilience and recovery, each marked by different frames such as political, public health crisis, social, economic and on-the-brighter-side frames. This dynamic approach allowed the media to adapt to the evolving nature of the pandemic and cater to the diverse information needs of the audience. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of media coverage during health crises and offers valuable insights for media professionals, policymakers and the public.

Keywords

Coronavirus pandemic, media reportage, news attributions, news sources, online media

AUTHOR(S)

Martin Thompson Kwadzo Ntem

University of South Africa,
South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0961-0894>

Siyasanga M Tyali

University of South Africa,
South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5365-6896>

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INTRODUCTION

Ghana first detected the virus on 12 March 2020 and within two months the nation recorded over 7,000 cases with an estimated 34 deaths (Aduhene & Osei-Asseibey, 2020). Following the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommendations, Ghana implemented precautionary measures against the coronavirus. These included lockdowns, mandatory use of masks and health protocols. From January 2020 Ghana's borders were closed and only flights were permitted. Many media reports heralded the government for its seriousness in the fight against the virus (Long et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, the media in Ghana played a significant role in the nation's efforts to combat the pandemic and effectively recover from the damages it had caused (Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2021).

In Ghana, as in many other nations, the media played a pivotal role in shaping public understanding and perception of the pandemic. The media's portrayal of the virus influenced the national response, individual behaviours and overall public sentiment during various phases of the pandemic. Central to this influence is the concept of media framing, which refers to how news outlets select, emphasise and present specific aspects of an issue to shape public perception (Sikanku, 2013). Understanding how the

Ghanaian media framing the pandemic during its various phases is crucial to understanding the broader public response and adherence to health guidelines.

Media framing not only is about how a story is told but also involves the selection of sources that inform the narrative (Thomas et al., 2020). In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, sources such as government officials, health experts and international organisations played a significant role in shaping the media narrative. In addition, media framing and coverage of health issues are greatly influenced by the different phases the health issues often adopt (Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2021). Thus, how the media reports on issues when the health crisis emerges through to how media captures issues when the crisis heightens and eventually capsizes has a significant influence on human behaviour during a global health crisis (Hirneisen, 2020). Essentially, phased media coverage of health issues and information sources that the media pay attention to are two critical things that are of relevance to health reporting (Amara et al., 2020; Hirneisen, 2020).

The way media outlets in Ghana used these sources and how their framing evolved across the different phases of the pandemic offer valuable insight into the role of news media in health crisis communication (Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2021). The study underpinning this article sought to analyse how the Ghanaian media framed the coronavirus pandemic, focusing on the sources of news and the phases of coverage.

The relevance of the media in dealing with pandemics such as the coronavirus pandemic is evidenced in numerous studies that have researched how the media aided the effective mitigation of the pandemic globally (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Matthews et al., 2023). Thomas et al. (2020) note that the media were even more critical as the WHO was dealing with the emergence of an infodemic, which clouded the effectiveness of prevention and mitigation measures. The role of the media during the pandemic can, therefore, not be understated as they were essential in dealing with the pandemic and fighting issues of misinformation during the pandemic. Essentially, the media's educational role has been identified as one of the main enablers that aided effective prevention and mitigation strategies across the world (Hirneisen, 2020).

Studies of Ghanaian origins have contributed to understanding the pandemic and its diverse impact in many ways (Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2021; Issahaku & Abu, 2020; Karpati, 2021). Furthermore, studies on how the media covered the pandemic in Ghana have been produced to some considerable length. However, most of these studies pay little attention to critical issues such as news sources and media coverage phases, among other issues. Meanwhile, studies such as those of Leask et al. (2010), Zafri et al. (2021) and Hirneisen (2020) argue that media engage in a phase-by-phase approach to covering critical health issues. Thus, media tend to cover health issues, focusing on different events that characterise the emergence, rise and decline of health issues. Hence, media engage in a step-by-step event-based approach to covering many health issues. Aboagye (2020) argues that this approach is essential to improving public understanding of critical issues during coverage of a health problem. Nyarko (2019) also notes that a phased approach to covering some health issues sustains public interest and attention to those issues.

Furthermore, WHO (2020) notes that one core means of dealing with the pandemic effectively is by ensuring access and use of the right sources of information for media coverage. The study underpinning this article was focused on investigating the core sources of news that the Ghanaian media engaged in while reporting on the pandemic, as well as the different phases of reportage that were engaged during coverage of the pandemic in the country.

Investigating key information is relevant to ascertain which key players the media focused on and, by extension, how the media sought to frame the health issues and how they set the agenda on different issues regarding the health issue (Aboagye, 2020; Nyarko, 2019). Furthermore, investigating the phases of coverage is crucial to understanding the various contexts relevant to media coverage of the pandemic, the key events it focused on and how the media framed and highlighted key issues (Aboagye, 2020; Asante & Tenkorang, 2021).

THE GHANAIAN CONTEXT OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Since the emergence of the pandemic in 2019, the devastating effects have been experienced by many African nations. Some studies have shown that the relatively late emergence of the disease in the African region enabled African governments enough time to mitigate the pandemic on the continent as it emerged (Nyadera et al., 2021). Thus, the Ghanaian government was able to put measures in place even before the first cases of the disease were recorded in the country (Sibiri et al., 2021).

Regardless of early prevention strategies, the pandemic severely affected Ghana (Aduhene & Osei-Assibey, 2020). According to Ofori et al. (2022), over 1,300 deaths were recorded in the country by January 2022. Lockdown regulations led to the imposition of restrictions that affected socio-economic activities to varying degrees (Owusu et al., 2023). Many authors applauded the efforts of the media as well as Ghanaian efforts in dealing with the pandemic and curtailing its implications on life and socio-economic activities in Ghana (Issahaku & Abu, 2020). The Ghana Health Service (GHS) and Ministry of Health spearheaded efforts to educate the public on safety protocols, such as wearing face masks, hand washing and social distancing. The government's response included a mix of health interventions and economic support measures, such as the "Coronavirus Alleviation Programme", which provided financial aid to businesses and vulnerable groups affected by the pandemic (Long et al., 2020). This proactive approach helped limit the early spread of the virus despite challenges such as inadequate healthcare infrastructure and the need to balance public health with economic concerns (Sibiri et al., 2021).

The pandemic exposed Ghana's public health system limitations, including limited healthcare infrastructure and unequal access to resources, and highlighted socio-economic disparities. Despite these, Ghana's response was effective in public health communication (Ofori et al., 2022; Sibiri et al., 2021).

Ghana's media landscape played a crucial role in disseminating information about the virus, government measures and public health guidelines (Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2021; Ofori, 2022). Traditional media outlets, including television, radio, newspapers, digital platforms and social media, became key channels for informing the public and combating misinformation (Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2021). Media framing of the pandemic in Ghana was influenced by the sources of information that were most accessible to journalists. The framing of the pandemic evolved through different phases, from the initial outbreak and early response to vaccine distribution and efforts to return to normalcy (Ofori et al., 2022).

The testing regime was one of the most highlighted protocols in the management of the disease. From Table 2, 2,539,312 COVID-19 tests were conducted, with 171,780 positive (Ghana Health Service, 2023). There were 170,318 recoveries and 1,462 fatalities out of 171,780 samples tested (Table 1). In August 2023, the GHS reported no new cases, demonstrating the effectiveness of government response efforts. The statistics illustrate Ghana's ongoing efforts to control the COVID-19 pandemic via the 3Ts strategy and vaccination campaigns (Owusu et al., 2023). According to Owusu et al. (2023) the 3Ts strategy covers governments efforts to trace, test and treat probable infected persons. This approach proved to be helpful in dealing with spread of the virus in the country.

This article is premised on two critical objectives: First, it examines the key information sources the media in Ghana used during the coverage of the pandemic and, second, it examines the phases the media in Ghana adopted in covering the pandemic. The selected media organisations were chosen based on Alexa rankings and their general relevance in the country's media landscape. Gna.org, for instance, was selected because the website represents the online wing of the state-owned national news aggregator. The other three news platforms were selected because they comprised three of the most visited news websites in Ghana, according to Alexa rankings, making them the most popular online news platforms in Ghana.

Table 1: Confirmed cases of COVID-19 and treatment outcomes, Ghana as at 13 August 2023

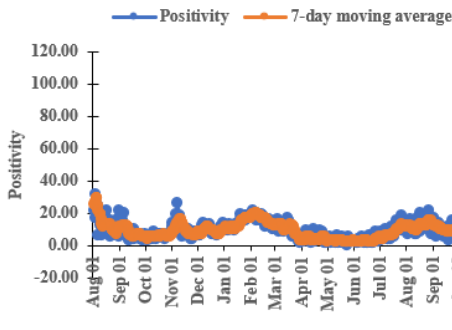
Category	Number of Cases	Recovered/ Discharged	Severe	Critical	Dead	Active
Discharged	62,650	162613	0	0	1462	0
Routine Surveillance	101,425					
Enhanced Contact Tracing	7,705	7505				
International Travelers (KIA)	171780	170318	0	0	1462	0

Source: Ghana Health Service, 2023

Table 2: Positivity rate by surveillance type for samples tested in Ghana, March 2020-August 2023

Surveillance Type	Total no. Tested	Total no. Positive	Positivity Rate
Routine Surveillance	506,649	62,650	12.4
Enhanced Contact Tracing	1,147,230	101,425	8.8
International Travelers (KIA)	885,433	7705	0.9
Total	2,539,312	171780	6.8

Source: Ghana Health Service, 2023

**Figure 1: COVID-19 positivity rate by date of report taken 01 August 2020 to 13 August 2023**

Source: Ghana Health Service, 2023

Reportage of health issues in Ghana

The focus of media coverage on pandemics is mainly directed towards subjects such as the prevalence of infections (Husemann & Fischer, 2015), strategies for prevention (Liu et al., 2020; Zafri et al., 2021) and instances of death. Media coverage of severe illnesses and epidemics such as HIV/AIDS (Halabi et al., 2013), cholera (Donkor & Namaitijiang, 2019), meningitis (Smith & Tietaah, 2017), Ebola virus disease (Seidu, 2018) and the recent COVID-19 pandemic have been the subject of numerous studies. The results of these investigations also demonstrate the use of diverse news sources and imply an apparent proactive approach in Ghanaian media coverage of global health issues. Studies such as those of Appiah et al. (2022), Asamoah et al. (2017) and Sano et al. (2016) have noted the relevance of media coverage of diverse health issues, focusing on how the media is essential to enforcing positive health behaviours among media consumers.

In Ghana, media coverage of health issues often follows patterns influenced by public health priorities, government policies and global health trends. Ankomah and Agyei (2020) note that there is significant focus on reporting on communicable diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS with an occasional emphasis on epidemics, pandemics and global health crises. Sesenu (2016) studied how the media covered and framed HIV/AIDS in Ghana. The study found that between 2000 and 2015, the media adopted a rise-peak-decline approach to express the pattern the media focused on while reporting on malaria issues in Ghana within the study period. The study found further that the media adopted an issues-based framing approach while reporting on HIV/AIDS. The study further found that the prevention frame dominated media coverage of AIDS in Ghana. However, the study also found that over time, the use of the prevention frame declined while other frames emerged, such as transmission, political, impact and funding, and became more dominant. Oppong and Adu-Gyamfi (2021) found in their study on how the media covered issues concerning malaria that the media in Ghana often focused on prevention methods while reporting on the disease. As most studies in the literature suggest, Oppong and Adu-Gyamfi also found that multiple frames are often used to cover malaria in Ghana effectively. Nyarko (2019) found, while studying a similar phenomenon, that the coverage of malaria is often event driven, with the media increasing coverage in line with infection spikes and outbreaks and focusing on other issues, such as donor support and campaigns, when infection rates are lower.

Mensah and Boateng (2022) also found that malaria, like other communicable diseases, is predominantly covered using the prevention frame to shape perceptions towards positive behaviours among media users. Hence, the literature points to issues relevant for describing media coverage of critical health problems in Ghana. First, multiple frames are adopted, with prevention frames emerging as the dominant frame. Second, the framing and coverage approaches assume an events-based approach with more focus on outbreaks and infection spike periods.

The literature highlights a significant focus on communicable health diseases, with relatively little attention given to non-communicable diseases. Oppong and Adu-Gyamfi (2021) note further that non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and cancer receive limited media attention, although these diseases are quite prevalent in Ghana.

Some studies have extended the discussions on media coverage of health issues from the framing approach to investigate the nature and focus of media coverage. Diedong (2013), for instance, studied health portrayal in Ghanaian media. They found that media have focused on political matters and that health coverage has been primarily descriptive with little interpretation. Diedong (2013) found that the news coverage of health concerns in Ghanaian newspapers mainly consisted of straight news items. A significant proportion of the stories focused on symptoms, aetiology and therapeutic interventions. Diedong (2013) also found that a significant proportion of the stories were from government officials, with smaller contributions from the media, professionals, interest groups, non-governmental organisations, people and scientific research. This suggests that media have a wide range of news sources about health problems, with varying degrees of accuracy.

Smith and Tietah (2017) found that media coverage of the Ebola virus was unimpressive. The study noted that very little attention was paid to issues concerning the pandemic. The study further found that government officials and health experts were the most accessed news sources during the coverage. Thompson and Ofori-Parku (2021) note that media are selective of their sources while also favouring some sources over others.

Amu et al. (2018) have shown that the Ghanaian media not only emphasises illness reporting but also places significance on health-related policy formation and execution. Mensah and Boateng (2022) show that media coverage of health policies is event based as the media focuses more keenly on health policies during illness outbreaks, the emergence or inception of the health policy or its failure. Oppong and Adu-Gyamfi (2021) argue that media coverage of health issues is often contextualised within the remit of economic and political frames. For instance, Nyarko (2019) found that the Free Maternal Healthcare Initiative policy was framed through political lenses with a keen focus on partisan political connotations. Ankomah and Agyei (2020) found that the National Health Insurance Scheme was also covered in line

with the policy's economic ramifications for Ghanaians.

Therefore, Ghanaian media coverage of health issues focuses on various issues connected with illness, health delivery and policy issues in Ghana. More importantly, framing of health issues often relies on the use of multiple frames with more emphasis on prevention frames.

Phases of media reportage on the coronavirus pandemic

There is limited research that addresses the topic of phased media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Zafri et al. (2021) and Hirneisen (2020) highlight the different stages of the COVID-19 epidemic and focus on media reporting during the pandemic. Zafri et al.'s (2021) study in Bangladesh identifies a four-stage methodology: readiness, response, recovery and implementation. Media coverage centres on creating awareness and disseminating potential solutions in the readiness phase. The response phase encompasses government actions, healthcare systems, testing, tracing and isolation measures. The recovery phase evaluates the efficacy of response measures, while the implementation phase emphasises drug research, immunisation, education and capacity-building efforts.

Hirneisen (2020) describes a three-stage media portrayal of health crisis circumstances. In the alarm phase, the media's primary role is to raise public awareness about the pandemic. The second phase focuses on national preparedness, security systems, assistance to heavily affected countries and the spread of the illness. Phase three highlights disease containment efforts, medical and pharmaceutical advancements, and strategies to mitigate illness transmission.

Both studies contribute to understanding how the media approached and framed the COVID-19 pandemic in different phases, emphasising the importance of disseminating accurate information, evaluating government responses and promoting containment measures. These findings reflect a broad trend in global media coverage during the pandemic.

Information sources in media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic

The sources of information that the media use while reporting on health crises and pandemics are often diverse and depend on perspectives from political, economic and scientific specialists. For instance, Holland et al. (2014) posit that the Australian media prioritised specialist news sources, making them primary actors in the coverage of pandemics that had hit the country in the past. Kato et al. (2016) observed that expert sources continued to be the primary information providers within the media at the peaks of different pandemics. Matthews et al. (2023) note that individuals engaging with media during pandemics tend to use a diverse range of platforms, including radio and television broadcasts and Internet sources. Essentially, coverage of different pandemics in the media tends to focus on more specialist news sources amid the use of other critical information sources.

Media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic is observed to have followed similar suit in some studies (Amara et al., 2022; Umeta et al., 2022). Thus, several studies provide a comprehensive overview of the various sources used by the media throughout their coverage of the pandemic. Morani et al. (2020) conducted a study using a mono-source methodology to examine media's usage and incorporation of health professionals in their reporting on the pandemic. As a result, the research showed that single news sources were media's most important news information sources. Research conducted by Apuke and Omar (2021) using a multi-source methodology revealed that media outlets used diverse sources rather than relying on a single source while reporting on the pandemic in Nigeria. The study looked at fake news and information sources during the pandemic and found that the media relied on multiple information sources. This limited the spread of fake news in the mainstream media in Nigeria. Apuke and Omar (2021) suggest that the news sources used by the media exhibit politicisation and division based on media ownership. According to them, Nigerian media relied on many key sources for information on the coronavirus pandemic, including government officials, the Centre for Disease Control, COVID-19 patients, specialist technicians, the WHO and the health agency.

Mach et al. (2021) assert that news sources accessed during the pandemic in the United States of America were either scientific knowledge based or sensational sources. The scientific news sources

included the perspectives of specialists, health professionals and affected persons. Conversely, sensational news sources were identified as being influenced by partisan politics and government agendas. Matthews et al. (2023) aver that news sources accessible in the United Kingdom during the pandemic exhibited a division between expert and political sources. The study revealed that media outlets covered more political news sources than expert news sources. Mellado et al. (2021) also emphasise coverage from political news sources in Latin America.

Dahal and Khatri (2021) investigated the key information sources Nepalese media focused on while covering the pandemic. The two newspapers examined by Dahal and Khatri (2021) (*The Kathmandu Post* and *The Rising Nepal*) focused on migrant workers, political leaders, government officials, company owners and managers, women and children, and health professionals. The existing literature suggests that media coverage of the virus covered diverse sources of news. However, the literature seems to focus more keenly on traditional and broadcast media platforms in establishing the news sources that the media focused on. There appears to be little attention to online media platforms, although these media forms were some of the most used sources of information for media users during the pandemic (Nelson & Lewis, 2022; Tkacova et al., 2023). The study underpinning this article, then, fills this gap by highlighting the dynamics regarding the news sources that online news media focused on during coverage of the coronavirus pandemic. This is essential in highlighting how online media covered the pandemic and to improve the literature in this regard.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The study underpinning this article was guided by the media framing theory. The media framing theory is one of the most widely used theories within media studies. Notably, researchers have adopted the theory to evaluate media framing of the coronavirus pandemic in different dimensions (Milutinović, 2021; Misganaw, 2020; Sikanku, 2019). The media framing theory suggests that media reports shape society's situations and events, with more profound implications on how audiences perceive the events they report on (Scheufele, 1999; Sikanku, 2013). Ervin Goffman originally developed the framing theory in his book *Frame Analysis*. However, its application to media studies has been attributed to the efforts of Robert Entman (1993) (Sikanku, 2013). Entman (1993:52) defines "framing" as selecting "some aspect of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text in a way that can promote a certain definition, interpretation, moral evaluation or treatment recommendation".

Thus, media framing theory posits that media actively select or ignore some aspects of issues and events for the event or issues to be portrayed somehow (Sikanku, 2019). Media portrayals often make certain issues or events more salient, leading audiences to pay more attention to these portrayals. Entman (2007) and Scheufele (1999) state that media engage in framing issues because it increases the likelihood that audiences digest information faster and remember it more easily (Kostopoulos, 2020). Sikanku (2019) argues that framing places news stories in some social contexts. These contextualisations make stories easier for audiences to understand and remember.

The media framing theory aids in understanding the pandemic reporting process in Ghana, enabling a phase-by-phase approach and revealing news source selection processes. The framing theory is relevant as it provides the framework for understanding how narratives in the news stories project the different phases of media coverage of the pandemic and how media consumers should perceive them. The theory is also essential to highlighting why media chose particular news sources and covered the pandemic from their perspectives.

METHOD

An interpretivist paradigm, consistent with a qualitative research approach (Landi, 2023), underpinned the data collection and analysis of the study underpinning this article. This philosophical stance informed the choice to employ qualitative content analysis as the research design to help understand how the coronavirus pandemic was covered and framed in online media.

To achieve this, the study found 3,819 news stories about the coronavirus published on four prominent websites: myjoyonline.com, citinewsroom.com, peacefonline.com and gna.org.gh. These online news portals were selected because they comprised Ghana's most visited news media platforms, according to Alexa rankings at the time data was collected for the study (Alexa Rank Checker, 2023). The study adopted a systematic sampling approach that included critical inclusion and exclusion criteria to sample news stories from this population.

The data collection period spanned 12 March 2020 to 24 March 2021. The study focused on this period mainly because 12 March 2020 marked the date of the first entry of the virus into Ghana, while 24 March 2021 marked exactly a year after the virus had entered Ghana. This period provides an adequate time frame to collect enough data in order to properly analyse how the media reported on the pandemic in the country. The study engaged an extensive data search using a dual approach. The study sourced news articles through a dual approach comprising a cursory search within the selected Ghanaian online news portals and utilisation of the Google Advanced search tool.

Furthermore, the news search systems that the selected online news organisations provided were also used to identify stories for the investigation. Keywords such as COVID-19, pandemic, coronavirus and coronavirus pandemic were used to search for and identify stories. An inclusion and exclusion criteria system was adopted to ensure rigour in the selection of the stories. First, the study sought news stories that highlighted only coverage of the pandemic. Second, only stories published between 12 March 2020 and 24 March 2021 were included.

Furthermore, only text-based news articles were selected. Stories that did not concern Ghana as a primary area of concern were excluded. This approach, which was applied through a systematic sampling process, provided 208 news stories (2,719 paragraphs) considered for analysis for this study. Essentially, only 2,719 news paragraphs were accepted for analysis. Paragraphs contain complete thoughts and represent the basic meanings of messages a writer wants to put across (Bengtsson, 2016). It was, hence, essential to focus on paragraphs to access detailed messages encoded within the sampled news stories.

The selected articles were then organised into individual Microsoft Word documents, and content analysis was adopted to analyse the news stories selected for the study (Macnamara, 2018). The stories were put into categories, each containing the article's headline, publication date and author's name, if available, which facilitated efficient identification and analysis. The individual units of analysis (paragraphs) were analysed with a codebook. This was done manually by the researcher to ensure that all codes, patterns and themes were tracked effectively. The codebook included a guide developed by the researcher to identify the dominant news source in each news story. Distinct tag names were given to the identified news sources in the stories to help identify and develop patterns and themes. For instance, the researcher included the name "nurse" or "doctor" in instances where the news story was sourced mainly from a doctor or nurse. The individual tags were then merged into themes based on their patterns and similarities. Hence, stories tagged "nurse" or "doctor" were themed "Health Expert", and tag names that carried indications of government officials were themed "Government Officials" (Klarin, 2024).

Furthermore, the themes were given numeric identifiers to aid the researcher in tracking their frequency of appearance in the news stories. The thematic approach was used to draw out patterns in the central ideas of the news stories in investigating the phases of coverage (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). Thus, the researcher looked out for news stories that focused on the emergence of the disease, its spread, vaccination events and the decline of the pandemic as core underpinnings of the news stories to draw out the phases. Unique identifiers were developed to mark out these distinct events (Leask et al., 2010). The identifiers were merged based on their similarity and patterns to form themes that are discussed as the result of the study.

The subsequent section of this article presents these themes and provides a comprehensive qualitative interpretation of the findings. The decision to use a qualitative research approach was considered the most suitable method to address the study's research question effectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings of a qualitative content analysis of news articles from Ghanaian news portals myjoyonline.com, citinewsroom.com, peacefmonline.com and gna.org.gh, from 12 March 2020 to 24 March 2021, using data reduction and thematic analysis techniques, and contextualising them within relevant theories and literature. This section commences with the presentation and discussion of results pertaining to the primary news sources used by the selected media portals in their coverage of the coronavirus pandemic.

Who are the major sources behind news stories about the coronavirus pandemic?

The media plays a crucial role in disseminating essential information during pandemics and health crises and in providing accurate and timely updates, with individuals heavily relying on media during such times (Hwang et al., 2021; Matthews et al., 2023). Government officials, health experts, communities directly affected, corporate leaders and international media are some of the primary sources that media consult when reporting on pandemics (Amara et al., 2022; Umeta et al., 2022). The study reveals that Ghana's media frequently engaged with government officials, health experts, corporate organisations and international media during the pandemic, emphasising the importance of understanding these sources in shaping media narratives.

News source one: Government officials and politicians

The study revealed that government officials and politicians were the most accessed news sources, primarily through interviews, to convey the government's efforts in combating the pandemic:

Deputy Sports Minister, Perry Okudzeto, believes that the idea of the Ghana Premier League being played behind closed doors is one that could be explored. (Owuraku Ampofo, myjoyonline.com, 24 May 2020)

The category for government officials and politicians also included prominent figures from Ghana's two major political parties, namely the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP). These political leaders, significant newsmakers in the country, were frequently consulted by myjoyonline.com, citinewsroom.com, peacefmonline.com, and gna.org.gh for information, critiques and updates on the management of the pandemic. Interestingly, the study findings align with those of Matthews et al. (2023) who observed a similar pattern in the United Kingdom, where politicians received more media attention than health experts. This resulted in the reporting of various claims and counterclaims that were attributed to politicians and politically affiliated individuals and groups during the pandemic:

HEADLINE: Gov't Responds to Minority Claims on Covid-19 Response Plan. (gna.org.gh, 8 and 13 May 2020)

News source two: Medical experts and health organisations

The study found that medical experts comprised the second most accessed news source. Journalists from the selected news platforms engaged with medical professionals to gather information for their pandemic-related reports. This pattern aligns with the findings of Kato et al. (2016) in their study of the H1N1 pandemic in Japanese media, emphasising the prominence of expert sources. Contrary to Chapman (2007), who highlights concerns about unethical media practices hindering medical professionals from sharing sensitive information, this study indicates that medical experts, health organisations such as WHO and GHS, as well as local health institutions, were essential sources for media guidance during the pandemic, a trend consistent with previous research (Niederdeppe et al., 2010):

The World Health Organization (WHO) has classified this coronavirus variant, first found in India last year, as a "variant of global concern". (Kwaku Asante, myjoyonline.com, 21 June 2020)

The viewpoints and ideas of medical experts such as doctors, epidemiologists, urologists and researchers were also sought to provide accurate information and updates about the coronavirus, its transmission and preventive measures. Below is a selected excerpt on the media's use of these sources:

As an immunologist, somebody who has studied the virus, we all understand how quickly we need to deploy because the virus is constantly changing. If we are too slow, the virus will change, and we will have to transfigure things all over again. (Miriam A. Cobblah, myjoyonline.com, 13 February 2021)

News source three: Affected communities

While a prior study by Smith and Tietaah (2017) focusing on meningitis outbreaks in Ghana revealed that media organisations primarily emphasised government officials and health experts, with limited attention to affected individuals, the news portals examined in this study took a different approach. They actively highlighted the challenges and experiences of vulnerable individuals and communities impacted by the pandemic, sourcing information from a broader spectrum of "Affected Communities", including businesses, infected persons and their relatives, thus providing them a voice in the media coverage:

HEADLINE: A physically challenged trader tells the story of how she lost her capital to the coronavirus. (Fred Quame Asare, myjoyonline.com, 22 September 2021)

News source four: Corporate executives

The media relied on corporate executives and leaders as key sources of information when communicating the efforts of corporate organisations to address the challenges posed by the pandemic to their operations and finances. In addition, the media highlighted acts of corporate social responsibility, with businesses and organisations being given a platform to explain their forms of support and motivations for assisting affected individuals and pandemic victims:

Diana Owusu-Kyereko, CEO of the company, said, "We are proud to partner with relevant authorities to help fight against COVID-19 and support our communities which continue to support us". (myjoyonline.com, 25 March 2020)

News source five: International media

International media and other sources, including social media, religious leaders and economists, collectively contributed 9% of the news attribution in the pandemic coverage. The selected Ghanaian news portals actively monitored and reported valuable information from international media outlets such as the BBC and CNN to provide their readers with a broader perspective on the pandemic, allowing for comparisons with the local situation in Ghana. In addition, they kept a close eye on social media platforms to track public discussions, emerging trends and noteworthy issues related to the pandemic:

"Data shows clearly that B.1.1.7 (first reported in the UK) is now the predominant strain driving local transmission in Ghana," the Director of the WACCBIP, Dr Gordon Awandare, said in a Facebook post. (Nii Larte Lartey, citinewsroom.com, 6 February 2021)

What were the various phases of the media's coverage of the pandemic, and what news frames characterised each phase?

Downs (2016) explains the media's "issue-attention cycle" strategy, covering social, political and economic subjects in phases. Recent journalism practices have become event based, prioritising event coverage over sustained issues reporting. In the context of the coronavirus pandemic in Ghana, this study examined various phases adopted by myjoyonline.com, citinewsroom.com, peacefmonline.com and gna.org.gh in their coverage, aligning with the concept of issue-attention cycles. The study identified five distinct stages: early responsiveness, heightened concern, critique and review, community activism, and resilience and recovery, corroborating prior literature on the phased nature of media coverage during health crises.

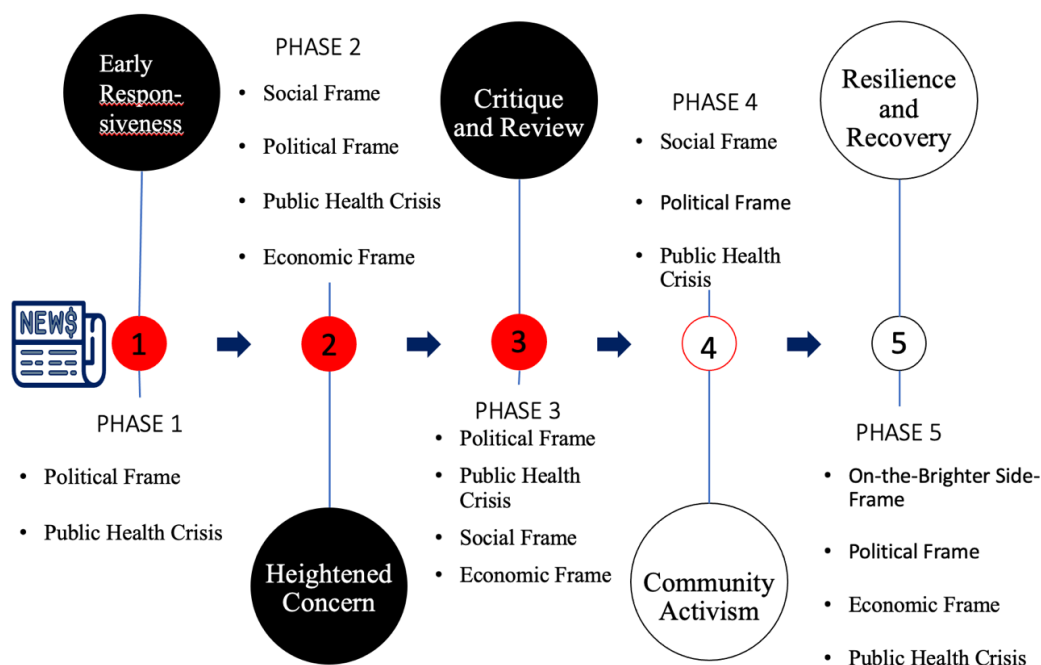


Figure 2: Phases of the coverage of the pandemic by myjoyonline.com, citinewsroom.com, peacefmonline.com and gna.org.gh, and news frames characterising each phase

Source: Field Data, 2023

Phase one: Early responsive

In adopting the Political and Public Health Crisis frames, the initial phase of the pandemic coverage by the media organisations under study was distinguished as "early responsiveness". During this phase, the media played a crucial role in creating awareness about the virus by using the public health frame and disseminating information about its symptoms, transmission and global prevalence. They also reported on the origins of the virus in China and its global spread. Concurrently, the media covered the government's initial actions to curb the spread of the virus in Ghana. This phase resembled Downs' (2016) "problem identification phase", where the media drew public attention without comprehensive information. In addition, the political frame came into play during this stage, with media stories focusing on the government's responses and interventions, particularly about stranded Ghanaians abroad, which sparked political debates regarding their evacuation:

A few weeks ago, the government was described as "bankrupt" and "expired", the repetitive call of the Minority in Parliament and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) on the

government to fly back home Ghanaians who are stranded in other countries as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Peacefmonline.com, 29 May 2020)

At this phase, there were stories about governments' efforts to prevent the virus from entering Ghana: "The coming week will be crucial in Ghana's war against coronavirus." In this story, myjoyonline.com described how the government had set up a committee whose mandate was to ensure the virus did not enter the country.

President Akufo-Addo set up the National Technical Coordinating Committee to ensure the virus was not imported into Ghana or, at best, that it was detected early and contained if it entered the country. (Fred Kuukua Smith, myjoyonline.com, 22 March 2020)

During this phase, the media covered initial government interventions in response to the pandemic. A citinewsroom.com report on 17 March 2020, highlighting government directives aimed at controlling the virus's spread and featuring the President's quotes prominently in the story, serves as an example of how the President's periodic national addresses had established themselves as a significant and trustworthy source of news and information for the media:

As of April 15, 2021, the country's active COVID-19 cases are 1,334, with 89,604 recoveries. (Kenneth Awotwe Darko, MyJoyOnline.com, 1 April 2021)

Phase two: Heightened concern

Agenda setting theory suggests that media influences public perception and priorities by consistently emphasising specific issues or stories rather than reflecting audience preferences. Editors and gatekeepers focus on these issues, which shapes what dominates the public sphere (McCombs, 2004). Through framing, the media can influence how the audience perceives the severity of the pandemic by selecting and presenting certain events (Jibrin, 2019). The media's framing is crucial in shaping the public's perception of the pandemic's severity. As the pandemic progressed, media outlets such as myjoyonline.com, citinewsroom.com, peacefmonline.com and gna.org.gh shifted their focus to highlight local impacts. This approach allowed them to report on how the virus profoundly affected the socio-economic lives of Ghanaians, as evidenced by a news story on myjoyonline.com that highlighted the pandemic's detrimental impact on the income and employment of millions of Ghanaians, based on a survey by the Ghana Statistical Service. This finding was evidenced by Hirneison (2020) and Jibrin (2019), who highlight how the media localised the implications of the pandemic to show the need for attention and concern:

The Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) has revealed that about 22 million Ghanaians out of the projected 31 million population have experienced a drop in income since March 16, when various restrictions due to coronavirus were introduced. (myjoyonline.com, 3 August 2020)

News stories at this phase also focused on congestion in the mortuaries because of the numerous deaths and how relatives of the deceased refused to bury them because of the ban on mass gatherings. In some instances, mass burials had been undertaken by the city and health authorities to decongest the mortuary and create space for more dead bodies:

The Sunyani city authorities have buried 33 unclaimed bodies to decongest the Sunyani Regional Hospital morgue, which was congested due to the government's directive on public gatherings to stem the spread of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). (Peacefmonline.com, 28 April 2020)

The media used political frames to highlight governmental interventions and health authorities' actions taken to address the pandemic, including lockdown measures, increased testing, isolation facilities, personal protective equipment (PPE) provision and incentive packages. Strict enforcement of safety protocols was also reported:

An Accra Circuit Court on Thursday sentenced 10 persons, including a journalist, to a fine of ₵12,000 each for not complying with the Covid-19 restriction orders. In default, they would each serve a four-year jail term. (Jonas Nyabor, myjoyonline.com, 5 June 2020)

Using the Public Health Crisis Frame, this phase was also characterised by disseminating information about preventive measures, new guidelines and updates on the latest scientific developments related to the pandemic, as seen in the excerpts below:

Dr Bernard Toboh, a Consulting Urologist at the Korle-Bu Teaching Hospital, says the claim that some men who recovered from Coronavirus infection are experiencing erectile dysfunction is real. (Peacefmonline.com, January 2021)

HEADLINE: Covid-19 virus does not spread fast in buses – Ghana Health Service boss

During this phase, there was a noticeable increase in news stories addressing the issue of fake news and misinformation regarding the pandemic, along with efforts to counter such false information by providing accurate and educational content to the public. This educational approach included intensifying efforts to encourage people to get tested and eventually receive vaccines, emphasising the critical role of effective communication in the fight against pandemics. This is emphasised by Siddiqua et al's (2020) argument that communication, alongside vaccines, is a crucial weapon in combating pandemics, and it is achieved through the media's framing of pandemic-related issues.

Phase three: Critique and review

This phase was characterised by critiques and reviews from the media and other bodies. The media scrutinised the government's response to the pandemic, evaluating its effectiveness, personal protective equipment and restrictions. Reports praised the government's management, while critics criticised decisions such as school re-opening and lifting restrictions despite rising cases. Furthermore, the media highlighted the pandemic's socio-economic and political impacts, highlighting weak health, economy and education systems, including congested classrooms, inadequate hospital beds and PPE shortages.

The phase provided a balanced evaluation of the government's response, highlighting its benefits and drawbacks, including the negative impact on businesses, especially tourism and hospitality, and the challenges faced by the educational sector:

Mr Quaye has revealed that due to the abrupt closure of educational institutions, the salary payments of members have not been paid. "Our main source of income is school fees and once children have gone home, parents are not working as of now so nobody will come to pay school fees," he said. (Seraphine Akua Dogbey, myjoyonline.com, 28 April 2020)

The study also found that the critique and review phase was characterised by political elements, with the media focusing on political connotations. Thus, a prominent part of the critique and review phases was engraved in media coverage of political opposition to significant decisions from the government. In the extract below, for instance, one of the key opposition political parties was captured criticising some of the government's decisions during the pandemic.

If there is nothing wrong with praise, there should be nothing wrong with criticizing... others can feel free to praise, others should also feel free to criticize. If you want to say criticizing amounts to politicking, then what would you say of praising? (Delali Adogla – Bessa, Citinewsroom.com, 9, May, 2020)

Another story titled “GH¢12m Spent on Hot Meals” and published on one of the media platforms further exacted the nature of the critique and review phase of media’s coverage of the pandemic. The story presented a critique of the government for spending a considerable amount of money on hot meals to be provided to citizens during the lockdown period in the country. The story focused on a lack of transparency by the government in their expenditures during the pandemic. Stories of such a nature speak to the finding that phase three of the media’s coverage of the pandemic was focused on critiquing and reviewing critical issues during the pandemic.

Phase four: Community activism

The media highlighted grassroots responses to the pandemic, encouraging self-defence, preventive measures and philanthropic assistance. Religious institutions and groups supported safety precautions, which highlighted effective communication and preventing COVID-19 spread:

The training was to build the capacity of participants to understand community engagement as a health promotion and disease prevention strategy and expose them to challenges in community engagement. (gna.org.gh, 7 August 2020)

In addition to education, the media highlighted efforts to provide individuals and communities with essential safety tools and equipment, such as hand sanitisers and face masks, particularly for those who could not afford them. An example cited was the Rotary Club of Accra-East’s distribution of protective items to residents of Tabora Santana, including face masks, hand sanitisers, vitamin C and educational flyers on COVID-19. This support not only enabled communities to adhere to safety protocols but also fostered a sense of collective responsibility, leading Ghanaians to become critical of individuals who intentionally violated COVID-19 rules, as seen in the case of Deputy Minister for Trade and Industry Carlos Ahenkorah, whose breach of protocols led to public outrage and calls for his resignation:

A Deputy Minister for Trade and Industry, Carlos Ahenkorah, has resigned from his position. This comes after he admitted breaching COVID-19 protocols by visiting a registration centre despite being aware that he had tested positive for the virus. (Jonas Nyabor citinewsroom.com, 3 July, 2020)

Phase five: Resilience and recovery

In the resilience and recovery phase of the media’s coverage of the pandemic in Ghana, which can be likened to Pan and Meng’s (2016) post-crisis stage, the focus shifted to how communities and individuals were coping with ongoing challenges and recovering from the pandemic’s effects. The media used the On-the-Brighter-Side Frame to highlight efforts towards recovery, including addressing the financial burden of the pandemic, returning to normalcy and initiatives aimed at building a more resilient future. Media reports also showcased innovative approaches adopted by individuals and businesses to adapt to the pandemic, such as virtual schooling and online church services. These stories emphasised the importance of resilience and adaptation in navigating the pandemic’s impact. The quote below buttresses this:

We have practically lost a semester because the academic calendar usually starts from August to the end of July, but now the school will be reopening in January. So, that requires some sort of alteration to the calendar and due to Covid-19, it might not be prudent to

have all the students on campus within that same period." (Daisy Palinwinde Jacobs, Citinewsroom.com, 2 January, 2021)

At this stage, the media also focused on the financial support offered to businesses to help them to revive their businesses and continue their contributions to the total economic revival of the country. "US\$100m Fund to Fight COVID-19 Ready, GHS1bn For SMEs—Ofori-Atta" was the title of a story published by peacefmonlie.com in which the finance minister, Ken Ofori-Atta, confirmed the receipt of a US\$100 million fund that would be disbursed to businesses to help them build back. Below is an excerpt from the story that explain the government's motive behind the support:

The President is determined to cushion the economic and social difficulties this coronavirus is visiting Ghanaian businesses and people. (peacefmonline.com, 30 March 2021)

The media reported on the potential impact of tax impositions and policies on businesses and individuals. For instance, see the extract below:

The deputy minister-designate for Finance, Abena Osei-Asare, emphasized the importance of new tax policies in generating additional revenue to compensate for pandemic-related losses.

According to a deputy minister-designate for Finance, Abena Osei-Asare, government seeks to introduce several tax policies between 2021 and 2023 aimed at raising the needed resources to offset the deficit created by the novel coronavirus. (Abednego Asante, myjoyonline.com, 2 June 2021)

This phase also saw media reporting on the government's effort to put in measures to make Ghana pandemic proof. There have been reports on suggested policies and measures to be taken by the government to revive the economy. Stories have also been published on how the two leading political parties hope to bring the country back to the path of progress after the pandemic. On 30 October 2020, the Ghana News Agency published two publications, both on how the ruling NPP and the opposition NDC planned to revive the country when voted for in the 2020 general election. Excerpts of both stories have been cited below:

The New Patriotic Party Post-Covid plan tagged: "The Ghana Covid Alleviation and Revitalization of Enterprises" (Ghana CARES) Programme is Ghana Beyond Aid in Action. The NPP in its Election 2020 Manifesto, explained that the implementation of the Ghana CARES programme would restore growth to Pre-COVID-19 levels. (gna.org.gh, 30 October 2020)

The media used the Public Health Crisis Frame to raise awareness about coronavirus vaccines, addressing concerns about efficacy, safety and accessibility, and promoting trust in vaccination. This phase is very similar to the third of four phases identified by Zafri et al. (2021), where Bangladeshi newspapers focused on mitigation strategies adopted by the government to curb the pandemic's spread.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the coverage of the coronavirus pandemic by Ghanaian media portals such as myjoyonline.com, citinewsroom.com, peacefmonline.com and gna.org.gh from 12 March 2020 to 24 March 2021. The study revealed the media's primary sources and coverage phases, noting a critical emphasis on the use of diverse news sources to cover the pandemic in the country. This essentially implies that the Ghanaian online media observed an expansive approach to covering the pandemic through the use of a

wide array of different news sources. The study findings highlight the role of government officials, medical professionals, health organisations, affected communities, corporate executives and international media in shaping the media narrative. The study found a five-phased approach, from early responsiveness to resilience and recovery, each marked by different frames. The findings have critical implications for understanding how the media engaged pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis framing approaches to cover the pandemic. This provides crucial insights into understanding that the media engaged distinct framing techniques for covering each of Ghana's different phases of the pandemic. This dynamic approach allowed the media to adapt to the pandemic's evolving nature and cater to diverse audience needs. It is recommended that online media organisations follow the use of a multi-framing approach to ensure objectivity and accuracy of reportage when reporting on health crises such as epidemics and pandemics. Furthermore, the study emphasises, as has been noted by other studies such as Pan and Meng (2016), that engaging a phases-to-phase approach to framing global health issues and crisis impacts audience comprehension and further sets the agenda for policy discussions.

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Re-Imagining Broadcasting in the Public Interest: SABC TV Broadcasting in a Commercialised Competitive Media System

Abstract

The article looks at the South African Broadcasting Corporation as a case study to examine the impact of liberalisation and competition by examining scheduling and programming to ascertain diversity. The public sphere theory was used to evaluate its performance as a public service broadcaster. The article challenges the arguments that, first, liberalisation commercialises public service broadcasting which results in the erosion of the public sphere through excessive similarity in programming, thus excluding certain perspectives, fragmenting audiences and limiting its social and integrative role. Second, commercial interests have undermined the service mandate of public service broadcasting and it has lost legitimacy and relevance. It also decries the dominance of public service broadcasting literature from the North which focuses on the public-private dichotomous approach that emphasises collective interest over personal choice, and commonality over diversity. Findings show that the South African Broadcasting Corporation programming is diverse with high local content, and that responses to competition are not deterministic, while commercialisation and convergence are inherent risks that can be mitigated by creative programming strategies and regulation. Findings further provide insight to the approach of the South African Broadcasting Corporation to scheduling and programming through broadcasting the rainbow nation, a construct that suggests ideals of nation building, unity and diversity as public interest embedded in the broadcasting legislative and organisational frameworks. The notion of the rainbow nation is rooted in diverse cultures and the different racial make-up of South Africa.

AUTHOR(S)

Momelezi Kula

Parliament of the Republic of
South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1243-3937>

Maud Blose

University of Johannesburg,
South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5732-3420>

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INTRODUCTION

This article explores the effects of liberalisation on diversity in public service broadcasting (PSB) by examining diversity of genres to ascertain variety or lack thereof, and scheduling to ascertain similarity or disparity. This is done to evaluate the theory of erosion of the public sphere. The aim is to determine whether the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) lives up to its mandate and commitment to be accessible to all by catering for diverse interests while competing with other broadcasters. Diversity is understood here as a mix of variety, balance and disparity, where variety refers to different genres/programme types, and balance refers to the amount of time devoted to every genre. Disparity is the difference between the genres (Hendrickx et al., 2019). Diversity is a stated objective for the PSB in South Africa (South African Government, 1999). The issue is whether in the case of the SABC, market forces have compromised it to the extent that the democratic character of the public sphere has been eroded. This article unpacks the SABC's response to liberalisation of television broadcasting in relation to its public service mandate, as evidenced by programmes and scheduling.

The article makes a case for the continued significance and role of PSBs in democratic engagement and their ability to transform and adapt to changes to remain relevant and valuable (Syvertsen, 2003). It challenges the argument that liberalisation commercialises PSB, leading to convergence in programming and fragmentation of audiences, which erodes the common space for public engagement and expression (Golding & Murdock, 1991; Keane, 1991; McChesney, 1999; McQuail, 1998; Murdock, 1994). Liberalisation refers to changes in regulatory approach that remove restrictions and obligations, particularly around ownership, control and content, and that is in favour of less regulation (Hitchens, 2006). PSB here refers to all forms of public broadcasters that have a combination of a level of regulatory arrangement, public service obligations or some type of programming that is regarded as valuable to society, and privileges including public funding (Syvertsen, 2003). In the case of the SABC, it is similar to other African PSBs. It is characterised by strong public intervention through legislation that determines its constitution, ownership and content (South African Government, 1999), but it has limited funding and is heavily reliant on advertising and sponsorships (76%), television licence fees (15%), government grants (3%) and other revenue sources (6%) (SABC, 2019). As Berger et al. (2009:7) put it, "the theoretical correspondence of public ownership, public financing and public service was never quite there from the start." Even as a monopoly, the SABC has always been commercialised, generating more income from advertising than license fees (Hayman & Teer-Tomaselli, 1989). However, in the democratic and liberalised dispensation, the influence of advertising revenue is tapered by content regulations. Liberalisation merely resulted in the emergence of privately owned commercial broadcasters in direct competition with the SABC.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To a large extent, the article relies on outdated sources from the North and from South Africa due to a lack of research on the topic. From the rest of Africa, literature is even more scarce. Most of the available literature on PSB is largely based in the North (Golding & Murdock, 1991; Jacka, 2003; Keane 1991; McChesney, 1999; McQuail, 1998; Mouffe, 1992; Murdock, 1994). This may be attributable to literature on policy studies which predicted the demise of PSB as an outdated model (Fourie, 2003; Lowe & Steemers, 2012; Price & Raboy, 2011; Steemers, 2003). Among the cited challenges is the proliferation of communication channels through liberalisation and digital platforms, which has led to competition for audiences and advertising revenue. This pending demise, however, has not materialised. Instead, there is a body of literature that demonstrates that PSBs are adapting to changing broadcasting environments and are providing value; (D'Arma & Labio, 2017; Esser & Jensen, 2015; Freedman, 2018; Hendrickx et al., 2019; Newton, 2016; Stollfuß, 2021; Strömbäck, 2017; Syvertsen, 2003). A substantial number of these studies show that public service media generate more political knowledge and cover news more frequently than private media (Newton, 2016; Strömbäck, 2017). Viewers of PSB tend to be more informed about politics and are likely to participate in political activities (Iyengar et al., 2010). This article adds to this body of literature, demonstrating that contrary to the anticipated demise of PSB, it continues to provide freely and equally accessible diverse programming that caters for all interests and tastes.

Unlike literature from the North, which focuses on news and current affairs, emerging literature from the South reflects a growing interest in the role of popular culture in democratic engagements (Barnett, 1999a; Evans, 2010; Fuchs, 2020; Hermes, 1998; Milton et al., 2013; Morley, 2006). It is unclear whether PSBs in the South are adapting like their counterparts in the North and, if they do, what that means for their public service remit.

While literature on the performance of PSBs in Africa is scarce, available studies express concerns about falling short on its PSB mandate and its commercialisation, political interference and bad governance (Duncan, 2015; Fourie, 2003; Hadland et al., 2008; Tleane & Duncan, 2003; Wasserman & Garman, 2012). Wasserman and Garman (2012) and Duncan (2015) lament the commercialisation of South African media for fragmenting audiences and favouring elites, curtailing their ability to serve as inclusive diverse spaces for political engagement. Meanwhile, Teer-Tomaselli (cited in Hadland et al., 2008) argues that SABC has always been commercialised without affecting programming until liberalisation, which led to an increased number of channels and broadcasting hours that resulted in more entertainment programmes and less

education, public affairs and regional affairs content (Hadland et al., 2008). Further, Ciaglia (2017) argues that the SABC is caught between the market and the state, while Fourie (2003) and Tleane and Duncan (2003) argue that the SABC is falling short of its public service mandate. Furthermore, the SABC is criticised for politicisation, political interference and bad governance (Arndt, 2018; Dannhauser, 2013; Skinner, 2011), and abandoning the working class and vulnerable groups (Hodes, 2014). Afrika (2021) claims it fails to play a role in the cultural public sphere. However, Dibetso and Smith (2012) show that SABC scheduling and programming is diverse even though news is least covered. Literature on PSBs in South Africa suggests liberalisation and commercialisation as some of its key challenges in delivering on its public service mandate. Barnett (1999b) notes that South Africa chose liberalisation over public service objectives. Similarly, Horwitz (2001) expresses concern about commercialisation at the cost of PSB. In the main, research on the SABC performance of its public service mandate reflects concerns and suggests an institution in crisis (Tager & Chasi 2013). This article examines scheduling and programming by three SABC television channels to evaluate the accuracy of these criticisms that suggest erosion of the public sphere.

Updating and calibrating the public sphere theory

The public sphere, as theorised by Habermas (1989), is more of a conceptual platform than physical space for people to assemble as a public with the purpose of engaging on state matters. His ideal type of a bourgeois public sphere is characterised as a space that lies somewhere between the market and the state, free from both (Habermas, 1989). It is dynamic and has transformed over time; it thrives in its changed form and its evolution continues in mediated communication (Boeder, 2005). Its value lies in continuing to provide a viable option for the future of PSB in its changed form of a multiplicity of public spheres unconstrained by rationality and consensus seeking, and PSB that is no longer a monopoly. From the public sphere perspective, public interest (not profits) serves as the measure of media performance (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006), especially PSB. However, Habermas (1989) argues that due to commercialisation, expansion of communication networks, growing capital requirements and large-scale publishing, opportunities for access to public communication came under great selection pressure, giving media new influence and power, eroding the common space for public engagement.

The public sphere (Habermas 1989) is a conceptual starting point for evaluating PSB and its performance in a context dominated by a neoliberal perspective that favours individual choices over collective interest. Authors Garnham (1992, 2003), Dahlgren (1995), Sparks (1995), Dahlgren and Sparks (1991) use citizenship and public interest to justify PSB. They argue that the shift from collective interest to consumer choice erodes the public sphere. Meanwhile, advocates of market competition claim communication markets ensure consumer satisfaction through freedom of choice (Fowler & Brenner, 1982; Golding & Murdock, 1989). However, PSB is complex: the dichotomous distinction between citizenship vs consumerism, collective vs individual and public vs private fails to appreciate the realities of both approaches (Dawes, 2013). Hence, neither perspective alone can provide an adequate defence of PSB and its role and value in a competitive broadcasting media system. There is a need for a nuanced approach that combines certain aspects of free market and public sphere approaches (Curran & Gurevitch, 1991; Picard & Siciliani, 2013), an approach that is sensitive to the theoretical arguments of both perspectives (Dawes, 2013) to be able to explain how public and private interests, and citizen and consumer identities, are constantly negotiated and reconfigured (Dawes, 2013).

With the seemingly contrasting approaches to democratic engagement and the public sphere within democracy-based perspectives, Karppinen et al. (2008) make a case for theoretical eclecticism. They advocate engagement with developments in political theory that bring the approaches of Mouffe and Habermas closer. Contrary to Habermas (1989), Mouffe (1992) challenges the notion of the universal public good, arguing that in a pluralised society, it is impossible to have common interests, wherein personal interests defer to public interests. As Karppinen et al. posit, the public sphere is best understood as an arena of articulating expressions of both solidarity and difference (Karppinen et al., 2008). Thus, in terms of the role of media institutions, PSB represents an institutional compromise that reflects a need

to reconcile unity and difference (Karppinen et al., 2008). Through the principle of universality (Scannell, 1989), PSB is able to provide a neutral space for rational debate on issues of common interest while at the same time, through the principles of diversity and distinctiveness (Scannell, 1989), it is able to provide content that is not only different, but oppositional, that reflects dissent and divergent views in society. Similarly, Dahlgren (2005), advocates expansive reading of the rational communication aspect of the public sphere that does not exclude aesthetic-affective modes, where reflexivity "include[s] aesthetic, intuition and imagination which draw[s] on feeling," and that "positions worth defending will usually be articulated and reasoned with a degree of passion and commitment" (Dahlgren, 2005:116–117).

Ncube and Tomaselli (2019) provide a perspective that reflects the expanded reading of the public sphere and which reconciles political and cultural/entertainment communication using *Dairo* and *Dare* concepts. These concepts are precolonial African communication systems used by Shona people in Zimbabwe. *Dairo* and *Dare* place importance on inclusivity, accommodating everyone, encouraging universal participation (Ncube and Tomaselli, 2019). As Ncube and Tomaselli (2019) demonstrate, these communication models highlight democratic aspects excluded by Habermas' public sphere, providing platforms that are available to all people to freely express themselves (culture, identity and entertainment), resolve disputes (address difference and dissent) and build unity (consensus) while encouraging diversity and difference. Democratic engagements, agency and public contestation are hallmarks of these precolonial African communication systems, which, at times, surpass democratic practices and principles espoused in Habermasian public sphere (Ncube & Tomaselli, 2019). Their use of the precolonial African communication systems illustrates similarities and differences with the Habermasian public sphere but updating and calibrating it for appropriate application in the South.

This understanding of the public sphere is embedded in the origins of the political public sphere, with its roots in the cultural public sphere, which provided the basis for its development. The *Dairo* and *Dare* concepts are indicative of such origins and provide a good framework for updating the public sphere theory. They show that the cultural and political public spheres were never separate as they always worked together. Similarly, broadcasting the rainbow nation as a conceptual framework suggests the political role of culture and the part played by broadcasting in it to facilitate the understanding and explanation of links and interactions between politics, culture and institutional arrangements. This enables the updating of the public sphere theory with local context and concepts. This conceptualisation in new democracies allows an understanding of the public interest role and function of PSB as one of the key platforms for development, nation building, national unity and development of public opinion and government accountability. In a similar way, this article uses broadcasting the rainbow nation as a conceptual framework to update and expand the reading of the public sphere.

Framework: Broadcasting the rainbow nation

The SABC's performance of its public service mandate can be understood in terms of its links to the notion of the "rainbow nation" which, Mathebe (2002) suggests, is regarded as one of the main pillars of social cohesion and nation building. This article employs broadcasting the rainbow nation as a conceptual framework to understand the linkages and how the SABC facilitates them. The concept of broadcasting the rainbow nation was first used by Barnett, who viewed television as critical in "symbolic representations of the rainbow concept of 'One Nation, Many Cultures'" (1999a:275) in reference to South Africa. It was also used by Teer-Tomaselli (2001), illustrating its workings through mythology building, everyday programming and thematic content of dramas. It was later used by Evans (2010:310), who claims that "rainbow nationalism owes much to the ways in which the mass media operates".

As a construct, broadcasting the rainbow nation suggests that broadcasting has a political and cultural role of integration of individuality and collectivism, nation building and national unity (Kula, 2024). Principally, broadcasting the rainbow nation entails the use of television broadcasting in pursuit of social, economic, political and cultural goals of nation building, social integration, unity and diversity, and economic transformation as elements of public interest. As a conceptual framework, it posits that through scheduling, programming and channel branding, SABC television facilitates, supports, perpetuates and

reinforces the notion of the rainbow nation as part of nation building and national unity objectives, by emphasising representations of unity in diversity as representing and reflecting the nation to itself. Broadcasting the rainbow nation concept regards the idea of reinforcing the rainbow nation as a public interest, hence nation building constitutes a key consideration for PSB (Teer-Tomaselli, 2001). Broadcasting the rainbow nation suggests that the ideology of the rainbow nation is embedded in broadcasting regulation, PSB mandate, SABC corporate frameworks, culture, processes and programming. It serves to influence broadcasting output in a manner that aspires and inspires unity in diversity (Kula, 2024).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: CASE STUDY USING MIXED METHODS

This research is a case study using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to leverage the strengths of both (Creswell, 2014) by using multiple sources and techniques of data collection and analysis. The study used content analysis to collect and analyse quantitative data from television schedules and utilised qualitative data from interviews to understand and contextualise data. Content analysis is widely used in diversity and programming analysis (Bishop & Hakanen, 2002; Hendrickx et al., 2019; Park, 2005). The analysis examined which genres were present and how much broadcasting time was allocated to each particular genre. The interviews sought to understand the context in which they were produced.

The research compares current performance to existing standards (public service mandate and content quota). The selection of SABC television as the subject of the study was necessitated by the SABC as the only PSB and specificity of the case (Stake, 1994). The research required in-depth understanding of the performance of the PSB mandate in a competitive media environment through a holistic examination and to understand the meaningful characteristics (Yin, 2003), that is, scheduling, programming and production context in South Africa. As suggested by Yin (2003), the use of a case study was to understand “how” and “why” SABC television as a PSB is affected by liberalisation. The single case study was sufficient – the three channels cater for different audiences and, when viewed together, they cater for all South African audiences.

Non-probabilistic, that is, purposive and random sampling were used for both content analysis and interviews. For content analysis, purposive and random sampling was used to select one full calendar month of SABC 1, SABC 2 and SABC 3 daily television schedules (24 hours), from 1 to 31 August 2020. A full calendar month was sufficient as SABC television schedules are in 24-hour and weekly blocks and are repeated over 12 months.

For the interviews of broadcasting professionals, purposive, random and convenient sampling were used to select four television broadcasting professionals who had experience as general managers, heads of channels, scheduling and programming, based on their knowledge, experience and decision-making roles in programming and scheduling, and their willingness to participate. More potential participants (16) were approached, but declined. Only four accepted. Data was collected from interviews conducted between June 2022 and August 2024 based on the availability of the participants. Two interviews were conducted face to face and two online using Microsoft Teams, with semi-structured open-ended questions. In the article, participants are identified as Interviewee 1 to 4 to protect their identities.

Quantitative data were collected by downloading television schedules from the SABC and Truter websites on a daily basis for the indicated month, following which they were saved onto an excel spreadsheet. Data were prepared and coded by grouping into 11 categories/genres (codes)¹ as units of

1 Drama – movies, drama, soap opera, thriller, horror, action, mystery, romance, sitcom, series and telenovela; 2) News and Current Affairs – news and current affairs; 3) Documentary – documentaries and investigative journalism; 4) Sport – matches, races, sports magazines, sporting events, sport/match previews/reviews, highlights and results; 5) Animation and Children – animation, cartoons, children and youth; 6) Lifestyle and Infotainment – travel, holiday, make-over, talk-shows, home, garden, cooking, motoring and magazine; 7) Reality and Variety – reality, games, stand-up comedy, music and competition; 8) Factual – education, science, nature and history; 9) Religion – faith, spirituality and tradition; 10) Local Content – all locally produced content excluding franchised, dubbed, wholly foreign subject matter/content/events; and 11) Imported/Franchised – foreign production, franchised or licenced production and dubbed.

observation. The preparation, coding and tabulation for analysis were conducted as shown in Table 1, by creating a column for the category/genre, the number of slots, the airtime in hours and the percentage for each channel. Analysis included enumeration – the establishing and mentioning of the number of categories/genres/programme types – and was subjected to rudimentary statistical (arithmetical) analysis, which included counting the types of genres and the number of their slots, and the amount of broadcast time. Analysis of qualitative data from interviews involved the interpretation of open-ended responses and the identification of explanatory or illustrative statements/phrases/examples. The techniques for analysis involved explanation building (Yin, 2003) to generate meaning, and direct interpretation (Stake, 2000) of interview responses to enable the drawing of conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

SABC TV variety and balance

The study found the three SABC television channels broadcast a variety of genres, which were distributed differently within and across the channels. For the combined channels, as illustrated in Table 1, genres had variable numbers of programmes and duration. Overall, the allocated airtime difference (comparison of duration expressed in hours and percentages) between the main genres was not huge. For instance, *Drama 553h15 (24.78%)* has a gap of 3% and 5% from its nearest genres, *Reality and Variety 492h45 (22.06%)* and *News and Current Affairs 425h30 (19.04%)* respectively. From there on, it is more than 8%. This suggests a balance between genres without domination of a particular genre, as anticipated by McChesney (1999) and McQuail (1998). This finding does not support the notion of erosion of the public sphere. To the contrary, it illustrates that SABC as a PSB, through principles of comprehensive programming and universal access, is able to guard against the erosion of the public sphere by excessive similarity that leads to exclusion of unpopular genres and minority tastes. Broadcasting professionals attribute this to the influence of regulations saying that, at the base, the core of programming and scheduling strategies is prescribed by regulation (Interviewees 1 and 4).

Table 1: All three channel genres

Combined channels genre spread (No. of slots and duration) 1–31 August 2020				
Categories / Genres	No. of Slots	Proportion	Time	Proportion
Drama	97	31.59%	553h15	24.78%
News and Current Affairs	20	6.51%	425h30	19.04%
Documentary	17	5.53%	53h00	2.37%
Sport	17	5.53%	81h30	3.64%
Animation and Children	37	12.05%	251h50	11.26%
Lifestyle and Infotainment	35	11.40%	203h06	9.09%
Reality and Variety	52	16.93%	492h45	22.06%
Factual	16	5.21%	157h10	7.03%
Religion	16	5.21%	27h54	1.23%
Local Content	187	60.91%	1763h15	79%
Imported/Franchised	120	39.09%	469h45	21%
All Categories/Genres	307	100%	2 232h00	100%

All three of the SABC channels featured 11 genres with varying numbers of programmes and amount of airtime, as shown in Table 2. The top three genres by airtime per channel were *Reality and Variety* (225h00) followed by *Drama* (172h00) and then *Animation and Children* (91h50) on SABC 1; *News and Current Affairs* (270h30) followed by *Drama* (214h15) and then *Animation and Children* (120h30) on SABC 2; *Reality and Variety* (226h00) followed by *Drama* (167h00) and then *News and Current Affairs* (118h30) on SABC 3. *Drama* does not appear at the top on all three SABC channels, while *News and Current Affairs* dominated SABC 2 and *Reality and Variety* dominated SABC 1 and SABC 3. This suggests a variety and balance between news and entertainment or cultural programming, contradicting the predicted increase and domination of entertainment programming (see; Keane, 1991; McChesney, 1999; McQuail, 1998; Murdock, 1994). In the South African context, broadcasting the rainbow nation emphasises balanced scheduling and programming of political and cultural content that facilitates equal access, unity, diversity and difference, and accommodation of all tastes (SABC, 2020, 2022).

Table 2: Individual channels' number of programmes and airtime share

Genres spread per channel (No. of slots and duration) 1-31 August 2020									
Categories/Genres	NO.	SABC 1	%	NO.	SABC 2	%	NO.	SABC 3	%
Drama	23	172h00	23.1	35	214h15	28.9	39	167h00	22.5
News and Current Affairs	3	36h30	4.9	12	270h30	36.3	5	118h30	15.9
Documentary	8	25h30	3.4	5	12h00	1.6	4	15h30	2.1
Sport	7	55h00	7.4	4	13h00	1.7	6	13h30	1.8
Animation and Children	12	91h50	12.3	18	120h30	16.2	7	39h30	5.3
Lifestyle and Infotainment	13	69h06	9.3	15	34h00	4.6	7	87h00	11.7
Reality and Variety	25	225h00	30.3	13	41h45	5.6	14	226h00	30.4
Factual	3	63h10	8.5	6	27h00	3.6	7	67h00	9
Religion	7	5h54	0.8	7	12h00	1.6	2	10h00	1.3
Total	101	744	100	115	744	100	91	744	100
LOCAL VS FOREIGN/FRANCHISED CONTENT									
Local productions	78	693h30	93.2	77	564h45	75.8	32	505h00	67.9
Imported/Franchised	23	50h30	6.8	37	180h15	24.2	59	239h00	32.1

The domination of entertainment information, which market critics argue is a consequence of commercialisation (see Keane, 1991; McChesney, 1999; McQuail, 1998; Murdock, 1994), does not appear to be supported by evidence on the three SABC channels (see Table 2). The significance of this finding is that it points to the effectiveness of the role of PSB in ensuring an inclusive mixed programming output (see Scannell et al, 1992; Walker, 2000). At the SABC, this balance in programming and diversity of content occurs through a deliberative effort to ensure that scheduling and programming guarantee free and equal access, diversity of content and cater for everyone (Interviewee 3). This is achieved through broadcasting the rainbow nation, a commitment to represent and reflect society united in diversity, by utilising the three channels to target different audiences. This was confirmed by the television professionals who said they were required to provide scheduling and programming that was universally accessible technically, and through languages and representations, to accommodate all South Africans (Interviewee 3).

The diversity is attributable to nuances in scheduling strategies and the complexities of programming strategies in a regulated mixed (public and commercial) broadcasting market. For instance, programming of slots avoided direct (like-for-like genre) slot competition between the three SABC channels. Personnel from the three channels sit together at the beginning of each year and co-strategise to ensure that their schedules do not clash (Interviewees 1 and 2). This illustrates the role of scheduling and programming strategies and how they can be effectively employed to counter competition and commercial pressures, and achieve PSB mandates.

Findings show that cross channel programme rebroadcasts amount to 3% of programmes on the

three SABC channels, with airtime duration share of 3.76% of the total broadcasting hours of all three channels, as shown in Table 3. These comprise mainly prime-time dramas, educational programmes and news and current affairs programmes.

Table 3: Shared programmes

Shared/Repeat Programmes (1–31 August 2020)						
NO.	SABC 1	Time	SABC 2	Time	SABC 3	Time
1	OJ Guilty in Vegas	1h00			OJ Guilty in Vegas	4h00
2	Koze Kuse	17h30			Koze Kuse	17h30
3	DBE	21h00	DBE	0h30	DBE	20h00
4	Generations	33h30	Generations	10h30	Generations	10h30
5	Uzalo	33h30	Uzalo	10h30		
6	Skeem Sam	33h30	Skeem Sam	10h30		
7	Muvhango	10h30	Muvhango	33h30		
8			7 d Laan	33h30	7 de Laan	10h30
9			Stay	1h30	Stay	2h00
10			Unfiltered	10h00	Unfiltered	7h30
11			The Globe	62h00	The Globe	1h00
Total		150h30		172h30		73h00

The small percentage of broadcast airtime duration of these multichannel rebroadcasts during daytime and midnight to early morning, as unprogrammed hour fillers, does not have major implications on diversity, as anticipated (see Keane, 1991; McChesney, 1999; McQuail, 1998; Murdock, 1994). They cater to certain categories of viewers who are unable to watch them in the original channel or flighting slot. Their rebroadcast is not a simple financial decision, it is also a strategic (space filler) and public interest decision (Interviewee 2). Also, content quota requirements discourage uncontrolled repeats (Interviewee 1). Again, this finding suggests effectiveness of regulation in countering commercial pressures.

SABC TV distinctiveness

The findings show that SABC scheduling and programming is distinctive. The distinctiveness is based on its channel programming of all 11 genres, use of the 11 official languages, meeting all content quotas and exceeding many of them. Data show that SABC television channels not only comply but far exceed the content requirements. Tables 4–6 illustrate the breakdown of *Local vs imported/Franchised* content in terms of genre airtime share and programme slot share per channel. The content quotas that were exceeded were due to the popularity and alignment with broadcasting the rainbow nation. The concept of broadcasting the rainbow nation appears in sync with what the audiences want. This was confirmed by one of the television broadcasting professionals who said that South Africans in their diversity want to see themselves, their culture and hear their languages in television programmes (Interviewee 4).

Table 4: SABC 1 genres – local vs imported / franchised content share

SABC 1 Local vs foreign content (1–31 August 2020)									
Genre	Programmes	Local Content	%	Time	%	Import/ Franchised	%	Time	%
Drama	23	8	34.8	131h30	76.5	15	65.2	40h30	23.5
News & Current Affairs	3	3	100	36h30	100	0	0	0	0
Documentary	8	8	100	25h30	100	0	0	0	0
Sport	7	7	100	55h00	100	0	0	0	0
Animation & Children	12	10	83.3	84h50	92.3	2	16.7	7h00	7.7
Lifestyle & Infotainment	13	13	100	69h00	100	0	0	0	0
Reality & Variety	25	19	76	212h00	94.2	6	24	13h00	5.8
Factual	3	3	100	63h10	100	0	0	0	0
Religion	7	7	100	5h54	100	0	0	0	0
All Genre Local vs Imported/ Franchised	101	78	77.2	683h30	91.9	23	22.8	60h30	8.1

Table 5: SABC 2 genres – local vs imported / franchised content share

SABC 2 Local vs foreign content (1–31 August 2020)									
Genre	Programmes	Local Content	%	Time	%	Import/ Franchised	%	Time	%
Drama	35	12	34.3	119h30	55.8	23	65.7	94h45	44.2
News & Current Affairs	12	12	100	270h30	100	0	0	0	0
Documentary	5	5	100	12h00	100	0	0	0	0
Sport	4	4	100	13h00	100	0	0	0	0
Animation & Children	18	9	50	53h30	44.3	9	50	67h00	55.7
Lifestyle & Infotainment	15	15	100	34h00	100	0	0	0	0
Reality & Variety	13	9	69.2	25h45	61.4	4	30.8	16h00	38.6
Factual	6	5	83.3	25h00	92.6	1	16.7	2h00	7.4
Religion	7	6	85.7	11h30	95.9	1	14.3	0h30	4.1
All Genre Local vs Imported/ Franchised	115	77	67	564h45	75.8	38	33	180h45	24.2

Table 6: SABC 3 genres – local vs imported / franchised content share

SABC 3 Local vs foreign content (1-31 August 2020)									
Genre	Programmes	Local Content	%	Time	%	Import/ Franchised	%	Time	%
Drama	39	3	7.7	22h00	13.2	36	92.3	145h00	86.8
News & Current Affairs	5	5	100	118h30	100	0	0	0	0
Documentary	4	2	50	9h30	60.8	2	50	6h00	39.2
Sport	6	1	16.7	5h30	39.9	5	83.3	8h00	60.1
Animation & Children	7	6	85.7	35h00	89	1	14.8	4h30	10.1
Lifestyle & Infotainment	7	7	100	87h30	100	0	0	0	0
Reality & Variety	14	4	28.6	164h30	72.7	10	71.4	61h30	27.3
Factual	7	2	28.6	62h00	92.5	5	71.4	5h00	7.5
Religion	2	2	100	10h00	100	0	0	0	0
All Genre Local vs Imported/ Franchised	91	32	35.2	514h30	69.1	59	64.8	230	30.9

Tables 7–9 illustrate the individual channels' performance against local content regulations, reflecting both the required percentages of airtime allocation and the actual time and number of programmes flighted. SABC 1 exceeded local content targets by achieving 100% for three, which exceeded others by more than 25%. SABC 2 achieved 100% on two, but fell short by 10.7% on Children (44.3%). SABC 3 achieved 100% on one, exceeded others and fell short by 6.7% on the Drama target. This suggests that it was not just a matter of compliance, but a result of broadcasting the rainbow nation commitment.

Table 7: Individual channel local content regulations vs aired local content

SABC 1 Local content quota vs aired local content (1-31 August 2020)					
Category	Required %	Genre %	Aired Time	Programmes %	Aired Genres (Slots)
All Genres/ Content	65	91.9	683h30	77.2	78
Drama	35	76.5	131h30	34.8	8
Current Affairs	80	100	36h30	100	3
Documentary	50	100	25h30	100	8
Children	55	92.3	84h50	83.3	10
Educational/ Knowledge Building	60	100	63h10	100	3

Table 8: Individual channel local content regulations vs aired local content

SABC 2 Local content quota vs aired local content (1–31 August 2020)					
Category	Required %	Genre %	Aired Time	Programmes %	Aired Genres (Slots)
All Genres/ Content	65	75.8	564h45	67	77
Drama	35	55.8	119h30	34.3	12
Current Affairs	80	100	270h30	100	12
Documentary	50	100	12h00	100	5
Children	55	44.3	53h30	50	9
Educational/ Knowledge Building	60	92.6	25h00	83.3	5

Table 9: Individual channel local content regulations vs aired local content

SABC 3 Local content quota vs aired local content (1–31 August 2020)					
Category	Required %	Genre %	Aired Time	Programmes %	Aired Genres (Slots)
All Genres/ Content	45	69.1	514h30	35.2	32
Drama	20	13.2	22h00	7.7	3
Current Affairs	50	100	118h30	100	5
Documentary	30	60.8	9h30	50	2
Children	25	89	35h00	85.7	6
Educational/ Knowledge Building	30	92.5	62h00	28.6	2

The distinctiveness of the SABC is in line with the principles of PSB (Scannell et al, 1992; Walker, 2000). It reflects mixed programming output which provides a wide range of genres and use of 11 official languages to ensure free, universal and equal access. Intensive, demanding and expensive shows that require research and significant funding to commission are programmed, such as the *Factual* genre which includes education, science, history and nature programmes that are high quality, niche and expensive to produce. Therefore, the assumption of erosion of the distinction between high culture and low culture (Keane, 1991) appears to be contradicted. The finding supports literature on the contribution of PSB in a single or mixed media system and to democratic politics (Strömbäck, 2017). The distinctiveness continues to provide legitimization of PSB, especially in competitive markets where it has to justify its value by setting itself apart from commercial broadcasters.

SABC TV production context

The study found that the broadcaster's financial position impacted on programming. Responses from interviewees show that when a broadcaster is financially constrained, it does not have sufficient funds to commission content, and train and keep talent. Its decision making becomes too commercialised, resorting to cheap content and prioritisation of profitable programmes (Interviewee 3). The SABC Board chairperson, Bongumusa Makhathini, also alluded to the inability to "honour payments to service providers, adhere to its committed contracts, and commission local content productions" (SABC, 2019:13). This finding supports the literature that expresses fears of the impact of commercialisation of PSB (see Keane, 1991; McChesney, 1999; McQuail, 1998; Murdock, 1994). In the case of the SABC, this was mitigated by content quotas and innovative strategies (Interviewees 1 to 4). While in theory the public sphere can potentially be eroded by commercial pressures, this depends on the context, and political and legislative arrangements. As shown in the South African case, regulation and production context (editorial policies, core values, codes and scheduling, and programming protocols) serve to limit the risk of public sphere erosion.

The study also found that broadcasting competition influences the development and utilisation of scheduling and programming strategies aimed at maximising or retaining audiences, getting a competitive edge, complying with regulations and ensuring commercial viability (Interviewee 3). SABC looks for alternative competitive scheduling and programmes; they use different editorial approaches to both the format and content of programmes (Interviewee 2), thus employing distinctiveness and quality programming as a competitive edge.

Overall, the findings appear to contradict Barnett (1999b) who argues that SABC chose liberalisation over public service objectives. Further, the findings do not confirm Horwitz's (2001) concern of commercialisation at the cost of PSB. While they confirm Fourie's (2003) claim that competition pressured SABC to adopt commercial strategies, and Duncan and Glenn (2010), who argue that South African media is dominated by commercialism, the findings do not support their feared compromise of public interest programming. Scheduling and programming strategies of the SABC do not fit into the convergence scenario in that, while the channels follow the theoretical responses to competition (see Keane, 1991; McChesney, 1999; McQuail, 1998; Murdock, 1994), broadcasting rainbow nation influences the ultimate schedules and programmes that are broadcast, making them diverse.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to examine and explain scheduling and programming at the SABC to understand the impact of liberalisation and competition, and to evaluate its performance of the public service mandate. Using the case of the SABC, it emphasises the importance of regulation and organisational context in shaping PSB output. The SABC employs broadcasting the rainbow nation as a conceptual framework to explain how the SABC as a PSB performs its public service mandate in a competitive and commercialised environment.

Broadcasting the rainbow nation is a broadcasting approach that facilitates free equal access universally, appreciation of unity, diversity and different expression of identities, experiences, perspectives, interests, tastes and voices. As a construct, it encompasses the use of television broadcasting in pursuit of social, economic, political and cultural goals of nation building, social integration, unity despite diversity and economic transformation as elements of public interest. This article proffers that, through corporate strategies and editorial frameworks that facilitate scheduling, programming and channel branding, SABC television supports, perpetuates and reinforces the notion of the rainbow nation as part of nation building and national unity by emphasising reflection and representations of unity and diversity. Its significance as a conceptual framework lies in its ability to explain the links and interactions between politics, culture and institutional arrangements, such as PSB, regulation, mandates and strategies, and editorial frameworks, among others, and the outcome of such links, thus broadcasting output that serves public interest.

At the general level, broadcasting competition influences the development and utilisation of scheduling and programming strategies aimed at maximising audiences, gaining a competitive edge and ensuring

commercially viability. As demonstrated by the findings, despite being commercialised, the SABC still performs its public service mandate through its commitment to broadcasting the rainbow nation, which enables it to deploy editorial frameworks, strategies, processes and protocols that direct scheduling and programming towards public interest. The conclusion is that liberalisation and the resultant competition do not by themselves predetermine responses and behaviour of broadcasters, which are not uniform across all societies and systems. They are influenced by historical, political, cultural and organisational circumstances. While liberalisation and resultant competition commercialise SABC as a PSB, this has not resulted in the decline of the public sphere (erosion). Therefore, accuracy of such decline in the South African context is not confirmed.

To the public sphere theory, this study adds to the small but growing number of studies that challenge the narrow reading of the public sphere theory that tends to emphasise the public-private dichotomy, which ignores the role of alternative democratic strategies employed by PSBs to enhance the public sphere. The application of the concept of broadcasting the rainbow nation provides a conceptual framework that transcends the dichotomy of public vs private by acknowledging representation and reflection of unity and diversity pursued as public interest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that parliament and government reconsider the funding model of the public service broadcaster, and ensure that it is sufficiently funded, especially public interest programming. Such a model could review the television licence regime or approach.

While this study answers the question about what competition does to the SABC, questions remain about the impact on PSB in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) as a region. More research is needed to understand what competition does to PSB in the SADC region, to ascertain whether or not this is an exclusively South African phenomenon.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The data used in the study are available from the corresponding author on request.



Managing Corporate Reputation in Higher Education: The Case of the North-West University

Abstract

The objective of this article is to evaluate the corporate reputation of the North-West University during a period characterised by significant challenges, such as transformation within the higher education sector and the impact of global trends such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the emergence of new stakeholder groups. These challenges possess the potential to affect North-West University's corporate reputation. The article explores North-West University's corporate reputation with an emphasis on the importance of staff members as a key stakeholder group of which to take note. The article assesses this stakeholder group's perceptions through semi-structured interviews and an online survey characterised by RepTrak™.

The findings of the article suggest that there is room for North-West University to improve its corporate reputation among staff members, as these stakeholders perceive the university's corporate reputation as average. The findings also suggest a need to improve corporate reputation management and the need for development of a formal strategy to achieve this at North-West University. The article furthermore proposes reasons staff members at North-West University perceive the university's corporate reputation as average and provides recommendations for improving it.

Keywords

Corporate reputation management and measurement, higher education, North-West University (NWU), RepTrak™, semi-structured interviews

AUTHOR(S)

Ashleigh Gail Pieterse

North-West University, South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3109-8499>

Lida Holtzhausen

North-West University, South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1275-6684>

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the corporate environment has evolved with a shift from profit maximisation to customer satisfaction (Panwar et al., 2016:154). Corporate communication activities, particularly corporate reputation, play a crucial role in enhancing competitive advantage and public perception (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012:1059; Cornelissen, 2020:2).

South Africa's higher education sector (HES) faces challenges like the corporate sector but differs in objectives, funding, stakeholders and structure. The HES aims to create inclusive environments for diverse stakeholders and contribute to the economy through competent graduates and innovative research. Funding sources include tuition fees, government funding and third-stream income. The HES's diverse stakeholder landscape and multifaceted pressures make it unique when compared to the corporate sector.

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2020) aims to transform South Africa's HES into a high-quality, demographically representative and opportunity-rich sector. Traditional and comprehensive universities dominate, while smaller institutions contribute to competitiveness. Higher enrolment rates boost interest in corporate reputation scoring (Degenaar, 2018:71).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) must ensure effective communication activities to produce a satisfactory bottom line and successful tangible and intangible outputs (Ansoglenang et al., 2018:2; O'Loughlin et al., 2015:406). Traditional approaches focused on finance have proven unsatisfactory, leading to the need to define corporate reputation practices for the HES (Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014:144). The sector includes six categories: universities of technology, traditional universities, comprehensive universities, private universities and colleges, TVET (technical and vocational education and training) colleges and SETAs (sector education and training authority)(DHET, 2020). SETAs and other bodies play significant roles in managing and supporting these institutions. HEIs must compete with other post-school institutions and must adhere to sector guidelines (Degenaar, 2018:2; DHET, 2020).

South Africa's HES has been influenced by various trends, including the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), Covid-19, racial and cultural hostilities, political campaigns, student protests and financial factors. North-West University (NWU) has also been affected by additional changes of its own volition. Pressure from the Council of Higher Education (CHE) and the DHET to transform the sector probed NWU into restructuring itself (NWU, 2016:2). NWU, previously a mother-brand with three separate campuses, underwent restructuring in 2017 to create a holistic institutional identity (Kgwadi, 2016:2). The new strategy and structure, which included a unitary model, restructuring and alignment processes, impacted the university's corporate reputation (Pretorius, 2017:130). Challenges such as new reporting structures, increased travel for staff and the Covid-19 pandemic further impacted the university's workplace, causing overwork and dissatisfaction among staff.

The new unitary model of NWU, a three-campus institution, fails to recognise the importance of corporate reputation management (CRM) in managing challenges and crises. This article suggests that NWU should focus on its CRM and measure its effectiveness. It investigates the theoretical points of departure, approach and staff perceptions of the university's current CRM using the RepTrak™ measurement instrument.

This article reviews CRM and measurement, discusses methodology, presents findings and offers recommendations to enhance NWU's reputation among staff members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The sections of the literature review aim to answer the first research question posed by the study. The research question was as follows:

RQ1: What are the theoretical points of departure regarding corporate reputation management?

Corporate communication

Corporate communication can be regarded as an organisational asset focused on all relevant internal and external stakeholders of an organisation. It typically comprises activities aimed at positively influencing the relationship between an organisation and its stakeholders, positioning the organisation favourably in the market and improving its reputation (Cornelissen, 2020:2; Van der Vyver, 2020:91). Scholars such as Troise and Camilleri (2021:165) differentiate between three types of corporate communication, namely management communication, marketing communication and organisational communication. Management communication occurs between management and employees at all levels of an organisation, influencing internal stakeholders and their relationship with management (Troise & Camilleri, 2021:165; Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007:15;). Marketing communication focuses on external stakeholders, specifically customers, and supports product and brand sales through advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, public relations and direct marketing (Todorova, 2015:369; Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007:17). Organisational communication is strategic and targets a range of stakeholders, both internal and external, including shareholders, investors and regulatory bodies (Harris & Nelson, 2018:12; Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007:20).

Corporate communication is also comprised of various activities. The proceeding section identifies corporate reputation as one such activity.

Corporate reputation

Corporate reputation can be regarded as a measurable asset within an organisation, offering both tangible and intangible benefits (Gangi et al., 2020:1975; Pool et al., 2016:1425). Corporate reputation embodies the collective perception, whether positive or negative, held by stakeholder groups of an organisation (Aula & Mantere, 2008:15; Fombrun et al., 2015:5). These perceptions evolve over time and are based on past experiences as well as future interactions with the organisation (Cornelissen, 2020:63; Doorley & Garcia, 2017:3). When effectively managed, a strong corporate reputation cultivates uniqueness, confers a strong competitive advantage and contributes to the long-term success of an organisation (Ansoglenang et al., 2018:2; Van der Walldt, 2015:106).

Corporate reputation must regularly be measured, monitored and managed to ensure that the organisation is able to take advantage of opportunities, compare well to competitors and reduce risk and crises (Doorley & Garcia, 2017:5; Pollák et al., 2021:93). Stakeholders are defined as any individual or group who can affect, or are affected by, the actions of an organisation. Therefore, they have the power to affect the organisation's corporate reputation (O'Loughlin et al., 2015:406; Pérez-Cornejo et al., 2021:2). Corporate reputation thus depends on stakeholder relations; effective stakeholder management can aid effective CRM (Aula, 2011:30; Van der Walldt, 2015:110).

4IR has significantly impacted stakeholder management, rendering traditional approaches insufficient as the business environment is now increasingly influenced by new technology-driven trends (Van der Walldt, 2015:111). Virtual stakeholders, which are challenging to manage, have emerged from such trends. These stakeholders have the potential to have an immediate global impact on organisations' corporate reputation through the Internet (Ghadge et al., 2020:670). It is evident that corporate reputation is strongly influenced through stakeholder relations and perspectives, and it is important that these relations and perspectives be effectively monitored and managed. Monitoring and managing corporate reputation can assist in monitoring and managing stakeholder relations and perspectives, and vice versa.

Corporate reputation and stakeholder relations

Stakeholders, defined as any person or group affecting or affected by an organisation's actions, significantly impact corporate reputation (Matuleviciene & Stravinskiene, 2015:78; Reddiar et al., 2012:32). This interdependence necessitates that organisations proactively manage stakeholder relations from the outset of their CRM strategies (Aula, 2011:30; Aula & Mantere, 2008:30). Stakeholders can be categorised into various groups, such as internal/external, primary/secondary, normative/functional and regulatory/shadow groups, each with a unique importance to the organisation (Brandão et al., 2017:162; Matuleviciene & Stravinskiene, 2015:78–80). Employees and customers are often considered the most critical stakeholders. Effective management of customer relations ensures that customers feel valued and receive high-quality service, which fosters trust and loyalty and enhances corporate reputation (Schrock & Lefevre, 2020:6). Similarly, employees contribute to positive financial outcomes, competitive advantage and customer perceptions, making them vital to the organisation's success and reputation (Brandão et al., 2017:162; Cravens & Oliver, 2006:294). However, some literature suggests that the importance of stakeholder groups varies by organisation, and each should identify its key stakeholders based on its unique context (Matuleviciene & Stravinskiene, 2015:80). In the 4IR era, traditional approaches to stakeholder management are insufficient. The rise of virtual stakeholders, enabled by the Internet and social media, presents new challenges and opportunities for CRM (Ghadge et al., 2020:670; Van der Walldt, 2015:111). Effective online communication strategies are crucial as they influence stakeholders' perceptions globally and immediately (Aula, 2011:30). Therefore, organisations must closely monitor and manage both stakeholder relations and corporate reputation as they are interconnected.

Employer branding and corporate reputation

In the evolving landscape of the HES, characterised by rapid technological advancements and innovative educational strategies, institutions face the need to attract and retain high-quality support and academic staff (Silva & Dias, 2023:2). This necessity stresses the importance of creating a strong employer brand.

Employer branding refers to the strategic development and implementation of corporate communication strategies that are aimed at attracting and retaining high-quality employees that have strong and proven track records within their fields, thereby fostering an environment where these employees can feel valued, secure and equipped to excel within their domain (Pandita, 2022:557; Silva & Dias, 2023:2). Such an environment not only enhances employee satisfaction but also contributes to competitive advantage within the sector, which increases the institution's corporate reputation, making it more attractive to prospective employees (Santos et al., 2023:224).

New trends surrounding corporate reputation

Both corporate reputation and the corporate environment are dynamic and susceptible to change (Van der Waltdt, 2015:117). Together, this contributes to the establishment of new trends that affect organisations and their corporate reputation (Panwar et al., 2016:154; Vitale, 2020).

Adding to Van der Waltdt (2015:117-121) and Pollák and Markovic (2022:18), the study identifies seven trends that influence CRM, namely the impact of Covid-19, 4IR, virtual organisations, digital information, social technologies, social media parody accounts and online reputation management. Given these influences, it is imperative for NWU to remain aware of and adapt to the emerging trends that may affect its corporate reputation and the management thereof.

Corporate reputation elements

Corporate reputation comprises five elements, namely corporate identity, corporate image, corporate brand, corporate personality and corporate behaviour, ethics and culture (Drugă, 2021:104; Van der Waltdt, 2015:106). How organisations define, manage and measure each of these elements contributes to the overall success of the organisation's corporate reputation.

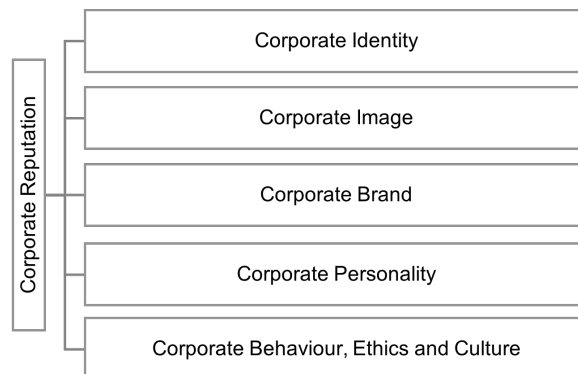


Figure 1: The elements of corporate reputation

Source: Author's own interpretation from Van der Waltdt (2015:106)

Corporate reputation management

Corporate reputation is an essential corporate asset that is crucial to the success of an organisation. It should therefore be effectively managed.

While literature documents CRM extensively, a framework for this is still lacking (Pérez-Corenjo et al., 2021:4; Reputation Institute, 2018:1). However, through considering the principles and guidelines of corporate reputation, CRM is manageable to an extent (Doorley & Garcia, 2017:3).

CRM involves a proactive approach by an organisation's top management and specialist communication staff (Henisz, 2017:120; Van der Waltdt, 2015:110). CRM should encompass all dimensions of the organisation and should be integrated into strategic stakeholder relations (Doorley & Garcia, 2017:40; Reddiar et al., 2012:31).

Communication practitioners play a vital role in CRM through ensuring that the organisation can

communicate with its stakeholders, possessing expertise in risk management and crisis communication, maintaining transparency and credibility, managing stakeholder relations and overseeing corporate reputation elements (Aula, 2011:30; Doorley & Garcia, 2017:28–32, 40; Henisz, 2017:121).

As stakeholder management significantly influences corporate reputation, identifying key stakeholder groups is considered essential (Aula, 2011:30; Doorley & Garcia, 2017:40–41). However, CRM is more complicated than effective stakeholder relationship management (Doorley & Garcia, 2017:5). Instead, organisations should plan and implement a CRM strategy that is specific to the organisation. Comprehensive reputation management assists in developing and implementing effective CRM strategies.

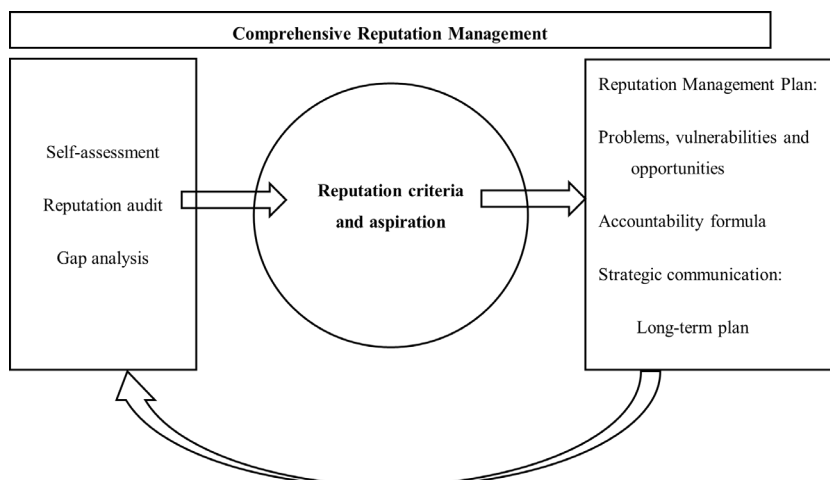


Figure 2: Comprehensive reputation management

Source: Doorley & Garcia (2017:22)

Comprehensive reputation management is an approach that attempts to measure, audit and manage corporate reputation within the main departments of an organisation. It suggests that organisations assess, audit and analyse through seven activities. An organisation should first develop a reputation template that outlines what it wants to measure, achieve or change. Second, the organisation should perform reputational audits pertinent to the organisation's stakeholders, aimed at identifying reputational gaps within the organisation's corporate reputation (Doorley & Garcia, 2017:20–22). Third, organisations should identify their reputational goals (Rainey et al., 2014:233). The fourth activity includes the development of a CRM plan that is aligned with the objectives of the organisation derived from activities one through three (Doorley & Garcia, 2017:20–22). The fifth activity involves compiling an accountability formula and identifying reputational components and departments responsible for attaining the identified goals (Esenyel, 2020:31; Van der Waladt, 2017:79). Once organisations reach activity six, activities one through five must be fine-tuned. Activity six requires organisations to implement annual follow-up audits and assessments of the organisations' corporate reputation, whereby risk and improvement areas are identified, and organisational goals become more specified and better understood (Cohen & Sayag, 2010:296). Here, organisations essentially build upon their strategy or go back to the drawing board. Finally, activity seven includes developing reports that provide insight and an overview of stakeholders and their perceptions of the organisation (Doorley & Garcia, 2017:20–22).

Measuring corporate reputation

Corporate reputation measurement should consider an organisation's definition, stakeholder group and organisational nature, with holistic reports involving all stakeholders but individual measurements for each group (Barchiesi & Colladon, 2021:2; Dowling, 2016:211). The choice of a corporate reputation measurement instrument is crucial, as no single instrument can measure every organisation's reputation

across all stakeholders, and a multi-faced approach is more effective as it incorporates specific elements of corporate reputation and therefore stakeholder perception (Eckert, 2017:146; Pires & Trez, 2020:49).

In addition, not all instruments measure all elements of corporate reputation. Many instruments focus on tangible aspects such as finance to measure corporate reputation in terms of capital, which does not provide a holistic stakeholder perspective of the organisation (Bigus et al., 2023:149). With this, RepTrak™ has gained traction from academia and practice as a measurement for corporate reputation that encompasses the assessment of several organisational dimensions.

RepTrak™ offers a standardised framework that evaluates perceptions across various stakeholder groups, facilitating a nuanced understanding of corporate reputation. Recent developments in corporate reputation measurement tools, such as FTI Consulting's RepScore developed in 2024, leverage advanced artificial intelligence (AI) and analytics to provide real-time insights into stakeholder perceptions, further enhancing the precision and responsiveness of reputation management strategies. In essence, RepScore aims to provide companies with a platform to manage their corporate reputation in 2025 and beyond through using data to simplify the process (FTI Consulting, 2024).

Reptrak™

RepTrak™ comprises four themes: trust, admiration, esteem and feeling (Chan et al., 2018:204; Sah & Abdullah, 2016:36;). These are "emotional dimensions" (Wepener, 2014:7). Understanding these feelings allows organisations to identify what areas require improvement (Reputation Institute, 2018).

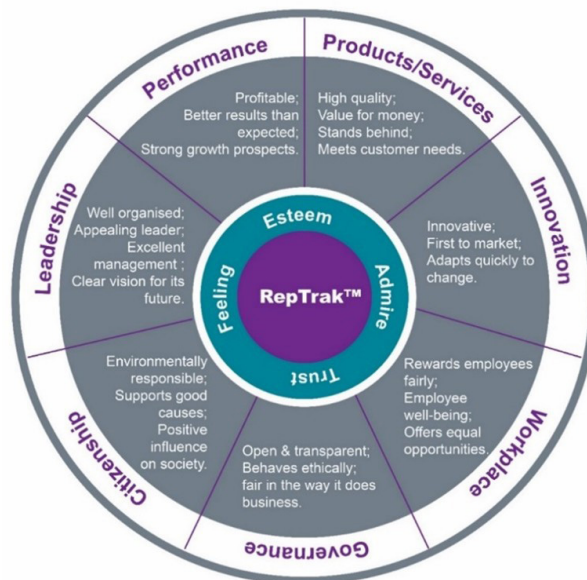


Figure 3: RepTrak™

Source: Redesigned from Reputation Institute (2018)

RepTrak™ further encompasses seven dimensions (products and services, innovation, workplace, governance, citizenship, leadership and performance). Each dimension is divided into three or four attributes (Reputation Institute, 2018).

Products and services are the key value creators of an organisation (Cunningham et al., 2018:141). Measuring this dimension allows organisations to establish how stakeholders perceive organisational offerings and value (Osterwalder et al., 2015:82; Sah & Abdullah, 2016:36). As purchasing offerings are often the first experience that stakeholders have with an organisation, this dimension has a considerable influence on the organisation's corporate reputation (Fombrun et al., 2015:6). This dimension aims to

understand stakeholders' perceptions of an organisation's product and service quality, its commitment to these offerings and their alignment with consumer needs (Reputation Institute, 2018).

Innovation is the capacity of an organisation to evoke emotional responses from its customers and the rate at which it can create novel and innovative offerings (Fombrun et al., 2015:6). Stakeholders will perceive an organisation's ability to adapt to change and generate innovative products, services or ideas favourably, which will encourage purchases that overlook high prices (Van der Walddt, 2015:110).

Workplace refers to the organisation's ability to provide a good working environment that facilitates productivity and a positive atmosphere for employees. Thus, when employees perceive their workplace as pleasant, they are more likely to remain with an organisation and endorse it (Fombrun et al., 2015:6-7).

Governance describes the systems and procedures that distribute and exercise authority within an organisation, as well as the responses taken by these systems and procedures in challenging times (Sah & Abdullah, 2016:34). Stakeholder perception of these behaviours is influenced by how effectively an organisation communicates with stakeholders. In this regard, stakeholder communication should cover the nature of the problem, its cause, the organisation's response and the steps that the organisation will take to prevent future occurrences. This communication should be transparent, showing that the organisation takes accountability and accepts responsibility (Coombs, 2010:27; Heide & Simonsson, 2014:5). When stakeholders perceive an organisation as ethical and transparent, they will trust and admire the organisation (Fombrun et al., 2015:7).

Citizenship describes how much an organisation is seen as a good citizen by its stakeholders. It includes an organisation's performance – whether it makes a difference in society, promotes worthy causes and protects the environment (Fombrun et al., 2015:7; Reputation Institute, 2018).

Leadership refers to the management structures of an organisation and the individuals who fulfil these positions. Strong leadership is required as it enhances organisations' financial performance and attracts positive media attention, investors and trust in the organisation (Fombrun et al., 2015:8; Sung & Choi, 2021:6).

An organisation's reputation can be strongly predicted by its financial performance (Ramos & Casado-Molina, 2021:122). Organisations that demonstrate solid and consistent financial performance will likely enjoy greater stakeholder trust, which will increase the possibility that it will continue to grow (Fombrun et al., 2015:8). These organisations will also benefit from other advantages such as the capacity to develop and introduce new offerings and an efficient workforce (Sah & Abdullah, 2016:33).

In implementing RepTrak™, each attribute is presented as a statement rated by a Likert scale. Together, these attributes measure the dimension they comprise (Fombrun et al., 2015:9; Reputation Institute, 2018). The result is a corporate reputation score of 0–100.

Table 1: RepTrak™ scores

Score	Ranking
0-39	Poor
40-59	Weak
60-69	Average
70-79	Strong
80+	Excellent

Source: Authors' own interpretation of RepTrak™ (2022:3)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, to assess NWU's current approach to CRM and to determine the perceptions of NWU staff of the university's current corporate reputation.

The qualitative approach included a literature review and four semi-structured interviews with NWU

Director: Corporate Relations and Marketing (DCRM) management, including the Executive Director and three directors of DCRM's sub-departments, for analysis and discussion. The study used 29 open-ended questions to gather demographic information and knowledge pertaining to CRM from respondents. Data was processed through qualitative relational content analysis, including transcription, repeated analysis and presentation of findings. Transcription was done verbatim. Repeated analysis and reflection on the dataset allowed for conclusions to be drawn. In the presentation of the data, the researchers discussed, compared, found links between and presented the uncovered themes.

To ensure methodological rigour, interview questions were designed based on key themes identified in the literature review to ensure alignment with corporate reputation constructs. In addition, the study employed investigator triangulation by comparing interview findings with secondary data sources, such as internal NWU reports pertaining to the restricting process and academic literature. Coding of interview transcripts was conducted using statistical software, which allowed for a systematic identification of recurring themes and relationships between different responses. This process strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative data collected and discussed by the study.

The quantitative approach used an online RepTrak™ survey to gauge respondents' perceptions of NWU staff's evaluation of RepTrak™. From this, descriptive statistics were generated from the ratings provided by respondents, and these opinions and ratings were analysed and debated to understand their evaluations. The survey was sent to all NWU staff, inviting participation via the NWU Daily Comms newsletter. The survey was available for two months, with 6,594 respondents identified as the population. However, not all potential respondents participated, and the rater focused on a sample of the population instead of the entire population, with 242 submissions received. The interpretation of the findings is therefore focused on a sample rather than that of the population.

NWU Statistical Consultation Services (SCS) assisted researchers in data processing, including AMOS and SPSS Versions 27 for descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to assess underlying dimensions within the RepTrak™ framework, and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate the construct structure. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure reliability, yielding a score above 0.7, which indicated strong internal consistency across survey items. Nonparametric correlations were also performed to identify significant relationships between reputation attributes.

In addition to descriptive statistics, inferential statistical methods were applied to gain deeper insights. Independent T-tests and one-way ANOVAs were conducted to determine whether perceptions of corporate reputation varied significantly across different demographic groups, such as academic versus support staff, years of service and campus location. This allowed for a more granular analysis of how different stakeholder segments perceive NWU's reputation. Furthermore, response bias was assessed by comparing early and late responses to detect potential non-response bias as changes that could affect respondent's perspectives had occurred internally at the NWU during the duration of the data collection process.

Google Forms provided descriptive statistics, which were discussed to identify themes, dimensions and attributes that scored well, average or poorly. The researchers then compared the data and drew observations.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results and findings section presents that of the second and third specific research questions posed by the study. To begin, the second research question focused on NWU's approach to CRM. This was determined through semi-structured interviews.

RQ2: What is the North-West University's approach to corporate reputation management?
(Determined through semi-structured interviews)

Table 2: Interviewee biography

Respondent	Position	Gender	Race	Qualification	Employment at NWU	Employment in current position
A	Senior management	Male	White	Tertiary	14 years	14 years
B	Senior management	Male	African	Tertiary	6 years	6 years
C	Senior management	Male	African	Tertiary	9 years	5 years
D	Senior management	Male	White	Tertiary	10 years	8 months (acting for 1 year prior)

In terms of understanding corporate reputation, the interviewees provided sufficient understanding of the concept and recognised its importance. Interviewees had difficulty identifying the trends that affect corporate reputation, but mentioned factors such as technology, digital marketing, and social media. Interviewees also struggled to identify the elements of corporate reputation but displayed a fair understanding of each when presented with the list obtained from the literature review. Interviewees showed confusion about what encompassed corporate identity, brand and image. Interviewees exhibited a strong understanding in correctly identifying all NWU stakeholders and achieving consensus on the ranking thereof. The group showed a good understanding of CRM and its alignment with NWU's strategic goals. However, the absence of comprehensive reputation management knowledge at an individual level was a concern. When questioned on corporate reputation measurement, the interviewees showed an average understanding thereof. The group was not able to effectively discuss what measurement instruments NWU used and participants were unable to reach consensus on measurement frequency and timing. Interviewees had varying opinions on RepTrak™'s dimensions: while they perceived products and services, governance, performance and leadership positively, they remained divided on workplace and citizenship. The group perceived innovation at NWU as lacking. While they exhibited strong understanding of the advantages of strong corporate reputation, their understanding as to how it could improve the workplace was lacking. When asked how they perceived NWU in comparison with its competitors, the group felt that the university performed well considering the challenges it faced.

In summary, all interviewees demonstrated sufficient comprehension of corporate reputation, its management and measurement. While some areas for improvement were identified, such as how and when corporate reputations should be formally measured, the interviewees also added valuable additions to the study such as the identification of climate change initiatives as a trend that affects corporate reputation in a university setting.

The third research question aimed to determine how staff at NWU perceive the university's corporate reputation.

RQ3: What are the perceptions of NWU staff regarding the university's corporate reputation management according to the RepTrak™ measurement instrument?

Table 3: Frequency table: Respondent demographic

Variable	Frequency	Percent (%)
Age		
18-25 years	0	0
26-30 years	18	7.5

31-35 years	35	14.6
36-40 years	50	20.9
41-45 years	30	12.6
46-50 years	25	10.5
51-55 years	35	14.6
56-60 years	23	9.6
61-65 years	20	8.4
66 + years	3	1.3
Total	n=242	100 n=50 (20.9%)
Gender		
Male	95	39.7
Female	142	59.4
Gender fluid	0	0
Agender	0	0
Prefer not to say	1	0.4
Other	1	0.4
Missing	3	1.24
Total	n=242	100 n=142 (59.4%)
Home language		
English	47	19.42
Afrikaans	150	61.98
African	41	16.94
Missing	4	1.65
Total	n=242	100 n=150 (61.98%)
Staff member type		
Support staff	121	50
Academic staff	121	50
Total	N=242	100 n=121 (50%)
Campus		
Potchefstroom	173	71.49
Vanderbijlpark	40	16.53
Mahikeng	29	11.98
Total	n=242	100 n=173 (71.49%)
Duration of employment at NWU		
1-5 years	57	23.55
6-10 years	58	23.97
11-15 years	56	23.14
16-20 years	28	11.57
21+ years	41	16.94
Missing	2	0.83
Total	n=242	100 n=58 (23.79%)

Overall, NWU fared well in terms of trust, admiration, respect and perception, with no significant concerns noted in the following statistics. Considering trust, 35.1% of respondents agreed that they trusted NWU, while 33.1% remained neutral. Although many were neutral, more respondents leaned towards agreement than disagreement. Only 18% had below-average trust, while 48.9% had above-average trust. Interestingly, this theme had the most "strongly disagree" responses. Considering feeling, 41% agreed they had a good feeling about NWU. The difference between those who strongly agreed and those who were neutral was 11.3%, while 15.9% had a below-average feeling. Collectively, 56.9% had an above-average positive feeling about NWU. Considering admiration, 38.5% agreed they admired and respected NWU, while 26.4% were neutral and 16.8% had below-average admiration. In total, 57.3% had above-average admiration, with 18.8% strongly agreeing. Finally, considering esteem, 41.4% agreed with the positive statement about NWU's corporate reputation, 29.7% were neutral and 11.7% had below-average ratings. Overall, 59.6% rated their perception as above average.

Table 4: RepTrak™ themes

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
NWU is an institution that I trust.	4.6%	13.4%	33.1%	35.1%	13.8%
NWU is an institution that I have a good feeling about.	2.1%	13.8%	27.2%	41%	15.9%
NWU is an institution that I admire and respect.	2.5%	13.8%	26.4%	38.5%	18.8%
NWU has a good overall reputation.	1.7%	10%	29.7%	41.4%	18.2%

Considering the dimensions and attributes, the sample had a favourable opinion of NWU's products and services. The majority of the sample agreed with each of the attributes, and each obtained a solid statistical review. The majority of the sample agreed with each attribute for this dimension. For each, this ranged between just above 40% and 50%. Around 20% of the sample strongly agreed with each attribute, except for meeting the needs of customers, which was indicated by 13% of the sample. Between 19% and 30% of the sample remained neutral on each attribute and between 6% and 12% did not agree with each. Each attribute only showed a strongly disagree of under 6%. The sample concluded that NWU provided high-quality goods and services, that its offerings were cost-effective, that it stood behind those offerings and that it satisfied the expectations of its customers.

Not everyone perceived innovation the same way. Most respondents agreed with only one of the three statements, while the remaining two were neutral or divided. For the attribute of innovation, 36.8% agreed that NWU was innovative, with 28.5% remaining neutral. In addition, 17.2% strongly agreed, 13.8% disagreed and only 3.8% strongly disagreed. Overall, 54% had a positive perception of innovation, while 17.6% had a negative perception, resulting in a positive differential of 36.4%. Regarding NWU being the first to market with new products and services, 40.6% remained neutral. Meanwhile, 39.8% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and only 19.7% agreed or strongly agreed. This resulted in a negative differential of 20.1%, indicating below-average perceptions with a significant portion remaining neutral. For adaptability to change, the sample was divided, with 27.2% agreeing and 27.2% disagreeing, along with 11.3% strongly agreeing and 11.8% strongly disagreeing. The differential was slightly negative at 3.5%, with 22.6% remaining neutral. Overall, with one attribute measuring well, one below average and one divided, the dimension of innovation is concluded to be average but requires attention. Although average is not negative, the ideal would be a positive perception.

The dimension of the workplace at NWU had the lowest rankings from the sample. For the first attribute, "rewarding employees fairly", a significant 29.3% of respondents strongly disagreed, and 28% disagreed, with 25.9% remaining neutral. This means that 57.3% had a negative perception, the highest rate of strong disagreement among all 23 attributes measured. Only 16.7% had a positive perception (10% agreed, 6.7% strongly agreed), resulting in a negative differential of 40.6%. The second attribute,

"concern for employee well-being," fared better. In the sample group, 25.9% agreed and 15.5% strongly agreed, totalling 41.4% with a positive perception. However, 21.8% remained neutral and 36.9% had a negative perception (21.8% disagreed, 15.1% strongly disagreed). The positive differential was 19.6%. The third attribute, "offering equal opportunities," was negatively perceived. Of the respondents, 27.2% strongly disagreed, 23.4% disagreed, with 24.7% neutral. Only 24.7% had a positive perception (15.9% agreed, 8.8% strongly agreed), producing a negative differential of 25.9%. Overall, the dimension of the workplace was rated poorly, with significant concerns regarding fair rewards and equal opportunities, though perceptions of concern for employee well-being were better.

The dimension of governance at NWU measured as average, with most respondents remaining neutral on each attribute. For the first attribute, "open and transparent communication," 25.5% were neutral, 25.5% disagreed and 18.8% strongly disagreed, producing a collective negative perception of 44.3%. Only 35.1% had a positive perception (20.5% agreed, 9.6% strongly agreed), indicating an average to below-average rating with a less than 10% negative differential. The second attribute, "ethical behaviour," showed 33.9% neutral responses. However, 38.5% had a positive perception (25.5% agreed, 13% strongly agreed), while 27.6% had a negative perception (18.4% disagreed, 9.2% strongly disagreed), producing a positive differential of more than 10%. Despite this, the attribute was rated average with a slight positive inclination. The third attribute, "fairness in business practices," had 33.1% neutrality. A collective 41.9% had a positive perception (31.4% agreed, 10.5% strongly agreed), while 25.1% had a negative perception (19.2% disagreed, 5.9% strongly disagreed), producing a positive differential of 16.8%. This attribute is concluded to be average with a positive inclination. Overall, the governance dimension was average, with two attributes leaning positively and one negatively. However, the ethical behaviour attribute's average rating is a concern, suggesting the need for re-evaluation to achieve a more positive overall perception of NWU's corporate reputation.

Overall, the dimension of citizenship was perceived positively by the sample. The first attribute, NWU's responsibility to protect the environment, had a majority neutral perception (33.5%), but the positive perception (agree, strongly agree) outweighed the negative perception (disagree, strongly disagree) with a 33.1% difference. However, due to the majority remaining neutral, the attribute was considered average, leaning slightly towards positive perceptions. The second attribute asked about NWU's support for good causes, which was well perceived with 59% of the sample agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only 7.1% disagreed. Although a large portion (33.9%) remained neutral, the positive perceptions outweighed the negative by 51.9%. The third attribute, about NWU's positive influence on society, also measured well, with 59% of the sample perceiving it positively. Again, the difference between positive and negative perceptions was 51.9%. Overall, all three attributes showed a strong inclination towards positive perceptions, indicating a positive perception of the citizenship dimension by the sample, which is beneficial for NWU's corporate reputation.

In terms of leadership, the overall perception of the sample was divided between average and positive. Two attributes received a majority rating of neutral and two a majority rating of agree. For the first attribute, respondents were asked if they felt NWU was a well-organised institution. Most of the sample agreed or strongly agreed, totalling 46%. A smaller part remained neutral at 27.6%, and 26.4% did not agree. The positive perceptions outweighed the negative by 19.6%, indicating an overall positive perception. The second attribute asked if respondents felt NWU had an appealing leader. The majority remained neutral, with positive and negative perceptions almost equally divided. While the negative perceptions slightly outweighed the positive, the study concluded the attribute measured as average, not inclined towards positive or negative perceptions. The third attribute asked if respondents felt NWU had excellent managers. Again, most of the sample remained neutral, with positive and negative perceptions equally divided. With less than a 1% difference between positive and negative perceptions, the attribute measured average. The fourth attribute measured whether respondents felt NWU had a clear vision for its future. A majority agreed or strongly agreed, totalling 50.6%. Although a large part of the sample remained neutral, the positive perceptions outweighed the negative by 32.2%, indicating an overall positive perception. Overall, two attributes measured as average, and two showed a positive perception, producing an overall

evaluation of the dimension as average to good.

In the dimension of performance, most of the sample either remained neutral or showed a positive perception for each attribute. For the first attribute, respondents were asked if they thought NWU was financially profitable. A majority of 36.4% agreed, while a similar percentage of 34.7% remained neutral. In addition, 17.6% strongly agreed, totalling 54% of the sample feeling that NWU was financially profitable. A much smaller percentage, 11.2%, indicated they did not think so. The differentiation between positive and negative perceptions was 42.8% in favour of the positive, providing sufficient evidence that the sample felt NWU was financially profitable. The second attribute asked if respondents felt NWU produced better financial results than expected. The majority remained neutral at 43.5%. However, 42.6% felt NWU produced better financial results than expected, and 13.8% did not. The differentiation of 28.8% suggests the attribute measures as average but with a stronger inclination to positive perceptions. The third attribute asked if respondents felt NWU had strong prospects for future growth. The majority agreed at 37.2%, with 31.8% remaining neutral. In addition, 17.2% strongly agreed, totalling 54.4% positive perceptions. The collective negative perceptions comprised 13.8%. The differentiation between positive and negative perceptions was 40.6%, indicating a strong positive perception. As two attributes measured well and one measured average with an inclination to positive, the overall dimension of performance can be concluded to measure well.

Table 5: RepTrak™ dimensions

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Products and services					
NWU offers high-quality products and services.	1.7%	6.3%	19.7%	50.6%	21.8%
NWU's products and services are of high value for money.	2.5%	7.5%	23%	43.9%	23%
NWU stands behind its products and services.	2.1%	7.5%	19.2%	47.7%	23.4%
NWU meets the needs of its customers.	5.9%	11.7%	29.3%	40.2%	13%
Innovation					
NWU is innovative.	3.8%	13.8%	28.5%	36.8%	17.2%
NWU is generally the first institution to go to market with new products (qualifications) and services.	12.6%	27.2%	40.6%	15.1%	4.6%
NWU adapts quickly to change.	11.8%	27.2%	22.6%	27.2%	11.3%
Workplace					
NWU rewards its employees fairly.	29.3%	28%	25.9%	10%	6.7%
NWU demonstrates concern for the well-being of its employees.	15.1%	21.8%	21.8%	25.9%	15.5%
NWU offers equal opportunities to its employees.	27.2%	23.4%	24.7%	15.9%	8.8%
Governance					
NWU is open and transparent in all communication.	18.8%	25.5%	25.5%	20.5%	9.6%
NWU behaves ethically.	9.2%	18.4%	33.9%	25.5%	13%
NWU is fair in the way that it does business.	5.9%	19.2%	33.1%	31.4%	10.5%
Citizenship					
NWU acts responsibly to protect the environment.	5%	11.7%	33.5%	32.6%	17.2%
NWU supports good causes.	1.7%	5.4%	33.9%	41%	18%
NWU has a positive influence on society.	2.9%	4.2%	33.9%	40.6%	18.4%

Leadership					
NWU is a well-organised institution.	9.2%	17.2%	27.6%	31.8%	14.2%
NWU has an appealing leader.	14.6%	16.3%	38.5%	18%	12.6%
NWU has excellent managers.	8.8%	23%	36.8%	23.8%	7.5%
NWU has a clear vision for the university's future.	5.4%	13%	31%	37.2%	13.4%
Performance					
NWU is financially profitable.	3.3%	7.9%	34.7%	36.4%	17.6%
NWU produces better financial results than expected.	3.8%	10%	43.5%	32.6%	10%
NWU shows strong prospects for growth.	2.9%	10.9%	31.8%	37.2%	17.2%

Respondents also provided general comments regarding NWU's corporate reputation. These included the following perceptions: discrimination exists between academic and support staff, and between staff of the three campuses; NWU offers poor remuneration compared to other universities; NWU performs well financially, which frustrates respondents regarding lack of appropriate remuneration; NWU does not communicate transparently with stakeholders; NWU is an innovation follower; NWU does not look after the well-being of employees with psychological and physical disabilities; some respondents indicated that the managers of NWU were both good and bad, but others indicated a negative perception of managers; respondents could not present an opinion on leadership, as it had changed during the period of the study; and respondents felt that NWU was doing well in terms of its citizenship, but that there was room for improvement.

The best faring theme was respect, while trust was perceived as the worst. The dimension that recorded the highest mean value was products and services. In terms of general comments in comparison with the other dimensions, products and services was one of the best perceived dimensions, if not the best. The dimension that recorded the lowest mean value was workplace. This was also a dimension that presented concerns in the general comments. Other dimensions such as governance and innovation also had lower means. These dimensions also presented concerns in the general comments. The means of each remaining dimension (citizenship, performance and leadership) were perceived as average, although performance bordered on average and good.

Reliability and validity

Reliability is the assessment of whether a method would yield the same results when repeatedly applied to the same scenario (Babbie & Mouton, 2012:119; Noble & Smith, 2015:34). In the qualitative method, four NWU employees at a senior managerial level, who regularly work with NWU's corporate reputation, were interviewed. These interviewees were selected for their professional capacity and knowledge. For the quantitative method, reliability was ensured by surveying all NWU staff across all three campuses. In addition, the application of Cronbach's alpha by SCS confirmed the reliability of the quantitative method.

Validity refers to the extent of integrity and application of empirical methods used in a study and how well the findings reflect the topic of investigation (Babbie & Mouton, 2012:119; Noble & Smith, 2015:34). It assesses whether the instrument measures what it is supposed to measure. In the qualitative method of this study, validity was ensured by asking each interviewee the same set of pre-determined questions. All four interviews occurred within one month to ensure NWU's current position was consistent and to avoid any unforeseen factors that could influence responses. Interviews took place in respondents' offices or via MS Teams in comfortable, private and quiet settings, allowing truthful and competent responses. The researcher recorded answers without background interference.

For the quantitative method, an online RepTrak™ survey, validity was ensured by sending the same questionnaire to all NWU staff between April 2022 and May 2022, including new staff members, via NWU Daily Comms. Respondents could complete the survey in comfortable settings for truthful and competent

answers. SCS confirmed the survey's validity using CFA in AMOS Version 25.

Figure 4 shows that all dimensions and attributes of RepTrak™ fit well within their intended constructs. Standardised regression estimates ideally should be above 0.3 and close to 1, indicating strong relationships. Each attribute scored well above 0.3, ranging from 0.72 to 0.91. For products and services, the standardised regression estimates for each attribute ranged between 0.75 and 0.90, innovation between 0.77 and 0.84, workplace between 0.74 and 0.82, governance between 0.86 and 0.91, citizenship between 0.72 and 0.84, leadership between 0.72 and 0.82, and performance between 0.79 and 0.87. This provides sufficient evidence that the dimensions and attributes fitted well within the constructs they aimed to measure. In addition, the dimensions each displayed a p-value which was smaller than 0.001, also indicating that the dimensions and attributes fitted well within the measurable constructs.

The discussion on the CFA shows how well the dimensions correlated with one another. Correlation scores ranged from 0.53 to 0.89, indicating sufficient relevance among dimensions. The strongest correlations (0.80 and above) were between products and services and innovation, products and services and leadership, innovation and governance, innovation and citizenship, innovation and leadership, workplace and governance, governance and citizenship, governance and leadership, citizenship and leadership, and performance and leadership. Moderate correlations (0.72 to 0.75) included products and services and citizenship, innovation and workplace, performance and innovation, workplace and leadership, and performance and citizenship. Lower correlations (0.53 to 0.68) involved products and services and workplace, products and services and governance, performance and products and services, performance and workplace, workplace and citizenship, and performance and governance. All correlations had p-values less than 0.001, showing statistical significance. Despite the range in correlation strength, the connections among dimensions justify using the full RepTrak™ instrument with minor adjustments for wording and a comment section.

From this, the theoretical measurement model of CFA for RepTrak™ is presented in Figure 4 below.

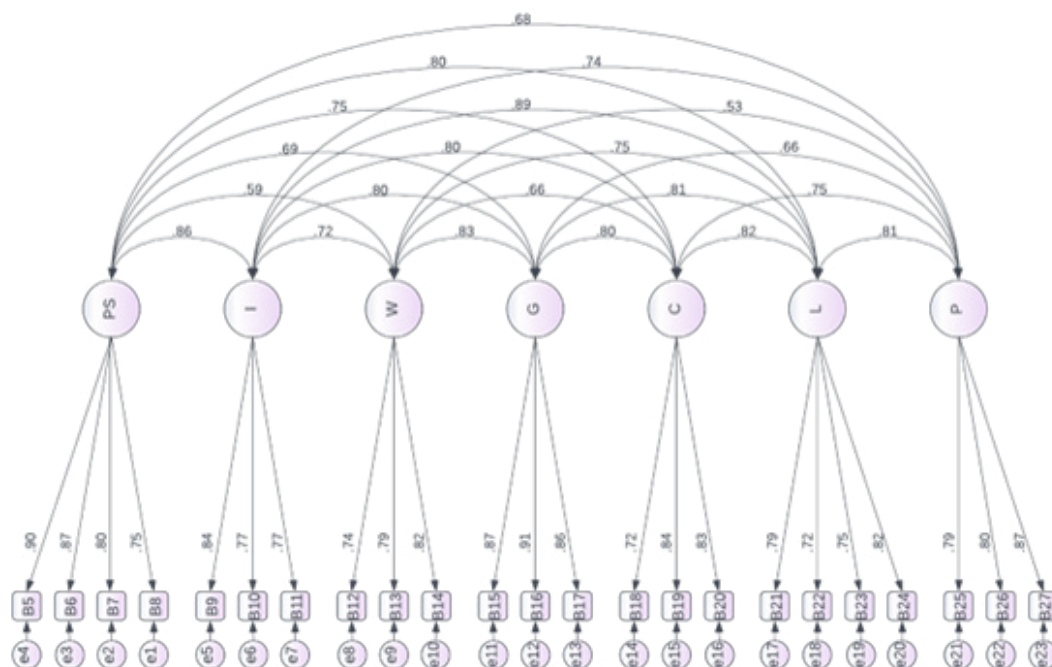


Figure 4: Researchers' interpretation: Theoretical measurement model of CFA for RepTrak™

In addition, the validity assessment of RepTrak™ included a goodness of fit test, presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Goodness of fit for the measurement model of RepTrak™

Minimum Sample of Discrepancy divided by Degrees of Freedom (CMIN/DF)	Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) LO 90	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) HI 90
1.972	0.952	0.064	0.054	0.073

The chi-square test assesses how well a dataset fits its theoretical model and is considered an “overly strict model of fit”. The ratio is divided by the Degrees of Freedom, ideally around 2, but can be as high as 3-5 (Bryant & Satorra, 2012:373; Mueller & Hancock, 2010:109). A CMIN/DF of 1.972 indicates an excellent fit. Mueller and Hancock (2010:379) suggest presenting at least three fit indices for validity. Besides the chi-square test, incremental and non-centrality indices were used. The model showed an excellent fit with a comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.952, where a CFI above 0.9 is ideal (Normalini et al., 2019:507).

Regarding non-centrality measures, the Root Mean Square Error Approximation (RMSEA) is reported in Table 6. The RMSEA should be as small as possible, ideally closer to 0. Literature varies on the maximum acceptable RMSEA score, suggesting it should be smaller than 0.06 – 0.1 (Blunch, 2012:116). With an RMSEA of 0.064, and a 90% confidence interval of 0.054 – 0.073, the model is considered an excellent fit.

Therefore, data obtained from the survey fits well into the theoretical model, confirming the validity of RepTrak™ as used in this study. This study contributes to literature, proving that RepTrak™ can be used within a South African and university context.

Considering the reliability of RepTrak™, all 242 surveys in the sample were deemed reliable, with none excluded. Cronbach's alpha was used to test reliability, providing values from 0 to 1. The closer to 1, the more reliable the model. According to Mueller and Hancock (2010:381), a value of 0.70 or higher is acceptable. Table 7 presents the reliability of RepTrak™ and its variables.

Table 7: Reliability of RepTrak™ dimensions

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
RepTrak™_Trust	n/a	1	5	3.41	1.03
RepTrak™_Feeling	n/a	1	5	3.56	0.98
RepTrak™_Admire	n/a	1	5	3.58	1.02
RepTrak™_Respect	n/a	1	5	3.63	0.93
Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
RepTrak™_Products and Services	0.89	1.00	5.00	3.72	0.84
RepTrak™_Innovation	0.83	1.00	5.00	3.07	0.95
RepTrak™_Workplace	0.82	1.00	5.00	2.67	1.09
RepTrak™_Governance	0.91	1.00	5.00	3.05	1.06
RepTrak™_Citizenship	0.83	1.00	5.00	3.61	0.83
RepTrak™_Leadership	0.85	1.00	5.00	3.16	0.94
RepTrak™_Performance	0.86	1.00	5.00	3.49	0.86
Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
RepTrak™_Total	0.92	1.00	5.00	3.25	0.79

Table 7 does not indicate Cronbach's alpha values for RepTrak™ themes as each comprises only one statement. However, dimensions (three to four statements each) present high Cronbach's alpha values of 0.82–0.91, indicating high reliability. Respect ranked highest with a 3.63 mean, while trust was lowest at 3.41. Products and services had the highest mean value among dimensions at 3.72, perceived well by the sample, while workplace had the lowest at 2.67, indicating concerns. Governance and innovation had means of 3.05 and 3.07, respectively. Citizenship, performance and leadership had means of 3–4, indicating average perception, with performance bordering on good.

Demographic variables' effects on RepTrak™ were examined using nonparametric correlations, independent T-tests and one-way ANOVAs. Most demographic variables did not affect RepTrak™, except for home language and campus. Nonparametric correlations showed that age and employment duration did not affect RepTrak™. Independent T-tests revealed that gender and staff type had no effect. One-way ANOVAs indicated that home language had a medium effect: respondents who spoke African languages had a better perception of NWU's corporate reputation than English- and Afrikaans-speaking respondents, with English speakers perceiving it slightly better than Afrikaans speakers. The campus had a medium to high effect on RepTrak™: Mahikeng Campus (MC) had a more positive perception of NWU's corporate reputation than Vanderbijlpark Campus (VC), and Potchefstroom Campuses' perceptions were closer to VC but did not differ as much from MC as VC did.

Table 8: Reliability of RepTrak™ dimensions

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
RepTrak™_Trust		1	5	3.41	1.03
RepTrak™_Feeling		1	5	3.56	0.98
RepTrak™_Admire		1	5	3.58	1.02
RepTrak™_Respect		1	5	3.63	0.93
RepTrak™_Products and Services	0.89	1.00	5.00	3.72	0.84
RepTrak™_Innovation	0.83	1.00	5.00	3.07	0.95
RepTrak™_Workplace	0.82	1.00	5.00	2.67	1.09
RepTrak™_Governance	0.91	1.00	5.00	3.05	1.06
RepTrak™_Citizenship	0.83	1.00	5.00	3.61	0.83
RepTrak™_Leadership	0.85	1.00	5.00	3.16	0.94
RepTrak™_Performance	0.86	1.00	5.00	3.49	0.86
RepTrak™_Total	0.92	1.00	5.00	3.25	0.79

To determine the overall score of RepTrak™, a score of 0–100 is calculated. NWU received a score of **65/100**, and therefore has an *average* corporate reputation. This shows that NWU has room to enhance its corporate reputation from a staff member perspective.

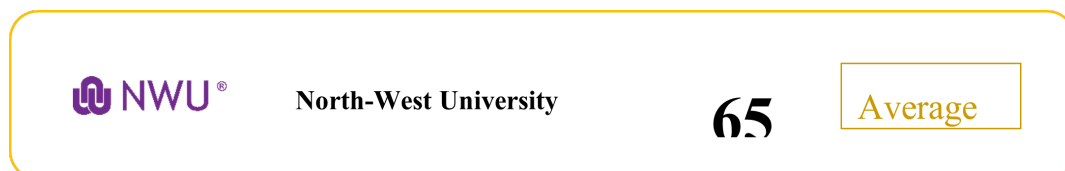


Figure 5: NWU RepTrak™ score

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the results, in order of importance, the key drivers for NWU's CRM strategy should include workplace, governance, innovation, leadership, performance, citizenship and products and services. Workplace focus should be on employee rewards, opportunities and well-being, while governance should be open and transparent. Innovation should be adaptable to change, and leadership should be strong and effective. Performance should be financially profitable and citizenship should focus on environmental protection and positive societal influence. Products and services should be of high quality, reflect value for money and meet customer needs.

Table 9: Key drivers for NWU's CRM strategy in terms of staff member perspective

Keys:	Poor, requires significant and immediate attention	Weak, requires substantial and immediate attention	Average, requires ample attention	Good, requires monitoring and maintenance
Level of importance	Dimension Mean	Key drivers for NWU's CRM strategy in terms of staff member perspective		
		Dimensions	Attributes	
1	2.67	Workplace	Rewarding employees fairly	
			Offering equal opportunities to employees	
			Demonstrating a concern for the well-being of employees	
2	3.05	Governance	Being open and transparent in all communication	
			Being fair in the way business is conducted	
			Behaving ethically	
3	3.07	Innovation	Adapting quickly to change	
			Being the first to go to market with new products and services	
			Being innovative	
4	3.16	Leadership	Having a strong and appealing leader	
			Having excellent managers	
			Being a well-organised institution	
			Having a clear vision for the university's future	
5	3.49	Performance	Producing better financial results than expected	
			Being financially profitable	
			Showing strong prospects for future growth	
6	3.61	Citizenship	Acting responsibly to protect the environment	
			Having a positive influence on society	
			Supporting good causes	
7	3.72	Products and services	Meeting the needs of customers	
			Products and services are of high value for money	
			Standing behind products and services	
			High-quality products and services	

The recommendations derived from the study are divided into three groups: NWU DCRM management, NWU's CRM strategy and improvement of RepTrak™ dimensions within NWU.

Two recommendations for NWU DCRM management are presented. First is to clearly conceptualise and uncover the core elements of corporate reputation. NWU DCRM management arrange a strategic session to define corporate reputation, its management and measurement, as well as identify and define the elements of corporate reputation and trends that affect it to ensure that the holistic DCRM department and management are idiomatic. A consolidated document identifying and defining all aspects of corporate reputation for NWU should result. This should be used when developing a strategic plan for CRM at NWU. Second is to use the study's findings within the context of NWU. It is suggested that NWU DCRM management consider addressing the concerns raised by the sample of the study with university management.

Nine recommendations are presented for NWU's CRM strategy. NWU DCRM should share a mutual understanding of what corporate reputation is. This entails understanding what corporate reputation comprises, by what it is affected, what benefits it can yield and how it should be managed and measured. Each sub-department of DCRM should understand what their role in the implementation of the corporate reputation strategy is, and what results they are expected to deliver within a specified timeframe. All stakeholders of NWU should be identified and the management strategies for each re-evaluated to ensure relevance. A strategy template for CRM should be developed. This should speak to the unique nature of NWU and include what NWU wants to achieve, change or measure when considering its corporate reputation. A formal corporate reputation assessment should be conducted at NWU on a larger scale to identify concerns regarding corporate reputation among its stakeholder groups. Based on such an assessment, NWU should set objectives or goals that it wants to achieve for its corporate reputation. After implementing each of the recommendations and assessing the results, NWU should review their strategy template. A detailed document that presents NWU's CRM strategy should follow and must be aligned with the strategic goals of the university, the objectives of its corporate reputation and the basic principles surrounding CRM in theory. NWU should then determine who is responsible for attaining each of these objectives. Thereafter, annual follow-up assessments of how the university's stakeholders perceive the university should be conducted. Finally, the university should ensure maintenance of their CRM strategy. This strategy should be implemented in all dimensions of the university. Results of follow-up assessments should be used to determine whether the efforts made by the university to improve its corporate reputation were successful, and appropriate actions should follow. Once a favourable corporate reputation has been achieved across all stakeholder groups, NWU should strive towards maintaining these positive perceptions through proactive and regular evaluation and action.

Recommendations to improve the dimensions of RepTrak™ within the context of NWU are presented for each dimension. When considering workplace, NWU should provide serious and immediate consideration to this dimension. NWU should evaluate and enhance the way in which employees are compensated and offer equal chances to all employees. Here, it would be wise to reconsider pay increases and give academic and support employees more aligned incentives. NWU should also keep expressing concern for the welfare of its employees. In terms of governance, NWU should prioritise ensuring that all stakeholder interaction and communication is open, transparent and sincere. NWU should evaluate how it can become fairer and behave more ethically in its daily operations. For innovation, NWU should implement strategies and processes to ensure that it is able to adapt to change in a more timeous manner. The university ought to support NWU research and services to produce new products and solutions to market and industry problems ahead of their competitors. NWU should keep working to become a cutting-edge university. Stability within the dimension of leadership must be attained. Thereafter, NWU should carry out an official evaluation of how the university's leadership is seen. Managers at NWU should receive training and have a standard management strategy used by all managers at the institution. NWU should continue to be a well-run organisation with a distinct future goal. When considering performance, NWU should focus on delivering more superior financial results than stakeholders anticipate. The university should continue to be financially successful and maintain its promising possibilities for future expansion.

In terms of citizenship, NWU should continue to promote a constructive impact on society and assist deserving projects. By actively attempting to lower its carbon footprint, the university might enhance citizenship. Finally, NWU should try to maintain high-quality products and services that are greatly valued by consumers and satisfy their needs. NWU should also keep supporting these products and services.

While this study identifies key actions to enhance NWU's corporate reputation, effectively translating these recommendations into practice requires a structured implementation approach. Drawing on insights from CRM literature as discussed in the relevant section above, the study outlines practical implementation of strategies that can support the successful execution of these recommendations at NWU.

As discussed in this article, the CRM model developed by Doorley and Garcia in 2017 emphasises the need for organisations to develop a tailored integrated framework for CRM that encompasses a multi-stakeholder approach. This framework should be tailored to the specific nature of the organisation and implementation and revision thereof should be a continuous activity. The researchers conclude that applying this model at NWU would involve the following specific activities: reputation audits, planning and implementation of corporate communication strategies, leadership and employee engagement programmes, innovation and institutional positioning, and continuous monitoring and adaptation of the implemented strategies.

In practice, reputation audits at NWU should therefore include conducting systematic assessments to measure NWU staff perceptions of the institution and identify any reputation gaps that arise within the stakeholder group. Not only does this align with the Doorley and Garcia's CRM model, but it also aligns with RepTrak™ investigation findings, which indicate areas requiring targeted interventions among staff at NWU.

In terms of planning and implementation of corporate communication strategies, the researchers recommend that NWU develop internal and external communication strategies that address the transparency concerns among their staff and enhance stakeholder engagement. Given the feedback on governance and workplace issues, this would involve a more direct and open communication channel with the stakeholder group.

By implementing leadership and employee engagement programmes, NWU would be able to start addressing concerns related to workplace fairness, recognition and well-being of its employees.

Innovation and institutional positioning activities at NWU should include activities that enhance NWU's corporate reputation for innovation by fostering a culture of research-driven advancements and strategic partnerships that position the institution as a leader in higher education.

Finally, through establishing a continuous review of these strategies and activities, leveraging RepTrak™ metrics and qualitative feedback to refine and adapt reputation management strategies over time should be a continuous activity undertaken by NWU.

The results of the study can only aid NWU in developing a CRM strategy based on the key drivers of the university's corporate reputation in terms of staff member perception. The study also only focused on a sample of the university's staff, and not the entire population.

The study can be applied as a framework to evaluate how NWU manages its corporate reputation regarding the university's other stakeholders and to create a CRM plan tailored to NWU. The study can be reproduced and expanded upon to examine CRM from the standpoint of different stakeholders at other South African HEIs, or to create models for CRM and measurement for South African HEIs. The research can also be used to support the adoption of RepTrak™ as a recognised indicator of corporate reputation in South Africa and tertiary institutions.

The study's conclusions and recommendations, if considered by NWU, could help the institution to change how its staff perceives the organisation. The corporate reputation of NWU may be enhanced by changing these perceptions, which would also make managing it easier going forward.

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"We All Love Cinderella but...": How Young Nigerian Parents Engage with Portrayals of Women in Disney Animated Films

AUTHOR(S)

Chinedu Richard Ononiwu

Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
Awka, Nigeria

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2900-5561>

Chikezie E. Uzuegbunam

Rhodes University,
Grahamstown, South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3958-5494>

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Abstract

This study investigated how young Nigerian parents engage with Disney's portrayals of women in animated films. The study employed a qualitative research approach. Drawing on the Audience Reception Theory and the Parental Mediation Theory, the research examined how these parents interpret and mediate Disney's gender representations in their parenting practices. Data were collected from 20 university-educated parents, aged 25 to 35 years, across various professions in two diverse urban locations, using a guided snowballing technique. The participants were those who had recent exposure to female portrayals from Disney productions. Findings showed diverse media consumption patterns and a high level of exposure to Disney content. Disney animated films were accessed via a wide variety of platforms such as Disney+, Amazon Prime Video and Disney Channel. Findings also revealed varied interpretations of Disney's portrayals, including perpetuation of gender stereotypes and depictions of empowerment. In addition, parents employed restrictive, active and co-viewing strategies to mediate these representations. They expressed concerns about gender socialisation and the reinforcement of cultural values. In the young parents' navigation of negative portrayals through active mediation and restrictive mediation, they questioned and sieved Disney content for their children and also engaged in open communication where they discussed Disney content with their children. They also used the films to teach cultural values. Stay-at-home mothers used these films more than the other groups of parents. This study highlights the relationship between media, culture and parenting in shaping gender attitudes.

Keywords

Animated films, audience reception, Disney, parental media engagement, Parental Mediation Theory, portrayals of women, young Nigerian parents

INTRODUCTION

Disney animated films have long played a significant role in shaping gender perceptions among audiences worldwide. With their widespread reach, these films influence how femininity and masculinity are constructed, particularly through the portrayal of female characters (Clarke et al., 2024). While classic Disney princesses, such as *Snow White and Cinderella*, have historically embodied passive and dependent traits, more recent productions, such as *Moana* (2016) and *Frozen* (2013), depict female characters with greater agency, resilience and independence (Hine et al., 2018). These evolving representations reflect broader shifts in gender norms and expectations over time, aligning with contemporary discourses on female empowerment and gender equality (Dundes et al., 2019).

However, despite extensive scholarship on gender portrayals in Disney films, much of the existing literature on how people engage with the representations of women has focused on Western audiences, overlooking how diverse cultural contexts influence the reception of these creative products (Clarke et al., 2024; Dundes et al., 2019; Tóth & Lassú, 2023). Therefore, there is a need to explore how audiences

in other contexts engage with Disney's representations of women because media consumption is not universal, and cultural norms play an important role in shaping how audiences interpret and engage with gendered narratives (Tehrim & Jahan, 2024).

In regions such as Nigeria, where traditional gender roles lay emphasis on values such as respectfulness, submissiveness and modesty of women (Akpan, 2015; Ifegbesan & Azeez, 2024), it is not clear how parents perceive and respond to Disney's evolving depictions of female characters. Given the role of parents in shaping children's gender socialisation (Luisi, 2022), understanding their perspectives is crucial in assessing the broader implications of global media narratives on local cultural values. As Disney films continue to be consumed by audiences across the world, it is important to explore whether the evolving gender representations in these products, which have shifted from the portrayal of women as weak to the portrayal of the empowered woman (Dundes et al., 2019; Hine et al., 2018), for instance, align with or challenge the expectations that parents in non-Western societies have for their children. This study, therefore, examined how young Nigerian parents engage with Disney's portrayals of women, how they interpret these representations within the context of their cultural values and how they mediate these portrayals in their parenting practices. In this study, "women" (to be used interchangeably with the adjective "female") are Disney animated film characters that exhibit physical attributes traditionally associated with femininity. These characteristics include slender physiques with small waists, curvaceous hips and busts, long, flowing hair, large expressive eyes, full lips and rosy cheeks. Such attributes are emblematic of Disney princesses and are exemplified by characters such as *Cinderella* (Dundes et al., 2019).

The study was guided by the following overarching research question:

How do young Nigerian parents engage with portrayals of women in Disney animated films?

Based on this key question, the following sub-questions became crucial:

1. What mediation strategies (restrictive, active or co-viewing) do Nigerian parents adopt when engaging with Disney animated films that portray women?
2. How do Nigerian parents decode the portrayals of women in Disney animated films?
3. How do Nigerian parents perceive the implications of portrayals of women for their parenting behaviours?
4. What are the determinants of how young Nigerian parents engage with portrayals of women in Disney animated films?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study draws on two theories: the Audience Reception Theory and the Parental Mediation Theory. The idea of audience reception, as captured in Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, was used to explore how young Nigerian parents construct meaning from Disney films' gender portrayals. Hall argues that media messages are encoded with preferred meanings by producers but are subject to various interpretations by the audience, based on their sociocultural contexts. These interpretations can be dominant, negotiated, or oppositional (Hall, 1980). The dominant interpretation means that the audience has accepted the message at face value, without questioning or challenging its meaning, while negotiated interpretation means that the message has been accepted but the audience goes on to bring their experiences or perspectives into the interpretation. Oppositional interpretation entails rejection of the media message, often because it conflicts with the values of the audience.

Stuart Hall's framework is complemented by the Parental Mediation Theory (Clark, 2011; Rasmussen et al., 2016), which emphasises how parents actively engage with media to shape their children's media experiences, either through restrictive mediation (limiting access), active mediation (discussing content) or co-viewing (watching together). Parental engagement with media encompasses how parents select, monitor and discuss media content with their children (Clark, 2011). The Parental Mediation Theory would categorise the engagement of young Nigerian parents with Disney's portrayal of women in animated films into restrictive mediation (limiting access to the films), active mediation (discussing content with children) and co-viewing (watching together with children), with active mediation relying on and also having the

potential to enhance critical thinking and media literacy (Rasmussen et al., 2016). These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for analysing how young Nigerian parents interpret Disney's evolving portrayals of female characters and how they mediate these representations in their parenting practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disney's portrayals of women

Scholars argue that Disney productions are well known for their iconic female characters, such as *Cinderella* and *Moana* (Hine et al., 2018; Tóth & Lassú, 2023). However, previous research has highlighted numerous issues with gender representations in Disney animated films, for example, the portrayal of Disney heroines such as *Snow White* and *Cinderella* as passive, helpless and in dire need of rescue (Hine et al., 2018). These portrayals are an extension of the negative portrayals that Disney has been criticised for in the past decades (Uzuegbunam & Ononiwu, 2018). Studies have criticised the negative portrayals of women, especially princess characters, in Disney films released before 2009 (Hine et al., 2018). England et al. (2011) suggest these female characters portrayed by Disney often embody traits and behaviours traditionally associated with women, such as weakness and a reliance on men for salvation or codependency. Hine et al. (2018) suggest that these portrayals reflect the social contexts of their time, indicating that women were seen as weak and dependent on men by society.

Examinations of Disney films produced after 2009 indicate several positive developments: princess characters exhibit a broader spectrum of romantic scenarios, demonstrate a mix of masculine and feminine traits, participate in rescue missions and, occasionally, dismiss romantic pursuits altogether (Dundes et al., 2019). After 2009, more Disney princesses were depicted as empowered, meaning that they were able to protect and provide for themselves, unlike earlier representations in which they relied on male characters for support (Hine et al., 2018). For example, Hine et al. (2018) argue that the films *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), which features Princess Aurora as its main character, and *Moana* (2016), showcasing Princess Moana, highlight the significant differences between the outdated gender roles depicted during the Disney Classical Era (1937–1959) and the more modern roles presented in the Disney Revival Era (2009–2022). Hine et al. (2018) argue that the female Disney character Aurora, categorised as a "Classic Years Woman", is predominantly passive, with her destiny shaped by others, such as Prince Philip who raised her from the dead with a kiss. In contrast, *Moana* embodies a strong and independent character with a well-rounded behavioural profile, displaying a higher proportion of masculine traits than feminine ones (60% to 40%, respectively) (Hine et al., 2018).

There has been extensive analysis of the representations of female characters in Disney animated films, particularly focusing on the contrasting portrayals of classic and modern princesses (Dundes et al., 2019), but there is a notable gap regarding the specific engagement and interpretation of these portrayals by diverse cultural audiences. Most studies have primarily centered on Western perspectives (Dundes et al., 2019; England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018), leaving a significant lack of exploration into how young parents from the global South perceive and interact with these portrayals of women in Disney films. Given that cultural contexts can influence the reception and interpretation of media, it is important to investigate how young Nigerian parents understand the representations of female characters in Disney films, especially in light of the cultural values and beliefs surrounding female gender roles within Nigerian society, including those associated with respectfulness, submissiveness, chastity (Okunnu, 2024), and expectations of decorum (Akpan, 2015; Ifegbesan & Azeez, 2024). This gap is particularly relevant as the narratives presented in Disney films not only reflect Western ideals but also have implications for global audiences, particularly in countries with differing cultural norms and values regarding gender.

Furthermore, while the literature indicates a shift towards more empowered female characters in Disney films produced after 2009 (Dundes et al., 2019), there remains a lack of qualitative insight into how these changes are received by non-Western audiences, particularly in terms of their implications for parenting, education and the socialisation of children. Understanding the perspectives of Nigerian parents can provide a richer and more diverse view of the impact of Disney's evolving portrayals of

female gender roles and can contribute to broader discussions about global media influence on gender socialisation.

Determinants of how parents engage with Disney portrayals

There have been investigations on the factors influencing parents' interactions with Disney portrayals. One significant element is parental demographics. Luisi (2022) found that parental mediation approaches are often linked to parents' gender, with fathers typically setting rules and mothers engaging more in daily discussions with their children. However, parent's media literacy, rather than gender, can also determine their mediation style (Luisi, 2022).

The demographics of children have also been found to influence the extent to which discussions about gender in Disney films occurs. As children grow older, parental mediation generally decreases, with parents more actively regulating media consumption for younger children (12 and under) compared to adolescents (Collier et al., 2016). Furthermore, a child's gender may affect how parents approach media management, with female children receiving more attention during television viewing than male children (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2022; Luisi, 2022).

Luisi's (2022) research investigated whether specific parental traits and social identities influenced the willingness of 190 parents to talk about media portrayals. The results from the study conducted by Luisi (2022) indicated that parental involvement, fandom and nostalgia played a significant role in parents' readiness to discuss Disney movies with their children. Parents who regularly watched Disney films with their children identified as Disney fans and felt nostalgic. These parents were more inclined to have conversations about these movies. With regard to the determinants of Nigerian parents' interactions with female gender representations in Disney animated films, the results from the study conducted by Luisi (2022) would imply that social identities – such as fandom – might significantly influence discussions regarding the representation of women in Disney content within Nigerian homes. Recognising these elements could help explain the factors that influence how young Nigerian parents approach discussions with their children around the portrayals of women in the media.

Beyond Disney-specific engagement, Nikken and Schols (2015) examined parental mediation strategies across digital media use among young children. Their study found that children's media skills and activities significantly influenced parental mediation styles, with variations depending on whether children engaged in educational content or passive entertainment. They identified five key mediation strategies – co-use, supervision, active mediation, restrictive mediation and monitoring – demonstrating that children's media skills played a stronger role in shaping mediation approaches than parental attitudes about media. These findings point to how parental mediation is not only reactive but also adaptive, influenced by children's evolving digital competencies and behaviours. Similarly, Livingstone et al. (2015) emphasise how socio-economic factors, particularly income and education, shape parental mediation of digital media use. Their study revealed that higher-income, more educated parents were more likely to employ diverse mediation strategies and balance restrictive rules with efforts to promote offline activities. In contrast, lower-income, less educated parents tended to rely on stricter mediation strategies but were often ambivalent about digital media, reflecting concerns over both its risks and benefits. Notably, Livingstone et al. (2015) highlight how parental digital literacy also played a role, with more technologically proficient parents demonstrating greater confidence with regard to managing their children's media use. This suggests that mediation strategies are not uniform but are shaped by intersecting socio-economic and technological factors.

Expanding on the findings of Nikken and Schols (2015) and Livingstone et al. (2015), Dias et al. (2016) explored parental mediation practices across European contexts and demonstrated how cultural norms and technological access influence digital engagement strategies. Their study, which included qualitative interviews with families in Belgium, Germany, Latvia and Portugal, found that parents predominantly acted as "gatekeepers" who controlled both access to and use of digital technologies. Dias et al. (2016) found that their mediation practices were shaped by their perceptions of digital technologies as either responsible entertainment or educational tools, ultimately influencing the types of content children could

access. While parents primarily employed restrictive mediation (focused on time limits rather than content regulation) and supervision, the study conducted by Dias et al. (2016) also revealed a gap between parental perception and actual control over children's digital consumption. Dias et al. (2016) found that some parents assumed they had more oversight than they actually did, illustrating the challenges of ensuring children's online safety despite strict mediation efforts. These studies reveal what can be described as a complex landscape of parental mediation, where factors such as children's media skills (Nikken & Schols, 2015), socio-economic background (Livingstone et al., 2015) and cultural context (Dias et al., 2016) all interact to shape how parents regulate their children's media engagement.

The literature reveals three major patterns in parental engagement with Disney content: co-viewing, active mediation and restrictive mediation. Co-viewing, as seen in Asawarachan's (2016) study, highlights shared enjoyment but limited critical engagement. In contrast, Luisi (2022) emphasises active mediation, where parents facilitate discussions on sensitive themes such as gender roles. Tóth and Lassú (2023) showcase restrictive mediation, where parents curate media consumption to avoid perpetuating undesirable stereotypes. The studies illustrate cultural and contextual differences in how parents engage with Disney media. While Thai parents (Asawarachan, 2016) often accepted Disney films' educational and moral value (dominant readings), United States (US) non-White parents (Luisi, 2022) actively negotiated their children's interpretations, reflecting Hall's encoding-decoding model. Similarly, Mason (2017) found oppositional readings among audiences who critiqued Disney's gender stereotypes, aligning with Luisi's findings on critical engagement.

Literature establishes the need for more scholarship on parental engagement, particularly in relation to Disney films. The review highlights how parental engagement with Disney varies across cultural contexts, such as Thailand (Asawarachan, 2016), the US (Luisi, 2022), Hungary (Tóth & Lassú, 2023) and Norway (Sørenssen, 2018). However, there is a gap in research on African parents, particularly Nigerian parents. This study fills this gap by exploring how young Nigerian parents engage with portrayals of women in Disney animated films.

Studies such as Luisi (2022) and Mason (2017) show that parents – especially mothers – engage in discussions about gender stereotypes in Disney films. However, they also highlight gaps in how effectively these discussions address problematic portrayals. This study builds on these findings by examining whether and how Nigerian parents engage with representations of women in Disney animated films. Tóth and Lassú (2023) show how Hungarian parents' values shape their Disney film preferences (such as traditional vs. independent princesses). This study looks at how Nigerian cultural norms, religious influences and societal expectations shape parental engagement with portrayals of women in Disney animated films, given the paucity of research in this area. Moreover, while previous research (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2022; Luisi, 2022) found that mothers tended to engage more in daily discussions about gender themes, while fathers were more likely to set media rules, it is not clear whether this pattern applies in Nigerian households, where gender roles and parenting responsibilities may differ. This study contributes to understanding how Nigerian fathers and mothers navigate conversations about femininity in Disney films.

Furthermore, most research on parental mediation of Disney content is rooted in Western frameworks, such as Clark's (2011) typologies and Hall's (1980) encoding-decoding model. Therefore, this study provides an opportunity to assess whether these theoretical frameworks adequately explain Nigerian parents' engagement with Disney portrayals of women or whether alternative models are needed to account for local cultural and social dynamics. Over all, this study expands research on parental media engagement in the Nigeria context, due to limited research in this regard.

METHODOLOGY

We adopted a qualitative research approach because it provided the necessary depth and flexibility to explore how young Nigerian parents engage with portrayals of women in Disney animated films. This methodology was particularly suitable as it emphasises meaning, context and interpretation (Campbell & Domene, 2024; Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024), allowing us to capture the complexities of parental

perceptions, attitudes and interactions with gendered media content.

The interpretive nature of qualitative research was essential for examining the ways in which cultural, social and personal factors influence parents' engagement with the portrayals of women in Disney animated films. Thus, qualitative methodology was not just an appropriate choice but a necessary one, as it aligned with the study's objective of uncovering the deeper, context-dependent processes underlying parental engagement with portrayals of women by Disney.

Data collection method

In-depth online interviews conducted via Zoom were used to collect data, with each session lasting between 30 and 55 minutes. Open-ended questions encouraged detailed explanations and arguments (Hansen & Świderska, 2024). An interview guide was used to facilitate data collection.

Participants and sampling procedure

A total of 20 Nigerian parents, aged 25 to 35, participated in the study. Participants were purposively selected based on specific inclusion criteria. The first criterion was "exposure to Disney animated films". Participants had to demonstrate familiarity with Disney films featuring female protagonists, such as this in *Cinderella*, *Frozen*, *Moana*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid*. This was assessed through a short pre-screening questionnaire, which asked potential participants to list the Disney animated films they had watched that portrayed women (and briefly talk about the plot), how frequently they watched them and whether they discussed these films with their children. Second, eligible participants had to be parents of at least one child aged between 2 and 12 years, ensuring relevance to the study's focus on parental mediation of children's media exposure. This rigorous screening process ensured that participants possessed the necessary exposure and engagement levels to provide meaningful insights into the research questions.

Purposive and snowball sampling were employed to secure the participants. The recruitment process began with an initial eligible participant who met all selection criteria listed above. This participant was picked from the personal contacts of one of the researchers. After an interview with this first participant, she was asked if she knew other parents who also frequently engaged with Disney animated films and were actively involved in their children's media exposure. These referrals were then contacted and subjected to the same screening process to ensure they met the inclusion criteria before being recruited into the study. To maintain diversity, participants were encouraged to refer parents from different professional backgrounds. This approach helped mitigate potential biases that could arise if all participants were drawn from a single professional group.

The participants contacted for the study were accidentally resident in two metropolitan cities in Nigeria – Port Harcourt and Umuahia. Participants residing in Port Harcourt and Umuahia were still deemed suitable for the study because these two cities have a growing middle-class population and increasing internet penetration (Izeogu, 2016, 2018) that facilitate access to global media content online (Cunningham & Craig, 2016). The two cities also provided a balanced perspective from mid-tier metropolitan areas where Western media exposure can be said to intersect with deeply ingrained traditional values.

The study aimed for diversity in occupational and socio-economic backgrounds to capture different perspectives. Participants included both male (n=6) and female (n=14) parents engaged in various professions such as civil service (n=3), banking (n=2), teaching (n=2), lecturing (n=3), business (n=2), digital content creation (n=1) and nursing (n=1). Monthly incomes ranged from N60,000 (approximately \$35) to N2,000,000 (approximately \$1,176). In addition, six participants identified as stay-at-home mothers, adding perspectives from parents engaged in full-time caregiving. This diversity allowed for a broader understanding of how socio-economic status might influence perceptions of gender portrayals in media.

While the study's sample size of 20 participants may limit the generalisability of findings, it was appropriate for qualitative research, which prioritises depth over breadth (Gabriel et al., 2019). The relatively small sample enabled detailed exploration of personal experiences, parental reflections and nuanced interpretations of gender portrayals in Disney films.

This study specifically focused on educated parents (defined as university graduates) due to their potential for critical engagement with media content and gender portrayals. The views of Livingstone et al. (2015) suggest that educated audiences are more likely to be aware of global gender discourse, media influence on socialisation and the implications of stereotypical representations; their educational background positions them to analyse and articulate how gender portrayals in Disney animated films might reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles within Nigerian society.

Data analysis technique

The researchers manually analysed the interview transcripts using thematic analysis, identifying, assessing and summarising patterns or themes. Following Braun and Clarke's (2012) recommendations, the researchers engaged in a rigorous thematic analysis of interview data collected from the participants. This process involved four key phases, adapted specifically to the study focus on media consumption and gender portrayals in Disney films.

First, familiarisation with the data was achieved through repeated reading of interview transcripts, allowing the researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' perspectives. During this phase, initial impressions were manually noted, with recurring ideas such as "concerns over gender roles in Disney films" and "positive reception of strong female leads" emerging early in the process. Second, initial codes were generated by systematically organising the data into meaningful units. Key phrases from participants, such as "I don't like how the older Disney princesses just wait to be saved" and "My daughter loves Moana because she's adventurous and doesn't need a prince", were highlighted and assigned codes such as "passive female portrayals" and "empowered female characters". These codes captured contrasting viewpoints on gender representation in Disney films.

Third, related codes were clustered into broader themes, derived inductively from the data. One dominant theme, "Young Nigerian parents' decoding of Disney portrayals of the female gender", emerged from codes such as "perpetuation of gender stereotypes" and "portrayals of empowerment". Another key theme, "Media consumption patterns", encompassed codes such as "frequency of viewing", "media platforms used", and "co-viewing practices".

These themes reflected participants' concerns about gender messaging in children's media and their active role in shaping their children's viewing experiences. The themes were then refined and contextualised with supporting quotes, ensuring they were firmly rooted in participants' lived experiences. The theoretical frameworks of the encoding-decoding model and Parental Mediation Theory guided the interpretation, helping to explain how parents critically engaged with media content and mediated their children's understanding.

Finally, themes were reviewed for consistency by cross-checking them against the coded data and the entire dataset. Redundant or overlapping themes were merged, ensuring clarity and coherence in the findings. This systematic approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the data while reflecting the study's research objectives.

Ethical considerations

The participants provided informed consent and were informed about the study's objectives. Their anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms. Identifiers such as "Participant 1" were used to identify the participants instead of their real names. The researchers maintained open communication with participants throughout the research process, and qualitative data were securely stored on the cloud and Google Drive. The ethical measures taken in the study ensured participant safety and data integrity (Shaw & Satalkar, 2018). Informed consent clarified the study aims and maintained transparency (Nijhawan et al., 2013).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Engaging with female gender portrayals in Disney animated films

Throughout our interactions with the participants, a significant theme emerged regarding how parents engage with portrayals of women in Disney animated films. The parents discussed the mediation strategies they employed in this engagement. The sub-themes identified during the data coding process included media consumption patterns, critical consumption of media content, empowerment-seeking and open communication.

Media consumption patterns

One dominant theme that emerged from the qualitative data was the media consumption patterns of the participants. With regard to viewing frequency, as an aspect of the participants' media consumption patterns, we found that their responses in this aspect varied widely, with some parents watching these animated films with their children regularly (for instance, Participant 10 and Participant 2) and others less frequently (for instance, Participant 18). A stay-at-home mother who frequently watched Disney films with her children captured the views of four other stay-at-home mothers thus:

I frequently watch Disney films featuring female characters with my children. They adore these films and particularly admire the princesses so much, often wanting to imitate them.
(Participant 10; stay-at-home mother; female, aged 30)

Another participant, a teacher, indicated that watching Disney films was a regular activity in her household, adding that she had watched Disney for up to 15 years, since the childhood days of her first child:

We watch all the time. I and my girls constantly rewatch their favourite Disney princesses, like Moana, singing along with the movies like in *Frozen*. We watch in the evenings when I get back from work, as well as on weekends and during holidays ... I have been watching with them for up to 15 years since I gave birth to my first daughter ... (Participant 2; teacher; female; aged 33).

However, another participant, a businesswoman, indicated that watching Disney films was not a regular activity in her household:

We do not watch it always ... It is just once in a while. I do not have the time and my children help me in the shop ... We can watch on Sundays or during holidays just to relax, but it is not an everyday thing ... (Participant 18; business woman; female; aged 35).

Analysis revealed that some Nigerian parents, particularly mothers, frequently watched Disney animated films with their children (for instance, Participant 2; teacher; female; aged 33). The regularity of this activity suggests that these films are an integral part of their family entertainment and bonding time. For Participant 10, who is a stay-at-home mother, Disney films serve as a consistent source of entertainment and engagement for their children. The statement from Participant 10 reflects a routine where Disney films featuring female characters are watched "frequently", highlighting the children's affinity for the princesses and their desire to emulate them. For the working mothers who were part of the study, Disney films are a staple during the evening relaxation and weekends. The routine of Participant 2, which involves watching Disney animated films with her daughters after work and during holidays, points to the films' role in family bonding and the children's enjoyment of these characters. The frequent viewing of Disney films indicates a cultural integration where Western media is embraced within Nigerian households. This could point to a broader trend of globalisation and the appeal of Disney's storytelling and character development.

In addition, numerous participants indicated that they watched Disney films on a range of media platforms (Participant 14; Participant 16; Participant 17). Participant 17, who is a stay-at-home mother, aged 32 years, indicated that:

I can say that we watch on many platforms, we have Disney+, Amazon Prime Video, Disney DVD/Blu-ray and the Disney Channel. I always have to subscribe our cable TV for my children to watch Disney. (Participant 17; stay-at-home mother; female, aged 32).

This extensive access highlights the considerable exposure of some Nigerian parents who regularly watch Disney content with their children (such as Participant 14; Participant 16; Participant 17) to Disney animated films that feature female characters. In addition, the mention of both digital platforms (streaming services and digital purchases) and older media (DVD/Blu-ray) suggests that the Nigerian parents who frequently watch Disney content with their children have adapted to both modern and traditional forms of media consumption. This diversity in points of access increases the likelihood of frequent and varied exposure to Disney films. This consistent exposure could significantly influence children's perceptions of gender roles and characteristics. The availability of Disney films on demand and across different platforms ensures that these films are easily accessible whenever parents or children want to watch them. This constant availability could lead to repeated viewings that reinforce the messages and potentially make the portrayals seem true (Winter, 2024).

The findings that suggest that the participants, especially the stay-at-home mothers (for instance, Participant 17), regularly watch these films with their children, is consistent with previous research. Asawarachan (2016) suggests that parents in Thailand also create time to regularly watch Disney movies with their children. However, this study expands Asawarachan's (2016) study by highlighting that the young Nigerian parents who participated in this study accessed these films across various platforms, including Disney+, Amazon Prime Video and Disney Channel. This variety of media platforms emphasises the widespread availability and consumption of Disney content among Nigerian families, which we see as the starting point of whatever influence it can have on them.

The result that indicated that Nigerian parents, particularly stay-at-home mothers, frequently watched Disney films with their children aligns with the co-viewing aspect of the Parental Mediation Theory, where parents watch media alongside their children. Co-viewing, as a form of mediation, can have some implications that are worth mentioning. We can talk about a shared media experience where watching films together fosters family bonding and provides opportunities for shared discussions about the content. For instance, through co-viewing, parents can address the narratives, themes and characters portrayed in Disney films, guiding children's interpretations (Asawarachan, 2016; Luisi, 2022).

The finding that some Nigerian parents (Participant 14; Participant 16; Participant 17) access Disney films through multiple platforms such as Disney+, Amazon Prime Video and Disney Channel reflects the increased availability of global media content. This widespread accessibility seems to encourage regular co-viewing, making it easier for families to incorporate these films into their routines. However, while co-viewing ensures exposure to shared media experiences, it does not inherently encourage critical engagement. The Parental Mediation Theory suggests that active mediation, where parents deliberate and discuss the media's messages, is a more impactful way to develop children's media literacy as without active discussions children may passively absorb the messages, including stereotypical gender roles, as seen in many Disney films (Clark, 2011). However, the phenomenon of co-viewing can still be considered as important because the combination of regular co-viewing and the variety of media platforms highlights the growing penetration of globalised media into Nigerian households. This access points to a foundational opportunity for young Nigerian parents' critical engagement with Disney content, where they can guide their children through complex themes and reinforce critical thinking and cultural pride by doing so. Here, co-viewing can be considered a springboard for active mediation.

Consumption of media content

The young Nigerian parents we spoke to applied critical consumption of media content to manage their children's exposure to Disney animated films that feature female characters. One participant, a mother whose occupation is content creation, emphasised that:

I deliberately watch these movies with my daughters and discuss their content ...
(Participant 9; content creator; female; aged 29)

Another parent who is a lecturer highlighted her strict approach to reviewing media content:

We do not watch just anything in my house. Before allowing my children to watch a Disney movie, I Google it to ensure that it is in line with our culture. I hear some of these films even portray gay characters. We don't want that. I ensure that the movies my children watch do not promote harmful stereotypes (Participant 6; lecturer; male; aged 35).

The findings on the critical consumption of media content among the young Nigerian parents we interviewed align with broader literature on parental engagement with Disney films, particularly in relation to co-viewing, active mediation and restrictive mediation. The two parental perspectives in the findings reflect different approaches to media regulation, both of which resonate with existing research on mediation strategies. The mother who watches Disney films with her daughters and discusses their content demonstrates active mediation, which Luisi (2022) found to be more common among non-White parent-child dyads in the US. This approach is also in line with Asawarachan's (2016) findings on Thai parents who engaged in co-viewing, though the Nigerian mother's engagement was more critical, reflecting a deeper awareness of gender representations. Similar to the gendered mediation patterns observed by Luisi (2022), the mother in the Nigerian context (Participant 9) appeared to take a more hands-on approach to discussing media portrayals with her children.

The father in the findings presented above (Participant 6) exhibited restrictive mediation, closely monitoring media content before allowing his children to watch it. This approach mirrors the findings of Tóth and Lassú (2023), where Hungarian parents selectively exposed their children to Disney princesses based on their values. The Nigerian father's concerns about cultural representation and stereotypes align with the oppositional readings identified by Mason (2017), where certain audiences critique and reject dominant gender norms in Disney films. His explicit rejection of media content that portrays LGBTQ+ themes further illustrates cultural specificity in media mediation, a factor not explicitly explored in prior studies but relevant to African contexts where romance with same sex, for instance, is seen as taboo. With regard to parental media literacy and cultural context, Luisi (2022) suggests that parental media literacy influences mediation styles more than gender alone. In the Nigerian findings, the media literacy of Participant 9 seemed to inform her active mediation, while the approach of Participant 6 reflected a more conservative stance shaped by cultural values. This aligns with Sørenssen (2018), who identified cultural critique as one of the parental voices shaping media engagement.

Moreover, while Tóth and Lassú (2023) examined restrictive mediation in Hungary, this study provides a non-Western perspective, showing that moral and cultural considerations shape restrictive mediation beyond concerns about gender roles. Participant 6, a Nigerian father, explicitly rejected LGBTQ+ themes; this illustrates how cultural identity influences media censorship, a dimension that has not been extensively explored in prior research. Furthermore, the gendered division of mediation responsibilities seen in Luisi (2022) is also evident in the findings of this study, with Participant 9, a mother, engaging in discussions and Participant 9, a father, enforcing stricter content control. This reflects broader global patterns but also highlights context-specific differences in media censorship and active mediation in Nigerian families.

Empowerment-seeking and open communication

The research indicated that a young Nigerian parent actively searched for Disney animated films that cast strong, independent female characters. This participant, who is a stay-at-home mother, expressed this sentiment:

I look for Disney films like *Moana* which show women as strong and independent people because I want them to be inspired and be strong and independent also. (Participant 10; stay-at-home mother; female, aged 30).

These insights reflect parents' intentional efforts to provide positive role models for their children and to challenge conventional gender norms. The social cognitive theory would hold that exposure to strong and independent female characters can positively influence children's beliefs about gender roles and their self-perception (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2014). Choosing films that promote female empowerment would mean that some young Nigerian parents could contribute to the broader goal of achieving gender equality in society.

The results also indicated that a young Nigerian parent encouraged open communication with her children with regard to how Disney portrays female characters. This participant, who is a working-class mother, stated that:

I always tell my children to ask questions and tell me how they feel about these films. (Participant 2; teacher; female; aged 33).

Open communication and dialogue can encourage critical thinking and awareness among children about gender representations in media. Through the creation of an environment where children feel comfortable to express their opinions and ask questions, parents can help them develop analytical skills and discernment. This is consistent with assertions that active engagement with media content can foster discussions that shape children's perceptions and attitudes towards gender dynamics (Luisi, 2022).

In navigating female character portrayals in Disney animated films, some of the young Nigerian parents that participated in the study (Participant 2; Participant 10) applied approaches that included the critical consumption of Disney content, seeking empowered and empowering representations, as well as fostering open communication with their children. These strategies reflect an awareness of how media can influence children's perceptions and values. When young Nigerian parents engage with and discuss media content actively, they play a significant role in guiding their children's understanding of gender roles and nurturing critical thinking skills. Ultimately, these results point to the possibility that informed media consumption and parental involvement could shape children's development in the face of evolving gender norms and societal values.

The result that the participants shared various strategies for navigating female gender portrayals in Disney films, with open communication and dialogue being prominent methods, aligns with Luisi's (2022) findings that parents often engage in discussions about gender stereotypes. However, our study went further to suggest that many of these conversations involved parents actively explaining why certain gender portrayals, such as females as dependent on men, should not be copied. These conversations are predominantly between mothers and daughters. Luisi's research, like ours, also showed that such discussions were less frequently initiated by fathers and were more frequent between mothers and their daughters, highlighting a universal trend of mothers being more invested than fathers in addressing female-gender-related issues with their daughters. The finding that discussions about gender portrayals are more common between mothers and daughters is significant as it suggests that mothers, instead of fathers, deliberately take on the role of addressing gender-related issues with daughters to an extent that can build their awareness of and resistance to traditional gender norms. Conversely, the lesser engagement of fathers in such discussions may point to an African trend that reflects traditional gender roles where fathers may not perceive themselves as primary agents in addressing gender representations

with their children but as mainly agents for financial and material support of children (Mavungu, 2013).

The explicit review and discussion of media content demonstrate how parents actively guide their children's interpretations. This parental behaviour aligns with active mediation and restrictive mediation as key aspects of the Parental Mediation Theory. Parents such as Participant 9 (content creator; female; aged 29) and Participant 6 (lecturer; male; aged 35) engage in deliberate analysis of Disney films, scrutinising their themes for cultural compatibility and the potential reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. For example, the lecturer's pre-screening process reflects restrictive mediation by filtering out content they consider misaligned with cultural or moral values. In addition, the focus on selecting Disney films with strong, independent female characters also resonates with active mediation. Through prioritising films that showcase female agency, the young Nigerian parents that spoke to us tend to disrupt traditional portrayals of women as dependent or passive, thereby providing children with alternative and aspirational narratives. Furthermore, encouraging dialogue about Disney films aligns with active mediation and tends to build a learning environment where children can critically reflect on media messages.

While the findings presented above align with the Parental Mediation Theory, they also extend its application. The findings of this study confirm that individuals can combine active mediation, restrictive mediation and co-viewing, which suggests a more holistic aspect of media mediation. In addition, this study extends the understanding of the Parental Mediation Theory by emphasising the cultural context in which mediation occurs. Nigerian parents' concerns about preserving cultural values (such as rejecting portrayals of LGBTQ+) highlight the relationship between global media influences and local cultural frameworks. This adds a layer of restrictive mediation, where parents limit exposure to content that is deemed inconsistent with their values in a way that ensures that media consumption aligns with their family's cultural and moral principles.

DECODING DISNEY PORTRAYALS OF THE FEMALE GENDER IN ANIMATED FILMS

The participants interpreted the portrayal of the female gender in Disney productions in multiple as well as varied ways. Sub-themes that emerged in this regard included the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and portrayals of empowerment.

Perpetuation of gender stereotypes

One of the participants from the working-class category viewed Disney movies as perpetuating certain gender stereotypes that might shape children's understanding of gender roles. According to this participant, who is a male civil servant:

We all love Cinderella but I am worried that Disney films convey to our daughters that they need a prince to save them or that their worth is determined by their looks. Many older Disney movies emphasise the prince rescuing the princess and similar themes.
(Participant 6; lecturer; male; aged 35)

Another participant highlighted the detrimental effects of these stereotypical representations:

The emphasis on romantic love is excessive. Take Cinderella and Snow White, for example, their lives appeared to revolve around the prince. The phrase "Prince in Shining Armour" is always associated with the idea of the prince saving the princess in Disney films.
(Participant 8; lecturer; female; aged 35)

Participants, especially those from the working class (Participant 6; Participant 8), expressed concerns that Disney films reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. These concerns focus on the portrayal of female characters needing rescue and the emphasis on their appearance. Participant 6, a lecturer, was worried that Disney films teach daughters that their value is tied to being rescued by a prince or their physical appearance. This perception is rooted in older Disney films where narratives often revolve around a prince

saving a princess, thus promoting a limited view of female agency and worth. Participant 8, also a lecturer, emphasised the excessive focus on love and romantic relationships in films such as *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, where the princesses' lives seem dependent on the prince. The participants' concerns suggest that these stereotypical portrayals could shape children's perceptions of gender roles in ways that may limit their understanding of female empowerment and independence. The views of different scholars (England et al., 2011; Hine et al., 2018; Uzuegbunam & Ononiwu, 2018) suggest that children might internalise the idea that female characters are passive and reliant on male figures for their success and happiness and that these reinforced stereotypes could have long-term implications for how children view gender roles in real life, potentially influencing their aspirations, behaviours and expectations in gender relations.

Portrayals of empowerment

One of the participants valued Disney films for showcasing strong female characters. This parent, who is a stay-at-home mother, pointed out this beneficial aspect:

I really appreciate it when I see brave female characters in these films. It is important for our children, especially daughters, to have inspiring people they would want to copy. Moana is a brave warrior princess. When our children watch these princesses, they are motivated. (Participant 12; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 30)

The findings suggest that certain Nigerian parents may hold Disney films in high regard for their representation of empowered female characters. Participant 12, a stay-at-home mother, praised these films for featuring strong, independent role models such as Moana, who inspire their daughters to be brave and ambitious. This perspective points to the positive impact of contemporary Disney characters on children's aspirations, showing them that they can be high achievers. These empowered portrayals tend to provide valuable role models which encourage children to emulate these qualities and foster a more progressive understanding of gender roles. This appreciation contrasts with concerns about traditional stereotypes, highlighting diverse parental perspectives on Disney's influence. These varied perspectives highlight the complex ways Disney animated films can influence parental views of children's gender roles and how this can be influenced by the media. These varied perspectives are consistent with findings from other studies (Asawarachan, 2016; Mason, 2017). Mason's (2017) research particularly highlights that while some parents enjoy Disney movies, others criticise them for problematic gender portrayals, such as the portrayal of female characters as dependent on men for survival. The findings of this study support Hall's encoding-decoding model as it indicates that some of the young Nigerian parents we spoke to do not passively accept media messages but rather interpret them in various ways, often making sense of portrayals of the female gender in Disney animated films in oppositional and negotiated ways.

PERCEPTION OF THE EFFECTS OF DISNEY'S WOMEN'S PORTRAYALS ON PARENTAL BEHAVIOURS

The young Nigerian parents that participated in this study make varied and multiple meanings of how female gender representations in Disney animated films can influence the ways they play their roles as parents. The results in this regard provide insights into how media can influence parenting styles, gender-related socialisation, as well as how cultural values are transmitted. The young parents' perceptions of the effects of Disney's female gender portrayals on their parenting is discussed under two sub-themes: influence on gender socialisation and reflection on cultural values.

Influence on gender socialisation

Two participants (Participant 13; Participant 19) acknowledged that Disney animated films significantly shape gender socialisation, which in turn influenced their parenting practices. A working-class mother shared:

I am increasingly aware of the content which my daughters absorb from Disney movies. I encouraged them to be strong and independent like Moana. I remind them not to wait to be saved by a prince like in Snow White. (Participant 19; sales personnel; female; aged 35)

Another participant, a stay-at-home mother who watches Disney films with her son, expressed that:

Watching these films with my son has made me teach him how to respect women and treat them with care. All Disney princes are caring ... There are also the bad women, and I tell him not to marry a bad wife like Cinderella's stepmother. I told him that his wife should be caring and loving and should behave well ... (Participant 13; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 33)

These parental narratives illustrate deliberate efforts by the young parents to counteract harmful stereotypes and mould their children to become responsible, gender-sensitive individuals based on Disney's gender portrayals. Exposure to varied gender depictions in media seemed to encourage critical thinking among the parents, which helps them nurture their children towards developing independence and a sense of respect.

Reflection on cultural values

Parents also contemplated how Disney's depiction of female characters led them to reassess and reinforce cultural values within their families. One stay-at-home mother remarked:

In *Pocahontas*, the princess climbs trees. I explained to my children that in Igbo culture, climbing trees is not customary. They inquired why Pocahontas was doing it, and I clarified that it might be acceptable in her culture. (Participant 13; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 33)

Another participant emphasised that she preferred portrayals of female gender as respectful and homely, as it helped her remind her daughters of the need to imbibe these values:

Our girls need to be homely, chaste and respectful. That is who we are as Africans ... Whenever we watch Cinderella, I remind my girls of how respectful and homely they should be... (Participant 16; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 32)

The young Nigerian parents we spoke to (Participant 13; Participant 16) showed complex perceptions of how female gender portrayals in Disney animated films could influence their roles as parents. While one of the participants was aware of gender socialisation and engaged in proactive discussions with their children (Participant 16; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 32), another suggested that these Disney films helped them to reflect upon and reinforce cultural values (Participant 13; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 33). These findings highlight critical media engagement and active parental involvement as important factors that can help young parents to shape the understanding of gender roles and cultural norms among their children.

Some participants suggested that gender portrayals by Disney could impact their parenting (Participant 13; Participant 19). This result is consistent with findings from another study where parents seemed to be guided by Disney portrayals (Tóth & Lassú, 2023). There is also a takeaway from the social learning theory which posits that children learn behaviours by observing and imitating media models (Iwwighren & Chukwuebuni, 2024).

Participant 13 seemed to fear that her children might replicate the gender roles depicted in these films. Therefore, they actively engaged in gender socialisation and communication, using these films to educate their children about gender roles and cultural values. This mirrors findings by Tóth and Lassú (2023) where

parents of preschool-aged children in Hungary who valued traditional virtues such as submissiveness preferred classic Disney princesses such as Snow White, while those favouring independence and resilience selected contemporary characters such as *Belle*, reflecting the deliberate role parents play in shaping their children's media exposure to align with their cultural and aspirational ideals. The results, however, contrast with Asawarachan's (2016) study, which found that Disney films were mainly viewed as tools for learning English, with minimal impact on parenting and gender expectations.

DETERMINANTS OF HOW YOUNG NIGERIAN PARENTS ENGAGE WITH FEMALE GENDER PORTRAYALS IN DISNEY ANIMATED FILMS

Participants were asked about the factors that shaped how they engaged with female gender portrayals in Disney animated films. We found that their engagement was influenced by factors including worries about female gender stereotypes and the parents' own fandom.

Parental worries about female gender stereotypes

Participant 2 seemed worried about how Disney animated films reinforced female gender stereotypes. This concern seemed to influence their engagement and selection criteria. One participant summarised this perspective:

We are cautious about films that depict women as helpless people. We are mindful of films that focus too much on romance and those that show women as too reliant on men for survival. It is crucial for our children to see diverse, empowered and empowering portrayals of girls. I appreciate that *Kiya* which airs in Disney Junior channel on DSTV portrays African girls as empowered. I think this can help African girls become confident ... (Participant 2; teacher; female; aged 33)

The concerns raised by the participants with regard to gender stereotypes seem to motivate them to select films that feature strong, independent female characters. This is to ensure that their children receive and are influenced by positive and varied representations of women.

Parents' fandom

Some parents' engagement with Disney animated films was shaped by their affection for Disney. The engagement allowed them to relive childhood memories. One participant remarked:

I love to watch Disney animated films so much. I love *Cinderella*. It reminds me of life while living with my parents in Enugu. So, it is easy to watch with my children ... (Participant 10; stay-at-home mother; female; aged 30)

The comment above reflects how nostalgia and emotional connections influence parents' engagement with Disney films. According to Jenkins (2007), fandom influences how people consume media content and ties fans emotionally to the media (Jenkins, 2007). The participant's affection for Disney films was tied to feelings of nostalgia; watching these films allows them to reconnect with cherished memories, resonating with Jenkins' concept of "affective economics", which sees the consumption of media as a phenomenon that is shaped by emotion. The finding that the ways in which the young Nigerian parents who participated in this study engaged with the portrayals of women in Disney animated films are shaped not only by cultural values and expectation contrasts but also by nostalgia and emotional connections is consistent with Luisi's (2022) study, which identified fandom and nostalgia as significant factors.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how young, university-educated Nigerian parents, aged 25 to 35 years, across various professions in Port Harcourt and Umuahia, engaged with Disney's portrayals of female gender in

animated films. The study adopted a qualitative research approach and drew on the Audience Reception Theory and the Parental Mediation Theory. This study points to the significant role that the media, specifically Disney's animated films, can play in shaping parental practices and children's understanding of gender roles in Nigeria. Findings show that the young Nigerian parents who participated in this study, just like their counterparts in the Western context, critically engage with the portrayals of women in Disney films, often adopting active mediation strategies to address perceived stereotypes or to reinforce values of empowerment and cultural identity. While some parents expressed concerns about the perpetuation of traditional gender stereotypes and the possibility that Disney films may encourage aspects that are not consistent with African culture, such as same sex orientation, others appreciated the evolving depiction of strong and independent female characters, such as Moana.

The study confirms that Disney films are a medium through which parents reflect on and transmit cultural values, blending globalised media content with local traditions. Through the adoption of active discussions, restrictive strategies or co-viewing practices, young Nigerian parents can deliberately attempt to mitigate the potential adverse effects of stereotypical portrayals while incorporating positive Disney representations in their gender socialisation efforts.

While our study points to the relationship between media, culture and parenting practices, it has limitations. The sample size for the study was 20 and this number did not adequately capture the diversity of Nigerian parents. Moreover, certain demographic groups such as older parents (above 35 years) as well as less educated parents were excluded. The focus on an urban context (Port Harcourt and Umuahia) also limits the generalisability of the findings. To address these limitations, future research should aim for a more diverse sample, including participants of various ages and those from various socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, adopting qualitative interviews alongside observational methods could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how Nigerian parents engage with Disney films, while comparative studies across different cultural contexts could further throw more light on how cultural values and expectations can shape sense-making of gender portrayals in Disney animated films.

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Risk Communication Strategies Used During the Rising Water Levels Around Kenya's Lake Naivasha

AUTHOR(S)

Iminza Turere

United States International
University- Africa, Kenya
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4133-3915>

Robert G. Nyaga

Busara Center for Behavioral
Economics, Kenya
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7528-4840>

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Abstract

Risk communication is critical to providing a scientific understanding of perceptions and responses to climate change threats. Using seven focus group discussions comprising 75 participants, this study examined the role of risk communication in effective implementation of climate change adaptation during floods experienced around Lake Naivasha basin in Kenya in 2018. Specifically, within the contexts of Protective Action Decision Model and risk communication in relation to flood occurrences, the study investigated the following: knowledge and awareness of climate change, risk communication systems put in place to enhance adaptive behaviour and whether the risk communication systems in place were viewed as effective. Findings revealed that the participants understood what climate change is, and related it to their own experiences. In addition, as there was no clear communication before the floods occurred, the risk communication systems were seen as not effective enough, even though the participants received warnings about the imminent rise of water levels in the freshwater lake.

Keywords

Climatic event, communication strategies, flooding, Kenya, rising water levels, risk communication

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INTRODUCTION

Risk communication is an important means for scientific understanding of perceptions and responses to climate change threats (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013; MacIntyre et al., 2019). Effective communication is required to reach policymakers, inform decision-making actions and influence people's behavioural choices (Buszko-Briggs, 2021) – whether in times of threat or not. However, it is notable that during extreme weather changes, risk communication tends to focus more on short-term messaging about the hazards and protective actions that need to be taken by organisations and individuals affected during such life-threatening events (MacIntyre, et al., 2019). On the contrary, climate change often requires long-term proactive risk communication strategies that motivate adaptive changes so as to ultimately improve climate resilience, and to safeguard the continuity of communities' daily activities and the operations of public and private institutions. Research suggests that current risk communications have not resulted in the intended increase in awareness or behavioural change in response to topics related to climate change consequences (Rollason et al., 2018). Literature shows that people want information on when and how flooding may occur so that they can understand their risk and feel in control of their decisions on how to respond (Rollason et al., 2018).

The study examined the role of risk communication in effective implementation of climate change adaptation during flooding periods experienced around Lake Naivasha basin in Kenya. To be more specific, within the contours of Protective Action Decision Model (PADM) and risk communication in relation to flooding occurrences, the study investigated the participants' knowledge and awareness of climate change, risk communication systems put in place to enhance adaptive behaviours and whether the interviewees viewed the risk communication systems in place as effective. PADM was the study's perfect intellectual guide because it incorporates the processing of information derived from both social and environmental signifiers with messages that social sources convey through communication channels to those at risk (Savitt, 2015).

Climatic crises in the Eastern Africa region and globally are undeniable. Floods, typhoons, storm surges and sea level rise represent significant risk management challenges. This calls for a need to develop early warning systems that start with seasonal preparedness and continue to all the way to strategic planning for future risks (Ngo et al., 2019). Unfortunately, potentially affected populations are often familiar with only local natural hazards such as flood risks and are, at times, less aware of risks associated with a changing climate or they do not associate perceived hazards with climate change (Ngo et al., 2019). Thus, it is necessary to create public awareness about climate change and its associated risks. This makes the current research important as it provides useful information regarding the central role of risk communication during catastrophes such as floods in Lake Naivasha. Literature shows a paucity of research about the place of risk communication during flooding periods in Kenya, when compared to other sub-Saharan Africa nations such as Nigeria, where this topic of investigation has been significantly studied (Nwafor, 2021; Olawuyi & Adiamoh, 2015; Oruonye, 2013). Even the available Kenyan studies in risk communication are lopsided in favour of the health sector (see Cholo et al., 2024; Kaduka et al., 2023; Khaoya & Mogambi, 2024; Otaye & Awuor, 2024). As such, one overarching goal of the study discussed in this article was to bridge this existing research gap.

While the study helps to narrow down the identified research gap, it also contributes to the growth of PADM in African risk communication scholarship. Scholars of risk communication and climate change, government environmental agencies, governments, policymakers, non-governmental organisations, donors, climate change advocates and local communities around flood-prone areas will find this study's findings highly beneficial. For instance, the Kenyan government could use the current findings to improve the existing risk communication strategies, while donors could provide more funding to strengthen the identified weak areas in risk communication strategies.

THE RISING WATER LEVEL PHENOMENON IN THE RIFT VALLEY LAKES

The rising water levels of Kenya's Rift Valley lakes have been a major cause of concern for the country's socio-economic development (Republic of Kenya, 2021). In recent years, the rising waters have caused a humanitarian crisis with approximately 75,987 households displaced in 13 affected counties. This has resulted in 379,935 people requiring humanitarian help (Republic of Kenya, 2021). The effects on lake ecologies are a concern as flooding increases disturbance and dilutes the saline waters of alkaline lakes (Avery, 2020; Cheronon, 2021; Omondi, 2020). These upsurges have affected not only the rich biodiversity but also the infrastructure and livelihoods of the local communities within the vicinity (Herrnegger et al., 2021). Lake Turkana, the largest permanent desert lake in the world, has shown substantial increases in water levels that have affected the local communities.

Lake Naivasha, the focus of this study, is part of the Kenya Lake System in Great Rift Valley. Situated in the eastern Rift Valley, and about 100km north of Nairobi (Kenya's capital), the lake is a shallow freshwater lake (three to six metres in depth) and occupies approximately 160 km² in area (Hickley et al., 2002). The lake lies in a closed basin at an altitude of 1890m above the sea level, receives 90% of its water from River Malewa and is subject to considerable fluctuations in water level (Hickley et al., 2002). Since 2018, the lake has experienced an inexplicable rise in water levels (Nzuve, 2023). With a 30% increase in mean annual rainfall between 2010 and 2020, the lakeside town of Naivasha was hit by catastrophic floods that lasted for nearly a year (Nzuve, 2023). The local community, especially those residing in Naivasha's

Kihoto Settlement, bore the brunt of the disaster: hundreds of people were displaced and countless facilities, public services and livelihoods were lost as the waters rose (Nzuve, 2023). Further, the lake's rising water levels – attributed to climate change – displaced between 1,400 and 5,000 people from Kihoto and Kamere beaches (Gitonga, 2024; Nzuve, 2023). Also, flower farms, wildlife, crop fields and fishing activities were not spared (Gitonga, 2024; Nzuve, 2023).

The Kenyan government attributes the lake's changing water levels to climate change, which it sees as the chief cause, and to a combination of other human activities such as deforestation and accumulation of silt (Republic of Kenya, 2021). Avery (2020) points out that the rising Rift Valley lake levels are not unprecedented, because such lakes as Lake Naivasha have reached higher levels historically. This is supported by Herrnegger, et al. (2021) who observe that the current fluctuations in lake levels had been there in the past. In 1917, for instance, the lake was 2.4 metres higher than it is and at least 13 metres higher in earlier centuries. Lakes Nakuru, Baringo and Bogoria have also risen to their highest level in decades, but they all had been higher in earlier centuries. Even then, in conjunction with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the government of Kenya cited climate change as the main factor behind the rising lake levels in the Rift Valley basin (Republic of Kenya, 2021).

The current population in the region has expanded, however. This has resulted in higher population densities, more so in the riparian areas, which has led to higher damage potential (Herrnegger, et al., 2021). Similarly, Avery (2020) adds that conversion of catchment areas to agricultural land, coupled with clearing of forests in the catchment areas, encroachment of riparian land and wetland zones in general, besides increase in urbanisation, have all led, in part, to the degradation of the land surrounding the lakes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present research was anchored on the revised PADM. The model, as captured in Figure 1 below, identifies three core perceptions: threat perceptions, protective action perceptions and stakeholder perceptions that form the basis for decisions about how to respond to an imminent or long-term threat (Lindell, 2021). PADM suggests that risk communicators should not neglect any step of the model to avoid ambiguity for their audiences as this could initiate a repetitive cycle of decision processing and information seeking, which in turn could delay the initiation of protective action (Lindell & Perry, 2012). Further, Lindell and Perry (2012) point out that the outcome of the protective action decision-making process, together with situational facilitators and impediments, produces a behavioural response among the audiences. In the present study, PADM was used to demonstrate the importance and effectiveness of risk communication, and the eventual adaptation of long-term risks linked to climate change. PADM identifies three critical pre-decision processes: reception, attention and comprehension of warnings or exposure that precede all further processing.

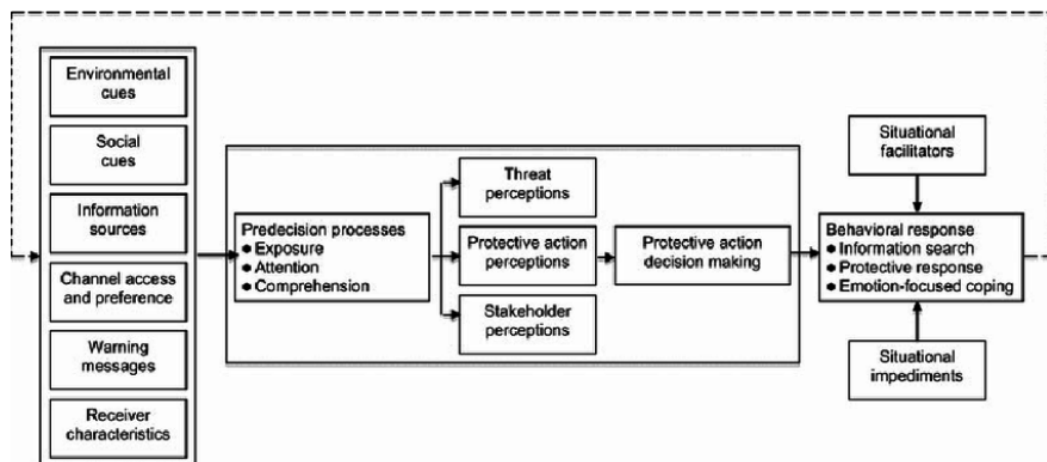


Figure 1: Information flow in the PADM (Source: Lindell & Perry, 2012)

Further, the flow chart in Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of the model, which captures the findings of studies on individual response to environmental hazards or disasters (Lindell & Perry, 2012). The process of protective action decision making begins with three types of cue: environmental cues, social cues and warnings (Lindell & Perry, 2012). While environmental cues include sights, smells or sounds that signal the onset of a threat, social cues emanate from observations of others' behaviour (Lindell & Perry, 2012). Lindell and Perry (2012) say that warnings are messages that are transmitted from a source via a channel to a receiver. These warnings result in effects that rely on the receivers' attributes such as physical (e.g., strength), psychomotor (e.g., vision), cognitive (e.g., mental abilities), economic abilities (e.g., money) and social resources (friends). Effects are changes in receivers' beliefs and behaviours.

In related works, Mileti and Sorensen (1990) developed a sequential process model of decision making: hear the warning, understand the contents of the warning message, believe the warning is credible and accurate, personalise, confirm that the warning is true and others are acting, and respond with protective action. Importantly, Strahan and Watson (2018) in their research concluded that the PADM should be modified to reflect the complexity of choice confronting communities facing risk, and consider alternatives to mandatory evacuation. Thus, information from the physical environment will not lead to the initiation of appropriate protective actions unless people are exposed to, heed and accurately interpret the environmental cues (Mileti & Sorensen, 1987). Most studies have found that risk perception predicts response activities as well as long-term hazard adjustments for a variety of hazards (Dash & Gladwin, 2007; Lindell, 2013; Sorensen, 2000).

From the three core perceptions of the revised PADM mentioned above, stakeholders include "authorities (all levels of the government from the top to the local government), evaluators (scientists, medical professionals, universities), watchdogs (news media, citizens' and environmental groups), industry/employers, and households" (Lindell & Perry, 2012:620). Some stakeholders have more power to influence than others do. That said, Raven (1993) highlights six bases of this power held by some stakeholders: reward, coercive, expert, information, referent and legitimate power. Reward and coercive bases of power consist of regulatory approaches that require constant scrutiny to ensure rewards are received only for compliance and that punishment will inevitably follow noncompliance (Lindell & Perry, 2012; Raven, 1993).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies indicate that effective climate change communication depends on how the message is designed and how it resonates with the intended audience (Poortvliet, et al., 2020). The assumption that the general public simply does not have enough information to accurately evaluate societal risks has dominated the risk communication field for many years (Heath et. al., 2017). Thus, if scientists and experts in the field would do a better job of explaining and communicating climate science in a simplified or tailored manner, then, perhaps, the public would be more concerned about the issue (Banerjee, 2015). Studies such as that of Markowitz and Guckian (2018) highlight climate communication challenges, insights and opportunities with an existing evidence base that communicators can incorporate to improve outcomes. This includes the importance of knowing one's audience, cultivating the right message, framing the issue carefully, highlighting solutions and confronting false information in ways that unify diverse audiences rather than contribute to polarisation (Markowitz & Guckian, 2018).

In support of such solutions, Poortvliet, et al. (2020) conclude that effective climate change communication depends on how the message is designed and how it resonates with the intended audience, which is probably why there is a need to explore different ways of effectively passing on the intended messages. In this context, various studies have examined the risk communication strategies employed during occurrences of climate change consequences such as rising lake water levels that result in flooding and that are characterised by extensive damage to human life and property (see Ben-Enukora et al., 2023; Elia, 2017; Krueger, 2022; McIntyre et al., 2019; Zhong et al., 2021).

In Nigeria, Ben-Enukora et al. (2023) examined flood risk communication, risk perception and

precautionary behaviours among heads of households in flood-prone communities in select local governments in Kogi State. Findings showed that access to early warning about the risk of flooding was high (68.8%) and accessible through interpersonal communication channels. However, perceived knowledge of flood precautionary measures and emergency protocols gained from early warning information was low. In conclusion, although the results show a high-risk perception of floods, perceptions of coping abilities are low, which results in low levels of precautionary measures. Ben-Enukora et al. (2023) recommend an appropriate media mix and action-based information for future flood risk communication.

Elia (2017) investigated farmers' awareness and knowledge of climate change and variability of farmers in Tanzania. Using in-depth interviews and focus discussion groups, findings showed that farmers were aware of climate change, its variability and had coping and adaptation knowledge. Further, factors that affected farmers' awareness and understanding of climate change were the types of media used in communication, communication gaps, unreliable and untimely information, low income and budget constraints. The study recommended intensive awareness and sensitisation, timely access to information and frequent contacts between researchers, extension officers and farmers. In Thailand, Kittipongvises and Takashi (2015) investigated public perception of flooding events through analysis of risk communication for Bangkok's flood crisis of 2011. Using an online survey of 437 respondents, findings showed poor risk communication. The vast majority of the respondents distrusted any information provided by the central government, while rumours and misinformation might have affected public perceptions and responses to the floods.

Taking cognisance of how to improve the decision making of risk management and enhance community resilience to flash floods, Zhong et al. (2021) examined the perception of risks, communication of warnings and mitigation actions concerning flash floods in Qingyuan district, Guangdong province in China. Enlisting a survey sample size of 280 respondents, they found that risk perceptions and risk communications influenced the mitigation action in the community. For instance, 55.4% of the respondents misperceived or underestimated the risk of flash floods. Moreover, residents in the rural community and suburban community reported close social communication with neighbours, which might have influenced the inhabitants' attitudes and behaviours towards the flash flood warnings and mitigation actions. Krueger (2022) examined important flood risk communicators in Canadian municipalities – flood risk communication practices relative to risk communication theory. The study surveyed staff from 18 large, flood-prone Canadian municipalities and interviewed 21 subject matter experts concerning household-level flood risk mitigation. Krueger's findings indicate that most municipalities' flood risk communications should theoretically be raising residents' flood risk awareness and preparedness. Limited time and resources were the greatest barriers to municipalities' flood risk communication efforts to the public. The study recommended further application of evaluation frameworks to flood risk communication activities.

In Pakistan, Ali et al. (2022) explored risk perception and communication in flood-prone rural areas of District Dera Ghazi Khan. The research reported a strong correlation between flood risk perception and risk communication. Those living away from the river had higher risk perception and received better risk communication than their peers. Further, hazard proximity was also found to affect risk perception and communication. Thus, people with higher risk perception were likely to seek risk communication information and engage in flood preparedness and mitigation measures, the findings showed. MacIntyre et al. (2019) reviewed 43 articles addressing issues such as climate change, flooding, hurricane events, extreme heat and wildfires predominantly from the United States, Canada and Europe. Their findings on the evaluation of risk communication show that community-based strategies proved to be more effective in extreme weather and climate change. In their analysis, McIntyre et al. defined effective risk communication as a two-way exchange of information between parties (government, public, community, experts).

This comprehensive review of literature leads to the study's five research questions (RQ):

RQ1a: Do participants understand what climate change is?

RQ1b: Do participants relate their experiences to climate change?

- RQ2a:** What climate change risk communication systems are in place to enhance adaptive behaviour to climate change?
- RQ2b:** Was climate change information available to the participants?
- RQ3:** Do participants view as effective the risk communication systems put in place to enhance adaptive behaviour?

METHODS

This study used focus group discussions to collect data from 75 participants who were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques from community members living around Lake Naivasha, Kenya. The participants comprised 55 community members and 20 key informant interviews (KIIs) took place. Focus group discussions were chosen as they are effective in getting in-depth insights about perceptions, implicit beliefs and attitudes (Keyton, 2014; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Each focus group discussion had between six and 10 participants. The participants involved in the KIIs were drawn from various categories based on the stakeholder mapping framework developed by Ogada et al. (2017). To enhance data validity and reliability, each focus group discussion interview was recorded and saved as an audio file to ensure accuracy during transcription. The participants' inclusion criteria were guided by the following: community members who were directly affected by the rising Lake Naivasha water levels; those displaced by the lake's waters or people currently living near the risen water levels of the lake; KIIs participants who were directly affected by the rising waters or involved with creating the awareness; those involved in helping the community with the climatic crisis and mitigation measures; and a participant had to be at least aged 18 years.

The 75 participants were drawn from members of the communities surrounding the lake; stakeholders in the Lake Naivasha basin which includes villages such as Kihoto, Kasarani and Malewa; members of government agencies such as the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA); the business sector such as Naivasha Tourism Group, KenGen Limited whose Ol Karia hydropower plant is a prominent lakeside landmark; international agencies/NGOs; local resource-use groups such as farmers or fishing communities; local community-based organisations and research institutions. The focus group discussion interviews were conducted between March and May 2022. The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the United States International University-Africa and the Government of Kenya through the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI).

The data corpus was analysed using thematic analysis, where only the emerging themes and patterns that were relevant to the two research questions and the PADM were considered. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis involves analysing and reporting patterns within data. The first step in the analysis process was to familiarise the researcher with the data through transcription of the audio files. The transcripts were then read to observe meanings and patterns that occurred across the data set. This led to the development of a coding system that represented the meanings and patterns identified from the data. Codes were subsequently collated manually with the supporting data. Through this, classification of the major issues was done by sorting the codes into potential themes with the research questions as the foundation. The researcher then reviewed and revised the themes to ensure that each theme was supported by sufficient data to back it up. The researcher removed those that did not have sufficient data. The final step was to synthesise data into findings that identified the major themes that addressed the research questions.

FINDINGS

Knowledge and awareness of climate change

RQ 1a explored the participants' knowledge and awareness of climate change, while RQ1b examined the participants' experiences of climate change. The findings revealed that most of the participants

understood what climate change is, and could relate to it through their own experiences, including the risks they faced as a result of the weather phenomenon. In addition, the participants said their awareness of climate change was from mainstream media (television and radio) and social media platforms. For instance, Wallace (40 years) from Kihoto said: "Climate change is the weather variability during certain seasons due to global warming caused by human activities such as deforestation and pollution". Jane (34 years) from the Lake Naivasha Riparian Association explained: "Climate change is the changes in the usual climate of the planet that are especially caused by human activities". These findings suggest that most participants know what climate change is. This indicated a need to focus on interventions, more so the effects of climate change, rather than focus on rudimentary concepts of the weather phenomenon.

Most of the participants learnt about climate change through television, which points to a possibility that information may not have reached some people, specifically those who do not own a television set. In addition, the majority of the interviewees attributed the rising water levels of Lake Naivasha to climate change. Similarly, some participants reported that dumping waste in the lake was one of the main reasons causing the water levels to rise. They observed that some residents and business people, including industrial plants, practised poor waste management. As a result, the lake has high metal levels with raw sewage, phosphates and nitrates washed into it by river tributaries when it rains. Notably, waste management has remained a great challenge in Lake Naivasha, according to some stakeholders.

Existing climate change risk communication systems

In line with RQs 2a and 2b, the findings showed that there was no explicit nor clear communication, especially before a climatic risk or extreme weather event. Nevertheless, most people living around the lake region usually receive warnings concerning the possible risks of climate change, such as rising water levels. However, this happens when it starts to rain and not before. Some participants confirmed receiving warnings. Salim (46 years) stated: "I heard on the radio that Lake Naivasha has broken its banks further as the water has been rising. People were advised to move to higher grounds with immediate effect". Likewise, a 25-year-old female from Kihoto concurred with Salim's observations:

Yes, I have received such warnings before. Initially, when I relocated to Naivasha, I heard that Lake Naivasha usually bursts its banks and that it is always destructive, especially to businesses and those living around the Lake. Therefore, I am always prepared to move once it happens.

These observations are consistent with previous studies which showed that during extreme weather, risk communication tended to focus on short-term messaging around the hazards and protective actions that needed to be taken by organisations and individuals during these events (MacIntyre, et al. 2019). The authorities responsible oftentimes failed to motivate long-term adaptive behaviour since long-term proactive communication strategies required for effective impact were usually lacking.

In a similar vein, the findings from this study also revealed that some participants who received the warnings about rising waters did so from community leaders who disseminate such information, especially during the rainy season. They noted that community leaders and those under the "Nyumba Kumi Initiative" went door-to-door to notify people living around the lake to vacate before flooding was out of control. "I received the warning from the community leaders from 'Nyumba Kumi'. They visited every household around the lake to notify them that the lake would burst its bank and advised people to relocate to the higher grounds," said 40-year-old Giselle from Malewa Group. In addition, other community leaders were reported to have used public address systems to alert the community members about rising water levels. Most of the participants recognised the public address system as the most effective means of disseminating information on rising waters as it caters to the needs of everyone, even those without access to media such as television and radio.

Relatedly, some participants learnt from the older people who had lived in the area for a long time and who understood the possible occurrences based on their historical background. For instance, Onditi

(41 years) said his grandmother told him that when it rained heavily, the lake used to extend and its waters filled their houses. However, other participants reported having never received any warnings of the possible risks of climate change. James (28 years) from Malewa area said this:

I am one of the victims of the rising levels of Lake Naivasha. I have never received any warning signs of the chances of this happening. I know that the lake broke its banks after a long time, but I did not get any warning.

Notably, communication has been given in a top-down manner, or one way, and the community has no way of responding to or inquiring from the authorities. However, the respondents held the government responsible for ensuring that climate change information was accessible and also for disseminating the relevant communication on climatic issues that affected them. Mary (from Karagita Group), noted:

I would not say I have access to that kind of information. The government officials are supposed to communicate and even create awareness of the impacts of climate change risks don't do so. They only come to communicate with us after the risk has happened.

These comments capture the frustrations participants experience with the government not utilizing early warning systems that could help the communities relocate from areas near the lake before flooding starts. This calls for the government to work closely with the communities to co-create solutions that could foster community trust between them and enhance the effectiveness of communication systems.

Environmental organisations such as NEMA were recognised by the participants as the bodies responsible for communicating information on risks associated with climate change. NEMA is a government agency responsible for the implementation of all policies relating to the environment. According to the interviewees, matters concerning environmental sustainability and climate are in NEMA's domain, and so the agency should do its work by ensuring the dissemination of the right information at the right time, and by using the most accessible means. Alvin, 22 years, said: "I think environmental organisations such as NEMA should be entrusted with communicating climate issues since it is their work". In addition, Josephat (39 years) asserted: "Environmental organisations should be the ones that disburse information on climate change risks and its impacts". These sentiments illustrate that the participants know the organisations that deal with environmental risks at Lake Naivasha, but it appears that the communication channels used by these organisations have not been effective. Thus, there is a need to enhance how government agencies communicate the risks associated with the rise in water levels to ensure that the communities residing around the lake are properly forewarned on time.

Effectiveness of the risk communication systems

Poortvliet et al. (2020) reiterate that effective climate change communication depends on how the message is designed, and how it resonates with the intended audience. This makes clear the importance of messaging and tailoring message designs for specific audiences. As clearly stated, the PADM integrates the processing of information derived from social and environmental cues with messages that social sources transmit through communication channels to those at risk. From the findings of RQ 3, participants considered the existing warning system not effective enough. However, as noted above, during floods, warning systems such as the use of radio and public address systems informing people to move to safer grounds were used, which seemed to have been more effective. MacIntyre et al. (2019) note that risk communication efforts during short-term extreme weather events appear to be more effective than efforts to communicate risk around climate change. Their study suggested that this could highlight a unique opportunity for authorities to adapt strategies commonly used for extreme weather to climate change.

The rate of adaptive practices such as relocating to higher grounds was observed to be drawn from environmental cues as the water levels kept rising, displacing more people as it spread. Warnings were

sent by the county government through radio and community leaders such as chiefs using public address systems. Importantly, responses to the climatic change warnings were an indicator of how effective the risk communication was. Most participants who received communication concerning Lake Naivasha's rising water levels took the warning seriously and responded in different ways. Some relocated their families, while others stayed in the same area but were more cautious and observant of the slightest changes in the lake water levels. Here are three excerpts from the interviewees.

When I received the warning, I relocated my family to another rental away from Kihoto. It was very expensive to move, but we could not wait for the danger. Now we are waiting until we move back when everything goes back to normal. (Morris from Kihoto)

I received the warning, but I could not relocate because I am running my business here. However, I got more attentive and cautious so that in case of any notable signs of the rising waters, I moved to a different place. (Kimani from Kongoni)

After I received the warnings, I relocated. I am not planning to ever live in Kihoto again because the area always has issues with flooding. (Esther, 37 years from Kihoto)

The initial stages of PADM include messages that social sources transmit and postulate how channels differ in characteristics such as dissemination rate and precision. Moreover, it goes on to show that people differ in their channel access and preference (Lindell & Perry, 2012). The respondents in this study expressed their preferred mode of communication based on what they deemed more effective – the use of the public address system by the community leaders or the government officials were seen as more or less acceptable and effective. This is important for the policymakers and the Nakuru county leadership to note when considering effective channels and modes of communication, especially when climatic risk is involved.

DISCUSSION

Information is an important tool used in the realisation of any set objective, especially where adaptation is required (Awili et al., 2016). This study's findings demonstrate that most of the residents in the Lake Naivasha region do not have access to basic information on climate change risks. The vast majority of the participants did not have access to relevant data on climate that was important to their situation or experiences. This calls for more awareness and education concerning climate change risks, mitigation and how it impacts people directly in their daily lives. There is a critical need to come up with communication systems that are both convenient and effective to satisfy the need to access climate change information.

Living in the digital age, we are exposed to too much information, too many sources and information often seems to be too complicated (Wardekker, 2004). In the wake of smartphone devices, younger people can find out general information on climate change, but none tailored specifically for their situation or area. A study showed that despite having a wealth of information and knowledge existing in research institutions, universities, public offices and libraries, only a small amount of information reaches grassroot level (Awili et al., 2016). People who have access to climate change information, either from the Internet or television, stated that information on climate change risks was quite complex with scientific jargon that ended up being misinterpreted by most recipients. Mabon (2020) recognises that "translating" knowledge and enhancing user capacity to understand complicated data are recognised challenges to making climate information services more effective. However, climate change policymakers are urged not to underestimate the citizens' ability to comprehend climate change awareness and their willingness to engage with complex scientific data. This resonates with the respondents' attitudes towards climate change information in this study.

Coincidentally, previous research shows a gap in climate change risk communication. Rollason et al. (2020) found that current risk communications failed to meet user needs for information in the period

before a flood event, thus leaving users unsure of what would or might happen, and how best to respond and adapt. The PADM includes information-seeking activities that involve information needs assessment, communication action assessment and communication action implementation, all of which influence protective action. The process of information search begins with an information needs assessment arising from an individual's judgement that the available information is insufficient to justify proceeding further in the protective action decision process (Lindell, 2021). Understandably, the residents in this study expressed the need to learn more for them to be better equipped for climate change impacts.

Scholars such as Poortvliet et al. (2020) suggest that the overall goal of climate change communication should first be determined to create the right messaging appropriate for the cause – whether for scientific communication or a call to action for adaptive behaviour. Once this is determined, they further suggest that greater efforts towards measuring the efficacy of climate change risk communication be used to track the effects of varying communication strategies quantitatively. These are critical pointers for the government and other responsible stakeholders to note.

PADM notes that the process of protective action decision making begins with environmental cues, social cues and warnings. In this study, all these cues were present and influenced the decision of many people around Lake Naivasha to move or relocate to safer grounds. However, when it comes to information needs assessment, the available information was not sufficient to justify long-term protective action. This information provides the opportunity to make long-term plans on climate change information education available for all. In so doing, people would be able to adapt to the environmental changes happening every day. Studies recommend intensive awareness and sensitisation, timely access to information and frequent contact between researchers, extension officers, farmers and the community (see Elia, 2017).

FUTURE RESEARCH

In this study, respondents expressed worries about the reactive nature of the messages they received. This opens a door for future research to finding out the reasons that may hinder the dissemination of proactive climate-change-related information, especially in the context of sub-Saharan Africa. Further, the rising water levels have also affected other Rift Valley lakes such as Turkwel Gorge Dam and Lake Victoria, according to a government report (Republic of Kenya, 2021). Similar studies should include people living around major lakes and those who have experienced floodings due to climate change. This calls for thorough research in these areas, of both a qualitative and quantitative nature.

More investigations could be carried out to find out specific gender perceptions and to gauge whether there might be distinct attitudes between men and women, so as to develop better risk communication strategies that accommodate both genders. Some studies have shown that women are more knowledgeable on climate change affairs than men. However, despite this, they are less likely than men to respond to climate change risks due to gender-specific adaptation barriers (Akter & Khanal, 2020). Women experience a higher burden of domestic work, which limits their ability to participate in climate change adaptation measures such as training or information-sharing sessions (Akter & Khanal, 2020). Such a study could also be extended to consider other factors and demographics, for example, different age groups could be reached better through different means of communication. Young people, for instance, are more likely to be reached by information disseminated via social media platforms than older people who might be either illiterate or semi-literate. Future research could also take an ethnographic approach, where the researcher would use a combination of several data collection techniques (surveys, observations, in-depth interviews, document analysis, diary note taking, focus group discussions, case studies, etc.) to holistically understand the place of risk communication in flood-prone areas such as Lake Naivasha.

LIMITATIONS

A major limitation of this study was the fact that scores of communities had been displaced by the swelling banks of Lake Naivasha, hence most of the target respondents had either moved to safer grounds or relocated from the area completely. To address this limitation, the study used a combination of purposive

and snowball sampling approaches to locate the relevant target population for data collection. Also, this being qualitative research based on non-representative sampling techniques (purposive and snowball); the results are not generalisable to the larger population and should be interpreted with caution, even though they provide wonderful insights about the topic of investigation. This calls for more studies which use representative sampling techniques, for example, survey research.

CONCLUSION

The current research examined the role of risk communication in effective implementation of climate change adaptation during flood periods experienced around Kenya's Lake Naivasha basin in 2018. Within the context of PADM and risk communication in relation to flood occurrences, the study explored knowledge and awareness of climate change, risk communication systems put in place to enhance adaptive behaviour and whether the risk communication systems in place were viewed as effective. Findings revealed that the participants were knowledgeable about climate change and related it to their own experiences. As there was no clear communication before the floods occurred, the risk communication systems were seen as not effective enough, even though the participants received warnings about the imminent rise of water levels in the freshwater lake. The findings coincide with other studies (MacIntyre et al., 2019; Poortvliet et al., 2020), which reiterates that effective climate change communication depends on how the message is designed and how it resonates with the intended audience. It is important that the right expertise should be employed, applying the right strategies, for effective communication to specific audiences. From a theoretical viewpoint, the government should create a feedback mechanism for monitoring and evaluation. This should be in line with the final stage in the PADM, which is a feedback loop directed by the communication action assessment that returns to the initial inputs that include the environmental and social cues, information sources, channel access and preferences, and warning messages. Feedback is an important tool to get communication right as it reveals what is effective and what is not, whether people have the right information, and it gives a chance to offer clarity wherever there is doubt. The feedback from the government should take a collaborative approach with all relevant stakeholders because issues related to climate change require combined efforts for collective resilience. The stakeholders include communication experts, researchers, climate change experts, government, policymakers, donors and communities, to name but a few.

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Parental Perspectives on Gamified Experiences and Entrepreneurial Skill Development in Children: A Qualitative Study from South Africa's Eastern Cape

AUTHOR(S)

Eugine Tafadzwa Maziriri

University of the Western
Cape, South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8047-4702>

Tinashe Chuchu

University of the
Witwatersrand, South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7325-8932>

Miston Mapuranga

Walter Sisulu University, South
Africa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4402-5600>

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Abstract

Gamified communication is increasingly recognised as a powerful modality in education, fostering interactive learning and behavioural transformation. This study explored how game-based communication strategies contribute to entrepreneurial skill development in childhood, with a focus on South Africa's Eastern Cape. While gamification is well researched in Global North contexts, little is known about how it functions in early entrepreneurial development within African childhood settings. Drawing on an interpretivist paradigm, the study investigated how parents experience and make sense of gamified tools that promote entrepreneurial mindsets in their children. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 parents, and data were analysed using the Gioia methodology and narrative analysis. The findings revealed that gamified platforms act as dynamic communication environments through which children engage in simulated entrepreneurial scenarios. Themes such as strategic risk taking, creative problem solving and financial decision making emerged as communicative competencies fostered through these interactions. Through foregrounding gamification as both a pedagogical and communicative practice, this study contributes to African-centred communication scholarship. It highlights the potential of gamified media in localised development contexts, particularly in addressing youth unemployment and social inequality. The research underscores the importance of adapting global digital communication frameworks to African childhood learning environments, opening up new avenues for policy, pedagogy and participatory communication.

Keywords

Development communication, digital media, entrepreneurial skills, gamified communication, South Africa, youth development

INTRODUCTION

In today's postmodern era, education can occur in informal settings, such as purchasing toys and games for children that foster entrepreneurship (Tessema et al., 2024). Gamification, the integration of game mechanics into non-game environments, has emerged as a globally transformative approach to enhance learning, motivation and behavioural development (Hamari et al., 2014; Sailer et al., 2017). Within the context of entrepreneurship, gamification serves as a dynamic tool to nurture essential entrepreneurial traits, including creativity, resilience, problem solving and critical thinking (Kapp, 2012; Khaled & Vasalou, 2022). Through leveraging game-like experiences, gamification fosters engagement and cultivates an entrepreneurial mindset among learners, enabling them to navigate challenges and seize opportunities

with innovative solutions (Deterding et al., 2011; Lam et al., 2023). Globally, scholars such as Hamari et al. (2014) and Deterding et al. (2011) have highlighted how gamified learning transforms education by enhancing motivation and behavioural outcomes. The global rise of educational technology has amplified this trend, integrating gamification into both formal and informal learning spaces. Children represent a critical demographic for cultivating entrepreneurship, as early exposure to entrepreneurial concepts can shape their cognitive and behavioural development (Hwang et al., 2022). This is especially relevant within broader international efforts to prepare children for the 21st-century economy through creative and entrepreneurial skillsets (European Commission, 2016; Fayolle & Gailly, 2015).

In South Africa, where unemployment and economic inequality persist, fostering entrepreneurial skills among children is increasingly recognised as a vital strategy for long-term socio-economic transformation (Herrington et al., 2023). Gamification provides a unique platform for introducing entrepreneurial skills in an engaging and interactive manner, thereby bridging the gap between traditional education and experiential learning (Trotta et al., 2022). The Eastern Cape, one of South Africa's most underserved provinces, presents both a need and an opportunity for innovative educational interventions such as gamification, particularly among youth who face systemic educational and economic barriers.

While global studies have extensively explored gamification in entrepreneurial education, they predominantly focus on regions such as Europe, Asia and North America, leaving significant gaps in African perspectives. For instance, Landers and Armstrong (2017) investigated the motivational effects of gamified learning environments on entrepreneurial intentions among secondary school students in the United States. Similarly, Hamari and Koivisto (2019) explored the role of gamification in enhancing entrepreneurial creativity and risk-taking behaviours among youth in Finland. From a Brazilian context, de Melo et al. (2023) examined the impact of gamification on entrepreneurial skill development among middle school students, while Alkaabi (2023) analysed the influence of gamified entrepreneurial simulations on problem solving and innovation in the context of the United Arab Emirates. In additionally, Daniel et al. (2024) highlighted the application of gamification to nurture entrepreneurial attitudes in Portuguese schools.

Despite these international advancements, a notable lack of equivalent research persists within African countries, particularly in South Africa. This gap is striking, given the potential of gamification to address challenges such as youth unemployment and the need for entrepreneurial skills development in the region. Existing South African studies have provided foundational insights but have not directly investigated how gamification fosters entrepreneurial skills among children. For example, Alao and Brink (2022) assessed the use of educational technology in enhancing creativity and problem solving among South African youth for employability but did not focus on entrepreneurial outcomes.

These studies highlight the need for research that directly addresses the intersection of gamification and entrepreneurial development in children within the South African context. Through building on international findings and adapting them to local educational, cultural and socio-economic dynamics, this study addressed this critical gap. This study also focused on a relatively underexplored demographic in gamification research: parents who introduce entrepreneurial games at home. While most previous studies prioritise educators and institutional contexts, this study highlights the familial setting as a formative space for entrepreneurial learning. Specifically, it investigated how gamification could be leveraged to nurture entrepreneurial mindsets and behaviours among South African children, ultimately contributing to the development of a robust entrepreneurial culture in the country. To achieve this, the following research question was formulated:

RQ: How do parents perceive the role of gamified experiences in fostering entrepreneurial skills in their children?

This study offers several key contributions. First, it advances the body of knowledge on gamification and entrepreneurship by investigating how gamified experiences can cultivate entrepreneurial skills in children. Existing literature emphasises the effectiveness of gamification in education (Dichev & Dicheva,

2017; Su & Cheng, 2019), yet its application to entrepreneurial development, especially among children, remains underexplored. Through addressing this gap, the study enriches theoretical and empirical understandings, highlighting the role of game mechanics in nurturing key entrepreneurial traits such as creativity, problem solving and resilience (Landers, 2022). This contribution is critical as it aligns with the growing emphasis on integrating innovative methods into early entrepreneurial education (Groening et al., 2022).

A second unique contribution of this research lies in its focus on a rural setting in South Africa, specifically in Mthatha, Eastern Cape. Rural areas are often underrepresented in studies on entrepreneurship and gamification, despite their distinct socio-economic and cultural dynamics. Through situating the research in a rural context, this study sheds light on how gamified experiences resonate within communities where traditional educational resources may be limited. It also provides insights into how rural parents perceive and utilise games as tools for their children's entrepreneurial development, contributing to a deeper understanding of how entrepreneurship can be fostered in underserved regions (Abubakre et al., 2021).

Third, this study targets an under-researched population of parents who purchase games for their children. While prior research has predominantly focused on educators and policymakers, this study emphasises the role of familial influences in shaping children's early exposure to entrepreneurial thinking (Li et al., 2023). Through collecting data from parents, the research provides a unique lens on how games contribute to children's cognitive and entrepreneurial development. This demographic perspective is critical as it underscores the interplay between home environments and gamified learning tools.

Research in developing countries frequently emphasises entrepreneurship as a means of economic empowerment and innovation (Cele, 2022). The study identified specific game features and mechanisms that resonate with children in the region by situating the findings within South Africa's socio-economic framework. This contextual focus ensures the applicability of findings to real-world settings and enhances the practical relevance of the research for policymakers, educators and game developers.

In addition, the study provides practical implications for the design of gamified tools and platforms. Game developers and educators can leverage the findings to create engaging and effective gamified experiences that instil entrepreneurial skills in children. Through identifying specific game elements that enhance entrepreneurial learning, the research bridges the gap between academic inquiry and practical application, providing actionable recommendations for stakeholders invested in fostering entrepreneurship among young people in rural South Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gamification as an educational method is based on multiple learning and motivation theories, including Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2004), Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984) and Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) (Sweller, 1988). These theories suggest that game-based learning elements, including active engagement, autonomy and instant feedback, significantly enhance knowledge retention and skill acquisition (Kapp, 2012). Each of these theories, SDT, ELT and CLT, provides a distinct perspective on how gamification nurtures entrepreneurial skills in children. SDT emphasises intrinsic motivation, ELT focuses on the importance of experiential learning, while CLT highlights cognitive efficiency. Collectively, these theories create a robust framework for understanding how gamification promotes engagement, resilience and practical entrepreneurial skills among young learners. Details about these theories are discussed in the following sections.

Self-determination theory

SDT was pioneered by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in 1985. The theory posits that intrinsic motivation is the fundamental driver of human behaviour, particularly in learning environments. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), intrinsic motivation stems from three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the individual's ability to have control over their actions; competence is the perception of effectiveness in an activity; and relatedness is the need for social connection and interaction. When these needs are satisfied, individuals are more likely to engage in tasks

with enthusiasm and persistence. Other scholars have expanded on SDT by applying it to various learning environments, including gamified educational settings. Ryan and Deci (2017) assert that gamification effectively nurtures intrinsic motivation by incorporating elements that satisfy these psychological needs. For instance, leaderboards, progress bars and achievement badges provide a sense of freedom while interactive challenges offer open and meaningful engagement. Seaborn and Fels (2015) further support this notion, highlighting that gamified learning environments sustain engagement by fostering an intrinsic desire to improve and succeed. In the context of this study, which examined how gamification promotes entrepreneurial skills in children, the SDT was particularly relevant. Gamification elements such as goal-setting, feedback mechanisms and virtual rewards enhance children's intrinsic motivation to engage with entrepreneurial concepts. Through creating an environment that promotes independence (through the choice of business strategies), competence (by mastering financial literacy) and relatedness (through collaboration in team-based business simulations), gamification encourages sustained participation and persistence in entrepreneurial activities.

Experiential learning theory

ELT was developed by David Kolb in 1984. Kolb describes learning as a continuous process in which knowledge is acquired through experience. His model consists of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Kolb (1984) argues that effective learning occurs when individuals engage in an activity (concrete experience), reflect on their actions (reflective observation), derive meaningful insights (abstract conceptualisation) and apply these insights to future situations (active experimentation). Other researchers have extended Kolb's work to various educational settings, including digital learning and gamification. Bellotti et al. (2013) argue that gamified learning environments align with Kolb's experiential learning cycle by immersing learners in interactive business simulations. These simulations allow children to make entrepreneurial decisions, evaluate the outcomes and refine their strategies through trial and error. Gee (2008) highlights that gamification provides a safe space for failure, which is crucial in entrepreneurship. Children can test different business models, analyse the consequences of their choices and adapt their strategies without real-world risks. The relevance of ELT to this study lies in its emphasis on learning through hands-on experience. Entrepreneurship requires practical engagement, and gamification provides children with hands-on opportunities to experiment with business concepts. Through gamified simulations, children can experience the entire entrepreneurial process, from ideation to financial decision making, enhancing their understanding of business dynamics. Through iterating on failed attempts, they develop resilience and problem-solving skills, both of which are essential for fostering an entrepreneurial mindset.

Cognitive load theory

CLT was formulated by John Sweller in 1988. The theory suggests that learning is most effective when instructional materials are designed to manage cognitive load efficiently. Sweller (1988) categorises cognitive load into three types: intrinsic load (the complexity of the content), extraneous load (irrelevant information that hinders learning) and germane load (cognitive effort directed towards meaningful learning). According to Sweller, learning environments should be designed to minimise extraneous load while optimising germane load to facilitate comprehension and retention. Other researchers have applied CLT to gamification and digital learning environments. For instance, Sailer et al. (2017) argue that gamification helps to manage cognitive load by structuring learning experiences incrementally and engagingly. Kapp (2012) emphasises the role of storytelling in gamification, noting that narratives create meaningful contexts that support cognitive engagement. Children can grasp complex entrepreneurial principles more intuitively by embedding business concepts within interactive stories. CLT is relevant to this study as it emphasises the importance of designing gamified learning environments that facilitate, rather than hinder, learning. Entrepreneurship education often involves complex concepts, including financial literacy, risk assessment and business strategy. Through structuring these concepts through interactive games, children can engage with entrepreneurial content without feeling overwhelmed.

Gamification ensures that information is presented progressively, which reduces cognitive overload and enables children to process and apply knowledge effectively in real-world scenarios.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Understanding the phenomenon of "gamification"

The concept of gamification has gained significant traction in education, particularly in entrepreneurship education, as an innovative approach to fostering engagement and motivation. Gamification integrates game-like elements into non-game contexts to enhance learning experiences and promote skill acquisition (Deterding et al., 2011). Given the increasing emphasis on cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset from an early age, gamification offers a promising tool to instil creativity, problem-solving skills and resilience in children (Ruiz-Alba et al., 2019). Gamification in education has been linked to various psychological and cognitive benefits, including increased intrinsic motivation, enhanced engagement and improved knowledge retention (Hamari et al., 2014). When applied to entrepreneurship education, gamification offers a simulated business environment where children can experiment with entrepreneurial concepts, develop business acumen and foster critical thinking skills in a risk-free setting. This learning methodology aligns with 21st-century skills development, which emphasises problem solving, innovation and adaptability (Gee, 2008). Therefore, exploring the impact of gamification on fostering entrepreneurial skills in children is crucial to understanding its potential as a long-term educational strategy.

Gamification in education

Gamification has been widely explored in various educational settings, including primary, secondary and higher education. Studies have shown that game-based learning enhances motivation, knowledge retention and engagement (Dicheva et al. 2015). In entrepreneurship education, gamification is used to simulate real-world business challenges, enabling students to practise decision making, risk taking and strategic planning (Isabelle 2020). Research by Hanus and Fox (2015) found that students who engaged in gamified learning environments exhibited higher levels of participation, engagement and persistence than those in traditional learning settings. The use of leaderboards, point systems and achievement badges fosters a sense of achievement, which, in turn, enhances motivation and promotes long-term learning (Buckley & Doyle, 2016). Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Sailer et al. (2017) demonstrated that gamification has a positive influence on cognitive, motivational and behavioural outcomes in education.

Gamification in entrepreneurship education

Entrepreneurship education aims to develop skills such as opportunity recognition, innovation and business management (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Gamification in entrepreneurship education has been found to increase students' entrepreneurial intentions and competencies by providing experiential learning opportunities (Fernandes et al., 2012). A study by Subhash and Cudney (2018) found that students who had been exposed to gamified entrepreneurship programmes exhibited higher levels of entrepreneurial behaviour and intent than those who had not. In addition, gamified approaches improve students' abilities to apply theoretical concepts to real-world business scenarios (Ruiz-Alba et al., 2019). Research by Bellotti et al. (2013) highlights that digital simulations and serious games provide an interactive platform where students can learn the intricacies of starting and managing a business and can make real-time decisions that mimic entrepreneurial realities.

Gamification and entrepreneurial skills in children

Encouraging entrepreneurial thinking from an early age is crucial when preparing children for future business and career opportunities. According to Almeida (2017), serious games in entrepreneurship education significantly enhance children's leadership, problem-solving and strategic-thinking skills. Furthermore, digital gaming environments provide a safe space for children to experiment with business ideas and learn from failures without real-world consequences (Khan et al., 2018). This aligns with the

argument that gamification helps cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset by fostering creativity, adaptability and resilience (Daspit et al., 2023). Research by Fang et al. (2024) further supports this claim, indicating that children who engage in gamified entrepreneurship learning exhibit higher levels of risk taking, opportunity identification and innovative thinking than their peers who engage in traditional business education.

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

This research followed an interpretivist research philosophy and employed a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with parents in Mthatha, in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study (Pheko, 2014). This approach enabled the collection of rich, narrative data grounded in participants' lived experiences. Through incorporating a narrative inquiry and participant stories, the study aimed to collect data and grasp the lived experiences of the participants (Blustein et al., 2013; Chinyamurindi, 2016a). The use of narratives also enabled an exploration of the sequence of events and actions as they had an impact on individuals (Czarniawska, 2004). Ultimately, the research sought to uncover meaning through participant reflections (Chinyamurindi 2016a; 2016b). To support this aim, the Gioia methodology served as the foundational analytical framework for coding, interpretation and concept generation. Gioia et al. (2013) are advocates of this method's capacity to generate grounded theory through rigorous inductive procedures, rather than relying solely on impressionistic approaches. This methodology is especially relevant when exploring complex social phenomena such as entrepreneurship, where context, behaviour and meaning-making are tightly interwoven (Brush et al., 2009).

Specifically chosen for its aptness, the Gioia approach enabled a structured progression from first-order concepts (informant-centred) to second-order themes (researcher-interpreted), culminating in aggregate dimensions that articulated broader theoretical insights (see Table 1). Gioia (2021) further emphasises that this methodology ensures resonance with both scholarly audiences and the lived realities of participants. In this study, the Gioia method was integrated with narrative analysis to offer a dual lens on how gamification facilitates entrepreneurial skill development, combining thematic rigour with attention to lived sequence and meaning.

Table 1: Analytical coding process using the Gioia methodology

First-order concepts (parent quotes)	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
"My child is always calculating risks in Monopoly."	Strategic risk taking and financial acumen	Entrepreneurial skill development
"SimCity has helped my child manage multiple priorities."	Creative problem solving and resource management	Business strategy and decision making
"My child constantly comes up with new product ideas after playing The Entrepreneur Game."	Entrepreneurial mindset and innovation	Entrepreneurial mindset cultivation
"The Game of Life has led my child to explore different career options."	Decision making and career exploration	Personal and career development
"After playing The Startup Game, my daughter prepares structured presentations."	Pitching and fundraising skills	Business communication and finance
"Food Chain Magnate has taught my son how to manage money effectively."	Financial literacy and resource management	Financial competence development

Sample

To conduct a narrative analysis, the study recruited 18 parents based in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, over a one-year data collection period (January to December 2021). A non-probability convenience sampling technique was employed (Cohen et al., 2011), selected for its practicality in accessing a hard-to-reach population of parents actively using gamified tools for skill building at home. Although convenience sampling limits generalisability, the study prioritised depth over breadth, aligning with the principles of qualitative inquiry. As Guest et al. (2006) highlight, thematic saturation is often reached within 12 to 15 interviews in qualitative research. Our findings affirmed this, with recurring patterns emerging by the 15th interview, and subsequent interviews serving to deepen existing insights. Participants were included if they were parents of children under 18 and had purchased or used gamification tools to support entrepreneurial learning. Eligible participants were invited to take part in the study, and interviews were conducted at mutually convenient times and locations, typically in participants' homes. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours. Informed consent was obtained and pseudonyms were used to ensure participant confidentiality. Table 2 provides a demographic overview of the sample.

Table 2: The participants' demographic characteristics

Participant Number	Name	Age	Gender	Number of Children (Below 18)
1	Peter	47	Male	2
2	Lebogang	33	Female	1
3	Jimmy	51	Male	4
4	Natasha	44	Female	2
5	Thando	36	Male	2
6	Nelly	26	Female	1
7	Howard	47	Male	3
8	Mellisa	41	Female	2
9	Justice	39	Male	3
10	Hope	29	Female	1
11	Mpilo	39	Male	2
12	Fundiswa	33	Female	2
13	Silumko	49	Male	3
14	Noxolo	43	Female	4
15	Sibabalwe	51	Male	2
16	Funeka	39	Female	2
17	Nkosi	53	Male	4
18	Khanyiswa	47	Female	3

Source: Field data (2021)

Data collection method: Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, chosen for their ability to explore complex phenomena through guided yet flexible conversations. This approach allowed participants to reflect on their lived experiences and share detailed narratives about how gamification supports

entrepreneurial learning at home (Sobuce, 2012; Thompson, 2022). An interview guide was developed based on existing literature on gamification and childhood entrepreneurship, combining structured prompts with open-ended questions to elicit both expected and emergent themes (Maziriri & Madinga, 2015). This semi-structured format enabled the interviewer to probe deeper into relevant areas as they arose, ensuring consistency across interviews while allowing for individual variation and depth.

A total of 18 interviews were conducted in person over a 12-month period, from January to December 2021. Interviews took place at participants' homes or other agreed-upon locations and they ranged in length from 45 minutes to two hours. The length variation was influenced by the level of engagement and availability of each participant, but the consistency of themes across interviews helped maintain data quality. With participant consent, most interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. In cases where participants declined audio recording (n=5), detailed field notes were taken during the session and expanded immediately afterwards. To mitigate any potential loss of nuance, these notes were validated through participant member checking. All transcribed data and notes were imported into NVivo 11 for systematic organisation and analysis. The use of digital transcription software allows for accurate theme tracking and efficient categorisation aligned with the Gioia coding structure. This data collection strategy facilitated the emergence of rich, contextualised insights into how gamification was perceived, applied and experienced by parents as a tool for fostering entrepreneurial competencies in their children.

Strategies to ensure data quality and reporting

Strict guidelines were followed to ensure the quality and accuracy of the data in reporting. First, an interview guide was developed, reviewed by experts and piloted during the validation process. Second, data collection was conducted over 12 months, allowing ample time for transcription, analysis and the researcher's reflection.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to institutional ethical requirements and standards. Ethical clearance was obtained from the participating institution, and all participants provided informed consent before the interviews. The study maintained participant confidentiality and anonymity, ensuring that participation was voluntary throughout the research process.

Ensuring the quality and rigour of the research

To maintain research quality and rigour, the researchers employed peer debriefing and member checking throughout the research design, execution and dissemination phases (Treharne & Riggs 2015). Following Johnson et al. (2020), reflexivity was applied to mitigate potential biases. In addition, the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were used to enhance trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was ensured by accurately capturing participants' perspectives and aligning them with the study's objectives. Transferability was achieved through rich descriptions of the data, enabling future researchers to build on similar studies. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining a consistent research protocol, while confirmability was ensured through systematic coding and verification processes.

Narrative analysis

All interview transcriptions were imported into QSR International's NVivo version 11 software for data analysis and management. NVivo facilitated the organisation of textual data, identification of thematic patterns and visualisation of emergent narratives. As guided by the literature, narrative markers were used to structure participant responses, including orientation, abstract, sequence of events, evaluation and conclusion (Labov, 1972). The narrative analysis enabled participants to articulate their experiences with gamification in fostering entrepreneurial skills in their children. This method provided a holistic understanding of how gamified learning environments impact children's entrepreneurial development. Narrative interviews, as noted by Gatenby and Humphries (2000), honour participants' lived experiences

while also yielding comprehensive insights into their daily practices (Woodley & Lockard, 2016).

Determination of the main narratives

To derive key narratives, NVivo software was used to group similar codes into overarching themes. While the semi-structured interview guide was designed based on existing literature on gamification and entrepreneurial learning, data analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing new insights to emerge beyond the theoretical framework. Codes and their frequencies were recorded and categorised into distinct narratives that reflected the role of gamification in shaping entrepreneurial traits among children. These emergent themes were aligned with established literature, further reinforcing the study's significance and contribution to research in gamified entrepreneurial education. Table 1 presents the coding framework derived from the initial research question, which asked parents to describe how they use gamification to stimulate an entrepreneurial mindset in their children. The responses were systematically coded and analysed using three levels of meaning formation (Chinyamurindi et al., 2021; McCormack, 2000; Nachmias et al., 1996), leading to the identification of key strategies employed by parents. The findings are presented in the subsequent section.

FINDINGS

The results from this study highlight how gamification fosters entrepreneurial skills among children by developing critical skills such as strategic thinking, decision making, financial management, creativity and communication. These games offer valuable learning experiences in a fun and engaging manner, helping children to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and the practical skills necessary for future success. These findings are presented in the next sections.

Theme 1: Entrepreneurial skill development

Gamified environments, such as Monopoly and Cashflow 101, cultivate strategic risk-taking and financial management skills in children by simulating real-world economic scenarios and decision-making processes. The responses from parents demonstrate that these games not only teach financial concepts but also encourage children to think strategically about money and investments. The skills learnt in the games are being transferred to real-world situations, such as managing school projects and personal finances. This view is aptly encapsulated in the following comments:

Parent 1: "My child's approach to Monopoly has really surprised me. She is not just playing the game; she is thinking several moves ahead, calculating risks and rewards. I see her applying these skills in her school projects and even in how she manages her pocket money."

This was supported by another participant, who stated:

Parent 2: "With Cashflow 101, my son has become more confident in discussing investments and money management. He talks about his 'financial freedom plan' with a seriousness I have not seen before. It is amazing how a game can spark such maturity."

Theme 2: Business strategy and decision making

Games such as SimCity and Food Chain Magnate enhance creative problem solving and resource management by challenging children to balance multiple factors and make strategic decisions. These games provide children with opportunities to experiment with strategies and make complex decisions. The skills of resource management and planning extend beyond gaming, influencing the children's daily activities and fostering critical thinking in various contexts.

Parent 3: "Watching my daughter play SimCity, I see her carefully plan out her city's infrastructure and manage resources efficiently. She often translates these skills into her daily life, from organising her study schedule to planning her weekend activities."

Another participant elucidated the following:

Parent 4: "Food Chain Magnate has been a game changer for my son. He is not just playing; he is experimenting with different business strategies and learning from his failures. It is incredible how a game can teach him about market demands and resource allocation."

Theme 3: Entrepreneurial mindset cultivation

Games such as Startup Company and The Entrepreneur Game stimulate an entrepreneurial mindset by simulating startup challenges and innovation processes, encouraging children to think creatively and embrace business strategies. These games are instrumental in developing an entrepreneurial mindset by encouraging children to think creatively and proactively. The passion for business ideas and the inclination to innovate are evident in how children begin to view their potential careers and ventures. This view is aptly encapsulated in the following comments:

Parent 5: "My daughter's experience with Startup Company has ignited her entrepreneurial skills. She discusses her 'business ideas' with enthusiasm and is constantly thinking of new ways to improve her company. It's as if she's already gearing up for her future career."

This was supported by another participant, who stated:

Parent 6: "The Entrepreneur Game has made my son more proactive about problem solving and innovation. He's always coming up with new 'product ideas' and is fascinated by how businesses operate. It's wonderful to see his creativity and business acumen flourish through play."

Theme 4: Personal and career development

The Game of Life encourages decision making and career exploration by allowing children to navigate various life scenarios and career choices, helping them to understand the consequences of their decisions. The Game of Life promotes reflection on future careers and life choices, encouraging children to consider various paths. The game serves as a springboard for important discussions about personal goals, responsibilities and the decision-making process. This view is aptly encapsulated in the following comments:

Parent 7: "Playing The Game of Life with my kids has sparked interesting conversations about career choices and life goals. They're learning to weigh different options and think critically about their future, which I believe is crucial for their personal development."

Another participant elucidated the following:

Parent 8: "My son's interest in The Game of Life has led him to explore different careers and think about what he wants in his future. It's fascinating to see how a game can open up discussions about real-life aspirations and decision making."

Theme 5: Business communication and finance

Games such as The Startup Game develop pitching and fundraising skills by simulating the process of pitching business ideas and securing investment, providing children with practical insights into

entrepreneurial processes. This game provides valuable lessons in business communication, pitching and financing, empowering children to present ideas confidently and consider how to secure investments. The skills learnt here will be useful in various entrepreneurial activities and real-world business environments. This view is succinctly summarised in the following comments:

Parent 9: "After playing The Startup Game, my daughter has become quite adept at pitching her ideas. She's even started creating presentations for her school projects and has a newfound confidence when talking about her concepts."

Another participant mentioned that:

Parent 10: "The Startup Game has really boosted my son's understanding of how to attract investors. He's been more proactive about thinking through his business plans and strategising on how to make them appealing to others."

Theme 6: Financial competence development

Age of Empires fosters creative problem solving and innovation by enabling players to build and manage civilisations, compelling them to devise strategies and adapt to shifting circumstances within a dynamic environment. The game Age of Empires cultivates financial competence by challenging children to manage resources and adapt strategies in complex situations. The skills acquired in the game are transferable to academic projects and beyond, fostering creative thinking and problem-solving skills. This view is succinctly summarised in the following comments:

Parent 17: "Playing Age of Empires has sparked a great deal of creativity in my child. He is always thinking about new strategies and innovative ways to overcome challenges, and it has been fascinating to see this creativity extend beyond the game."

Another participant elucidated the following:

Parent 18: "My daughter's problem-solving skills have greatly benefited from Age of Empires. She has learnt how to adapt her strategies and think outside the box, skills that she now applies to her academic projects and other activities."

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that gamification is an effective method for cultivating entrepreneurial skills among children in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. Through the use of games that simulate real-world business challenges and decision-making processes, children gain hands-on experience with critical entrepreneurial competencies, including strategic thinking, financial management, creativity and effective communication. The results suggest that these gamified learning experiences offer rich opportunities for children's development, fostering important skills that can impact their personal and professional growth.

The study found that gamified environments, such as Monopoly and Cashflow 101, significantly enhance children's understanding of strategic risk taking and financial management. As noted by Parent 1, children learn to think several moves ahead, mirroring real-life financial decision making and project management. This aligns with prior research by Gee (2003), who argues that games simulate authentic experiences, enabling players to acquire skills that can be transferred to real-world contexts. Similarly, research by Anderson and Dill (2000) suggests that games such as Monopoly are particularly effective at fostering strategic thinking, as they require players to engage in long-term planning and consider the consequences of their actions.

The findings are consistent with those of Hamari et al. (2014), who note that gamification has

enhanced problem-solving abilities, particularly in tasks requiring financial literacy. By using gamified tools, children are not merely absorbing abstract concepts; they are actively applying them in playful yet practical scenarios. This demonstrates that gamification offers a dynamic avenue for learning that traditional educational methods might lack (Deterding et al. 2011). The parents' testimonies demonstrate that these skills are being applied to daily activities, underscoring the value of gamification in real-world scenarios.

Games such as SimCity and Food Chain Magnate enhance children's decision-making and problem-solving abilities by simulating complex systems that require them to balance multiple variables (Parent 3 and Parent 4). This aligns with the findings of researchers such as Gee (2003), who posit that games provide a context in which players are encouraged to make decisions under uncertainty, thereby fostering critical thinking. The ability to manage resources and experiment with strategies, as evidenced in the interviews, aligns with findings from Steinkuehler and Duncan (2008) who observe that strategy-based games enhance cognitive flexibility and long-term planning.

The results also align with the work of Barr (2012), who asserts that strategy games promote a systems-thinking approach, which is crucial for entrepreneurs who must manage interrelated factors, such as financial resources, market demand and competition. This suggests that these gamified environments offer children opportunities to practise complex decision making and resource management in a low-risk, engaging setting.

The games Startup Company and The Entrepreneur Game have been shown to stimulate entrepreneurial mindsets by encouraging children to innovate and develop business strategies (Parent 5 and Parent 6). These findings align with the existing literature on entrepreneurship education, which suggests that early exposure to business simulations promotes entrepreneurial attitudes, including creativity, risk taking and proactive problem solving (Fayolle & Gailly, 2015). Games that simulate business challenges help children understand the value of innovation and the process of turning ideas into action skills essential for entrepreneurial success.

In line with Schumpeter's (1934) theory of entrepreneurship as creative destruction, the games mentioned in this study encourage children to think critically about market demands, competition and new business opportunities. This aligns with the findings of Glover (2013), who discovered that gamified learning environments encourage children to experiment with innovative ideas, learn from failures and cultivate a growth mindset. The entrepreneurial skills sparked by these games, as noted by the parents, can inspire children to consider entrepreneurial careers, enhancing their motivation to innovate in real-life business contexts (Robinson, 2008).

The Game of Life emerged as a key tool for decision making and career exploration, as it encouraged children to think critically about their future careers and life choices (Parent 7 and Parent 8). The game's ability to promote reflection on personal goals and decision making aligns with findings by Hummel et al. (2018), who highlight that simulation games can be effective tools for career exploration, helping children to better understand the implications of their decisions and to navigate the complexities of adulthood.

In addition, the ability to experiment with different life paths in a game-based environment helps children build resilience and adaptability, qualities essential for navigating uncertain career landscapes (Kuratko, 2005). This also aligns with the concept of "career capital", which is crucial to building a successful career, particularly in entrepreneurial contexts (De Vos et al., 2011).

The findings of this study suggest that games such as The Startup Game foster skills in business communication and financial literacy, which are vital for entrepreneurial success (Parent 9 and Parent 10). These games simulate the process of pitching ideas and securing investments, thus providing valuable insights into the entrepreneurial process. The ability to pitch effectively and manage finances is crucial for entrepreneurs, as it significantly influences their ability to attract funding and effectively communicate their business ideas to potential investors (Baron & Markman, 2003).

The parents' observations support the findings of research by Muntean (2011), which suggest that gamification is effective in teaching business communication skills, especially when games require players to engage in negotiation, persuasion and problem solving. These skills, acquired in a game-based

setting, prepare children for real-world entrepreneurial endeavours where effective communication and sound financial decision making are essential to success.

Finally, the game Age of Empires was found to develop children's financial competence by requiring them to manage resources and adapt strategies to changing circumstances (Parent, 17, 18). This aligns with the findings of Donaldson et al. (2010), who emphasise that strategic games promote financial literacy by requiring players to manage resources, make investments and plan for future growth. Adapting and innovating in response to changing circumstances is a crucial entrepreneurial skill, as it reflects the resilience and adaptability necessary to succeed in dynamic business environments (Baumol, 2002). The results of this study demonstrate that gamification can be a powerful tool for fostering entrepreneurial skills in children. Through engaging with gamified learning environments, children develop competencies such as strategic thinking, financial management, creative problem solving and communication skills that are essential for future entrepreneurs.

Furthermore, these findings suggest that gamification can help bridge the skills gap in South Africa, where youth unemployment remains a significant challenge. Through equipping children with an entrepreneurial mindset and skills needed to succeed in the business world, gamified learning can play a pivotal role in promoting socio-economic transformation and addressing unemployment issues in the country (Mkuzo, 2023).

Ultimately, the study highlights the significance of tailoring global educational frameworks to local contexts. While gamification has been widely studied in Europe, North America and Asia, this study contributes to the limited empirical research on gamification in the African context, highlighting its potential to foster entrepreneurial skills in South African children.

In brief, this study presents compelling evidence that gamification can cultivate essential entrepreneurial skills among children in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. Through using games that simulate real-world business environments, children can develop critical skills such as decision making, strategic thinking and financial literacy, all of which are necessary for entrepreneurial success. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating gamified learning tools in educational curricula, particularly in regions such as South Africa where entrepreneurial development is key to addressing socio-economic challenges. Further research is needed to investigate the long-term effects of gamification on children's entrepreneurial outcomes and its potential scalability across various contexts.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on gamification, entrepreneurship education and child development by providing a contextual lens focused on South Africa. Theoretical implications extend across several educational and motivational theories, particularly Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), which collectively offer a multi-faceted perspective on how gamified experiences can foster entrepreneurial traits in children.

First, this study builds on SDT by emphasising how gamification, through autonomy, competence and relatedness, can cultivate intrinsic motivation in young learners. The findings suggest that game-like experiences can enhance children's internal motivation to engage with entrepreneurial tasks, reinforcing the central tenets of SDT in a practical setting.

Second, the study extends ELT by highlighting how the experiential learning process, rooted in active engagement and reflection, can be seamlessly integrated into gamified environments. Children are not only passively receiving knowledge but are actively involved in solving real-world problems, thereby reinforcing the role of experience in learning entrepreneurial concepts.

Third, in terms of CLT, the study provides valuable insights into how gamification can enhance cognitive processing by managing the cognitive load through structured and interactive learning modules. This aspect is crucial to understanding how gamified activities simplify complex entrepreneurial concepts, enabling young learners to develop critical skills such as problem solving and decision making without overwhelming their cognitive resources.

In addition, the study fills a significant gap in the literature by focusing on the South African context,

where entrepreneurship plays a vital role in addressing socio-economic issues such as unemployment and economic inequality. While international studies have explored gamification in various cultural contexts, this study makes a unique contribution by examining how gamification can promote entrepreneurship in an African setting, taking into consideration the country's educational system, cultural dynamics and economic challenges.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The practical implications of this study are significant for educators, policymakers and parents, particularly in the context of South Africa's educational landscape. By demonstrating the potential of gamification to foster entrepreneurial mindsets and behaviours, this study provides actionable insights for developing and integrating gamified learning tools into educational curricula at various levels, from primary school to high school.

For educators, the findings highlight the importance of incorporating gamified learning experiences that simulate real-world entrepreneurial challenges. This approach can make learning more engaging and meaningful for students, encouraging them to think creatively, take risks and collaborate effectively – skills that are essential for entrepreneurship. Educators can leverage gamification to provide a more dynamic and hands-on learning environment, where students can practise entrepreneurial decision making and problem solving in a safe, controlled setting.

For parents, the study emphasises the role of gamified tools in shaping their children's entrepreneurial mindsets outside the traditional classroom. Parents can support the development of entrepreneurial skills in their children by introducing board games, online simulations and other gamified activities that promote financial literacy, strategic thinking and innovation. The study also provides parents with a clearer understanding of how these tools can influence their children's cognitive and behavioural development, enabling them to make more informed decisions about the types of educational toys and games they purchase.

From a policy perspective, the findings encourage the integration of gamification into national educational reforms, particularly in the context of skills development for young people. Policymakers can use this research to advocate for the inclusion of gamified entrepreneurial education in the formal school curriculum, thereby equipping children with the skills needed to navigate an increasingly complex and competitive job market. Furthermore, given the high unemployment rates in South Africa, policies that promote gamification in education could contribute to long-term socio-economic transformation by fostering a generation of young people who are more self-reliant and capable of creating their own employment opportunities.

In conclusion, this study has both theoretical and practical implications that extend beyond the academic realm, offering valuable insights into how gamification can be a transformative tool in shaping entrepreneurial behaviours in children. It not only adds to the theoretical understanding of gamification and entrepreneurship education but also provides practical recommendations for its implementation in various contexts, particularly in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights gamification as a promising educational strategy for developing entrepreneurial skills in children, particularly in South Africa. Through simulating real-world business scenarios, gamified tools help nurture essential entrepreneurial qualities such as creativity, decision making, financial literacy and resilience. The findings are underpinned by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), demonstrating how game-based learning can enhance motivation, engagement and practical understanding. The study also offers guidance for educators, parents and policymakers on incorporating gamified learning into formal and informal educational settings.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Some limitations should be noted. First, the study was conducted in a single South African region, which may limit the applicability of findings to broader contexts. Second, the sample size was relatively small and drawn through purposive sampling, which may affect the generalisability of the results. Third, the study focused exclusively on parents of young children, excluding perspectives from other age groups, educators or the children themselves. In addition, the sole reliance on qualitative interviews introduces subjectivity, as findings are based on personal interpretations of experiences.

Future research should consider employing more rigorous sampling strategies and increasing sample sizes to enhance representativeness and reliability. Direct observation of children engaging with gamified tools would also provide a richer, more holistic perspective to complement parental insights. Incorporating a more detailed analysis of the specific game mechanics, such as feedback loops, reward systems and interactive storytelling could shed light on the elements most effective in fostering entrepreneurial competencies. Researchers are also encouraged to reflect on their positionality and explicitly state any assumptions or biases to enhance the transparency and credibility of their analyses.

Longitudinal studies could offer insights into the sustained impact of gamification on entrepreneurial outcomes over time. Combining qualitative approaches with quantitative tools, such as validated measures of entrepreneurial behaviour, would provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the impact. Furthermore, studies focusing on underrepresented groups (for example, girls, neurodiverse learners and children from low-income communities) and comparative cross-cultural research could support the development of inclusive, scalable and context-sensitive gamified learning interventions. In summary, these future directions could contribute to a deeper and more inclusive understanding of how gamified communication supports entrepreneurial skill development among children in diverse African settings.

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