EDITORIAL

Just a few days ago, on 22-23 November 2025, South Africa hosted the first G20 Summit on African soil in Johannesburg, under the theme *Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability*. The summit highlighted the growing role of African countries in a multipolar world. It drew attention to issues disproportionately affecting the Global South, including infrastructure development, food security, disaster resilience, and challenges related to unsustainable debt and a fair allocation of benefits from mining resources.

The G20 declaration (2025) identified key priorities such as inclusive economic growth, industrialisation, employment creation and reducing inequality. It also specifically recognised the potential of Artificial Intelligence, emerging technologies, and innovation to drive sustainable development.

To commemorate the event *Communicare* has issued a call for papers for a special issue examining how human-cantered approaches to AI can strengthen communication and drive development across the African continent *The Human Factor in Public Relations, Communication and Development: Africa's G20 Moment*. The full call can be accessed on the website under *Announcements* section.

The articles in this issue highlight the multifaceted role of communication in Africa's development context.

Sutton and le Roux examine the internal communication challenges faced by South African companies in the post-COVID-19 environment. They highlighted various persisting challenges, including the limited access to technology, inadequate communication training, and lack of stakeholder inclusion and identified new emerging challenges such as employee wellbeing and digital inequality. The research offers practical recommendations to address these problems.

Segawa, Willson and Schaling investigate the shifts in communication strategies employed by the South African Reserve Bank since it implemented inflation targeting in February 2000, with a specific focus on new technologies aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability. The findings suggest that clearer central bank communication is linked to lower long-term inflation expectations.

Omojola's study evaluates the effectiveness of Yoruba-language media in motivating rural residents in southwestern Nigeria to register for national identity cards. The findings indicate that although radio, banners, and interpersonal communication had an impact, there were also multiple challenges, such as limited registration centres, inconsistent services, misinformation and corruption.

Ishengoma and Mutinta explore the role of community radio in reducing maternal mortality. The study found that although radio stations run awareness campaigns and integrate maternal health into programming, women face numerous constraints, including media illiteracy, poverty, household duties and patriarchal norms.

Aiseng examines South African Black Twitter, focusing on how Zulu, Venda, and Pedi ethnicities are represented and stereotyped within this digital subculture. Using virtual ethnography to analyse tweets, memes, and GIFs, the study highlights how social media both reflects and perpetuates ethnic stereotypes despite the country's rich cultural diversity.

Phelane and Delport interviewed 20 public relations officers across 10 ministries in Lesotho. The study identified multiple challenges facing the practitioners, including limited resources, managerial misunderstandings, bureaucracy, political interference and prioritising the routine tasks over strategic roles.

Mnisi and Ngcongo explore how reality television has reshaped perceptions of modern life with reality wedding shows claiming to showcase authentic expressions of love. Using a critical discourse analysis of *Our Perfect Wedding* from South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria, the study argues that these shows are shaped by consumerism and profit motives.

Anna Oksiutycz
Editor-in-Chief

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Internal Communication Challenges in Corporate South Africa After the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The survival of organisations relies heavily on effective internal communication, yet this function faces increasingly complex and often conflicting challenges – especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite its importance, relatively little research has been published on internal communication challenges in emerging economies, particularly in South Africa, and no studies have explored these issues in the post-pandemic context. To address this gap, this qualitative longitudinal study inductively explores internal communication challenges in the South African corporate environment following the pandemic. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with internal communication practitioners from South Africa's Top 500 Companies, as well as with highly regarded internal communication consultants. Analysis of pre-pandemic data identified 12 challenges faced by internal communication functions. These were grouped into four categories: access to technology, lack of formal communication training, parameters for including internal stakeholders, and management styles and structures. The longitudinal findings of this study indicate that many of these challenges are still relevant and have even worsened. In addition, new themes have emerged post-pandemic, including employee well-being, little credible information, digital imbalance and future work structure issues. The study offers suggestions to mitigate these challenges and provides practical recommendations for both internal communication practice and future research.

Keywords

Challenges, communication consultants, communication practitioners, corporate South Africa, COVID-19 pandemic, internal communication

INTRODUCTION

It is widely accepted that the survival of an organisation depends largely on internal communication. This communication function ensures success and contributes to long-term goal achievement of the organisation (IC Kollectif, 2018; Meng & Boyd, 2017). However, internal communication issues can jeopardise internal relationships and seriously affect the organisation (Kim et al., 2019; Ruppel et al., 2022). Moreover, most external challenges influence the macro and meso levels of the organisation, with a direct effect on the micro level of the organisation and the internal communication environment (Roux et al., 2019).

In many emerging economies such as South Africa, organisations struggle with problems that affect their survival and relate directly to their employees, such as employee strikes, low education levels, digital divides and maladministration (Bhorat et al., 2017; BusinessTech, 2018; PwC, 2018). These factors put pressure on both the employees and the organisation. It emphasises both the need for internal communication and how essential internal communication management is within such a context.

Over and above these challenges, the South African apartheid history brought about some distinctive political and economic conundrums for organisations in this environment. One such example is the

Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act (BEE), which was introduced by the government as a strategy to achieve transformation and equality in the private sector (Ndhlovu, 2011). As part of this law, very specific objectives are established: Black ownership must constitute at least 51% of the company, the development of employees through education, training and mentoring focuses on these specific groups, and priority is given to the empowerment and advancement of Black women (Chimhandamba, 2008). BEE, however, also has financial consequences for the company, such as the costs when ownership must be transferred, reduced productivity, decrease in profits and the costs of skill development and training (Acemoglu et al., 2007). The financial resources invested in BEE appointments, in turn, often lead to discord, internal conflict and unhappiness in the workplace. These factors are directly related to the relationship between employer and employees as well as the management of internal stakeholders.

Besides BEE and difficult economic and political conditions, South African organisations and communication practitioners often face other unique challenges, such as creating understanding between internal stakeholders of diverse cultures, where racial tension is often experienced internally, and mitigating language barriers with 12 official languages (Sutton, 2023). The accepted business language in South Africa is English. However, due to the diverse language skills of the workforce, there are often several internal stakeholders whose first language is not English. Internal communication must therefore receive specific attention to combat misinterpretations that could lead to loss of productivity (Hood, 2019). Non-verbal communication is often misinterpreted within the South African context, as employees come from different cultural backgrounds.

Another social issue in the South African workforce that adds negatively to the internal environment is xenophobia, described by Tella (2016) as the hatred of foreigners or immigrants. This anti-immigrant attitude and fear of immigrants taking South African citizens' jobs lead to industrial activism and riots, which also contribute to instability, uncertainty and fear among internal stakeholders. The complex work environment necessitates organisations creating a safe work environment for future sustainable employment. The challenge for communication practitioners is to communicate about these issues to create internal stability for local and international employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the workplace by creating an unstable environment that threatened organisations' viability and survival (Wade & Bjerkan, 2020). The significance of internal communication as a lifeline for organisations was emphasised during and after the pandemic (Ecklebe & Löffler, 2021; Kim et al., 2023). Within this setting and the resulting dispersed "work-from-home" policies, internal communication became central to organisational continuity during the pandemic (Li et al., 2021; Santoso et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2021). Organisations had to fundamentally adjust the way they communicated with their internal stakeholders, which resulted in a greater reliance on digital, online (web-based activities), electronic and virtual platforms (Von Gaudecker et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2024). Similar to other countries, South Africa also experienced various forms of lockdown in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which severely impacted on organisational health, employee well-being and organisation–employee relationships as internal communication became central to organisational survival (Santoso et al., 2022).

Given these challenging circumstances, it seems that relatively little has been published on internal communication challenges in emerging economies and even less on these issues in the South African context (Sutton et al., 2022), with no research on the topic after the pandemic. Sutton et al. (2022:100) specifically called for research on the topic "that is further adapted to the post-COVID-19 setting".

Scholars argue that African countries cannot look at their Western counterparts in the developed world for solutions, as the challenges they face are mostly unique and not understood by Western academics (Maritz, 2002; Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman, 2023; Rensburg, 2002). Furthermore, Lee and Yue (2020), Sutton (2023) and Tkalac Verčič et al. (2024) argue that more research is needed on internal communication from a non-Western perspective, which includes emerging economies and African countries such as South Africa. To fill these gaps, this qualitative study adds to the internal communication conundrums encountered in the emerging South African corporate context and to new research after the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the above in mind, the following research question guided the study: What internal communication challenges can be identified in corporate South Africa after the COVID-19 pandemic?

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

From data collected in 2019, Sutton et al. (2022) found several challenges that have a direct impact on internal communication in the South African corporate environment. These were categorised into four overarching groups: (i) access to technology, (ii) lack of formal communication training, (iii) parameters for inclusion of internal stakeholders, and (iv) management styles and structures. These challenges, as identified by the participants during qualitative semi-structured interviews, are briefly discussed below (see Sutton et al., 2022:93–99):

Access to technology

New technological advancements, but limited access

The country's infrastructure has a negative impact on Internet availability. Many organisations do not make access to WiFi or the Internet available to all their employees, and many employees do not have access to a smartphone or similar device. In some instances, electronic communication to lower-level staff members, such as miners, factory workers or shopkeepers, is limited as they are not allowed to access their devices while working. By implication, only office-based or higher-level employees receive electronic internal communication.

Information overload

Those with access to technology suffer from information overload, and many times important internal communication messages get lost. Furthermore, it seems that communication practitioners often try to fix communication problems by adding further channels or platforms for communication. This increases the amount of information employees need to filter and leaves them overwhelmed.

Lack of formal communication training

Diverse demographical characteristics

The South African internal organisational environment is known for its diverse workforce with regard to education, literacy levels, language and access to public services. Internal communication practitioners communicate simultaneously with employees who are illiterate and those who have university degrees, as well as people speaking a variety of languages.

Prejudice and diversity

Due to South Africa's historical past and its current focus on eliminating discrimination and prejudice against race, gender, orientation, religion and other beliefs in communication, more formal documented communication is often used in an attempt to eliminate prejudice. As a result, normative two-way symmetrical communication is often avoided.

Little formal communication education

The low education levels in South Africa have a direct negative impact on the low level of diverse formally trained internal communication practitioners in the workplace. Practitioners, therefore, struggle to navigate the current communication challenges, and to function on a strategic level to navigate technological advancements from an expert perspective.

Parameters for inclusion of internal stakeholders

Uncertainty as to who are considered internal stakeholders

The parameters of who should be classified as internal stakeholders are disputed in the South African business environment. Other than traditional internal stakeholders, classified as permanent employees, another broader group could also be included, such as contractors, part-time employees, consultants and agents. A debated issue is whether unions should form part of the internal grouping. Including these various groups would undoubtedly add complexity to internal communication.

Internal activism and the influence of trade unions

Trade unions are often politically driven, which fuels friction between organisations and their employees, incites activist action and results in destruction.

Management styles and structures

Hierarchy and line management

There are few opportunities for employees to share their ideas, opinions and concerns with senior management as hierarchical systems are not open or flattened in organisations. Following the hierarchical system, messages are filtered upwards, with little feedback being received downwards. This is specifically seen in middle management who are not part of decision making and therefore not able to feed information downwards.

History of autocratic leaders influencing current internal relationships

The historic organisational culture created by autocratic leadership styles and the fact that employees did not have pleasant experiences with previous autocratic executives and CEOs hinders the current relationship between the parties. Furthermore, new emerging or succeeding leaders do not result in significant changes to the culture inside organisations, as they exhibit the same traits as their predecessors who did not practice participative leadership.

Authoritarian leadership style and an internal culture of non-involvement

Employees are cautious to question or oppose management, because they find their leaders' communication style threatening or because of the belief that individuals should respect leaders and those in positions of power. Interestingly, it seems that more authoritarian, one-way communication produces better outputs and results for organisations.

Internal distrust

The internal stakeholders do not trust the leaders in organisations, mainly because employees are uninformed and consequently sceptical. This, in alignment with the powerless position of middle management, adds to a lack of trust. In addition, the political climate in South Africa, which is exploited by trade unions, as mentioned earlier, further contributes to internal mistrust.

Limited access to decision-making input from communication departments

The communication departments in South African organisations are seen as operational and they focus on technical tasks. Therefore, the internal communication functions (or the heads of these departments) are not invited to senior or executive meetings or represented at decision-making forums, which limits their strategic contribution.

See Sutton et al. (2022) for more details on the challenges identified before the pandemic in the corporate South African environment, which influenced the practice of internal communication.

The COVID-19 pandemic delivered even greater challenges to organisations. There seems to have been an adjustment in people's perception of their internal organisational environment. As a result,

shifts in the internal organisational environment have demanded renewed approaches and perspectives regarding the functions of internal communication in addressing ongoing and newly emerging challenges that organisations are facing in the post-COVID-19 era (Neill & Kang, 2023).

Therefore, this study aimed to build on the previously identified challenges by identifying additional challenges that emerged after the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHOD

A longitudinal qualitative approach (see Babbie & Mouton, 2001) was followed in this study, as we wanted to understand the perceptions and challenges that communication practitioners faced in the South African corporate environment before and after the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2019 with two groups who were purposively selected (see Kumar, 2014) for their knowledge on the subject:

i. Ten internal communication practitioners who manage internal communication at the Top 500 companies in South Africa. They were selected for the insider perspective on the challenges they face daily in the workplace.
ii. Eight internal communication consultants who are highly experienced, are regarded as leaders in the field and have won several local and international awards for their work. They were selected for their outsider perspective on the internal communication challenges they encounter by working for multiple organisations as consultants.

These participants represent various sectors, namely, education and training, health and beauty, tourism, dairy production, mining, food processing, investment and asset management, agriculture and diversified retailers. The findings from this round of interviews were published in 2022 in *Communicare: Journal for Communication Studies in Africa* (see Sutton et al., 2022).

A second round of semi-structured interviews with the same participants was conducted in 2022. As is usually the case with longitudinal research (see Bryman, 2012), some of the participants were not available again, mainly because they had changed jobs or a participant had passed away. It was decided not to include new participants, as the aim was to understand the perceptions of the same group of participants and how their perceptions had changed over time. In the second round, nine interviews realised with four practitioners from the Top 500 companies in South Africa and five consultants.

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants who were interviewed in the second round and whose responses were used in this study.

Table 1: Overview of participants

Round 2 interview participants	Inhouse practitioner or consultant
Participant 1	Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the hotels and resorts sector
Participant 2	Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the dairy production sector
Participant 3	Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the agriculture sector
Participant 4	Communication practitioner at a Top 500 listed company in the education and training sector
Participant 5	Consultant within a variety of business sectors and industries
Participant 6	Consultant within a variety of business sectors and industries
Participant 7	Consultant within a variety of business sectors and industries
Participant 8	Consultant in the forestry sector
Participant 9	Consultant within a variety of business sectors and industries

During both data collection stages, emails were sent to participants with detail about the research project and to invite them to participate in the study. The semi-structured interviews were conducted via

online platforms such as Zoom or MS Teams, scheduled for a date and time convenient for the participant, and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. Their participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained before the interviews commenced, as prescribed by the ethical clearance obtained for this research project. The anonymity of participants and organisations was guaranteed by deidentifying them in reporting the data.

The interview schedule was designed with open and broad questions to explore the challenges practitioners and consultants face within the internal corporate environment in South Africa, with a particular focus on their personal perceptions of these challenges. To capture additions or possible changes in their experiences and perspectives, the same set of questions was asked at two distinct points in time – once before the COVID-19 pandemic (which has already been reported on) and again after it. This approach aimed to provide insights into possible additional challenges from their perceptions in response to the pandemic.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the data was inductively analysed through qualitative content analysis (see Flick, 2014). Several challenges emerged from the data and themes were created to identify the internal communication challenges in the South African corporate environment. Both authors analysed the data and compared the themes with each other to contribute to the validity of the qualitative data (see Du Plooy, 2009).

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES AFTER THE PANDEMIC

This study aims to build on the previously identified challenges by identifying additional challenges that emerged after the COVID-19 pandemic. It should be noted that our findings show that most of the challenges identified in the South African environment are still relevant and have even worsened. Many of the challenges identified before the pandemic were mentioned again in the second round. However, the focus of this article is on the additional themes of internal communication issues that emerged during and especially after the pandemic. The extra themes (challenges) that we inductively identified are (i) employee well-being, (ii) little credible information, (iii) digital imbalance, and (iv) future work structure issues.

Employee well-being

During COVID-19 and due to the lockdown, people experienced uncertainty and change. Unexpectedly, employees had to work from home and take on the educator's role with their children. Participant 4 noted: "I have my kid next to me writing exams, while I am on Teams calls 10 hours a day". Furthermore, Participant 7 explained: "Our lives have been incredibly disrupted. Employees must get up, get dressed, go to the office, work for eight hours and come home. After COVID it feels like we must now continue with the day's work at home, while trying to homeschool our kids, while trying to go buy groceries, while trying to sort out the house. So, life has put more strain on people".

Furthermore, internal stakeholders experience anxiety and stress because of the uncertainties, and they suffer emotionally because many friends, colleagues and family members lost their lives. The aftermath of COVID-19 is still evident in South Africa, as many businesses (small, medium and micro enterprises and large corporates) are in debt review or have closed. Organisations are struggling to survive in the turbulent economic conditions. Companies must stop some of their projects and lay off employees to save costs, in order to prevent these companies from going under. Participant 7 noted that employees were more "loyal towards the organisation out of fear for retrenchment or salary cuts".

As a result, internal stakeholders were suffering from mental health issues because of financial insecurity – which is at the basic level of human existence. Furthermore, employees were facing physical, emotional, economic and digital well-being challenges. The participants stated that the needs of internal stakeholders changed to basic level and the communication needs had to change accordingly (even though in many instances this did not). Participant 5 explained: "All employees now want security, and everyone moved down to the bottom of Maslow's triangle of basic needs … Employees want to know how will I stay healthy, how will I keep my job, how will I care for my family …" Participant 7 also explained that

"there has been a lot of burnout and a lot of fatigue, and people have been in a survival mindset and not a growth mindset after COVID".

From an internal communication point of view, the wellness team or department should be supported by communicating about these well-being challenges. However, it seemed that there was little communication action with a clear sense of the whole person (in their personal context and within their family and social circumstances). Participant 7 noted: "Particularly in the content that is generated, it has to speak to the whole human being and their mindset at the time. It has got to be cognitive, empathetic, action-orientated, and speak to the entirety of a human being. Whereas, I think before the pandemic, internal communication focused mostly on the work aspect of communication".

There is a need to focus on people more, and take their stress, anxiety, burnout factors and overall well-being issues into consideration, because it impacts on productivity, cost utilisation per head, service delivery, customer value management and, eventually, on the triple bottom line.

Little credible information

In general, most companies did not bother to provide credible information to employees in response to COVID-19. One of the participants mentioned that organisations in South Africa hid behind government rules and regulations and government decisions, without educating their employees on the virus, vaccines, issues they were worrying about or financial information about the business. It was left to employees to read on the Internet or watch television to find out what the government was telling them.

Organisations seldom sent credible information, gave direction or advice to employees and seemed to be confused about how to keep the business going. For example, Participant 5 explained: "It is like the parable where the little boy cried 'Wolf! Wolf!' and the people ran away. And then one day when there was a real wolf, the people did not trust him. In the same way, it seems like employees ignored [organisational information] during the real crisis". This resulted in "rumours" (Participant 1) and the grapevine taking over as the most used internal communication channel among employees, with little trust in the organisation.

After the pandemic, it seems that distrust in organisational leadership was still one of the main challenges, because of a lack of transparent internal communication and widespread corruption. In general, people in South Africa do not know who to believe, and trust in the employers and its leadership will have to be "built from scratch" (Participant 6). Participant 8 stated that "employees trust the organisation's leadership just as much as they trust government's leadership".

Digital imbalance

During the pandemic, there was a deep need to embrace digital channels internationally. However, in the South African context, employees felt that the "wealthy" top-level management sat in their "fancy homes" (Participant 8) during the lockdown, while most of the ground-level employees did not have the means to continue to work from home. Most companies could not afford to send employees home with the hardware, software and data (such as a laptop and Internet dongle) needed to continue with their work. The participants also indicated that there were many employees who did not have a home environment that was conducive to work – for example, many South African employees reside in informal settlements in a dwelling of between 6m² and 20m², where more than one family lives, often without running water or electricity. Participant 8 explained that "it is quite clear that there are people that do not have a home environment that is very conducive to work. These employees actually prefer to work at the office because working from home is difficult". Participant 6 also noted that "many companies did not invest in making sure their managers manage their people properly remotely".

During the pandemic, only staff who had devices and were able to go online had access and could benefit from employee wellness programmes that some of the corporates established during that time. Participant 9 noted that "from an internal communication point of view, we are so instrumental in supporting the wellness team of the organisation in communicating the challenges around well-being, whether it is sensory ergonomics, whether it is mental health, whether it is financial well-being … But access to the right channels to communicate this is the problem …". As was evident before the pandemic,

the digital divide in South Africa became a bigger issue during and after the pandemic, with a direct influence on internal communication practices.

Future work structure issues

Although literature suggests that a hybrid workplace model gives employees more autonomy and a better work–life balance (SAP, 2024), most South African organisations were reluctant about the work-from-home approach and reverted back to the traditional office-bound approach after the pandemic. One reason could be the digital and social imbalances addressed in the above themes. The collapse of Transnet (the state-owned transport company) and the failed railway system contribute to the problem to get employees to work safely and affordably. However, it seems that some employees who had the means to create a work environment at home preferred to do so and wanted flexibility. Participant 5 mentioned that "people do not want to come back to the office, people have different requirements, they have different expectations of the organisation and their team leaders". Participant 9 further mentioned: "It is all very multi-dimensional. You now got the dynamic with the petrol prices in South Africa … the reality is people are saying, I have proven I can work remotely during COVID. Why are you forcing me to come back to the office at the expense [transport and petrol price] that I might not be able to afford now, in order to do what I have proven to you already that I can do".

From the internal communication participants' point of view, a hybrid model poses more communication channel challenges, more engagement challenges and more internal culture challenges. The structure of not having all employees at the office at the same time, with some employees at the office but being on online calls (such as MS Teams/Zoom meetings), while other employees are at home, talking on the same online calls, is difficult to manage. Participant 9 noted that "with a hybrid approach, there are conflicting priorities and needs from internal stakeholders in different spaces at different points in time". Conversely, it is not ideal to force all employees to go back to the office, because having "prescriptive leadership" (Participant 3) could lead to a negative corporate culture and unengaged employees.

In some operational roles, the work-from-home policy is enforced, but Participant 7 noted that "the impact that COVID-19 has had on people … they feel quite isolated even though they are on Zoom and Teams from sunup to sundown … there isn't that special connection with colleagues that happens in the physical space". Participant 9 added that "you cannot build relationship capital by permanently being disconnected from your teams".

On a positive note, the internal communication department found its place during the pandemic and functions more strategically in many organisations. The importance of internal communication is proven, and people have seen the impact that communication can have on an organisation, especially in a time of crisis. Participant 1 noted that internal communicators became part "of the father figures during the crisis". Therefore, as all the participants noted, the internal communication manager is now more often drawn into decision-making structures. Furthermore, after the pandemic, organisations realised that "in terms of expenditure, we need to invest more in internal communication" (Participant 5).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The past decade has seen much progress in research on internal communication and a much greater recognition of the importance of internal communication for organisational success (Lee & Yue, 2020; Men, 2021; Yue et al., 2024). In addition, research has shown that turbulent times place a renewed focus on the role of internal communication for organisational survival, as was seen during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Akhmetshin et al., 2019; Horlait & Lambotte, 2021; Liu-Lasters et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021; Santoso et al., 2022). At the same time, knowledge of specific issues or challenges in emerging economies remains weak, with very little research on how these issues influence the internal communication environment in the complex South African context (Sutton et al., 2022) and no research on these challenges after the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the world is changing, and organisations are continuously presented with new challenges, which were amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ararat et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2023). South African organisations face several challenges in what is labelled as the most trying and

unstable environment we have ever encountered (Kalidas et al., 2020).

The findings of internal communication challenges in corporate South Africa before and after the pandemic are presented as a framework (see Figure 1 below) to answer the research question posed for this study: What internal communication challenges can be identified in corporate South Africa after the COVID-19 pandemic?

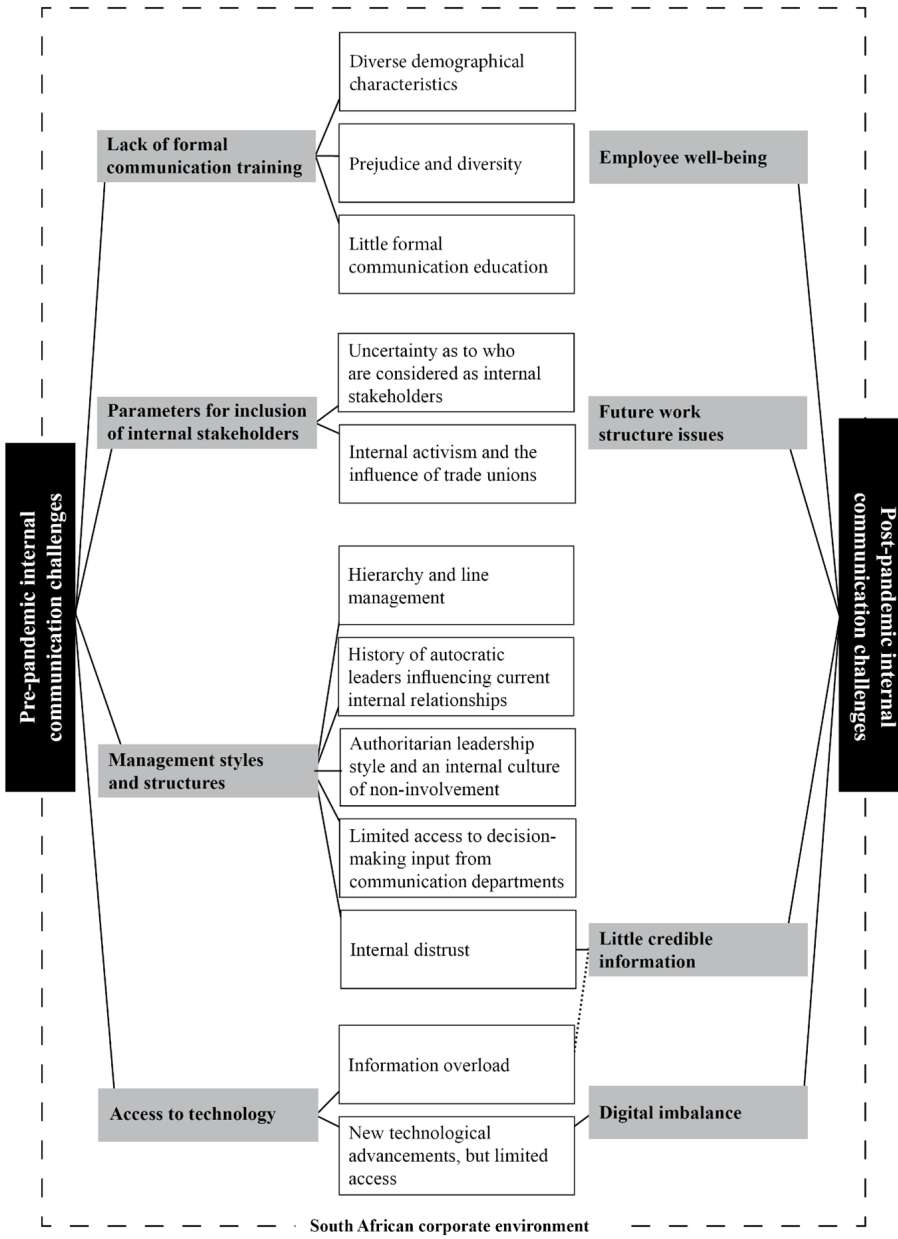


Figure 1: Internal communication challenges in corporate South Africa

First, most of the challenges identified pre-pandemic are still relevant issues in the South African environment. These themes include *lack of formal communication training* (which includes diverse demographical characteristics, prejudice and diversity, and little formal communication education), *parameters for inclusion of internal stakeholders* (which includes uncertainty as to who are considered internal stakeholders, internal activism and the influence of trade unions), as well as *management styles and structures* (which includes hierarchy and line management, history of autocratic leaders influencing current internal relationships, authoritarian leadership style and an internal culture of non-involvement).

Second, the pre-pandemic challenge of *access to technology* where technological advancements were an international trend, in the South African internal environment there is limited access to smart devices and Internet, which seems to have increased during the pandemic and lockdown where employees had to work from home. Since the pandemic, the issue has become even worse, highlighting the theme of *digital imbalance*.

Third, there was a change in the pre-pandemic challenge of information overload under the theme of *access to technology*, as employees felt that they did not receive enough information from their employers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theme of *little credible information* emerged, as the participants emphasised that internal stakeholders sought transparent and reliable information, aligned with the pre-pandemic challenge of internal distrust, which worsened during and after the pandemic.

Fourth, a positive change came to light from the challenge of limited access to decision-making input from communication departments under the pre-pandemic theme of *management styles and structures*, where the pandemic highlighted the importance of internal communication and, consequently, communication managers are now mostly involved in strategic decisions.

Lastly, two new themes emerged from the post-pandemic data, namely *employee well-being* and *future work structure issues*. These challenges identified that employees in South Africa are stressed and anxious about losing their jobs, especially since the pandemic where organisations are struggling to survive in a harsh economic climate. The well-being of employees is a challenge for internal communication practitioners in the "new-normal" hybrid work environment, seeing that many organisations reverted back to the traditional structures instead of a hybrid approach, which seems to have negatively influenced internal corporate culture.

With the above challenges in mind, internal communication efforts must adapt accordingly, and the following recommendations are made for internal communication practitioners and consultants to navigate the complex and difficult internal environment in South Africa:

- Employee well-being must be a priority in all internal communication, as emphasised in other reports and studies as well (e.g., CIPD, 2023; Qin & Men, 2023). Internal communication practitioners should understand the needs of employees in order to craft communication that will resonate with employees.
- Further investigation to find a workable solution for hybrid working, by creating new workplace structures, needs to be spearheaded by internal communication practitioners, as communication will be central in these efforts and to keeping a coherent organisational culture. Communication about future workplace structures has been highlighted as a central need by a number of scholars (e.g., Pass & Ridgway, 2022; Zarraga-Rodriguez & Alvarez, 2015).
- Internal communication training is needed, not only for communication practitioners but also for line managers and senior management (organisational leadership). It became evident that senior managers should improve their behavioural competencies to be trusted leaders, and that line managers should contribute to improve upward and downward communication flow. The importance of line management (middle management) participation in the internal communication process has also been emphasised in several previous studies (e.g., Allen et al., 2007; Holland et al., 2017; Usadolo & Usadolo, 2019). Furthermore, a focus on soft skills, internal communication guidance and toolkits is needed to manage internal stakeholders and teams in different spaces. Employee well-being needs to remain central to training.
- In the South African context, internal stakeholders' needs should be measured through more

informal feedback from the ground-level employees on a regular basis, because digital imbalances make online questionnaires and communication audits non-viable. Furthermore, the inclusion of additional communication measurements is needed to determine employee concerns and to address well-being issues, as recommended by other studies (e.g., Araújo & Pestana, 2017; Wijngaards et al., 2021).

. The employees should be informed regularly about the future of the company, strategic issues, financial results and performance signals (positive or negative), seeing that they feel disinformed, uncertain and anxious about the sustainability of the organisation and their jobs in the current corporate climate. It is the organisation's responsibility to protect the business and to communicate transparently and honestly about what the future holds, as confirmed in previous studies (e.g., Li et al., 2021; Ruppel et al., 2021).

This study proves once again that theory development is needed for the complex internal communication environment of South Africa. The identification of post-pandemic challenges shows that internal communication practitioners and consultants cannot apply Western theories to solve unique non-Western problems. Therefore, we call for more research and the development of a context-focused local theoretical framework to address the internal communication conundrums in the diverse corporate South African context.

We acknowledge that our study was relatively small in its qualitative nature, but the findings seem to resonate with various industry and academic reports that the world has changed and that communication practices need to adapt accordingly (e.g., Toth & Bourlands-Davis, 2023; Zerfass et al., 2023). It is suggested this study be expanded to a larger sample and across other emerging economies and African countries to obtain further insights on how organisations can address internal communication challenges in a sustainable manner.

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Evolving Monetary Policy Communication: Evidence from the South African Context

Abstract

This article reviews changes in communications at the South African Reserve Bank since the adoption of inflation targeting in February 2000. In particular, it examines the shift towards evolving methods of communication by the South African Reserve Bank through the use of new technologies and approaches intended to increase accountability and transparency. The analysis extensively evaluates the South African Reserve Bank's communication tools and how they affect the effectiveness of monetary policy implementation in the South African context. Notably, this study employs the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level metric to assess the effect of communication readability on domestic inflation expectations. By using readability scores as a proxy for clarity, the research measures the impact that central bank communication standards have on market agents' inflation expectations and their interpretation of monetary policy. The findings reveal that the South African Reserve Bank's communication clarity has a significant inverse relationship with South African market participants' long-run inflation expectations, highlighting the vital role of clear central bank communication in anchoring inflation expectations.

Keywords

Central bank communication, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, inflation expectations, monetary policy, South African Reserve Bank

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, central banking has undergone significant reforms, with traditional monetary policy tools increasingly complemented by strategic communication (Hartmann & Smets, 2018). This evolution has enhanced the effectiveness of Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) decisions by ensuring that policy actions and economic outlooks are clearly conveyed to market participants. Consequently, central banks have implemented a heterogeneous portfolio of communication modalities, including press conferences, official press releases and public speeches, to optimise the dissemination of policy-relevant information (Segawa, 2021).

The growing emphasis on transparent communication is widely regarded as a mechanism for reducing information asymmetry among market agents. This enhances policy credibility, fosters market stability and refines the process by which monetary policy impacts the economy (Nosike & Ojobor,

2024; Sturm & De Haan, 2011; Wadood, 2025; Warjiyo & Juhro, 2019). By effectively articulating their policy stance and the economic rationale underpinning decisions, central banks contribute to greater predictability in financial markets, facilitate equitable risk assessment and strengthen public confidence in monetary authorities. It should be noted that central bank communication literature posits that the strategic management of public expectations constitutes a fundamental component of contemporary monetary policy, with particular salience in proximity to the zero lower bound (Blinder et al. 2024; Kiley & Mishkin, 2024; Lima et al. 2025; Morris & Shin, 2002).

In such circumstances, central banks can shape private sector expectations through strategic communication to signal future policy trajectories via forward guidance and economic forecasts. These communications, in turn, influence asset prices and overall economic activity. The South African Reserve Bank (SARB) is no exception, as it actively employs communication as a tool to guide and manage market expectations (Reid, 2011). Subsequent to the institution of an inflation-targeting regime in 2000, SARB has continuously and progressively augmented its communication strategies. The broader literature on central bank communication supports the premise that increased transparency and clarity in monetary policy communication contribute to macroeconomic stability by improving market predictability and fostering confidence in policy decisions.

From a communication studies perspective, central bank messaging can also be rigorously framed within established communication theories. For instance, Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical communication model offers a robust framework. This model posits that effective public institutional communication transcends mere information dissemination, emphasising a dynamic process of dialogue and mutual understanding between an organisation and its stakeholders. Applied to the context of a central bank, this theory suggests that a deliberate shift towards engaging with the public in a genuinely two-way manner – rather than exclusively relying on one-way pronouncements – could significantly enhance trust and credibility in the bank's policy messages.

Such an approach, which fosters open channels for feedback and incorporates public perspectives, aligns with the model's emphasis on achieving shared meaning and resolving potential misunderstandings, ultimately bolstering the perceived legitimacy and effectiveness of monetary policy (Grunig, 2001; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This theoretical lens underscores the potential for central banks to move beyond a "transmission" model of communication towards a more participatory and relational approach, thereby strengthening public confidence in their vital economic functions (Blinder et al., 2024; Yulianto, 2025).

In addition, agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) highlights how communication influences which issues the public perceives as most important. By consistently emphasising particular themes in its communications, such as the inflation outlook or policy objectives, a central bank can shape the public agenda and expectations regarding the economy. However, because mass media often serve as intermediaries, clear and salient messaging is crucial, otherwise media outlets may filter or transform the content in ways that distort the intended message. These theoretical perspectives underscore that the clarity, framing and interactivity of monetary policy communications are vital for public understanding and for maximising policy effectiveness.

Despite the consensus that clear central bank communication is beneficial, a notable gap remains in the empirical literature regarding the influence of such communication on the expectations of the general public, especially in emerging market contexts. While numerous studies have examined the impact of central bank communications (CBC) on financial markets and expert audiences, far fewer have focused on how CBC affect the broader public's inflation expectations (Haldane & McMahon, 2018). This study seeks to address that gap by focusing on the role of communication clarity in South Africa.

In particular, we investigate whether the readability of SARB's MPC statements – as a proxy for clarity – has a measurable effect on inflation expectations among South African market agents and the public. Using two decades of data (2001–2023) and applying an Engle-Granger cointegration approach, we find evidence of a significant long-run inverse relationship between SARB's communication clarity and inflation expectations. In other words, clearer (more easily comprehensible) MPC statements are associated with lower long-run expected inflation, suggesting that improved communication clarity helps

anchor expectations. The remainder of this article reviews the relevant literature and theoretical context, describes the data and methodology, presents the empirical results and discusses the findings along with policy implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Clarity and central bank communication

Studies in the field of central bank communication have identified two broad dimensions of how communication clarity is examined. The first dimension pertains to the macroeconomic impact of CBC, specifically how policy pronouncements influence key aggregate variables such as exchange rates, inflation expectations and financial market stability. For example, Jansen and De Haan (2005) analyse the European Central Bank's communications and their impact on the euro's value. Similar approaches have been applied by Collingro and Frenkel (2020), Anderes et al. (2021) and Lehtimäki and Palmu (2022), who each examine the effects of central bank messages on financial markets or expectations in different contexts.

The second dimension of inquiry focuses on the micro-level effects of communication clarity on heterogeneous agents. This strand of research employs direct empirical methods, such as surveys and experiments, to measure how various audiences (investors, analysts, businesses or households) adjust their expectations in response to monetary policy communications. Capturing these expectation adjustments provides a more granular understanding of the transmission process of central bank information. Such evaluations are indispensable for assessing the effectiveness of different communication strategies in shaping economic behaviour and expectations across diverse groups of stakeholder. A notable study is Bulíř et al. (2013) who found significant, persistent differences in the clarity of central bank communication about inflation across various countries over time, using readability statistics and content analysis. However, their study still revealed that robust determinants of clarity applicable across all central banks proved elusive, suggesting that country-specific and institution-specific factors are highly relevant.

As monetary policy challenges have grown more complex, the clarity of central bank communication has become a central concern for academics and policymakers. Public discourse has trended towards simplification of language, underscoring the importance of clarity in achieving effective communication. In central banking, clarity effectively serves as a proxy for transparency. The successful implementation of monetary policy and, in particular, the effectiveness of forward guidance, hinges on the central bank's ability to convey its policy intentions in an accessible, intelligible manner (Warjiyo & Juhro, 2019). By fostering clarity and predictability, transparent communication reduces uncertainty, anchors public expectations and enhances the institution's credibility. This, in turn, amplifies the transmission of monetary policy to the broader economy, ensuring that forward guidance and other communications achieve their intended macroeconomic objectives. Conversely, ambiguous or opaque messaging can lead to misinterpretations, misaligned expectations and diminished policy impact. In essence, a central bank's ability to articulate its policy trajectory with precision and transparency is vital for the success of forward guidance and overall policy efficacy.

Recent evidence reinforces the value of clarity in CBC. Ferrara and Angino (2022) found that clearer European Central Bank communications (for example, speeches and press releases written in simpler language) tend to generate higher public engagement, suggesting that simplicity and clarity can broaden outreach and improve understanding. Similarly, Carotta et al. (2023) show that in Uruguay, improvements in the readability of CBC significantly strengthened the anchoring of inflation expectations. These findings underscore that communicative clarity is not merely a theoretical ideal but has tangible impacts: it enhances how well the public grasps monetary policy messages and can improve the effectiveness of policy transmission.

At the same time, literature also cautions about potential downsides of too much communication or overly complex messaging. Amato and Shin (2003) underscore that public monetary policy announcements can have powerful effects on markets, sometimes even exceeding the impact of private information.

However, Morris and Shin (2005) argue that if market participants over-rely on public signals, excessive communication could crowd out private information and lead to herding or inefficient responses. Dale et al. (2018) extend this caution by documenting the risks of information overload: too many data releases or overly detailed messages can create "noise", making it difficult for the public and market participants to discern the key signals. In such cases, information overload can cause analysis paralysis for decision makers and confusion among the public, ultimately diluting policy effectiveness. This line of research suggests that central banks must balance transparency with concision – focusing on high-quality, relevant communications rather than sheer quantity – to avoid undermining their messages (Aaker & Moorman, 2023; Kohn & Sack, 2003; Kostarella, & Palla, 2024; Poole, 2005). An optimal communication strategy thus balances openness with discipline, ensuring that the information shared is clear and not counterproductive (Neuenkirch, 2012; Warjiyo & Juhro, 2019).

Inflation targeting and measuring inflation expectations in South Africa

Over the past three decades, many central banks, including SARB, have adopted inflation targeting as a framework to ensure price stability. Under this approach, a central bank publicly commits to maintaining inflation around a specified target (or within a target range) over the medium term. This regime was introduced in South Africa in 2000. By announcing a clear inflation goal and consistently pursuing policies to achieve it, the central bank aims to anchor inflation expectations of businesses, investors and the public. Doing so enhances the credibility of monetary policy and can make actual inflation more stable, as economic agents adjust their behaviour (wage setting, price setting, etc.) based on the belief that the central bank will keep inflation in check.

Walsh (2009) notes that inflation-targeting regimes were often adopted to improve communication clarity regarding policy objectives, establish greater accountability for achieving those objectives and, ultimately, influence inflation expectations. In the South African context, the introduction of inflation targeting went hand-in-hand with reforms to SARB's communication practices. Walsh (2015) emphasises the need for a rule-based approach (centred on interest rates) to achieve inflation targets and, importantly, the need for central banks to clearly communicate their policy intentions to maintain credibility and guide expectations. This is reaffirmed by Castañeda (2021) and Davig and Foerster (2023). Consistency between what the central bank says (its communications) and what it does (its policy actions) is vital: credibility is earned by aligning words with deeds, which in turn stabilises expectations.

Since adopting an explicit inflation target, SARB has relied on surveys of inflation expectations to gauge whether its communications and policies are successfully anchoring the public's outlook. The Bureau for Economic Research (BER) conducts quarterly Inflation Expectations Surveys on behalf of SARB. These surveys cover four key groups: financial analysts, business people, trade union officials and households. The respondents are asked for their numerical inflation expectations for the next one to two years (rather than just qualitative higher/same/lower judgements). The BER's survey methodology draws on best practices from similar surveys (such as the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia's Livingston Survey and the Reserve Bank of New Zealand's surveys). Responses are kept confidential and aggregated to produce an overview of expected inflation among different groups (see Livingston, 1989).

For SARB, these survey-based inflation expectations serve as an important metric for policy success. If communication is effective and credible, one would expect survey respondents' expectations to remain close to the target range, even in the face of short-term economic fluctuations. Large or persistent deviations of expectation from the target may signal a communication or credibility problem. In our study, we use the BER's measure of average inflation expectations as the dependent variable of interest to examine whether improvements in SARB's communication clarity are associated with shifts in these expectations over time.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Communication channels and data sources

Today, central banks disseminate information through a wide array of channels, leveraging traditional and digital media to reach broad audiences. The primary data for this study consist of SARB's official MPC statements, obtained from SARB's website, spanning January 2001 to September 2023. The post-meeting statements by the SARB Governor outline the rationale behind policy decisions and the Bank's assessment of economic conditions.

It is important to note the evolving communication channels that SARB employs in the contemporary period. In addition to the official website publications, SARB now broadcasts the MPC statement via live webcasts and shares highlights through social media platforms. The MPC statements and press conference proceedings are communicated through channels that include Twitter (now rebranded as X), Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube. This multi-platform strategy greatly broadens SARB's audience beyond the traditional financial press. For example, SARB's communication team used a combination of Twitter, Facebook and interactive mobile-friendly microsites to publicise the launch of a new banknote series.

SARB's social media presence has grown significantly over the past decade, reflecting a broader trend of central banks embracing information and communication technology (ICT) for outreach. As of July 2025, SARB's official Twitter (X) account had over 135,000 followers, its Facebook page over 42,000 followers, and its LinkedIn page over 260,000 followers. Studies have noted that SARB is among the most active of central banks in Africa on Twitter, having posted over 6,700 tweets by mid-2025 – only slightly fewer than the continent's leader in this regard (Bank of Uganda, which boasts over 10,000 posts). This proactive adoption of social media indicates SARB's commitment to broadening its communication strategy and engaging with both expert audiences and the general public through ICT channels. Such channels complement traditional press releases and speeches, and they enable SARB to directly deliver its messages (in plain language, often accompanied by infographics or videos) to citizens, thereby potentially reducing reliance on intermediaries in the media.

For our empirical analysis, however, we focused on the content of the official MPC statements as the core communication instrument. These statements are standardised, authoritative and available continuously over our sample period. By analysing the text of these statements, we could quantify changes in communication clarity and examine their relationship with measured inflation expectations.

Quantifying communication clarity

To measure the clarity (or readability) of SARB's MPC communications, we employed textual analysis techniques. Our primary indicator of clarity was the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (FK) score. The FK score is a well-established metric of readability that translates text complexity into a United States (US) grade level equivalent. It is computed based on sentence length and word syllable count, according to the formula below:

$$0.39 \times (\text{words/sentences}) + 11.8 \times (\text{syllables/words}) - 15.59 \quad (1)$$

This formula yields a score roughly between 0 and 18 for typical texts, with higher values indicating more complex, difficult-to-read material. For example, an FK score of 8 corresponds to an eighth-grade reading level, whereas a score above 16 would indicate graduate-level difficulty. Lower FK scores thus reflect greater readability and clarity.

Bulíř et al. (2013) employed the FK grade level as an objective measure of communication clarity, interpreting the score as the number of years of education required for text comprehension. The FK grade level was applied to English versions of central bank documents, with the resulting scores used to proxy changes in clarity and analyse their relationship with the evolving economic context. In the context of central bank statements, a lower FK score (simpler language) is presumed to make the content more accessible to the general public, potentially enhancing the effectiveness of communication.

We calculated the FK grade level for each SARB MPC statement in our sample. In practice, this involves preprocessing each statement (removing non-substantive text such as titles, dates and page numbers), then computing sentence lengths and syllable counts. The statements, originally published as PDFs, were converted to plain text for analysis to ensure consistency over the 22-year period and to avoid artifacts from formatting changes.

Besides readability, we also considered the sentiment and tone of communications, as these could influence public reception. Using the Besigye-Segawa TextBlob framework (Segawa, 2021) with the Loughran-McDonald financial lexicon (Loughran & McDonald, 2011), we derived two additional text-based indices from each statement: a polarity score (measuring the sentiment on a scale from negative to positive) and a subjectivity score (measuring the degree to which the content was subjective/opinion-based or objective/factual). These scores allowed us to control for whether the tone of communications (such as optimistic or pessimistic language) might confound the relationship between readability and expectations. However, our primary focus remained on the readability metric as an indicator of clarity.

Our analysis centred on the hypothesis that improved clarity (lower FK scores) in SARB communications leads to better anchoring of inflation expectations. This hypothesis aligns with prior findings that simpler, clearer language by central banks can enhance public understanding and engagement. We formally tested this by examining the relationship between the FK score of MPC statements and subsequent movements in measured inflation expectations in South Africa.

Empirical strategy

To investigate the relationship between communication clarity and inflation expectations, we used a time-series econometric approach. Given that we were interested in the long-run association between the readability of communications and the level of inflation expectations (which may both exhibit trends over time), our main technique was the Engle-Granger two-step cointegration test.

In the first step, we estimated a simple long-run equilibrium relationship of the form:

$$\text{Inflation Expectations} = \alpha + \beta * \text{Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score} + \varepsilon \qquad (2)$$

Inflation Expectations is the dependent variable, representing the expected average inflation rate by the market agents. As the independent variable, the FK grade level score indicates the ease of reading with α as the intercept term, representing the constant term for the equation. β is the coefficient of the FK grade level score, indicating the relationship between the readability and inflation expectations, and ε represents the error term or residual, accounting for unexplained variations in the dependent variable.

The Engle-Granger cointegration captures the long-run equilibrium relationship between the two variables, suggesting that changes in FK grade level score may or may not have a substantial long-term effect on inflation expectations after accounting for short-term dynamics.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

Before turning to the regression results, we present summary statistics for the key variables and their simple correlations. Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for SARB's MPC statement FK scores, the average inflation expectations and other text-based indicators (polarity and subjectivity) over the sample period.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	Average_ Expectations	Fleschkincaid	Subjectivity	Polarity
Mean	6.00	12.024	0.337	0.0345
Median	6.00	12.9	0.337	0.030
Maximum	10.1	15.7	0.408	0.113
Minimum	3.2	7.00	0.269	0.008
Std. Dev.	1.575	2.225	0.0253	0.025
Skewness	0.713	0.00	0.032	0.621
Kurtosis	3.356	2.416	3.043	2.954
Jarque-Bera	8.029	9.858	0.022	5.734
Probability	0.018	0.007	0.988	0.056
Sum	534.8	1070.2	30.039	3.074
Sum Sq.				
Dev.	218.372	435.955	0.056	0.056
Observations	89	89	89	89

Table 1 shows the results of the descriptive statistics. We observe that the mean and the median of the time series are close to one another, which implies a relatively even distribution. The skewness is expected to be zero and kurtosis 3. However, for all the time series the skewness is positive. Apart from FK grade level score, the kurtosis is relatively normal because it approximates to 3. However, the Jarque-Bera statistic suggests that only subjectivity has a normal distribution.

Table 2: Correlation analysis

Variable	Average_ Expectations	Fleschkincaid	Subjectivity	Polarity
Average_ Expectations	1.000			
Fleschkincaid	0.164	1.000		
Subjectivity	0.094	0.233	1.000	
Polarity	0.263	0.189	0.161	1.000

Table 2 depicts the correlation among the variables. We observe that polarity has the highest correlation coefficient with average inflation expectations of about 0.26, which is statistically significant.

FK grade level score has a correlation coefficient of 0.16, which is not statistically significant. Among the control variables, we find that FK grade level score has a statistically significant pairwise correlation with subjectivity and polarity, but the correlation is relatively low.

The relationship between CBC indicators and inflation expectations is visually represented in Figures 1 to 3. We observe in Figure 1 that the FK level score has had a downward trend since 2015, which indicates increased clarity regarding communication. There is also a clear positive relationship between the clarity indicator and the average inflation expectations. This means that due to clarity of communication, market agents revised their expectations downward until the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

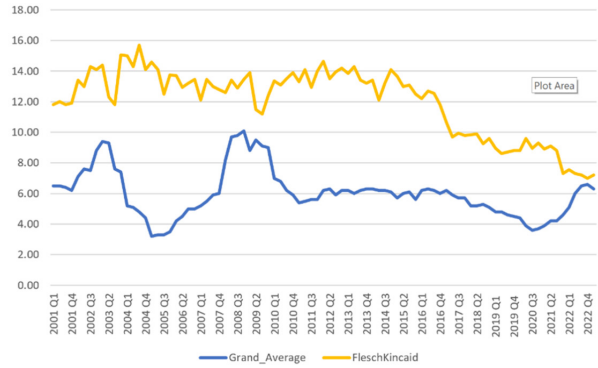


Figure 1: Average inflation expectations and Flesch-Kincaid index

Figure 2 shows the relationship between the polarity indicator and inflation expectations. There seems to be a clear negative relationship between the two series during certain periods, especially during the financial economic crisis and also during the COVID-19 pandemic.

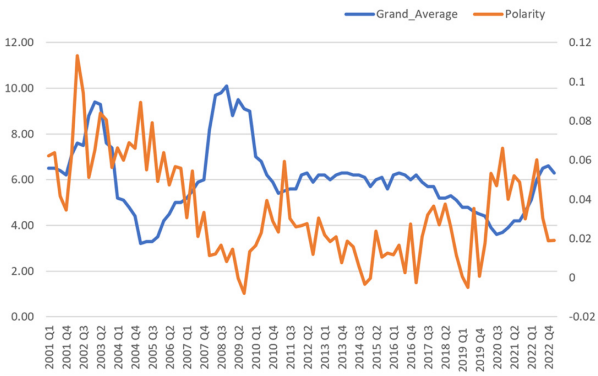


Figure 2: Average inflation expectations and polarity index

Figure 3 shows the relationship between the subjectivity index and inflation expectations. The series moves together during the early period of inflation targeting and then moves in the opposite direction from 2003 until the 2011 quarter 1, which includes the financial crisis period. The two series seem to lose their relationship in the 2022 quarter 3.

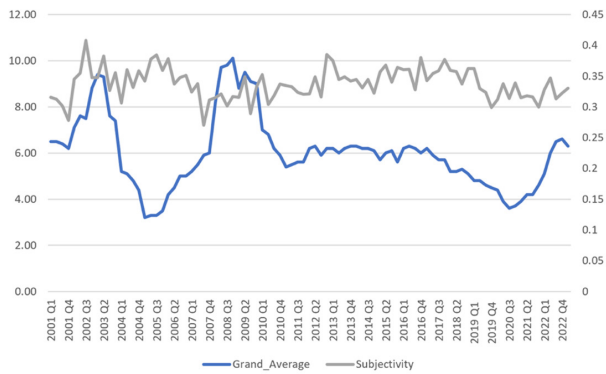


Figure 3: Average inflation expectations and subjectivity index

Stationarity tests

The Augmented Dickey–Fuller (ADF) and Phillips-Perron (PP) tests were conducted for each of the variables to assess whether they were stationary or not before testing for Engle-Granger cointegration. This is because the series must be at the same level of integration for the long-run relationship to be established.

H0: The series is non-stationary (has a unit root).

H1: The series is stationary.

Rejection criteria: Reject H0 if the absolute value of the test statistic is greater than the absolute value of the critical value. Alternatively, reject the null hypothesis if the probability value is less than 0.05.

According to the PP test, both variables are non-stationary at level because the probability values are greater than 0.05. The ADF test confirmed that Flesch-Kincaid is non-stationary at level, but the average expectations are non-stationary at the 5 per cent level when the intercept and trend are included. We therefore concluded that both series are non-stationary at level. Once the series are differenced once, they become stationary because the probability values are zero. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Unit root test table (PP and ADF)

UNIT ROOT TEST TABLE (PP)			
	At Level		
		FLESCHKINCAID	EXPECTATIONS
With constant	t-Statistic	-0,6359	-2,4791
		n0	n0
With constant & trend	t-Statistic	-2,7568	-2,5742
		n0	n0
Without constant & trend	t-Statistic	-0,7698	-0,6409
		n0	n0
	At First Difference		
		d(FLESCHKINCAID)	d(EXPECTATIONS)
With constant	t-Statistic	-12,5078	-7,4436
		***	***
With constant & trend	t-Statistic	-14,1567	-7,3570
		***	***
Without constant & trend	t-Statistic	-12,3909	-7,4837
		***	***
UNIT ROOT TEST TABLE (ADF)			
	At Level		
		FLESCHKINCAID	EXPECTATIONS
With constant	t-Statistic	0,1137	-3,1759
		n0	**
With constant & trend	t-Statistic	-3,0518	-3,4009
		n0	*
	Prob.	0,3060	0,3837
		n0	n0
	At First Difference		
		d(FLESCHKINCAID)	d(EXPECTATIONS)
With constant	t-Statistic	-9,4401	-7,3065
		***	***
With constant & trend	t-Statistic	-9,7938	-7,2661
		***	***
Without constant & trend	t-Statistic	-9,3925	-7,3494
		***	***

Notes: (*) Significant at the 10%; (**) Significant at the 5%; (***) Significant at the 1% and (no) Not Significant
**MacKinnon (1996) one-sided p-values*

Engle-Granger cointegration analysis of FK grade level score and SARB inflation expectations

The analysis employed the Engle-Granger cointegration methodology, with inflation expectations designated as the dependent variable, to ascertain the presence of a long-run equilibrium relationship between the FK grade level score of SARB MPC statements and SARB's average inflation expectations.

In the first stage of the analysis, a cointegration regression was implemented, with inflation expectations specified as the dependent variable and the FK grade level score as the independent variable. The outcomes of this estimation are presented in Table 4. The cointegration regression is run with inflation expectations being the dependent variable and the FK grade level score as the independent variable, as shown in Table 4.

To test the long-term relationship between the variables, we used the Engle-Granger two-step procedure. The first step was to run an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression of the variables. In the second step, we tested whether the residuals from the regression in the first step were stationary. This was done by running the Engle-Granger cointegration test on the results. These results are exhibited in Table 4. The *tau*-statistic is 3,4959 with the probability of 0.04, which is less than 0.05. This result means that we can reject the null hypothesis of no cointegration and conclude that there is a cointegrating relationship between the two variables at the 5 per cent level of significance.

Table 4: Cointegration regression of inflation expectations on Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score

Series: AVERAGE_EXPECTATIONS FLESCHKINCAID				
Sample: 2001Q1 2023Q1				
Included observations: 89				
Null hypothesis: Series are not cointegrated				
Cointegrating equation deterministics: C				
Automatic lags specification based on Schwarz criterion (maxlag=11)				
Dependent	tau-statistic	Prob.*	z-statistic	Prob.*
AVERAGE_EXPECTATIONS	-3,495992883	0,0405	-30,48456619	0,0029
FLESCHKINCAID	-1,309663549	0,8286	-5,208335048	0,7085
*MacKinnon (1996) p-values				
Intermediate Results:				
		AVERAGE_ EXPECTATIONS	FLESCHKINCAID	
Rho - 1		-0,150720155	-0,059185626	
Rho S.E.		0,04311226	0,045191473	
Residual variance		0,331853662	0,784488613	
Long-run residual variance		1,835553653	0,784488613	
Number of lags		2	0	
Number of observations		86	88	
Number of stochastic trends**		2	2	

DISCUSSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study provide clear evidence that CBC exerts a measurable influence on the formation of inflation expectations in South Africa. By quantifying clarity through the FK readability score, we have shown that periods of more readable, plain language communication by SARB's MPC correspond to

lower long-run inflation expectations among market participants and the public. In practical terms, when SARB's statements are easier to read and understand, the public's expectations of future inflation tend to be better anchored (closer to the official target). This result underscores the broader point that how a central bank communicates, and not just what it communicates, can affect the efficacy of monetary policy.

Two main implications emerge from our analysis:

Importance of readability and clarity: The evidence that improved readability correlates with reduced inflation expectations (in the long run) reinforces the argument that central banks should strive for clear and accessible language. The FK score essentially captures the structure and complexity of the text. A lower FK (simpler communication) likely makes it easier for a wide audience, including non-specialists, to grasp the central bank's message and policy stance. Our findings echo those of Bholat et al. (2018) at the Bank of England, who found that using "relatable" communication materials (including simpler language and visuals) increased public understanding and trust in the central bank. In SARB's case, greater clarity in MPC statements appears to enhance credibility and accountability, as evidenced by the inverse relationship with expectations. This suggests that central banks in emerging markets can benefit from adopting plain language approaches similar to those being implemented by major central banks to connect with the general public.

Communication as a policy tool: Our results reinforce the view that communication itself is a tool of monetary policy. When done effectively, communication can guide the public's expectations in the same direction as the policy intent, thereby improving policy transmission. Acting as a conduit for transparency and accountability, clear communication can build trust among the public and market participants. This trust, in turn, makes policy announcements more credible and potent. For SARB, maintaining a high level of clarity could help mitigate unwarranted swings in expectations, especially during times of uncertainty. For instance, during periods of economic stress (financial crisis or pandemic), straightforward messaging can help prevent an unmooring of inflation expectations by reaffirming the central bank's commitment to its goals in language that the public finds reassuring and understandable.

Based on these insights, we offer several policy recommendations for SARB and, potentially, other central banks in similar contexts:

Continue to prioritise readability: SARB should continue its recent efforts to improve the readability of its communications. This could involve internal guidelines or checklists for drafting MPC statements in plain language (avoiding unnecessary jargon, explaining technical terms, using shorter sentences where possible). Regular readability audits (using FK or similar metrics) could be instituted. Given the proven long-run benefits, even incremental improvements in clarity may yield dividends in terms of better anchored expectations.

Expand communication channels mindfully: While SARB has embraced social media and other channels, it should ensure that content across these platforms maintains clarity and consistency. Posts on Twitter or summaries on Facebook should mirror the clarity of the full statements, potentially using infographics or videos for key points. By engaging on platforms popular with younger or non-expert audiences, SARB could further broaden understanding of monetary policy. Importantly, the Bank should also monitor feedback and questions from the public on these channels, as this could indicate where messages are not clear and require further clarification or outreach.

Strengthen forward guidance practices: Forward guidance – communicating about future policy intentions – is most effective when messages are clear and credible. SARB should refine its use of forward guidance by providing as much clarity as possible about the factors that will influence future policy (without making unwarranted commitments). As our research and other studies suggest, clear forward guidance could reduce uncertainty during volatile periods. Ensuring that forward-looking statements are understood by the wider public, and not just economists, might involve publishing frequently asked questions (FAQs) or explainer documents alongside MPC statements, especially when introducing new policy directions.

Monitor and evaluate communication effectiveness: SARB could benefit from formally monitoring how well its messages are understood. This could include running periodic surveys or focus groups

to gauge public comprehension of its announcements. In addition, analysing media coverage (how newspapers or online media report on the MPC decisions) could provide insight into whether the intended message is getting through or being distorted. If misunderstandings are detected, SARB could adjust its communication strategy or issue clarifications. Over time, building a feedback loop would help to calibrate the level of detail and complexity appropriate for communications.

Leverage multimedia and translation: South Africa has a diverse populace with multiple languages. To truly reach a broad audience, SARB might consider providing key parts of its communications in other widely spoken languages (perhaps in summary form) and using multimedia (visuals, charts, short videos) to illustrate policy points. Our findings highlight literacy (in terms of reading level) as a barrier; using visual communication could transcend some language and education barriers. Many central banks now produce short explainer videos for social media. This could be a useful complement to written statements for SARB.

By adopting these strategies, SARB could further enhance the clarity and reach of its communications. The end goal is to ensure that all segments of the public understand the central bank's objectives and outlook, which fosters informed expectations and reduces the likelihood of misinterpretation that could lead to unwarranted volatility or scepticism.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of SARB's communication practices reflects broader trends in modern central banking towards greater transparency, public engagement and accountability. As Kganyago (2017) articulated in a notable address, effective communication has become as fundamental as traditional policy tools in sustaining monetary policy credibility. This has been particularly evident under South Africa's inflation-targeting regime, where clear communication is essential for anchoring inflation expectations and ensuring policy decisions are well understood and trusted by the public. SARB's experience underscores that transparency and openness, when combined with clarity, help foster public trust and strengthen the impact of monetary policy on the economy.

Our study contributes to this understanding by providing empirical evidence that the clarity of SARB communications has a tangible effect on economic outcomes. In summary, we found a significant inverse long-run relationship between the readability of SARB's MPC statements and inflation expectations in South Africa. This implies that the clearer and more accessible SARB's messages have become, the more firmly inflation expectations have been anchored to the target, all else equal. Such a finding affirms the critical role of clear and transparent communication in modern central banking. It aligns with recent international evidence and offers a concrete data point from an emerging market economy to support the notion that central banks can enhance policy effectiveness through better communication practices.

SARB's journey towards more effective communication has included increasing the frequency of its announcements, diversifying the channels of communication, including embracing social media, and improving the readability of its messages. These efforts have helped bridge the gap between the central bank and the public, thereby bolstering the bank's credibility and accountability. Moving forward, as SARB and other central banks continue to refine their communication strategies in an ever more complex and information-rich environment, a key lesson stands out: clarity is not optional – it is fundamental. Clear, plain language communication about policy decisions and their rationale fosters greater public understanding, which, in turn, makes monetary policy more predictable and effective.

In conclusion, the case of South Africa demonstrates that evolving a central bank's communication approach can yield meaningful benefits. By speaking in a language that people can understand, SARB has improved the alignment of expectations with its policy goals. As other central banks, especially in emerging markets, contemplate their own communication strategies, the South African experience offers a valuable example of how transparency and clarity can serve as powerful tools for enhancing monetary policy outcomes. The ongoing challenge will be to maintain this clarity and adapt to new communication platforms and audience needs, ensuring that the public remains not only informed about but also engaged with monetary policy issues. The evidence presented here provides a strong argument that doing so is well worth the effort.

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Assessing Indigenous Media Performance in Mobilizing Citizens for National Identity Enrolment in Rural Southwest Nigeria

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Abstract

This article investigates the effectiveness of domestic media in mobilising rural citizens towards national identity registration in Nigeria's southwest region, based on Yoruba-language media. Rural involvement has been low, despite the government's efforts to increase enrolment. A culturally responsive survey was administered to 960 rural participants to measure their involvement with 10 of the most significant indigenous media outlets. Radio broadcasts, banners and interpersonal messages were the most effective ways to communicate the message, with religious and community leaders playing a central role in mobilising citizens. However, these efforts were hindered by systemic challenges such as insufficient registration centres, inconsistent service availability, misinformation and the corrupt monetisation of ostensibly free services. Discussion transcript analysis uncovered ethical concerns in media content, including fear-based tactics, panic-inducing messaging and false information. Contrary to common assumptions, rural citizens did not always fully comprehend their indigenous language, as questionnaire responses revealed discrepancies in understanding, reading and speaking. Expanding grassroots infrastructure, employing culturally appropriate media outlets and developing more partnerships with community leaders to establish credibility are critical to complementing the media in raising enrolment. These findings have the potential to overcome system barriers and incorporate cultural sensitivity into national identity programme planning and execution.

Keywords

Culturally responsive methodology (CRM), indigenous media, media performance, national identity enrolment, Southwest Nigeria, Yoruba

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian government started the national identity programme in 2007 to allot every Nigerian, permanent resident and foreigner who has stayed in the country for at least two years a unique National Identity Number (NIN) that helps verify their identities and makes them traceable. Its agency, the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC), has been using NINs to improve financial inclusion and widen citizens' access to healthcare, education, welfare and immigration services with the support of the World Bank and European Union, and in tandem with the Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16). However, there is a concern: Nigerians are not enrolling as they should.

NIMC's website (NIMC, 2023) shows that, as of 31 December 2023, Nigeria had 104.16 million NINs, distributed almost equally between male and female registrants. One of Nigeria's dominant, urban-based media outlets, thecable.ng.com, escalated to 107.33 million on 10 May 2024, marking a three percent increase. On 16 September 2024, another urban-based media house, AriseNews (arise.tv), elevated to 110 million, indicating a 2.4% rise, meaning that between December 2023 and December 2024, NIN registrations increased by 7.4%.

At a glance, these figures look impressive. However, they paint an unimpressive picture of the future

following NIMC's pledge to create a robust, inclusive and secure identity system for all Nigerians in the next 10 years. The population of Nigeria was 232,679,478 in 2024 (Worldometer, 2024), premised on the 2.12% increase on the United Nations data that estimated the country's population in 2023 at 227,882,945.

The math corroborates the concern. If these growth rates remain stable, the population would increase by approximately 23.2% to 280,800,000 over the next decade, while national identity registrations would grow by about 104.1% to 212,500,000. The difference between the projected population and identity registrations after 10 years would be 68,300,000 (280,800,000 – 212,500,000). Since the growth rate of national identity registrations (7.4%) is significantly higher than the population growth rate (2.12%), enrolments would increase relatively faster. However, the total population would still be larger by some 68.3 million, meaning that 25% of the population will remain unregistered by NIMC over the next decade.

The projected 25% deficit has a rural dimension to it. NIMC's activities have been visibly successful in urban areas but unimpressive in rural communities, a situation the commission constantly looks for ways to turn around. While each state in the country has its share of rural communities, the agency's website dashboard figures show that of the country's 36 states, the 10 with preponderant urban areas have a total of 56,278,402 enrolments compared to 13,813,489 associated with the 10 that are replete with the most rural areas. This indicates that most of the estimated 68.3 million unregistered folks will be rural dwellers.

Low awareness and a lack of trust have consistently been identified as barriers to rural participation in African government programmes. However, empirical data to substantiate this claim are often scarce (Angrist et al., 2021; Canen & Wantchekon, 2022). Notwithstanding NIMC's recognition of the contribution that media publicity makes to promoting its programmes, it is not apparent that it has implemented a framework media engagement policy that will affect NIN enrolments in rural communities. Scholars have further highlighted that the absence of reliable data poses a challenge in formulating effective policies in Nigeria, a problem rooted in systemic issues inherited from the military era (Uzochukwu et al., 2016).

This study covers this gap by exploring the role of Yoruba-language outlets in enhancing rural participation in national identity programmes. It also provides actionable recommendations to help ensure they are more inclusive and effective in reaching underserved populations. This is vital in countries such as Nigeria and India that encompass hundreds of ethnic groups and languages and where communication strategies that transcend one-size-fits-all approaches are so much in need (Dutta, 2011; Ethnologue, 2023; Ojebode, 2002; Pavarala & Malik, 2007). It is on this note that the following objectives were floated:

1. To identify the Yoruba-language media outlets available in rural areas where enrolment agents operate and determine rural dwellers' awareness of them.
2. To examine the role of Yoruba indigenous media in mobilising citizens for identity registration in Southwest Nigeria.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of Yoruba indigenous media in driving actual participation in identity registration.

PLACING THE INFLUENCE OF INDIGENOUS MEDIA

Evidence shows that indigenous media have supported national identity registration in various countries (Adeyeye, et al., 2020; Dowell, 2006; Goldscheider, 2002; Omojola, 2009). The case of the United Kingdom shows that information about the NIN system and internal security is provided in several languages, including Yoruba, to accommodate the country's multicultural population. Similarly, in Germany, the Personalausweis (national ID card) registration process involved public broadcasters and local media to inform citizens in multiple languages (Breckenridge, 2014). In the United States alone, where about 350 languages are used, cultural group leaders have helped translate the Social Security Number (SSN) system into Chinese, Arabic and Tagalog, among other languages, and its association with digital services (Solove, 2020). South Africa uses indigenous media in its Smart ID system in reaching out to rural communities (Magoma, 2020). Kenya's Huduma Namba initiative leveraged local media to educate the public, building trust despite concerns about privacy and data misuse (Nyakundi, 2020).

In Ghana, the National Identification Authority (NIA) project used mobile registration units to reach remote areas in local languages (Thiel, 2017), while India's Aadhaar system used indigenous language

radio stations to educate marginalised communities (Chin et al., 2015; Khanna & Raina, 2012). These stations play a significant role in educating people about the programme's digital benefits and registration processes, notwithstanding that some news published was negative (Chin et al., 2015; Khanna & Raina, 2012).

In Nigeria, Yoruba-language media are regarded as essential in promoting government initiatives. Radios stations such as *Bond FM* and *Faaji FM* use dialects, culturally appropriate proverbs and stories to reach rural populations, making complex information simple (Folarin, 1998). Yoruba media are reportedly more successful in rural areas compared to mainstream media because they engage with local languages and cultural environments. However, the data that corroborate or debunk this hardly exist (Salawu, 2016), more so concerning citizens' mobilisation for the NIN enrolment project NIMC (2023).

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE METHODOLOGY IN PRACTICE

This study is situated in culturally responsive methodology (CRM), which extends beyond surface-level cultural acknowledgement to actually centre research design, data collection and analysis within the cultural values, communication practices and community structures of the target population. CRM contends that effectiveness in engaging marginalised communities is contingent upon respect for and inclusion of their cultural paradigms (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Within the context of this research, CRM provides a necessary lens through which to view the performance of local media. It frames the underlying research problem not as a simple absence of information across rural areas, but rather as a potential failure to situate the NIN enrolment message in terms that are locally meaningful. CRM is used to explain that indigenous media will not only adopt a grassroots language of communication, but also culturally recognisable forms (such as proverbs, storytelling and music) that are well known to its local audiences in an attempt to make complex information easier to comprehend and recall (Abdulai et al., 2023; Folarin, 1998).

These media can also perform their social responsibility function through exploiting credible cultural agents, which involves collaboration with renowned community influencers (traditional leaders, religious leaders, elders, for example) who are information validators and can mobilise citizens successfully (Aondowase et al., 2023). This paves the way for participatory engagement that accommodates feedback from the community and is reactive to local concerns, and also in line with the principles of participatory communication theory (Freire, 1970; Servaes, 2020).

This CRM system allows for the proper analysis of the empirical data and aids in describing why certain media succeed where others do not. CRM also uncovers gaps where media outreach is linguistically Yoruba but not necessarily culturally responsive. Furthermore, the system formally cautions against the presumption of a monolithic culture, preparing us to challenge such subtleties as dialectical differences and variation in levels of literacy in the native language – a finding this study later exposes.

METHODOLOGY

This study's population consists of rural dwellers in the six states of Southwest Nigeria – Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo and Ekiti. The region is one of six in the country, with others being southeast, south-south, northwest, northeast and northcentral. It is the most viable area, controlling over 60% of the country's $453 billion gross domestic product (GDP). Some 160 respondents received copies of the questionnaire in each state, making 960 across the six states. The attempt to randomise the questionnaire distribution failed because authentic population figures for rural communities are unreliable, making sampling frames indeterminate. This challenge is one of the issues the government plans to address in the proposed census in or before 2027. An availability sampling method was, therefore, adopted. The technique helped the research assistants to select participants based on ease of access and willingness to participate, making the exercise practical and cost effective. The non-random sampling enabled the continual distribution of questionnaires to target respondents until 160 copies were returned for each state.

The items on the questionnaire were drawn in Yoruba, the indigenous language of the region, and not in English, the official language of the nation. To the surprise of all, some of the respondents experienced

problems reading and understanding them. They indicated that their Yoruba oral language may not equal reading. This kind of difference was noted with the riverine communities in Lagos and Ondo states. They claimed the differential in reading, writing and understanding occurred because their dialects were at the fringes of the Yoruba language, making only speaking mutually intelligible with the popular Yoruba dialect. Respondents' eligibility was the ability to answer the questions in Yoruba. The respondents were 16 years and above, and they were the group approved by the government to register in the national exercise without being accompanied by a guide.

The six states (Table 1) have rural areas, though Lagos has many more urban communities than all others. Four local government areas (LGAs) were selected from each state since this number was enough and appropriate to achieve the objectives. Although Lagos State has officially categorised four of its 20 LGAs – Epe, Ibeju Lekki, Badagry and Ikorodu – as rural, the remaining five states do not have this classification. The study, therefore, relied on the suggestions of the state's top officials regarding what LGAs they considered as rural.

Table 1: The four LGAs selected for the study in each of the six states

State	No. of LGAs	Four study rural LGAs
Lagos	20	Epe, Ibeju Lekki, Badagry, Ikorodu
Ogun	20	Ogun Waterside, Ewekoro, Ipokia, Imeko Afon
Oyo	33	Ona Ara, Iwajowa, Irepo, Saki East
Osun	30	Orolu, Boluwaduro, Odo-Otin, Ayedire
Ondo	18	Akoko Northwest, Ese Odo, Ose, Odigbo

The research was implemented in communities with proof of NIN enrolment centres. A centre could be mobile or fixed. The mobile deployment of registration facilities involves using smartphones and biometric facilities powered by the Android system. Each centre was operated by one, two or three persons, including the centre coordinator. A mobile centre could not operate beyond the surrounding communities. Each centre's activities were tracked remotely by both NIMC or a principal agent or both.

PROBLEMATISATION AND JUSTIFICATION FOR THE AVAILABILITY SAMPLING STRATEGY

The ideal sampling approach for this study of rural dwellers in Southwest Nigeria would have been a probabilistic method to ensure statistical generalisability (Yilmaz, 2013). However, this was precluded by the stated fundamental constraint: the absence of a reliable sampling frame due to outdated census data and a lack of authentic population figures for rural communities, a well-documented challenge for research in Nigeria (Kiregyera, 1982; Thompson, 2019). Without a comprehensive population list, the application of true random sampling techniques is scientifically impossible (Elliott & Valliant, 2017). Selection bias was minimised by extending the questionnaire distribution to several sections of the population.

Consequently, the adopted availability system became the most pragmatic and feasible alternative. This non-probability technique is scientifically justified in exploratory research where the primary aim is to gain initial insights and understand phenomena within a specific context. Despite susceptibility to bias, a variety of strategic controls were employed to limit constraints and expand credibility and transferability of findings – the qualitative parallel to generalisability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such controls were exercised through maintaining small quotas (160 per state, 40 per LGA) to maintain geographical diversity and requesting researchers to seek heterogeneity among villages, ages and genders within sites (Müller & Renes, 2021). A large sample size (n=960) was employed to identify robust patterns across sites. Furthermore, methodological triangulation through the use of mixed methods increased the validity of inferences obtained (Kim, 2019). Therefore, even though not statistically generalisable, the research methodology is warranted and the controls employed ensure that the results reflect an analytically transferable, well-balanced and empirically rich investigation.

DATA ANALYSIS

Yoruba-language media outlets available in rural areas where NIN centres operate and rural dwellers' awareness

A preliminary survey of all available indigenous media was conducted to determine respondents' awareness of NIN enrolments. The ones listed below showed study prospects. Others, including Yoruba newspapers and magazines, were excluded because either they did not exist or there was the need to avoid wasting research resources.

1. *Radio stations:* These stations broadcast primarily in Yoruba or in English with Yoruba programmes.
2. *Television stations*: Yoruba-language stations or English stations that broadcast Yoruba programmes.
3. *Online media:* Yoruba-language blogs, social media platforms and video content on platforms such as YouTube that cater to Yoruba.
4. *Public service announcements* from government, traditional institutions or private organisations.
5. *Banners* (produced usually from clothing or flex materials).
6. *Posters and flyers*: The survey showed that 84.2% of centres with posters also printed flyer versions.
7. *Religious media*, including sermons in churches, mosques and other religious organisations.
8. *Interpersonal message passing*: This could be called interpersonal media. It involves transmitting information from one person to another about identity registration processes. Messages can be verbal or in the form of short messages sent via mobile phones or messaging apps.
9. *No awareness*: This is a situation where the rural populace was unaware of NIN registration due to non-exposure to any medium.

Table 2: Rural identity registration media distribution and awareness analysis in Nigeria's six southwest states (n=160 in each state, N = 960 in the six states)

Media	Lagos	Ogun	Oyo	Osun	Ondo	Ekiti	Total
Radio Stations	36	40	26	16	22	17	**157**
Television Stations	10	16	20	31	6	7	**90**
Online	12	7	10	11	24	11	**75**
Public Announcements	5	17	11	22	0	19	**74**
Banners	14	5	4	2	0	11	**36**
Posters & Flyers	12	10	4	11	21	22	**80**
Religious Media	4	6	7	2	5	11	**35**
Interpersonal Media	15	8	16	14	25	12	**90**
Awareness Total Across States	108	109	98	109	103	120	**637**
No Awareness	**52**	**51**	**62**	**51**	**57**	**40**	**323**
Awareness (> 1 Medium)	**76**	**66**	**34**	**29**	**19**	**44**	**268**

Table 2 reveals that radio remains the most widely accessed medium in rural areas, with 157 mentions overall, particularly in Ogun (40) and Lagos (36). Television usage, though significant, was less consistent, with Osun (31) leading and Ondo (6) trailing. Online platforms showed moderate adoption, with Ondo (24) and Lagos (12) leading. Public service announcements were relatively effective in Osun (22) and Ekiti (19), while posters and flyers were widely used in Ekiti (22) and Ondo (21), suggesting their practicality in low-resource settings. Interpersonal media, such as word-of-mouth, was highly effective in Ondo (25) and Lagos (15), suggesting community networking. Many respondents were exposed to more than one

media outlet. However, the high number of respondents with no awareness (323 out of 960), especially in Oyo (62) and Ondo (57), highlights significant gaps in reaching rural populations. Lagos emerged with the highest exposure to more media outlets than one.

THE ROLE (FUNCTIONS) OF YORUBA INDIGENOUS MEDIA IN MOBILISING CITIZENS FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY REGISTRATION IN SOUTHWEST NIGERIA

This article operationalises the social responsibility role in terms of 10 functions they perform and how media audiences see those roles performed: namely information (Info), which means providing news and reports to keep the public informed; education (Edu), offering educational content to inform, teach, or raise awareness; entertainment (Ent), engaging audiences to amuse or entertain, and persuasion (Pers), influencing opinions, attitudes or behaviours.

Others are socialisation (Soc), which means helping to shape cultural norms, values and behaviours; mobilisation (Mob), motivating people to take action; surveillance (Surv), acting as a "watchdog"; correlation (Correl), interpreting and contextualising messages for a broader understanding; cultural transmission (C/T), preserving cultural heritage and traditions, and community building (C/B), which involves fostering a sense of belonging by connecting people with shared interests. A contingency table for each state was built to show the rural dwellers' ratings of each media outlet's role in mobilising them for NIN registration.

Table 3: Crosstab for rural dwellers on the role of media in mobilising them for NIN registration in Lagos State (n=108)

	Info	Edu	Ent	Pers	Soc	Mob	Surv	Correl	C/T	C/B	Total
Radio	50	14	2	2	3	12	21	0	3	1	108
TV	35	23	17	9	0	6	10	5	3	0	**108**
Online	10	31	7	13	6	9	16	15	1	0	**108**
P/A	40	5	1	18	2	27	4	6	1	4	**108**
Banners	90	2	0	5	1	10	0	1	1	1	**108**
P & F	88	3	1	7	0	9	0	0	0	0	**108**
Religious	21	17	0	20	11	15	3	11	3	7	**108**
I/M	41	7	7	6	16	11	3	3	3	11	**108**
Total	**379**	**102**	**45**	**90**	**39**	**99**	**43**	**31**	**15**	**24**	**867**

Table 4: Crosstab for rural dwellers on the role of media in mobilising them for NIN registration in Ogun State (n=109)

	Info	Edu	Ent	Pers	Soc	Mob	Surv	Correl	C/T	C/B	Total
Radio	26	17	4	7	6	15	13	12	4	5	109
TV	19	10	12	7	11	9	15	11	6	9	109
Online	17	5	9	15	15	5	20	12	5	6	109
P/A	30	9	4	10	12	7	9	6	10	12	109
Banners	74	6	3	5	3	9	3	5	0	1	109
P & F	57	12	1	11	2	9	0	2	12	3	109
Religious	22	21	1	15	12	10	11	7	7	2	109
I/M	19	16	21	13	7	8	7	4	6	8	109
Total	264	96	55	83	68	72	78	59	50	46	811

Table 5: Crosstab for rural dwellers on the role of media in mobilising them for NIN registration in Oyo State (n=98)

	Info	Edu	Ent	Pers	Soc	Mob	Surv	Correl	C/T	C/B	Total
Radio	25	22	6	6	5	6	11	4	3	10	98
TV	19	11	17	9	4	13	11	2	5	7	98
Online	27	11	6	9	8	10	10	7	4	6	98
P/A	29	12	12	10	2	9	4	3	8	9	98
Banners	52	3	2	13	2	18	0	3	1	4	98
P & F	47	7	8	10	6	11	1	3	3	2	98
Religious	23	20	8	8	12	9	4	10	0	5	98
I/M	22	9	7	11	4	13	7	10	7	8	98
Total	224	95	66	76	43	91	48	42	31	51	767

Table 6: Crosstab for rural dwellers on the role of media in mobilising them for NIN registration in Osun State (n=109)

	Info	Edu	Ent	Pers	Soc	Mob	Surv	Correl	C/T	C/B	Total
Radio	29	30	3	12	2	10	8	9	5	1	109
TV	30	14	7	16	4	7	9	9	8	5	109
Online	23	8	16	10	6	7	12	9	9	9	109
P/A	35	6	9	13	8	9	6	8	6	9	109
Banners	66	2	2	18	3	14	0	2	2	0	109
P & F	55	5	3	16	6	14	3	5	1	1	109
Religious	27	15	2	16	8	1	20	5	7	8	109
I/M	24	12	6	19	12	11	6	8	5	6	109
Total	289	92	48	120	49	73	64	55	43	39	873

Table 7: Crosstab for rural dwellers on the role of media in mobilising them for NIN registration in Ondo State (n=103)

	Info	Edu	Ent	Pers	Soc	Mob	Surv	Correl	C/T	C/B	Total
Radio	29	24	7	11	7	5	6	4	4	6	103
TV	21	13	12	10	6	5	15	11	4	6	103
Online	25	7	7	11	8	12	13	9	7	4	103
P/A	30	9	4	15	3	15	4	7	8	8	103
Banners	63	13	5	2	6	7	0	2	3	2	103
P & F	59	8	3	13	2	11	2	1	2	2	103
Religious	22	14	0	5	17	10	14	12	7	5	103
I/M	26	7	12	1	16	8	8	7	7	11	103
Total	275	95	50	68	65	72	62	53	42	44	826

Table 8: Crosstab for rural dwellers on the role of media in mobilising them for NIN registration in Ekiti State (n=120)

	Info	Edu	Ent	Pers	Soc	Mob	Surv	Correl	C/T	C/B	Total
Radio	35	21	9	6	8	6	12	12	5	6	120
TV	39	11	3	11	12	11	8	9	8	8	120
Online	27	7	7	19	10	16	10	17	4	3	120
P/A	32	9	16	17	9	7	0	3	16	11	120
Banners	76	3	0	5	2	21	2	4	5	2	120
P & F	71	6	2	7	0	12	5	6	9	2	120
Religious	22	10	9	18	12	9	11	17	2	10	120
I/M	33	18	7	20	8	7	6	5	6	10	120
Total	335	85	53	103	61	89	54	73	55	52	960

Table 3, Table 4, Table 5, Table 6, Table 7 and Table 8 all show that information was the most dominant function in mobilising rural dwellers for NIN registration. Banners and posters and flyers consistently emerged as the most effective for delivering information, with frequencies exceeding 50 in most states. Radio and public announcements also played significant roles. The education function was the second most prominent, with radio, television and religious media being the primary sources of educational content. Online media showed growing relevance, especially in Lagos, where it was commonplace (31) in education. Religious media also stood out for its role in education, particularly in Ogun and Osun States, indicating its influence.

The mobilisation function was moderately represented, with public announcements and religious media being the most effective in motivating rural dwellers to take action. Entertainment, cultural transmission and community building were less emphasised, suggesting that these roles were not a primary focus in NIN enrolment media activities. However, religious media and interpersonal media showed potential for addressing these gaps, particularly in states such as Ekiti and Ondo.

The effectiveness of Yoruba indigenous media in driving actual participation in identity registration

A focused discussion was organised for six community leaders who provided evidence of NIN enrolment and demonstrated knowledge of it. They agreed to discuss the following questions on the WhatsApp messaging platform:

- Did Yoruba indigenous media play a role in your decision to enrol for NIN?
- Which medium motivated you the most to enrol?
- Were there specific messages that stood out for you?
- How did the media address your concerns about NIN registration?
- Would you have participated in NIN registration without the media?

The discussants summarised each point made to ensure proper articulation of the transcripts. While the discussions were mainly in Yoruba, at least four discussants code-switched a few times ((Nwokwu et al., 2018), using English for some Yoruba expressions. The transcripts were compiled in Yoruba before being translated into English. The quotations were compiled, after which a thematic analysis was implemented. Researchers had stated that quotations in discussion analysis were key to ensuring authenticity, credibility and transparency in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Yilmaz, 2013). Quotations humanise the data and are concrete evidence for the themes, so that readers can verify interpretations and listen to the data in participants' own words. They are used to show crucial linguistic and cultural sensitivities that would not be evident in a summary of discussions. They also make the results useful, especially for policymakers and stakeholders.

Predominance of interpersonal and localised communication channels

While mass media played a role, the most trusted and effective vectors for information were hyper-local and interpersonal. The following quotations from the respondents across the states corroborate the effective role of word-of-mouth:

Ogun: "I saw the Baale (local chief) asking people to go and register."

Ondo: "It was a Baale from Italeto [a village] who came around to inform us."

Osun: "I just arrived from the farm when a friend told me he heard it on the radio."

Ekiti: "Information flows regularly about NIN from people to people."

Official mass media often served as an initial trigger, but the information was catalysed into action through trusted community figures (Baales, pastors, imams) and personal networks. This suggests that in these rural contexts, social capital and traditional hierarchies are more effective for mobilisation than broadcast messages alone.

Use of fear and urgency as primary motivational tactics

The messaging strategy relied heavily on creating a sense of fear, scarcity and urgency to compel action, directly addressing the reviewer's point on "fear tactics".

Lagos: "No bank and passport for you without NIN... That scared me."

Osun: "Register now, tomorrow may be too late."

Ondo: "Se kia, ma d'agunla!" [Hurry now, don't delay!]

Ogun: Blogger's message: "if we don't register now, Fulani herdsmen will take our place."

The most memorable messages were not about the benefits of a national identity but about the negative consequences of *not* having one (loss of access to services) or existential threats. This tactic was effective in generating initial interest but may have contributed to public anxiety.

Pervasive structural and logistical barriers

This was the most consistent and powerful theme across all discussants. It encompasses the reviewer's points on "limited access", "fewer registration centres" and "absence of relevant information".

Oyo: "Nobody tells us where we can find centres ... We saw the poster but no enroller."

Osun: "The worst thing is that when I got to the NIN centre, one man said they only come there once in a week."

Ondo: "Only one centre was servicing more than 25 rural communities ... Government should wake up."

Ekiti: "The distance people have to travel ... is another issue ... only 20 enrolment centres in Ekiti. Too few."

The media successfully raised awareness but could not compensate for the state's failure to provide adequate infrastructure and consistent service. This created a frustrating paradox where citizens were motivated to act but were systematically hindered from doing so, leading to feelings of neglect ("Government should remember the ruralites").

The role of religious and traditional institutions in legitimisation

Religious leaders acted as crucial amplifiers and legitimisers of the government's message, often translating it into a moral or communal imperative.

Ogun: "During a Sunday service, the pastor told everyone to go and enrol ... saying we couldn't renew passports without NIN."

Oyo: "Our mosque's imam said we shouldn't be bothered about the initial crowd, adding that the situation would soon improve."

Ekiti: "During a rural evangelism programme ... the preacher said we should not pay the NIN centre operators."

The pulpit and mosque became key channels for dissemination. Religious leaders not only spread information but also addressed practical concerns (crowds) and countered corruption, lending their authority to the process.

Circulation of disinformation and rumours

The information vacuum and anxiety were fertile ground for the spread of falsehoods, as noted by the reviewer under "disinformation".

Oyo: "WhatsApp that Fulani herdsmen from Niger and Chad have crossed into Nigeria ... to register for NIN. That message was alarming but I knew it was exaggerated."

Ogun: Blogger's message about Fulani herdsmen taking their place.

The lack of clear, consistent and official information from trusted sources allowed ethnically charged disinformation to flourish, particularly on social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. This highlights the double-edged sword of digital media in rural mobilisation.

Corruption and exploitation of citizens

The chaotic rollout and scarcity of registration services created opportunities for exploitation, directly addressing "corruption".

Ekiti: "The banners said NIN is free but I have heard some people complain that the centre operators demanded for money before enrolment."

Ondo: "Some people came with a bus and offered to take us to council but only after we had paid them money."

The promise of a free government service was undermined by informal gatekeepers who monetised access, eroding public trust in the entire exercise. The media's role was silent on this critical issue.

Inconsistent and unreliable media coverage

The reviewer's point on "insufficient information" is reflected here. Media coverage was patchy, often lacking the critical details needed for action.

Oyo: "They didn't tell anybody where to register ... NTA ... mentioned NIN but NEPA took light before expatiating."

Ondo: "No media carried it. Even if they carried it, we wouldn't know because radio and TV signals are weak."

Ekiti: "I doubt the NIN matter is a priority for them [local radio]."

Table 9 below is a summary of the analysis.

Table 9: Themes, associated southwestern states and evidence of media mobilisation

Theme	States involved	Key evidence of media mobilisation
Predominance of interpersonal and localised communication channels	Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Ekiti	Reliance on community leaders such as Baales to spread information, word-of-mouth communication among friends and neighbours, and regular information flow through personal networks.
Use of fear and urgency as primary motivational tactics	Lagos, Osun, Ondo, Ogun	Use of alarming banners and SMS highlighting denial of services, posters and flyers with urgent messages in local languages, and disinformation on social media about ethnic threats to compel action.
Pervasive structural and logistical barriers	Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti	Critical lack of registration centres forcing long-distance travel, severe overcrowding at available centres, inconsistent operation of centres (e.g. only one day a week) and a complete absence of centres in many villages.
Role of religious and traditional institutions in legitimisation	Ogun, Oyo, Ekiti	Pastors and imams instructing congregations to enrol during services, religious figures advising on practical concerns such as crowds and corruption, and traditional leaders acting as primary information sources.
Circulation of disinformation and rumours	Oyo, Ogun	Spread of ethnically charged falsehoods on WhatsApp and Facebook, including fabricated stories about herdsmen from neighbouring countries registering en masse to displace locals.
Corruption and exploitation of citizens	Ekiti, Ondo	Demands for unauthorised payments by registration centre operators despite official policies stating the service was free, and exploitation through paid transportation schemes to distant registration sites.
Inconsistent and unreliable media coverage	Oyo, Ondo, Ekiti	Weak radio and television signals in rural areas preventing access, media coverage that lacked critical details such as location of centres, and perceived low prioritisation of the NIN issue by local broadcasters.

The thematic analysis reveals a complex picture. Yoruba indigenous media did play a role in mobilising citizens, but it was a secondary and often flawed one. The primary mobilising forces were interpersonal communication and local leaders. The media strategy relied heavily on fear, which was effective for awareness but counterproductive to informed participation. Above all, all media initiatives essentially were compromised fundamentally by overwhelming structural challenges – most notably the severe lack of registration centres and trusted services – and by the emergence of corruption, characterised by commercialisation of ostensibly free services. Therefore, while indigenous media initiated the discussions on the national identity registration, the government's failure to act on logistic and ethical deficits ultimately shaped the lived experience of NIN enrolment for Southwest Nigerian rural citizens.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study present a complex picture that both affirms and challenges the principles of CRM in the context of mobilising rural citizens for NIN enrolment. The empirical data reveal not only which media were effective but, when viewed through the CRM lens, explain why they were effective and where the strategy ultimately faltered.

The quantitative results strongly affirm CRM's emphasis on culturally familiar formats and trusted agents (e.g. Yoruba-Language radio broadcasts, religious leaders, community leaders – Baales and local chiefs – and interpersonal communication or word-of-mouth, which were crucial for mobilisation). The Chi-square results, which show p-values < 0.001 for all six state tables, confirm a significant association between media type and its perceived mobilising roles. This statistical validation means the choice of medium was not incidental but fundamentally shaped how the message was received. Delving deeper, the Cramer's V analysis provides crucial nuance: the strongest associations were found between banners and information ($V \approx 0.4$) and between religious media and mobilisation ($V \approx 0.35$).

This trend is in perfect harmony with CRM's very core principles. The ubiquity of banners as a medium of information can be reinterpreted: their very literal presence in public environments (markets, central squares) and dependence on concise, bold Yoruba-language headings are a modern, graphical

"proverb" – a culturally inscribed form that is instantly readable and readily transmitted. Conversely, the strong connection between religious media and mobilisation reminds us of CRM's general principle of using credible cultural agents. Religious leaders are not just message carriers; they are authenticators of information. They lend a layer of cultural trust to the information that converts an official government directive into a compelling community appeal, owing to its powerful mobilising effect. This finding, quantified here, is often absent or merely anecdotal in previous studies on indigenous media (Córdova, 2021; Mushengyezi, 2003; Nemec, 2021), making this empirical contribution significant.

Furthermore, the qualitative data bring these statistical associations to life, while also revealing a critical limitation in the application of CRM: the assumption of linguistic homogeneity. The discussion confirms that radio, interpersonal communication and community leaders were highly effective. As the Ogun discussant noted, getting the news from the Baale or a pastor was a prime motivator. But one unexpected yet vital finding emerged: the process showed that speaking ability in Yoruba did not automatically mean reading ability. This disparity, particularly noted in the riverine communities with their own dialects, challenges a basic assumption of using standardised indigenous language print materials. It contends that a truly culturally responsive approach must address dialectical diversity and oral–aural preference, with a priority for spoken-word media over standard text. This nuance is a critical addition to the CRM framework in practice.

This work exposes how systemic failures (e.g. insufficient centres, misinformation and fear-based messaging, and corruption, etc.) sabotage even the most culturally-grounded efforts, creating a fundamental breach of trust that CRM seeks to build. The transcripts are replete with frustrations – from the Osun discussant who found centres only operational once a week to the Ondo discussant who was forced to pay for a supposedly free service. The confirmation of extremely low numbers of enrolment offices (e.g. 18 in Ondo, 20 in Ekiti) describes a stark infrastructural deficit. The populace can be effectively mobilised by the media and leaders but if, in due course, the system of government fails to deliver effective, reliable services, it undermines the intervention of the people and poisons the well for future campaigns. Furthermore, the ethical concerns around fear-based and panic-driven messaging (e.g. "Fulani herdsmen will take our place"), while momentarily effective, contradict the ethos of CRM, which is built on empowerment, respect and transparent dialogue, not coercion and misinformation.

CONCLUSION: TRUST, TACTICS AND ETHICAL CONTRADICTIONS IN MEDIA-LED MOBILISATIONS

This study confirms that Yoruba indigenous media are mobilising forces, deriving strength from language and a symbiotic relationship with traditional rulers that mediates social trust through culturally resonant forms. However, their effectiveness is deeply compromised by systemic and ethical contradictions, as their significant potential to inform and mobilise is lethally undercut by the same systemic problems – such as corruption and unavailable services – that undermine the very trust these media attempt to establish,. This makes it clear that the success of any culturally engaging media effort is intimately tied to the integrity and availability of the government services it promotes.

Yet, this mobilisation model is perilously shallow. Media campaigns successfully compelled citizens to act, but they significantly failed to report critically or act on the debilitating systemic challenges – few registration centres and corrupt procedures – facing them. In magnifying the call to action without concurrently promoting accountability and accessibility, the media became unintentionally an accomplice to a violation of trust. Such ensuing public disillusionment erodes the credibility of both the media and the mainstream leaders they cover, annihilating the very social capital required for future mobilisation.

Furthermore, the large-scale use of fear campaigns and misinformation is an intrinsic ethical perversion. Measures such as "No bank for you without NIN" short change compliance for political expediency at the expense of principle, playing on fears instead of challenging them with realities. While there is a bank's NIN requirement, this coercive strategy contradicts the participatory ethos of culturally responsive communication and fails to build the long-term, trust-based relationship necessary for sustainable civic engagement.

The success of indigenous media performance cannot be measured by reach alone. Actual

effectiveness hinges on the balancing act between mobilisation and accountability. For media-driven mobilisation to be not only ethical but also sustainable, it must transcend only passing messages to also critically scrutinising realities on the ground, advocating viable systems as energetically as it advocates citizen registration.

CAUTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to overcome the identified obstacles, the following suggestions are made with a word of caution as follows:

Caution

Policy makers, researchers and media practitioners ought to shed the homogenising assumption that all citizens in folk communities necessarily read, write or understand standardised forms of their indigenous languages. This study revealed significant dialectal variations and literacy disparities, particularly in riverine areas. Research assistants observed that questionnaires were difficult to read and understand for riverine respondents in Lagos and Ondo states, despite the fact that they were competent Yoruba speakers. It was this challenge, which they rationalised as their dialects being outside of the core Yoruba language, that revealed differences between oral proficiency and literacy and established that understanding could not be assumed even in a community sharing a common language. A genuinely culturally responsive strategy must account for this linguistic nuance, prioritising oral and visual communication (e.g. radio, town criers, visual banners) over standardised print text for many communities.

Recommendations

A policy for refined hyper-local media strategy is necessary to move government's communication strategy beyond simple translation. This is a strategy that moves beyond broad regional Yoruba-language media to target specific villages, communities and even social networks with tailored messaging and trusted messengers. It would involve targeting specific localities, leveraging micro-level trusted agent and using deeply contextual formats (e.g. using dialects and cultural references specific to that immediate area to ensure comprehension). It must be grounded in empirical research on what media types are optimal for a particular function. Radio and interpersonal networks must take priority in such a policy to provide space for oral–aural and dialectal differences.

Effective public outreach requires a fundamental shift in communications strategy away from scare-mongering and panic-based tactics that risk misinformation and damage long-term credibility. Instead, messaging will need to emphasise the actual benefits of enrolment, such as access to financial services, health care and welfare. Developing ethical guidelines for media messages with community leaders will also ensure that outreach is respectful and compelling. At the same time, investment in infrastructure must be dealt with as a cultural imperative, not merely a logistics matter. The current shortfall – evidenced by the fact that there are only 18 centres in a state such as Ondo – needs to be the priority. A culturally responsive media campaign is ultimately self-defeating if it mobilises citizens to non-existent or dysfunctional centres, an outcome that only breeds cynicism and undermines the entire programme.

Enforcement of the integrity of the enrolment process should involve adopting open anti-corruption policies, defining clear accountability procedures, and punishing corrupt operators. Partnerships with prominent religious and community leaders to maintain neutrality as observers and sources of comment can further help with these efforts. Studies should continue to examine the ethical implications and long-term effectiveness of fear-based and benefit-based messages in indigenous media. Extensive research needs to be conducted to map specific issues of dialectical understanding in order to direct more effective, hyper-local models of communication.

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The Practice of Public Relations in Lesotho's Government Ministries: A Case Study

Abstract

Although scholars and practitioners increasingly recognise the strategic importance of public relations in the private and public sector, many government ministries have poor public relations, which affects service delivery. This is coupled with limited scholarship on public relations in developing countries, including sub-Saharan Africa. This article draws on a case study of government ministries in Lesotho to establish how public relations is practised, contested and can be repurposed in the African context. To collect data, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were employed to solicit views from 20 public relations officers working in 10 government ministries in Lesotho. Data were analysed through an inductive thematic analysis. The findings suggest that public relations professionals face many challenges in executing their duties. These include a lack of communication; a lack of resources; misunderstanding (specifically from management) as to what public relations entails; bureaucracy, political influence and manipulation of information released to the public; information presented in one language only; and the absence of a public relations cadre. Collectively, these challenges suggest limited awareness of the full scope of public relations and a predominance of routine technician tasks over strategic advisory roles. The proposed directives for improvement present an opportunity for public relations practitioners working in government ministries to strategise their work.

Keywords

Communication, government ministries, Lesotho, management, public relations

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INTRODUCTION

The body of knowledge on public relations has been dominated by discourse about best practices and how the profession might be applied to maximise value for organisations. Despite the call for increased documentation on public relations (PR) practice in underrepresented regions globally (Molleda et al., 2017), Africa continues to be among the most underrepresented continents in PR research (Nutsugah & Bossman, 2023). Research on PR practices on the African continent remains limited, with only a few studies conducted in Botswana (Chaka & Agang, 2011), Ethiopia (Geremew, 2017; Spurgeon & Wondimu, 2018), Ghana (Anani-Bossman, 2021; Wu & Baah-Boakye, 2014), Kenya (Kiambi, 2010; Kiambi & Nadler, 2012; Ramakrishna, 2016), Nigeria (Ukonu et al., 2018), South Africa (Holtzhausen, 2005; Rensburg & Botha, 2014; Tindall & Holtzhausen, 2011), Uganda (Natifu & Zikusooka, 2011) and Zimbabwe (Muchena, 2017, 2018; Ngondo, 2019; Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020). Many African nations are still left out of the PR discourse.

This state of affairs can be attributed to several factors: First, the ongoing issues of visibility for African PR scholarship at the global level (Nutsugah & Bossman, 2023) makes it challenging for academics and practitioners to obtain international recognition and impact, creating the impression that PR practitioners and academics in Africa are less knowledgeable or unaware of the most recent theories, studies and

best practices (Akpabio, 2009). Second, there is a lack of understanding regarding PR practices in Africa (Anani-Bossman, 2022; Ngondo & Klyueva, 2023; Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005), which prevents the continent from fulfilling its obligations to other emerging nations and the global PR society (Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005). Third, political instability, economic challenges and shifting societal dynamics continue to pose significant obstacles for PR practitioners across the continent (El Rafie, 2024), while future changes and environmental conditions affect the development of public relations research, theory and practice in Africa (Benecke et al., 2025). Lastly, the dominance of Western perspectives and models in PR (Anani-Bossman & Tandoh, 2023; Ngondo & Klyueva, 2023) further contributes to this scarcity, leading to a potentially skewed understanding of the field and a lack of emphasis on the unique cultural, social and economic contexts of Africa.

Many private institutions and corporate companies globally recognise the importance of investing in their PR endeavours to build relationships and manage their reputation. In this regard, Balaban and Doornkaat (2009) note that many public and private institutions have PR departments or at least a person in charge of PR activities because communication has become a relevant domain in organisations. Even though the importance of PR is recognised by both the public and the private sectors, it appears that most studies on PR practices are rooted in the private sector (Castelli, 2007). Studies on PR in the public sector are generally overlooked (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020). This means that very little research is available on the challenges, policies and practical aspects of PR activities in the public sector.

It is the responsibility of government departments to keep the public informed of their activities. However, the practice of PR in governments faces many challenges. Different political ideologies, sociopolitical controls and various levels of development in African countries contribute to these challenges. For instance, Molleda and Suárez (2005) contend that opportunities for corruption are caused by unregulated lobbying practices whereby PR in the government seems to serve the interests of personalities rather than those of institutions, while Rensburg (2002) declares that in many cases in Africa, PR is used as a self-serving tool by politicians.

Creedon and Al-Khaja (2019) submit that it is imperative to focus on PR practice in different countries, contexts and cultures to expand global literature on the practice of PR and to foster a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to PR research and practice. This view buttresses the suggestion by Edwards and Hodges (2011) that a (radical) sociocultural perspective of PR is both required and useful for increasing professional expertise and expanding research. These authors argue that more ethnographies of PR from diverse geographic regions and national contexts would help us to better understand the profession and allow us to see the connections between meanings formed in many contexts. Andersson (2024) submits that different contextual circumstances, like the type of organisation, sector and sociocultural circumstances, will influence how PR practitioners strategise their work. It thus makes sense, as Sterne (2011) suggests, that scholars should focus on a country or region when discussing PR practice to capture broader perspectives in international practice and to add to the global body of knowledge. Studies on PR in underexplored regions (such as the one reported in this study) could advance the field and expand theory outside of and without comparison to the Global West or North nations that dominate research (Iannacone et al., 2025).

To remedy the lack of PR scholarship in Africa, this study drew on a case study of government ministries in Lesotho to establish how PR is practised, contested and how it could be repurposed in the African context. In realising the aim, the following objectives were set: 1) to explore the roles and day-to-day activities of PR practitioners working in government ministries; 2) to outline the challenges they encounter in executing their duties; and 3) to propose directives for improving PR in their ministries. It was believed that such a study could inform the PR function at these ministries to be more focused and efficient by equipping PR professionals with the knowledge and skills needed to benefit their communities. In addition, the study could contribute to the knowledge base underpinning PR in Africa, foster awareness of PR practices on the continent and advance PR theory.

THE FOUR MODELS THEORY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS BY GRUNIG AND HUNT (1984)

The four models theory of public relations by Grunig and Hunt (1984) was studied to determine its applicability as a tool for assessing how PR is practised in the government ministries of Lesotho. The model serves as a foundation for understanding and explaining the behaviour of PR practitioners. Botan and Hazleton (2006) state that PR professionals use the four models to understand how they should approach the various publics they communicate with and how to do so effectively. The following section elaborates on the four models.

Press agentry is essentially a one-way communication system in which messages are sent from one source to another. The communication is often characterised by dishonesty, exaggeration and manipulation (Botan & Hazleton, 2006). According to Suyono and Hanathasia (2017), the press agentry or publicity model allows communication without the need for a carefully planned strategy or the study of a targeted public. When using this model, the organisation prioritises achieving its own goals over public interest (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Although the model remains prevalent in public organisations, its focus is on generating publicity rather than fostering public engagement (Eyo & Onyewuchi, 2025). Since attracting media attention and coverage is its primary aim, accuracy is sometimes sacrificed for impact (Duru et al., 2025). Furthermore, there is the possibility of messages being manipulated by the organisation to achieve its objectives, which neglects the important aspect of feedback from stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The *public information* model is similar to the press agentry model in that communication is primarily one way. However, it differs significantly by centring its mission on truthfulness rather than persuasion, meaning that the information shared must be precise, accurate and truthful (Botan & Hazleton, 2006; Suyono & Hanathasia, 2017). This model requires practitioners to not only assess the clarity of their messages but also conduct some audience research to ensure effective communication. Common tools include news releases, guidebooks and new media websites, all emphasising straightforward and relatively objective information (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Suyono & Hanathasia, 2017). According to this model, disseminated information should be based on facts and should refrain from attempts to improperly influence opinions (Everything PR News, 2025).

Botan and Hazleton (2006) state that the *two-way asymmetric* model focuses on communication that fosters agreement between the organisation and its publics. Lane (2014) further explains that this model is designed to ensure organisational decisions adopt a balanced approach, aiming for positive outcomes for all parties involved. Central to the model is the use of social research to understand the audience's needs and behaviours, which helps tailor effective and persuasive messages aimed at influencing recipients to accept the organisation's point of view (Everything PR News, 2025; Suyono & Hanathasia, 2017). Although Kriyantono et al. (2017) acknowledge that the model involves public feedback, they emphasise that its primary purpose is to influence the public to adapt to the organisation, rather than fostering mutual adaptation. Supporting this, Suyono and Hanathasia (2017) note that the model employs one-way communication from the organisation to its target audience with the intention of prompting specific actions.

According to Botan and Hazleton (2006), the two-way symmetric model aims to establish mutual understanding between an organisation and its audiences. This model encourages both parties to adjust to each other using a two-way communication approach to develop and maintain harmonious relationships. It promotes direct, reciprocal dialogue between the organisation and its stakeholders. The model allows the organisation not only to influence but also to listen, learn and adapt its modus operandi as a result of the communication process. Importantly, according to this model, the public is considered the primary beneficiary of PR activities. Kriyantono et al. (2017) acknowledge that while the model involves thorough research, conflict resolution occurs through dialogue that leads to cooperative solutions, as the organisation also bears responsibility for protecting its image. Recent research highlights the model's significance in managing crises, enhancing reputations, and facilitating corporate social responsibility through transparency, accountability and ethical communication practices (Davidson, 2025). Evidently, the model calls for negotiations among stakeholders and requires the organisation's willingness to adapt and compromise in response to proposed changes.

ROLES INFORMING THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

In understanding PR, the concept of role is imperative (Dozier in Grunig, 1992). In this context, roles refer to the everyday activities that PR practitioners perform (Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020; Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005). Global PR literature identifies a variety of roles performed by the PR practitioner.

Broom and Smith's (1979) foundational work conceptualised four roles. The *communication facilitator* facilitates two-way communication between an organisation and its publics. The *problem-solving process facilitator* works collaboratively with others to identify and solve organisational issues. The *expert prescriber* acts as a consultant prescribing professional solutions based on specialised knowledge. The *communication technician* handles the technical production and dissemination of communication materials.

Dozier (1983) tested these roles empirically and found a strong correlation between the roles of communication facilitator, problem-solving process facilitator and expert prescriber, representing distinct functions and responsibilities of a PR practitioner at the managerial level (Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020), while the communication technician was recognised as having a more tactical, execution-focused role. Subsequently, two predominant roles were identified: the manager and the technician.

The PR manager is responsible for developing communication programmes and policies, managing information input, determining what should be shared with the public and how it should be shared, and identifying, managing and anticipating threats from both the internal and external environments (Dozier & Broom, 2006; Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020). Apart from managing the PR team and crafting the brand's narrative, the PR manager has an impact on the workplace atmosphere and promotes organisational success by skilfully handling communication strategies and fostering relationships with important stakeholders. With the rise of digital media, the PR manager's role has evolved from simply issuing press releases to creating blogs and social media content that narrate the organisation's brand story (Sync, 2022).

The PR technician is tasked with producing and distributing communication materials such as news releases, brochures, fact sheets, photos, speeches and social media posts (Broom & Smith, 1979; Dozier, 1983; Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020). In fulfilling the technical role, PR practitioners carry out communication programmes and operate at an operational level, but they hardly ever conduct research or actively engage in the decision-making process (Broom & Smith in Grunig, 1992). Recent expansions of this role include technical digital skills such as search engine optimisation, web analytics and digital publishing to meet the demands of online and social media platforms (Clear, 2021). Literature indicates that in practice, especially within African PR contexts, the distinction between technician and manager can sometimes blur, with practitioners performing overlapping tasks (Anani-Bossman, 2022; Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005). The blurred boundaries between technician and manager roles in some African settings indicate evolving PR practices towards multifunctionality under resource and skill constraints (Anani-Bossman, 2022).

Steyn (2003) conceptualised the role of the PR strategist to respond to evolving corporate expectations of PR practitioners to engage at a strategic, top-management level rather than just operational or managerial levels. Viewed as the most advanced level of the roles of PR practice (Van Heerden, 2005), the role of the strategist focuses on the "monitoring of relevant environmental developments and the anticipation of their consequences for the organisation's policies and strategies, especially with regard to relationships with stakeholders and other interest groups in society" (Steyn, 2003:8). This role involves making decisions, providing guidance, informing top management of potential outcomes and incorporating strategic information into the decision-making process (Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005). Traditionally, PR strategists relied on sending press releases and media alerts to journalists, hoping to capture media attention. Today, modern PR approaches extend beyond traditional media outlets to engage audiences directly through the digital platforms and channels they regularly use, enabling more targeted and interactive communication (Noorman, 2024). The role of the PR strategist has been emphasised particularly in African research, highlighting its criticality in complex sociopolitical environments (Muchena, 2017; Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020; Steyn, 2000; Tindall & Holtzhausen, 2011).

It is important to note that both the manager and strategist roles require dynamic adaptability to complex environments and multicultural stakeholder landscapes, especially in African governmental contexts. This aligns with calls for PR to contribute more actively to social and political discourse (Anani-Bossman, 2022; Muchena, 2017).

Taking the above discussion into account, this study followed a three-role typology (PR manager, PR strategist and PR technician) to reflect the roles and describe the activities of PR practitioners in Lesotho's government ministries.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research sought to explore how PR practitioners make meaning of their daily lives in their working environment. Hence, this study was embedded in an interpretive–constructivist paradigm to create meaning of the practice of PR in Lesotho's government ministries. This article represents three facets of a master's study on the practice of PR in Lesotho's government ministries and reports on the roles and daily operations of PR practitioners, the challenges they face in performing their duties and directives for improvement. The article was guided by the following research questions:

> RQ1: What are the roles and day-to-day activities of PR practitioners working in Lesotho's government ministries?
>
> RQ2: What challenges do they encounter in executing their duties?
>
> RQ3: How can PR in these ministries be improved?

Since the research was exploratory in nature, a qualitative mode of inquiry was deemed most suitable. Qualitative research explores how people construct meaning from their lived experiences (Babbie, 2011) and uses descriptions in revealing information about certain situations, settings, processes, relationships, systems, or people (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). A case study design was particularly relevant since the research was focused on exploring a modern, bounded system in real life by gathering comprehensive data from a variety of sources (Creswell, 2013). A case study of the practice of PR in 10 government ministries in Lesotho is presented.

As indicated by Maree (2016), it is often challenging to include each participant in a study due to financial and time constraints. As such, the study's sample consisted of 20 PR practitioners, chosen from a total of 59 government PR practitioners across 10 government ministries in Lesotho. The ministries included the Ministry of Communications, Science and Technology; the Ministry of Education and Training; the Ministry of Defence; the Ministry of Local Government and Chieftainship; the Disaster Management Authority; the Ministry of Public Service; the Senate; Parliament; the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security; and the Ministry of Gender, Youth and Sports of Lesotho. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select small groups of individuals likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the practice of PR in Lesotho's government ministries. Selection criteria included the respondents' understanding of key concepts and practices in the field as well as their practical experience and proficiency in applying this knowledge.

The sample comprised seven male and 13 female public relations officers (PROs) (n = 20) from the various ministries. Table 1 outlines the sample of the study.

Table 1: Number and gender of the participants per ministry

Ministries	Number of practitioners	Males	Females
Ministry of Education and Training	3	1	2
Ministry of Defence	1	1	0
Ministry of Local Government and Chieftainship	3	1	2
Disaster Management Authority	1	0	1
Ministry of Gender, Youth and Sports	2	1	1
Senate	2	0	2
Ministry of Public Service	2	0	2
Parliament	1	0	1
Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security	1	1	0
Ministry of Communications, Science and Technology	4	2	2

Semi-structured questionnaires administered through interviews were used to collect data. The main author interviewed the respondents face to face, but the respondents still had to complete the questionnaires. This dual approach provided a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. Furthermore, it allowed for cross-verification and elaboration of findings between the interviews and questionnaire responses, thereby enhancing the study's credibility and validity.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections and comprised 28 open- and closed-ended questions. Section A sought to explore the interviewees' demographic information such as gender, age, highest level of education and designation. Section B consisted of questions pertaining to knowledge and perceptions of PR practice. The last section, Section C, involved questions about the use of language in the practice of PR communication.

The qualitative data collected through the interviews (verbal exchanges) and questionnaires (written transcripts) were analysed by means of thematic analysis to inform the study's research questions, achieve its objectives and propose directives to the PR industry. The use of thematic analysis was particularly useful to find, examine and convey patterns in the data. In addition, it provided rich and comprehensive descriptions of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study used inductive coding because this method has the benefit of allowing for the emergence of new and unexpected themes from the data, which may render fresh knowledge to the topic under investigation (Drew, 2023).

The study adhered to quality criteria to ensure trustworthiness, credibility, validity and confirmability throughout the qualitative research process. Trustworthiness was established by triangulating methods (interviews and questionnaires) and providing rich participant descriptions that were supported by direct quotations. Reliability was strengthened through detailed documentation of each research step, creating an "audit trail" that allowed replication and evaluation of research rigour (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:316). Credibility was further supported by the study design, authentic representation of participants' perspectives and alignment with theoretical frameworks. Validity was secured by carefully constructing interview questions to minimise bias and by thoroughly describing procedures to enable replication. Confirmability was achieved by grounding findings in the data and maintaining transparency through detailed analysis and audit trails.

Ethical clearance (FRIC 02/21/02) was obtained from the research university's Faculty Research, Innovation and Engagement Committee. Approval from the respondents was sought in line with the Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act (Republic of South Africa, 2013). The participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. The results of the data analysis are discussed next.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Insights into the roles and perceptions of public relations practitioners in Lesotho's government ministries

As an initial step in exploring PR practitioners' roles in government ministries in Lesotho, the interviewees were asked to share the perceptions they have of their own roles. In order to gain a more holistic view of how the PR function is perceived and received in government ministries in Lesotho and among external stakeholders, the interviewees were also asked to comment on their views of colleagues' and external stakeholders' perceptions of their roles. The following section addresses these.

PR practitioners' understanding and experience of their roles

During the interviews, respondents emphasised the important role of PR and indicated that their ministries perceived PR as vital for building and maintaining a positive public image and reputation between the public and the ministry. In essence, the respondents were aware of the major concepts of PR as a communication function and management tool used by an organisation to gather and disseminate information to the public and to manage communication channels. The respondents emphasised that PR is a link between internal and external stakeholders to manage and maintain good relationships. In this, the practitioners seemed knowledgeable about the principles of PR – that it is ultimately concerned with managing and building relationships, through communication, between an organisation (or government) and its publics (PRISA, 2023; PRSA, 2022; Skinner et al., 2007).

According to Anani-Bossman (2022), PR must play a managerial or strategic role in developing, shaping, maintaining and managing relationships between an organisation and its publics. Half of the respondents believed PR to be a strategic management function, while the other half claimed that it was not a strategic management function. Through cross-tabulation, however, we found that six of the respondents who defined PR as a strategic management function later responded that it was not, while five who did not use the word "management" in their understanding of PR later considered it to be a management function. This shows a lack of understanding among the respondents regarding the important strategic role of PR in their ministries. The strategic role of PROs is imperative, since these practitioners are responsible for maintaining an open line of communication between the organisation and the general public (Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005). Given the important role that the PR strategist plays in an organisation, one can therefore conclude that strategy is a central tenet in PR, as underscored in the work of Andersson (2024), Gregory (2020), Oliver (2010) and Silverman and Smith (2024).

The respondents' understanding of their roles is reflected in their tasks. The tasks and how many times the task was mentioned by the respondents are listed in Table 2:

Table 2: Respondents' views of their roles

Respondents' perceptions of their roles (tasks)	Frequency	Role(s)
Promoting and building relationships with internal and external stakeholders	Seven times	Strategic
Gathering and distributing information	Six times	Technical
Promoting the image and reputation of the organisation	Five times	Strategic
Coordinating communication	Three times	Management
Creating a link between internal and external stakeholders	Three times	Management/strategic
Changing public view	One time	Strategic
Gaining public understanding and support	One time	Strategic
Planning public campaigns	One time	Strategic
Resolving problems	One time	Management/strategic

Literature indicates that the line between PR managers and PR technicians is sometimes blurred (Anani-Bossman, 2022; Dozier, 1983) and that their duties overlap (Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005). This study, however, produced an unexpected finding in that the line between PR manager and strategist was blurred. But as Tindall and Holtzhausen (2011) point out, PR positions can be carried out across functional boundaries and are not mutually exclusive.

Even though the PROs recognise the important role that PR plays in Lesotho's government ministries, there was a recurring theme of PR professionals feeling underutilised in their organisations. This was evident in comments such as "As a PR professional I am less utilised"; "A PRO doesn't do much work in this ministry"; and "Public Relations is not well practised in the ministry".

Colleagues' awareness and misconceptions of PR roles in government

Some respondents stated that their colleagues' perception of their job was positive, that their colleagues understood their roles, and viewed their work as an important communication tool. However, the general view of colleagues' perception of the role and purpose of PR in government ministries showed an overwhelming feeling among the respondents that there was a lack of understanding of what they do, what their roles are, and what they are supposed to do.

Seventeen of the 20 respondents noted that they thought their colleagues had misconceptions and limited awareness of the true nature and role of PR. As one of the practitioners remarked, "I think this discipline is not understood by the ministry". Scholars such as Chaka and Agang (2011), Geremew (2017) and Spurgeon and Wondimu (2018) found similar results in Botswana and Ethiopia by indicating that top management did not understand what PR was and what role it should play in an organisation. Anani-Bossman (2022) highlights that management's lack of understanding of the importance of PR restricts PR practitioners' ability to fully optimise the strategic role.

Some participants believed their colleagues perceived their role as merely a tool for communication about the ministry's programmes and events, while others indicated that it was perceived as a shield to protect the government from bad publicity. This view is not unique to Lesotho, as other studies have also pointed to PR being viewed as a publicity and propaganda tool in African nations, including Botswana (Chaka & Agang, 2011), Ghana (Anani-Bossman, 2021) and Ethiopia (Spurgeon & Wondimu, 2018). The fact that PR is employed as a tool to save the government from unfavourable public opinion is a concern for practitioners, as was also evident in the study by Venter and Louw (2012) among PR practitioners in South Africa. PR within these ministries is therefore not exploited to its full strategic potential.

According to the respondents, there was a negative perception among colleagues who viewed PR professionals as individuals who had failed in other professions or as people who talked excessively and were lazy. This finding mirrors the view of Meintjes and Niemann-Struweg (2009) who found that South Africa's PR sector has served as a sanctuary for unsuccessful journalists. The view, we believe, prevents the profession and industry at large from positioning itself in the marketplace.

Overall, a lack of understanding and clarity existed regarding PR's multifaceted role, which is often reduced to mere information dissemination or media involvement. Some interviewees indicated that they face issues with management not taking the profession seriously and that the ministry viewed their work as only information dissemination. For example, one of the respondents commented, "Here it is all about news dissemination, nothing much". According to Nabukeera (2006), top management's perception of PR practitioners is impacted by the lack of education in the field. The lack of knowledge and understanding about PR ultimately influences its practice and consequently its contribution to organisations, as Chaka and Agang (2011) rightfully observe.

The lack of professionalism and resistance to change further contribute to the confusion surrounding PR's significance within the ministries. This results in an overall perception that PR is not well established or recognised in the ministries, with departments independently handling communications, which leads to a disjointed approach.

Based on the findings, it was clear that very few respondents felt that their colleagues understood the role of PR and perceived it as an essential component to enhance smooth communication within government ministries.

External stakeholders' understanding and expectations of PR functions

Various perspectives were expressed regarding practitioners' views on external stakeholders' perceptions of PR. The respondents thought that some stakeholders regarded the role of PR as important. Others indicated, however, that external stakeholders might feel that PR professionals should be more professional and positive in their approach and should recognise that PR is not just for the benefit of PR practitioners but also for the government ministries as a whole.

The respondents' perceptions of external stakeholders' views of their roles revealed several key insights: firstly, that external stakeholders, particularly the media, do not understand PR roles or duties; and, secondly, that stakeholders believed they were not carrying out their responsibilities effectively.

The participants concurred that external stakeholders did not understand the role and purpose of PR in government ministries. The interviewees pointed out that some stakeholders confused PR with media-related activities and thought that PR was solely about disseminating information. This was reflected in comments such as the following:

> They do not understand the role of PR; they just consider it as part of media.
>
> They think I should only disseminate information and that is all.
>
> They do not know what public relations is. They think they know better about the activities that are PR related.

These comments clearly show that PR in Lesotho's government ministries is mostly equated to media relations, which groups their duties under the press agentry model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). External stakeholders, especially the media, largely perceive PR as primarily about disseminating information, indicating a one-way flow of communication focused on publicity and promotion.

The respondents felt that some external stakeholders, especially the media, believed that PROs in the government ministries were not effectively performing their duties, and they felt that they (as the media) were doing the PR work for them. Here it is important to note that PR professionals and the media depend on each other to fulfil their daily tasks. However, even though there is a mutual need and interaction between PROs and journalists, Clear (2021) mentions that this can sometimes result in a favourable relationship and other times in a negative one. Interviewees felt that there was also a perception among stakeholders that PR is only responsible for responding to queries and inquiries from external parties.

There was a sense among the interviewees that some stakeholders might see PR professionals as lacking a clear understanding of their own roles and as engaging in tasks beyond their jurisdiction. Consistent with the findings of Ramakrishna (2016) regarding PR practitioners in Kenya, the respondents lacked a thorough understanding of what they should do, with concerns being raised about the status of their roles in the government ministries in which they were employed. This led to conflicting opinions about the profession both by practitioners and the external stakeholders.

Daily responsibilities and operational realities of public relations practitioners

To gain a better understanding of the daily practices of PR in Lesotho's government ministries, the respondents were asked, "Which day-to-day PR activities in this ministry are practised the most? Please list the most important daily activities". With this question, we sought to obtain a list of the PROs' duties in Lesotho's government ministries. The interviews revealed that the duties of PR professionals in Lesotho's government ministries encompass a wide range of PR responsibilities, including building relationships, gathering and distributing information, coordinating communication, gaining public understanding and support, planning public campaigns, protecting the organisation's image and resolving problems. Some of the responses included updating social media platforms such as Facebook and other websites, responding to media inquiries, disseminating information to the public, building community and employee relations, arranging radio programmes, organising press conferences and public gatherings, and writing

news releases. These duties reflect the practitioners' responsibility to the ministry in which they work, the community and their colleagues.

The findings indicate that while PR practitioners in Lesotho's government ministries perform day-to-day duties associated with Steyn's (2000) strategist role, they mostly identify with Dozier's (1983) technician role. The list reveals that the PR professionals devote a significant amount of their daily tasks to the technician position. This is evident in comments such as "answering to the media enquiries", "updating social media", "Facebook and website are used on a daily basis", "news releases" and "radio interviews". The findings reveal that Lesotho's media environment includes traditional outlets (radio) and a rapidly growing digital sphere, especially social media platforms such as Facebook and organisational websites. PR professionals working in Lesotho's government ministries leverage these channels to reach their audiences.

In concurrence with the studies of Muchena (2018) and Anani-Bossman (2021), but in contrast with the findings of Ngondo and Klyueva (2020), Steyn (2000), Tindall and Holtzhausen (2011) and Van Heerden and Rensburg (2005), this study underscores the role of the PR practitioner as a technician. The practitioners see themselves as gatherers and distributors of information, promoting the government's image and reputation to internal and external publics. This is evident in their routine tasks of disseminating news releases and responding to media inquiries, functioning as communication technicians rather than strategic advisors. What is striking from the findings is that, while the respondents view their role as mostly strategic (as discussed earlier), the actual day-to-day activities they engage in solidify the role of the PR technician. This might explain the earlier-mentioned uncertainty among PR practitioners regarding what they do and what they are supposed to do.

Obstacles facing public relations and directives for improvement

The findings revealed that communication problems, a lack of resources, lack of understanding of the profession by management, colleagues and stakeholders, bureaucracy and administrative hurdles, the use of language in official communication and the absence of a PR cadre are the main challenges the PROs struggle with when performing their duties. The respondents were also asked for suggestions on how PR in their respective government ministries can be improved. These suggestions, or directives for improvement, encompass various aspects of improving PR in the government ministries in which the respondents worked. The challenges and directives for improvement are outlined next.

Communication barriers hindering effective public relations

As Tworzydło et al. (2021) highlight, communication serves as a fundamental process that enhances understanding and helps in successfully achieving objectives. Although communication forms the nucleus of PR, the PROs experienced a lack of communication from the government ministries in which they worked. This is not surprising, as devaluation of communication is generally experienced as a challenge in the public sector (Graham & Avery, 2013). Ngondo and Klyueva (2020) state that the PR function in closed systems is limited to one-way communication. The findings suggest that most of the communication involved one-way communication from the ministry, while many activities and decisions that PROs should know of were not shared with them. The respondents also indicated a lack of a proper communication strategy, colleagues not involving PR in their activities and activities not being made public as concerns. Some of the respondents commented as follows:

> Model of communication used in this Ministry makes it difficult to explore, perform and apply creativity to enhance quality deliverable. Communication is one way thus PRs are just taking all that the Principal Secretary, minister and other authorities are saying.

> There is no proper communication strategy amongst ministry staff.

These remarks show limited evidence of two-way symmetrical communication, where mutual

understanding and genuine dialogue between the government and publics would occur. The communication barriers, lack of shared strategy and one-way communication culture in government ministries demonstrate that the ideal two-way symmetrical model is largely absent or underdeveloped.

The findings underscore the importance of communication in PR since the role of PR in government is to ensure that communication is well coordinated and that stakeholders have greater knowledge about the organisation, its activities and the services it offers (Mota, 2015). In support of the notion by Chaka and Agang (2011), open and transparent communication regarding all issues by organisations is becoming a necessity.

In view of the Excellence Study by Dozier et al. (1995) and the findings of Steyn (2000), this study submits that for an organisation to achieve excellent communication, there should be shared expectations between top management and the PR function.

Suggestions for improving communication in government ministries included the development of a proper communication strategy, that relationships with the press should be improved and that social media platforms be utilised more effectively for communication.

Resource deficits impacting public relations practice and effectiveness

The results revealed that PR practitioners experienced a lack of many resources, but the most urgent needs were for staff, equipment and financing for PR activities. Some of the responses follow:

> Lack of equipment to no equipment at all.
>
> Budget is always not enough for PR activities. We need advanced equipment to perform our job.
>
> Lack of office equipment and other resources like Internet. Understaffed.
>
> Shortage of staff.

A shortage of staff hinders PR functions, especially when there are series of events hosted at the same time. A lack of office equipment and office supplies (in this regard, especially modern cameras, printers and printer cartridges are urgently needed), as well as access to the Internet, makes it difficult for PR staff to do their work effectively. In this regard, Kiambi (2010) notes that the lack of Internet connectivity in rural areas makes it difficult to reach all targeted groups and people. The respondents also stated that the lack of finances has rendered their department useless due to budget constraints for PR activities. Insufficient training and transportation issues were mentioned as additional concerns. This lack of support provided to communication activities at the operational level was also underscored by Benecke et al. (2025:121), demonstrating a "symbolic rather than substantive commitment to strategic communication".

It was suggested that PR should be allocated a budget so that they can manage their own resources.

Limited professional recognition and understanding within ministries

The respondents felt that management and colleagues did not understand PR duties and responsibilities, reflecting the imbalance and strategic uses of PR to protect government image, which is typical of the two-way asymmetrical model. The practitioners are told by other people what to do and are not involved in management or decision making. Their duties are duplicated with those in other departments, for example having to organise events, which leads to confusion and distrust. Although most of the 20 respondents had official qualifications, there is an urgent need for training on PR writing and Community Relations and Development Communication (offered by the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa) and regular workshops.

In terms of support, the respondents felt that influence by ministers and principal secretaries, not being understood or recognised by management, consideration of their roles, involvement in decision

making and a political environment that is conducive to unbiased work were lacking in their roles as PR professionals in their ministries.

Suggestions for improvement included that PROs be employed based on qualifications and experience, that PR job descriptions be revised, that PROs be given opportunities to participate in management decisions and that training opportunities be supported.

Bureaucracy, political influence and other hurdles affecting public relations delivery

Rensburg (2002) contends that PR in many cases in Africa is used as a self-serving tool by politicians. This study revealed that bureaucratic challenges, unnecessary red tape and uncertainty in the line of command due to political meddling in the government ministries lead to dissatisfaction and uncertainty. As one of the respondents commented, "It is always a challenge to not being politically biased when dealing with matters or issues of public interest in a political environment like National Assembly". In this regard, Hopkins (2015) suggests that when a government's PR message is released, civil servants can be compelled to express a biased approach to please their political bosses.

Political influences were listed as government secrecy on some issues, politically appointed staff and political interference in the information released to the public. The challenges that PR professionals experience reflect the views of Tindall and Holtzhausen (2011) that political environments shape the context of PR roles. Respondents also felt that there was a duplication of duties with those in other departments.

The respondents indicated that these problems could be solved if a Director of Communication was appointed who could oversee PR activities and if PROs could work in a politically unbiased environment.

Language barriers in government communication

The respondents felt that the language of written communication was challenging. Some respondents mentioned that Sesotho-only speakers or English-only speakers might struggle with communications from the ministries if the communications were presented or published in only one of these languages. Using only English or only Sesotho in written communications might not be ideal for reaching the wider community as not all citizens can speak both languages. The following responses were recorded:

> There is a need to shift to Sesotho as one official language because English remains a challenge to both the organisation and the public.

> There are certain problems with regard to the use of language, especially written communication, for example, everything is in Sesotho, even on Facebook.

Several important insights were gleaned from the respondents' remarks about language use. Firstly, barriers to communication include varying meanings and wording and message quality and interpretation can be influenced by the language used to encode it (Mota, 2015). Secondly, language that is understood by all the participants in a communication encounter bridges knowledge gaps between communities and practitioners (Amano et al., 2016). Thus, it is evident that more engagement and deeper conceptual connections result from language that is understood by the intended audience (Manzini, 2000). When disseminating information, it is important to use a language that will be easily heard and understood by the audience (Flowers, 2015). Hence, it can be concluded that the use of language needs to be reconsidered by the PR profession in Lesotho's government ministries, as their work includes updating organisational websites and managing many social media platforms (Clear, 2021).

The findings in this study suggest that multilingual communication is essential. Koloti and Jita (2021) observe that the two official languages of Lesotho are Sesotho and English. The solution would be to present all communications in both Sesotho and English. Using Sesotho alongside English can thus maximise reach and impact.

The need for a professional public relations cadre to strengthen ministry communications

The respondents called strongly for the implementation of a cadre structure, as was suggested in the 2019 Report on the Restructuring and Professionalisation of the PR Cadre (Ministry of Communications, Science & Technology, 2019).

The respondents felt that the implementation of the proposed PR cadre would enable government ministries to recruit qualified PROs. Clear job descriptions for PR practitioners could be compiled and the role of PR professionals could be established. The PR professionals also believed that the structure would empower the PR cadre, lead to the growth of the profession and result in promotions for PR practitioners.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

PR in Africa is an evolving field that plays a key role in shaping the reputation of public institutions, including government ministries, across the continent. The purpose of this study was to join discussions on how PR is practised in different African nations by exploring the practice of PR in government ministries in Lesotho. The study outlined how PR is practised and contested by exploring various perspectives regarding the roles, the day-to-day activities PR practitioners engage in and the challenges they face in executing their duties. Given Africa's diverse cultures, languages and socio-economic contexts, PR strategies often need to be tailored to specific regional and local needs. As such, directives were outlined to improve PR in Lesotho's government ministries.

In addressing RQ1 (What are the roles and day-to-day activities of PR practitioners working in Lesotho's government ministries?), the study found that the practitioners primarily viewed their role as promoting and maintaining relationships with internal and external stakeholders, building the organisation's image and reputation, and managing communication. However, these roles were often contested and understood differently by the practitioners themselves, their colleagues (especially management) and external stakeholders such as the media. The study revealed that multiple role players were involved in the strategic practice of PR (practitioners, managers, media), each with divergent interests and expectations. Consequently, PR professionals' views of their own roles differed notably from those of their colleagues (particularly top management) and external audiences (particularly the media).

The practitioners' daily activities leaned heavily towards technical functions such as disseminating information, responding to media inquiries, updating social media and websites, arranging press conferences and organising public events. Despite acknowledging the strategic dimension of PR, most practitioners spent the majority of their time performing technician roles. This reveals an imbalance between their perceived role and actual practice, indicating that PR in the ministries is largely practised as a communication technician function with minimal engagement in strategic management or two-way symmetrical communication processes.

Regarding RQ2 (What challenges do they encounter in executing their duties?), the study revealed important insights. Resource constraints such as insufficient staff, equipment, finances and training opportunities limit effective PR delivery. In addition, a lack of understanding and recognition of PR's strategic value by management, colleagues and external stakeholders leads to misconceptions and underutilisation of PR functions. Bureaucratic and political influences further undermine unbiased communication and create operational hurdles. Language barriers also pose a challenge, as communications are predominantly conducted in either English or Sesotho, which limits reach and inclusiveness. Furthermore, the absence of a dedicated PR cadre to strengthen ministry communications was identified as an additional challenge.

The results revealed that the PR practitioners experience some trepidation regarding their work – both technically and strategically. On a technical level, they faced challenges executing their duties due to limited resources and infrastructure that constrained their daily tasks. The largest obstacle, however, appeared to be strategic two-way communication, both internally among practitioners, colleagues and management and externally with external publics and the media. Communication within the ministries was characterised by a one-way flow of information and a lack of inclusive communication strategies. The findings suggest that strategy and communication are closely intertwined. Communication is, therefore,

essential to the creation of strategy and to engaging in PR activities.

RQ3 asks, How can PR in these ministries be improved? To enhance PR effectiveness in Lesotho's government ministries, several interventions are necessary. The findings indicate that improvements should begin with developing and implementing comprehensive communication strategies that promote two-way communication and integrate PR into decision-making processes. In addition, resource allocation must be increased, including budgets, equipment and dedicated PR staff. Training and professional development should be strengthened through workshops that focus on strategic communication and community relations. Language inclusivity is also crucial, involving the use of both Sesotho and English in official communications to broaden access and engagement. Further directives include appointing senior-level communication directors to oversee PR activities and encouraging organisational culture shifts to better support PR functions. Finally, establishing a formal PR cadre structure to professionalise the function was identified as essential to improving PR in Lesotho's government ministries.

The study is not without limitations. Firstly, there was no literature available on the practice of PR in Lesotho. Secondly, including PR specialists from the private sector in this study would have been more advantageous in order to ascertain whether there are variations in PR practice.

The following suggestions are put forward for further research: more studies on Lesotho's government PR need to be conducted to provide a more holistic view of the practice of PR in this country. Future studies could focus on the practice of PR in the private sector so as to gain new insight and perspectives on the field – not only towards individual professional development, but also for the improvement of the PR industry at large. A future stream of research could also focus on the journalistic skills, attributes and behaviours that are required to perform PR tasks, since this study underscored the important communication and information dissemination component (technician role) of the PR practice. Storytelling is not only an essential aspect of communication, but also a cultural artifact, linking the modern practices of PR with the rich oral traditions of African cultures. More research is required to explore the use of storytelling that emphasises local success stories and community impact to establish a sense of connection with audiences, and to foster trust and loyalty.

In conclusion, PR in Africa is an essential tool for communication that requires a nuanced understanding of regional differences and a focus on building sound relationships with diverse communities. This study serves as an initial step in exploring PR practices in Lesotho's government ministries. With this work, an attempt has been made to contribute to the knowledge base underpinning PR in Africa, to foster awareness of PR practices on the continent and to advance PR theory.

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Community Radio in Efforts to Curb Maternal Mortality: Perspectives from Radio Staff and Women in Rural Areas of Tanzania

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Abstract

Maternal mortality is a critical public health challenge that significantly impacts the lives of millions of women globally, with sub-Saharan Africa accounting for 70% of global maternal deaths. Like many other sub-Saharan African countries, Tanzania continues to experience high maternal mortality rates, particularly among women of reproductive age in rural areas. Guided by the Community for Development Theory and the Health Belief Model, this study examines the potential of community radio as a community-based medium that can contribute to efforts aimed at reducing maternal mortality among rural women in Tanzania. A qualitative approach was employed, collecting data through in-depth interviews from a sample of 48 women involved in the focus group discussion from three Tanzanian districts (Bunda, Maswa and Uvinza), as well as from 22 community radio staff, including managers, editors and producers from Uvinza FM, Mazinga FM and Sibuka FM. The findings indicate that although community radio stations have undertaken several initiatives to combat maternal mortality, such as formulating radio policies to address community issues, conducting awareness campaigns on maternal health and incorporating maternal health topics into their programming, women's access to radio programmes and engagement in these efforts remain low. Their limited access and participation are attributed to factors such as media illiteracy, financial challenges, household responsibilities and entrenched patriarchal norms in rural areas. This article suggests enhancing rural women's access to and participation in community radio dialogues on maternal health issues as essential to improving maternal health outcomes.

Keywords

Community radio, gender, health communication, maternal health, maternal mortality, Tanzania, women

INTRODUCTION

Globally, maternal mortality remains a serious public health concern that impacts women. Maternal mortality is frequently used to gauge a population's general health and well-being (WHO, 2023). On average, maternal mortality accounts for 223 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births globally, with estimates indicating that 800 women die every day due to preventable causes associated with pregnancy and childbirth (Said et al. 2021; WHO, 2023). For instance, in 2020, about 287,000 women died following pregnancy and childbirth, with almost 95% of these maternal deaths occurring in low- and lower-middle-income countries (Ekwuazi et al., 2023). Identified as the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age, maternal mortality has become a central focus of international development efforts. In sub-Saharan Africa, maternal mortality accounts for 70% of global deaths. Despite a 34.3% decline in the global maternal mortality ratio from 2000 to 2020, the average maternal mortality in sub-Saharan Africa remains higher at 551 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (WHO, 2023). The significant factors associated with maternal mortality in sub-Saharan Africa include low use of postnatal care, low use of

family planning, delay in care seeking, difficulties in accessing health facilities, armed conflicts, HIV/AIDS pandemic, delayed seeking of care during pregnancy and childbirth, lack of awareness of danger signs of obstetric complications and inadequate quality of health services (Muriithi et al, 2022; Shija et al, 2011). Interventions in sub-Saharan Africa include the creation of roadmaps to strengthen the registration and collection of vital statistics on maternal mortality, tracking of results and resources using proposed indicators, publicly sharing the data obtained on maternal mortality, strengthening accountability mechanisms at the national level, and investing in capacity building to implement operational health information systems (Kouanda, 2022).

In Tanzania, maternal mortality rates (MMR) have remained persistently high, particularly in rural areas due to various factors that include challenges in pregnancy management and childbirth, inadequate healthcare services, affordability issues, sociocultural norms and traditional practices (Felisian et al., 2023; Said et al., 2021; Webber et al., 2019: 69), with an estimated MMR of 238 per 100,000 live births in 2020 (WHO, 2023). However, it is essential to note that the burden of MMR varies significantly across regions and between urban and rural areas of Tanzania (Shabani et al., 2018; Yeates et al., 2020). Therefore, effective strategies are needed to address maternal mortality, particularly in rural Tanzania, to ensure healthy outcomes for all women and to meet Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Number 3, which aims to reduce maternal mortality to less than 70 deaths per 100,000 births by 2030.

Achieving this ambitious target in countries such as Tanzania and other sub-Saharan African nations requires a collaborative and determined approach to establishing and sustaining high-quality healthcare services. Priority should be given to improving the understanding and prevention of factors associated with maternal mortality, improving knowledge and awareness, and promoting safe motherhood, especially among vulnerable rural women (Radoff et al., 2013). In light of these challenges, adopting community-based interventions through a communication approach, specifically via community radio, becomes necessary to addressing the barriers rural women face regarding maternal health.

In recent years, community radio has emerged in Tanzania and across Africa as a powerful tool for engaging communities in development issues, providing information services and fostering participatory knowledge sharing (Mwidima, 2019; Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2023). It has played a crucial role in addressing barriers to justice and healthcare, combating violence and challenging traditional beliefs (Faisal & Alhassan, 2018). Moreover, community radio stations have been recognised as catalysts for positive change that promote healthy practices and educational programmes which influence reproductive decision making and other behaviours (Diedong & Naaikuur, 2012; Mrutu, 2008). Consequently, they serve as essential platforms for empowering rural women (Nirmala, 2015). This study investigates the role of community radio programmes in reducing maternal mortality among rural women in Tanzania. It evaluates community radio's effectiveness in disseminating crucial maternal healthcare information and raising community awareness about maternal health behaviours.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY RADIO

The history of community radio can be traced to the 1940s in Latin America when the mode of communication (mainstream media) failed to address poverty and injustices in marginalised communities (Okinyi, 2019). In Europe, community radio establishments served as an alternative outlet for public broadcasting in the 1960s (Fraser & Estrada, 2001). In Africa, its significance grew with democratic processes in the 1990s, supported by organisations such as UNESCO, which recognise the potential of community radio as a tool for promoting free expression and amplifying the voices of marginalised communities (Mrutu, 2008).

In Tanzania, despite the emergence of private mainstream radio stations in the 1990s, which were initially controlled by large news organisations (Walsh and Wright 2010), these profit-driven stations had limited reach to marginalised communities (Ishengoma, 2024).

The country's population, particularly in rural areas, rarely had access to mainstream radio except when a politician visited them following a disaster or in the lead-up to an election (Ishengoma, 2024). However, starting in 1993, community radio stations began to operate in Tanzania, focusing on community broadcasting to promote fishing, farming, animal husbandry, poverty alleviation, literacy, HIV/AIDS

campaigns and environmental sustainability in various geographical areas (Manenosabin & Charles, 2019).

The emergence of these radio stations was also influenced by Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) implemented in the late 1980s and early 1990s that advocated the liberalisation of radio airwaves and pushed for democratic reforms (Mpehongwa, 2024). With the support from local government authorities, donors and religious groups, Tanzania has witnessed the rise of many community radio stations. These stations have been helping to promote social development, addressing issues such as agriculture, gender equality, environmental protection, good governance, fishing and farming promotion, illiteracy and HIV/AIDS campaigns (Ishengoma, 2024; Mpehongwa, 2024). Community radio remains crucial as existing national-based media are often perceived as biased towards certain beliefs and sometimes lacking in coverage of local issues (Gavaza & Pearse, 2019).

In Tanzania, a country with over 61 million people, approximately 65% reside in rural areas, the majority of whom are women (United Republic of Tanzania, 2022). Community radio continues to serve as a vital and sustainable means of reaching these populations. It is a critical medium for addressing development challenges, given its ability to engage communities within their social and cultural contexts. For instance, community radio in Tanzania has been recognised for its ability to address issues such as poverty, agriculture, elections, women's affairs, conflict, human rights, gender inequality, education and harmful traditional beliefs (Ishengoma, 2024; Mpehongwa, 2024). While addressing these issues, public health challenges such as maternal health challenges in rural areas remain a paramount agenda for sustainable development in Tanzania (Said et al., 2021). These challenges still require intervention, for which community radio can serve as an appropriate platform in rural areas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community radio and women's access to vital information

The development of community radio in many countries has significantly transformed media landscapes and communication discourses, enabling the inclusion of marginalised sectors of the public in the public sphere (Ifeoma, 2015). By focusing on local issues, civic challenges and socio-economic frames, community radio targets the development of the community, with women as key beneficiaries. According to Shelke and Shaikh (2023), community radio is women friendly, relevant and accessible. It offers opportunities to learn production skills and techniques, collaborate on programme agendas and share stories that address information, education and entertainment needs. Women in the community can play dual roles as active listeners and content creators, making them significant participants and beneficiaries of the programmes. Akhter & Syed, (2021) note that all community radio projects prioritise "women's empowerment" as a critical objective, educating, entertaining and informing local residents, particularly women, in their own dialects and covering issues relevant to them. Community radio enables vulnerable people, including women, to participate in decision-making activities, which fosters constructive change in the community. It has helped women move towards self-sufficiency and retain the best in their communities through programmes conceptualised and presented by community members (Akhter & Syed, 2021). Ngugi & Ochala (2015) discuss the involvement of women in community radio at various levels, including ownership, management (via representative local management committees) and production. They argue that community radio often implements special measures to ensure the full participation of those historically disadvantaged or marginalised within the community, such as women and individuals with physical disabilities. Ishengoma (2024:13) explores various forms of community participation in community radio, with a particular focus on women's involvement. His study in Tanzania revealed that 72% of the community, including women, engage with community radio by calling in and sending messages during live or recorded programmes using mobile phones. The second most common form of participation identified was sending messages through the radio station's social media platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Mogambi and Ochola (2015), and Vijayalakshmi and Saraswati (2023) argue that women's participation in community radio is crucial and is primarily observed through their

engagement in the radio programme process. This includes contributing to content production, providing feedback, influencing programming choices, actively participating in discussions and being involved in policy formulation through board membership. Therefore, community radio provides a platform for women to share experiences, influence programming and address issues directly relevant to their lives, while also challenging social and cultural norms that hinder their development.

Health communication and community radio

Scholars widely recognise the potential of communication, especially community media interventions, to reshape cultural beliefs and practices associated with health behaviour in communities. Jiang and Liu (2022:625) define health information seeking as the purposeful acquisition of information about health, risk, illness and health-protective behaviour. They add that individuals often experience a lack of health knowledge or uncertainties and act on this feeling by searching for information, which in turn serves as a liberating instrument for health behaviour. Lee and Ramazan (2022:491) add that with the rampant circulation of health information, concerns for information quality are growing, thus making media literacy an educative means to cultivate fact-checking behaviour among community members, while Igbinoba et al. (2020:12), Akhte and Syed (2021:56) add that there is a strong consensus that mass media exposure can promote awareness of health issues, enhance knowledge and beliefs, and reinforce existing attitudes. Ogunjuyigbe and Adepoju (2014:343) contend that mass media is a key component of a global strategy for sustainable health issues, with Igbinoba et al. (2020:2) supporting that mass media play vital roles in shaping culture, influencing politics, affecting people's attitudes and raising health concerns, especially regarding women, children and contemporary business. Nonetheless, the significant rise of community radio as a participatory medium, particularly in rural areas, adds a unique component of facilitating open discussions and influencing communities to take positive measures on issues affecting their lives. Akhter & Syed (2021:49) highlight the importance of community media as a means of addressing the concerns of marginalised groups and providing a voice to those experiencing poverty, health challenges, gender discrimination or ethnic bias. They further suggest that community media should foster open discussions on topics of community interest, such as maternal health and other problems.

Community radio and maternal health

Regarding maternal mortality particularly in rural areas, Mahiti et al. (2015:2) emphasise the crucial need for quality clinical services to reduce high rates of maternal death. He contends that solely focusing on clinical causes may overlook the broader perspective of maternal mortality, neglecting the significance of sociocultural determinants of health-related factors. As a solution, Oyibo et al. (2017:667) suggest the urgent need to inform the public about maternal health issues through the media, community associations, churches and community leaders. Galadanci et al. (2014) extend that community radio can facilitate individuals' use of a mental model to make sense of their environment, enabling them to screen information to prevent overload and intolerable uncertainty towards behavioural choices on maternal health care. Furthermore, Oyibo et al. (2017:668) suggest that the use of community-based interventions such as community radio to increase rapid understanding and addressing of contributory causes and factors associated with maternal mortality is inevitable. According to AMARC (2002), in remote areas, community radio remains the only medium available that is pervasive, accessible and affordable. In addition, community radio can be regarded as the most appropriate medium of mass communication in these areas, which usually have very low literacy rates, poor transportation systems and very low purchasing power. Furthermore, the UN Women and Prevention Collaborative report (2021:2) argues that public awareness campaigns conducted through community media interventions can effectively challenge sociocultural norms and attitudes that promote health challenges. Goswami and Melkote (1997) suggest that large-scale strategic health communication campaigns, such as those aimed at HIV/AIDS prevention and those that often use social marketing, primarily focus on influencing individual behaviour. While sweeping structural changes in society may be impractical, individual transformations can contribute to gradual and meaningful social progress. Nonetheless, research and strategies must

account for critical social intersections, including class, gender, ethnicity, religion and age (Goswami & Melkote, 1997).

According to Melkote and Muppidi (1999), campaigns that focus solely on providing accurate, medical and immunologically sound health information without addressing individuals' subjective perspectives may be less effective in altering risk perceptions. Strategies that consider people's complex, context-specific concerns are more likely to succeed. Similarly, Melkote and Steeves (2015) advocate the development of theory-driven persuasive messages grounded in an analysis of audience needs and beliefs. They further emphasise the importance of participatory communication approaches, wherein campaign beneficiaries actively contribute to message development and design.

However, while there is agreement and debate among scholars about the potential of community radio communication and intervention in promoting healthy trends globally (Ishengoma, 2024; Jiang & Liu, 2022; Olaoye, & Onyenankeya, 2023), in Africa and Tanzania in particular, its effectiveness in addressing maternal mortality is not well established. This study examined initiatives taken by community radio as a strategy to address maternal mortality among rural women in Tanzania. It recognises the potential of community radio to provide crucial information and education programmes that can empower rural women, improve access to quality healthcare services and promote positive maternal health behaviours.

Sociocultural factors and maternal mortality

Yamada and Brekke (2008:1390) define sociocultural factors as issues arising from socio-economic and cultural differences. They emphasise that these factors encompass a variety of social issues linked to ethnic minority status, which are often intertwined with cultural beliefs and practices. Such sociocultural determinants can significantly influence health outcomes and functioning, sometimes more so than ethnicity or racial background. Vlasov et al. (2023:4) add that societies are characterised by their sociocultural factors, which serve as social and cultural forces that shape the feelings, attitudes, values, thoughts, beliefs, interactions and behaviours of various groups. These factors play a vital role in shaping social development and functioning as they reflect the traditions, patterns and beliefs unique to specific communities or populations (Felisian et al., 2023:4). According to Bazzano et al. (2008), societal behaviours significantly influence maternal mortality and are deeply rooted in sociocultural factors that affect the adoption or rejection of practices and taboos that have an impact on maternal health, particularly in rural areas. Therefore, understanding these sociocultural factors is crucial to adopting intervention mechanisms, such as communication-based approaches for effectively addressing societal challenges, as they govern behaviour and are inseparable from daily interactions (Gedamu et al., 2018). Felisian et al. (2023) argue that social norms and culture govern societal behaviour and are intertwined with daily interactions, as traditional malpractices during the perinatal period continue despite modern advancements. Their study reveals that Indigenous women experience higher rates of mortality during pregnancy and childbirth due to sociocultural norms, traditional practices, values and beliefs, which are significant determinants in the realms of pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum care and child survival. This assertion is supported by Bazzano et al. (2008) and Adatara et al. (2019), who note that each community possesses distinct cultures and traditions that lead to variations in maternal and newborn customs across different societies. Therefore, identifying sociocultural and traditional practices during the perinatal period is an essential component of any intervention to promote beneficial behaviours and discourage harmful ones.

THEORETICAL MODEL

The theoretical framework for this study is rooted in Communication for Development (C4D) theory and the Health Belief Model (HBM), with the key assumptions of both theories integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. C4D is a practical framework designed to drive social change by implementing development initiatives tailored to the specific needs of individuals, communities and societies within their unique contexts. C4D theory places communication at the core of the development process, integrating various elements and emphasising the essential

role of marginalised and oppressed individuals in actively addressing and overcoming social challenges through communication (Gasana & Habamenshi, 2023). C4D challenges the traditional top-down model of knowledge dissemination, instead advocating a two-way approach similar to participatory communication. This model highlights the importance of community engagement in the development process through consultation and dialogue, reinforcing the value of community radio as a platform to involve stakeholders in developmental initiatives (Hernández-Ramos & Schramm, 1989; Melkote & Steeves, 2015; Navarro, 2002). Communication is central to the C4D framework. It serves as a vital tool for fostering community participation, engagement and transformative social change through interpersonal communication, community media and modern information technologies (FDFA, 2016). It also acknowledges the power dynamics between development planners and local communities, advocating the creation of media messages that promote change at both cultural and individual levels (Melkote & Steeves, 2015). Navarro (2002) asserts that social and political realities often trap marginalised groups – such as under-resourced people in urban and rural areas, including women – within deeply stratified socio-economic systems that perpetuate cycles of dependency. To address these challenges, communication strategies, including participatory action and media mobilisation, should be leveraged to influence public opinion, raise awareness and garner support for human rights initiatives (Melkote & Steeves, 2015:70). In the field of development communication, media planning and campaigns are crucial for implementing strategies that effectively engage target audiences, ensuring that content aligns with community needs, preferences and behaviours to drive meaningful social change (Lang & Lang, 2011). In the context of this study, C4D underscores the role of radio communication as a key component of development initiatives aimed at reducing maternal mortality. The core premise of C4D is whether media are effectively designed to reflect societal concerns and experiences through their programming.

However, although C4D provides key assumptions by emphasising the efforts and processes to be undertaken by radio stations, including programmes produced by editors, producers and reporters as part of broader maternal health interventions, while offering insights into women's participation in radio dialogues as well as the barriers that hinder their engagement in such discussions, it does not explicitly address how community radio can influence the psychological factors that drive health behavioural change.

Therefore, the HBM, developed by Hochbaum, Rosenstock and Kegeles in the 1950s, addresses this gap by providing a psychological framework for explaining and predicting health-related behaviours based on individuals' attitudes and beliefs towards health conditions (Rosenstock, 1974). According to the HBM, the likelihood that an individual will engage in a preventive health behaviour is shaped by six key perceptions: perceived susceptibility (belief about the risk of experiencing a health problem), perceived severity (belief about the seriousness of the condition and its potential consequences), perceived benefits (belief that a specific action will reduce the risk or severity of the condition), perceived barriers (perceived obstacles to taking the action), cues to action (triggers that prompt health-related engagement) and self-efficacy (confidence in one's ability to perform the behaviour successfully) (Ban & Kim, 2020; Rosenstock, 1974). The HBM further posits that individuals are more likely to take preventive action if they believe they are personally vulnerable to a serious health threat, perceive that the benefits of the action outweigh the barriers and feel confident in their ability to act effectively (Polit & Beck, 2004). In this study, the HBM provides a theoretical lens for examining how community radio can influence maternal health behaviours in rural areas. Maternal mortality remains a major public health concern in rural settings, driven by factors such as limited access to health facilities, entrenched cultural beliefs and inadequate health knowledge (Said et al., 2021; Shija et al., 2011). Community radio, being accessible, locally relevant and culturally sensitive (King, 2017; Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2023), can enhance perceived susceptibility and perceived severity by broadcasting real-life stories and health education on maternal risks. It can emphasise perceived benefits by explaining the advantages of maternal health practices, such as antenatal and postnatal care, while also addressing perceived barriers, including misinformation rooted in cultural norms, financial limitations and patriarchal systems.

Regular maternal health programmes on community radio act as cues to action, encouraging timely

health-seeking behaviour (Jiang & Liu, 2022). In addition, interactive segments such as listener call-ins and expert interviews can strengthen self-efficacy by equipping women with the confidence and skills to access maternal health services (Oyibo et al., 2017). Therefore, the central assumptions of both the C4D model and the HBM, including radio's benefits, barriers, engagement, participation and influence on health behaviours, form the foundation for developing key research questions and themes for this study on community radio and maternal mortality.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted across three districts in Tanzania. It involved three community radio stations: Uvinza FM in Uvinza District (Kigoma Region), Mazingira FM in Bunda District (Mara Region) and Sibuka FM in Maswa District (Simiyu Region). These stations were selected for their extensive experience in addressing community development challenges (Bamwenda et al., 2015) and their location in districts with high MMR (NBS, 2020; Prasad et al., 2022; Said et al., 2021).

The study employed qualitative approaches using purposive sampling to select key informants for focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs). A total of 48 women participated in six FGDs, with two discussions conducted per district. Each group consisted of eight women who had experience in maternal health, either as mothers or expectant mothers at the time of the study. In addition, 22 radio practitioners were interviewed, including six radio editors (two per station), three station managers (one per station), three programme managers (one per station) and 12 reporters/producers (three per station). These participants were selected based on a minimum of two years of experience in managing, editing or producing community-oriented radio programmes. The sample size for the women who participated in the FGDs and the radio practitioners was sufficient to reach the study's saturation point, as these groups provided comprehensive responses, with participants able to give similar answers that reinforced the study's findings.

Data collected through IDIs and FGDs were manually analysed using thematic analysis (Webber, 1990). Audio recordings and notes were transcribed, coded and categorised into themes to identify key patterns and insights. To ensure ethical compliance, research clearance was obtained from the University of Dar es Salaam and presented to relevant authorities, including the Regional Administrative Secretaries (RASs) in Mara, Simiyu and Kigoma, as well as the respective District Administrative Secretaries (DASs) and radio station managers. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, and informed consent was obtained before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld throughout the research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion based on themes derived from interviews with 22 radio practitioners and six FGDs involving 48 women from rural areas. The discussion primarily focused on community radio initiatives aimed at addressing maternal mortality and the challenges that hinder women's access to maternal health information through community radio.

Community radio initiatives that address maternal mortality

During IDIs with the managers, editors and programme producers of three community radio stations, Uvinza FM, Sibuka FM and Mazingira FM, these practitioners highlighted various efforts undertaken by their stations to address maternal health challenges in rural areas, with the overarching goal of reducing maternal mortality. While several strategies were discussed, the following emerged as the key approaches:

Radio policy on covering community concerns

It was noted that the radio policies of these stations are designed to prioritise information tailored to the specific needs of the community. These policies play a crucial role in ensuring that programming remains locally focused, addresses socio-economic and developmental issues relevant to the communities they serve and includes maternal health challenges. For example, Uvinza FM mandates that 70% of its

programming originates from the communities it serves, particularly within the Kigoma region. This policy ensures that critical issues such as maternal health challenges, which directly impact the local population, are given significant attention in the station's broadcasts. Similarly, Mazingira FM's policy requires that 80% of its content be sourced from the local community, ensuring a strong focus on local issues. The remaining 20% is allocated to external sources, including international content and other programmes, allowing for a balance between local relevance and broader perspectives.

> Our radio policy states that 70% of its programmes should originate from the radio's communities. This implies that most of the radio content should reflect the needs of Kigoma, particularly the Uvinza District. This enhances the radio's core mission of serving the community. (IDIs-Managing Director, Uvinza FM)

The policy-driven commitment of these radio stations was also reflected in their news coverage, ensuring that critical issues such as maternal health challenges were regularly featured in community radio news bulletins. For instance, Uvinza FM prioritises news stories from the Kigoma region, ensuring that a substantial portion of its bulletins focus on issues relevant to the local audience, including maternal health concerns.

> Most of the stories prioritise the Kigoma region, with a particular focus on Uvinza. For example, in yesterday's news coverage, we aired five news segments, four of which were dedicated to stories from the Kigoma region. In comparison, the remaining segments covered other areas outside of Kigoma. (IDIs-Programme Manager, Uvinza FM, 2025)

In short, the policies governing community radio stations play a vital role in ensuring that programming aligns with the needs of local communities. By mandating a high percentage of locally generated content, these policies enable community radio to serve as an effective tool for public education, advocacy and community engagement, which is the essence of community radio. Many scholars, such as Ishengoma (2024) and Mpehongwa (2024), have highlighted that community radio policy can serve as a guiding framework for ensuring that community-based issues are effectively addressed.

Radio educational campaigns on traditional and cultural beliefs on maternal health

It was clarified during field interviews that one of the significant challenges in maternal health is the persistence of deep-rooted cultural beliefs that discourage women from seeking medical care during pregnancy and childbirth. These beliefs were described as not merely individual choices but as embedded within wider sociocultural systems, where traditional practices are tied to identity, community belonging and gender norms. For instance, in the Mara region, the radio programmer explained that traditional birth attendants were initially preferred over healthcare facilities, and practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) contributed to a reluctance to seek hospital-based childbirth services. To dismantle these beliefs, community radio stations such as Mazingira FM were reported to be actively working to challenge these beliefs through targeted educational campaigns that advocate safer birthing practices and discourage harmful traditions such as FGM. Arguing that these radio campaigns go beyond simply broadcasting information, they aim to shift collective social norms by reframing maternal health not as a threat to cultural identity, but as a shared community responsibility linked to survival, dignity and well-being.

> In many communities, there was initially little trust in health facilities for childbirth, as people strongly believed in using traditional birth attendants. For example, in the Mara region, female genital mutilation (FGM) was widely practised, and many thought that if women gave birth in hospitals, they would be discouraged from continuing these cultural practices. Still, with a radio campaign, we have been able to address this challenge. (IDIs-Chief Editor, Mazingira FM, 2025)

Community radio has been instrumental in changing public perception by emphasising the importance of giving birth at healthcare facilities to prevent maternal complications, as articulated by the HBM, as it increases women's *perceived susceptibility* to maternal complications and highlights the *perceived benefits* of facility-based deliveries while directly addressing *perceived barriers* rooted in cultural beliefs. In this regard, the radio practitioners noted that health-centred programming and expert involvement enhanced the campaign's credibility. For example, Sibuka FM's weekly Wednesday health programme features medical professionals who guide discussions on maternal health, while Mazingira FM's "Kapeto" programme includes the "Ijue Afya Yako" (understand your health) segment, covering risks associated with home births, prenatal care and family planning.

> We established several radio programmes focusing on maternal health. One of our key programmes is Kapeto, which includes a segment called "Ijue Afya Yako". This programme provides maternal health education and features experts who discuss topics such as the dangers of home births, the benefits of attending prenatal clinics, family planning and the advantages of giving birth at health centres and hospitals. (IDIs-Chief Editor, Sibuka FM, 2025)

Beyond broadcasting, community radio stations have expanded their role into direct community engagement. For example, Mazingira FM has initiated educational visits to secondary schools in Bunda district, collaborating with doctors and journalists to discuss early pregnancies, menstrual health and gender-based violence. This outreach reflects a C4D approach, where media engagement is integrated with participatory, face-to-face communication to reinforce messages and foster community dialogue.

> For instance, we have offered assistance by visiting students, with the primary goal of educating them about maternal health. Through these efforts, we ensure that the community, especially women, actively participates in making our radio station truly inclusive and community-centred. (IDIs-Chief Editor, Mazingira FM)

The impact of these interventions is evidenced by observable shifts in community attitudes and practices, underscoring the transformative potential of localised, culturally sensitive media campaigns. Yet, critical reflection suggests that while community radio can challenge harmful norms, sustained behaviour change often requires structural reinforcement, such as improved access to health facilities, supportive male involvement and policy frameworks that protect women's reproductive rights (Lee & Ramazan, 2021).

Oyibo et al. (2017) highlight that community-based interventions, particularly community radio, are effective in addressing not only the *symptoms* of maternal health challenges but also their *structural and cultural root causes*. Similarly, the UN Women and Prevention Collaborative report (2021:2) emphasises that public awareness campaigns through community media can shift sociocultural norms when messages are consistent, participatory and grounded in local realities. This perspective aligns with Goswami and Melkote (1997), who advocate the strategic deployment of community media in public health campaigns, noting its capacity to address complex issues such as HIV/AIDS or maternal mortality among marginalised groups where conventional mass media often fail to penetrate. The success of these maternal health campaigns in the Mara and Maswa regions suggests that when local media integrates culturally responsive messaging with expert knowledge and participatory outreach, it can dismantle even the most entrenched harmful practices, creating space for new, health-promoting norms to emerge (Melkote & Steeves, 2015).

Radio programming: Community edutainment

Radio drama was explained as a powerful tool used by some community radio stations to address maternal health issues. For instance, the manager of Uvinza Community Radio explained that they had

a drama-based programme aired over five months which focused on key aspects of maternal health, including pregnancy care, family planning and safe childbirth. The drama programme engaged listeners in an entertaining yet informative manner, making it easier for the audience to grasp critical health messages as it allowed for relatable storytelling and depicted real-life maternal health challenges and solutions, thereby encouraging behaviour changes among expectant mothers and their families.

> For instance, last year, we aired a drama-based programme that focused on maternal health for over five months. This programme included various segments addressing key aspects of maternal health, such as pregnancy care, family planning and safe childbirth. (IDS-Programme Manager, Uvinza FM, 2025)

Another method discussed was the use of radio documentaries and special programmes, which were highlighted as an effective educational tool for providing in-depth analysis of maternal health issues. It was revealed that community radio stations produce documentaries that address these critical topics, featuring expert opinions from healthcare professionals and firsthand testimonies from mothers who have faced maternity-related challenges. For instance, "Let's Talk" was a documentary programme aired on Uvinza FM. At the same time, "Sema Usikike" (speak and be heard) on Mazingira FM served as a dedicated documentary segment focused on women's reproductive health. These programmes covered essential topics such as pregnancy management, labour education and childbirth.

> We produce dedicated documentary programmes focused on maternal health. For instance, we have a programme called "Sema Usikike" (translated as speak and be heard), which airs every Saturday. This programme has a documentary segment that involves health experts discussing maternal health challenges, but also, in the documentary, women voice their concerns regarding healthcare services at health centres. (IDIs-Chief Editor, Mazingira FM, 2025)

In addition, special programmes dedicated to maternal health provide focused airtime for discussions on critical issues affecting women's well-being. For example, Mazingira FM airs "Yako" (know your health), while Uvinza FM broadcasts "Ulimwengu wa Wanawake" (the world of women). These programmes serve as platforms for addressing women's health challenges, including maternal health, through expert discussions and community engagement.

> Our radio station broadcasts a weekly programme called "Ulimwengu wa Wanawake" (women's world). This programme is dedicated to women's reproductive education, with a particular focus on maternal health. The programme explores key topics such as pregnancy management, labour education and childbirth, providing valuable information to empower women in making informed health decisions. (IDIs-Chief Editor, Uvinza FM, 2025)

Scholars also contend that radio programming plays a crucial role in addressing health challenges, particularly maternal health, by raising public awareness and fostering behavioural change. Kruk et al. (2018), Kaaya et al. (2021) and Oyibo et al. (2017) emphasise that radio is an essential medium for educating communities about health issues. In addition, Vijayalakshmi and Saraswati (2023) highlight that through specialised programmes, community radio effectively communicates critical health information, helping to address the sociocultural factors that contribute to maternal mortality. Therefore, by integrating local knowledge and culturally relevant messaging through programmes such as documentaries and dramas, as explored in this study, community radio has the potential to create more inclusive, sustainable and healthier rural communities.

Radio collaborations with Health Ministry, UNESCO, BBC and other stakeholders

Radio editors, programmers and producers also highlighted that radio collaboration with other maternal health stakeholders has played a pivotal role in equipping community radio personnel with the skills and knowledge required to cover maternal health issues effectively. For example, Uvinza's manager explained that Uvinza FM's partnership with the Ministry of Health, the American Embassy and Internews facilitated specialised training for its staff. Such initiatives ensure that journalists are well informed on vital topics, such as maternal mortality-related causes, which empowers them to produce accurate and impactful content.

It was also highlighted that some community radio stations work closely with organisations that support content creation and programme development. For instance, UNESCO and BBC Media Action have played a key role in supporting Uvinza FM in producing educational dramas focused on women's reproductive health, with a strong emphasis on maternal education, such as family planning.

> One key partner is UNESCO, which has supported us in producing dramas focused on reproductive health, with an emphasis on maternal education. Additionally, BBC Media Action has been a valuable supporter of our station, contributing to not only our maternal education programmes but also other initiatives related to women's health in general. (IDIs-Programme Manager, Uvinza FM, 2025)

Sibuka FM collaborates with district-level experts in agreement with the District Executive Director (DED). This partnership allows the station to seek professional guidance whenever needed, particularly in matters concerning maternal health, as articulated below:

> At our radio station, we produce free programmes, but we collaborate with experts from the district level. We have an agreement with the district director (DED) to use the district's experts whenever we feel the need, and this has been very helpful, especially in the area of maternal health. (IDIs-Programme Coordinator, Sibuka FM, 2025)

Similarly, radio practitioners collaborated with local women's groups and gender desks in the community, explaining that these groups have the potential to provide valuable insights into addressing women's issues, particularly those related to maternal health challenges. For example, they revealed women with maternal challenges and provided several case examples from the community, such as those involving gender-based violence that may result in maternal mortality.

> In some instances, we also collaborate with women from gender desks in villages who provide valuable advice on addressing women's issues, such as gender-based violence and those related to maternal health challenges. (IDIs-Managing Director - Uvinza FM, 2025)

These findings clearly indicate that community radio collaboration with maternal health stakeholders is essential to addressing maternal health challenges. By working together with healthcare providers, government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), women's groups and community leaders, community radios can enhance health education. This collaboration not only facilitates the sharing of maternal health-related information but also strengthens the capacity of radio practitioners by improving their skills and expanding their coverage. In this context, scholars such as Figueroa et al. (2002) state that collaboration in radio programming with multiple partners plays a key role in achieving various objectives of radio campaigns. It helps to reach communication goals effectively and ensures that partners remain committed in the long run. This aligns with the C4D theory, which emphasises participatory processes and partnerships as critical for sustainable change, and with the HBM, which underscores the importance of perceived benefits in shaping health behaviours. Similarly, Ishengoma (2024) emphasises that community radios should not merely focus on broadcasting; instead, they should actively build connections, create a sense of community and foster collaboration with key stakeholders. This approach enables them to bring

people together, share experiences and, ultimately, influence positive change more effectively. Likewise, Van Rooyen and Van Doorslaer (2021) argue that radio collaboration should extend beyond interactions between community members and radio station staff or among employees within a station. Instead, it should also involve partnerships between different radio stations or between a radio station and other organisations to enhance the station's overall effectiveness.

Challenges that hinder women's access to community radio

The FGDs were conducted with a total of six groups, each comprising eight women, with two groups from each of the three districts in the rural areas. During these discussions, women were asked to explain the challenges they face in accessing maternal health information through their community radio stations. Various obstacles were identified, but the participants particularly emphasised the following challenges:

Lack of education on the importance of radio use

Women underlined that one of the primary challenges preventing them from fully engaging with community radio is a lack of education on the importance of media platforms, particularly community radio. They acknowledged that many women do not have the necessary knowledge or skills to use radio as a source of information effectively. For instance, in Maswa and Uvinza, women noted that even when radios are available in their households, many neglect to listen to informative programmes. Instead, they prioritise entertainment, particularly music, over essential broadcasts related to health and community awareness.

Below are some of the women's perspectives from Uvinza and Maswa:

> The main challenge in this area is that most women who listen to the radio focus more on music or drama rather than important programmes that provide information on reproductive health. (FGD-Itebula-Uvinza, 2025)

> I have never participated in radio dialogues because we lack awareness of their importance. Our knowledge in this area is minimal. Although I have heard some women engaging in these discussions on the radio, I have never tried to join. (FGD-Itebula-Uvinza, 2025)

Another significant issue identified was that many women, particularly in Bunda, had never attempted to participate or listen to radio dialogues on maternal health issues. This was due to either a lack of awareness about these opportunities or a perception that they held little value. For example, one woman in Bunda admitted that she had previously been unaware of the importance of engaging in radio dialogues. However, after learning about their significance, she expressed a willingness to follow up and actively participate in such discussions in the future. She explained:

> This information is new to me. I have never been told about the importance of participating in radio dialogues. However, starting today, I will start following up. If we continue receiving this kind of information, primarily through the media, we can actively participate in these issues. (FGD-Kibara-Bunda, 2025)

Financial challenge and lack of a radio set

All women in three districts during FGDs pointed out that access to community radio for many women in rural areas is severely limited due to financial challenges resulting from a lack of radio equipment, such as radio sets and mobile phones. It was stated that in many households, radios or mobile phones with radio capabilities were either absent or controlled by male family members. For example, some women reported that even when a radio was available, it was often reserved for their husband's use, leaving them without access to essential health information. It was also shared that in cases where radios were shared, the limited availability of devices often led to conflicts over usage.

> Many women in our area do not own radios or mobile phones with radio access. Even if there is a radio in the house, it is often kept for the husband's use, and sometimes women are denied access to it. (FGD-Sukuma-Maswa, 2025)

> Sometimes, we wish to listen to the radio, but when we want to tune in, our husbands are already using it to listen to sports programmes. Since there is only one radio in the house, we often let the men continue listening to avoid conflicts. (FGD-Sukuma-Maswa, 2025)

The lack of radio ownership and limited phone access exacerbate the problem. For instance, women in Uvinza and Bunda mentioned that they face challenges accessing maternal health information due to the absence of radios or phones in their houses. They argued that the financial burden of purchasing radios and radio batteries caused many families to struggle to access radio programmes.

> Radios play a significant role in providing education but due to rural living conditions, many women do not own radios or phones with radio functions. As a result, accessing health education can sometimes be difficult. (FGD-Bunda, 2025)

Family responsibilities

Despite some women recognising the importance of community radio in addressing maternal challenges as an effort to combat maternal mortality, women expressed that being overwhelmed with family responsibilities was the major obstacle for them to pay attention to community radio programmes. They argued that, unlike men in the village, women are mainly responsible for different gender roles, including production roles such as farming activities and reproductive roles such as taking care of children and their husbands and managing household chores, leaving them with little to no time to listen to the radio. Here are some of the articulations on this:

> Women in this area do not have enough time to listen to the radio. For example, I go to the farm every day, then return home to prepare food for my children coming from school and take care of my family. After that, I have other household responsibilities. (FGD-Woman-Chitengule-Bunda, 2025)

> Since we have many children, we are primarily responsible for their care, along with other responsibilities such as going to the market and working on farms. In this situation, it becomes difficult to listen to or participate in radio programmes. (FGDs-woman-Mtego wa Noti-Uvinza, 2025)

Moreover, women emphasised that the lack of gender role balance in families, especially in rural areas, poses a significant challenge. The unequal distribution of household responsibilities often leaves women overwhelmed with family duties, limiting their ability to engage with media messages. Their tasks require complete concentration, making it impractical to follow radio programmes. They stressed that due to the demanding nature of their responsibilities, any available free time is usually spent resting rather than seeking information through radio broadcasts.

> Many women here are constantly occupied with productive and household activities, leaving them with little or no time to engage with radio or other media platforms. For instance, if a woman thinks of listening to the radio after returning from the farm, her husband, who has been resting, will likely ask about food and other essential needs, making it difficult for her to access media content. (FGDs-woman-Buchambi-Maswa, 2025)

Patriarchy systems in rural areas

Another challenge expressed by women regarding listening to radio programmes on maternal health education was the challenges resulting from patriarchal structures in rural areas. Women explained that the patriarchal system within many households significantly limits women's access to community radio, arguing that in some communities, women are not permitted to turn on the radio or have control over its usage. For instance, one woman from Bunda explained that in her household, the husband is the only one allowed to operate the radio. In contrast, the woman continues with household chores, missing out on valuable radio programmes such as those on maternal education.

> Whether we accept it or not, patriarchy still exists in our society and contributes to this challenge. Women do not have the authority to turn on the radio; only the husband has that privilege. Men own the radios, and women rarely even get the chance to touch them. Additionally, the cost of purchasing radio batteries presents another challenge, further limiting women's access to radio information. (FGD-Chitengule-Bunda, 2025)

In line with traditional practices, particularly in Sukuma communities, women explained that men often control all media available in the family, particularly the radio. They take it with them when they leave the house, for instance, going to farms or using it for their preferred programming, as cited below.

> According to Sukuma traditions, the radio often belongs to the man of the house. Sometimes, he carries it with him when he goes out, and when he returns home, he listens to his programmes. This makes it difficult for women to access radio content. (FGD-Buchambi-Maswa, 2025)

In addition, in households where there is only one radio, women are often forced to defer to their husbands, even when they wish to listen to radio programmes. For instance, a participant from Sukuma (Maswa) shared that they sometimes let their husbands continue listening to sports programmes to avoid conflicts, which leaves them with limited access to other crucial broadcasts, such as those related to health and community awareness.

> Sometimes, we wish to listen to the radio, but when we want to tune in, our husbands are already using it to listen to sports programmes. Since there is only one radio in the house, we often let the men continue listening to avoid conflicts. (FGD5-Sukuma-Maswa, 2025)

The findings from the FGDs highlight several interrelated challenges that hinder women's access to community radio, including financial constraints, illiteracy and patriarchal systems (Mogambi & Ochola, 2015; O'Brien, 2018; Okinyi, 2019). Within the C4D perspective, these barriers signify structural inequalities that limit the ability of marginalised groups to engage in participatory communication processes. C4D literature emphasises that meaningful participation requires not only access to communication channels but also the removal of systemic barriers that hinder engagement (Manyozo, 2006).

Financial constraints, as noted by Mogambi and Ochola (2015), restrict women's ability to purchase radio receivers and mobile phones, thereby excluding them from community radio dialogues. This aligns with C4D's concern that socio-economic exclusion reduces citizens' opportunities to contribute to and benefit from communication initiatives. From an HBM standpoint, such economic limitations function as perceived barriers, obstacles that diminish the likelihood of women acting on health or development messages because they lack the means to access the medium in the first place.

Similarly, high illiteracy rates and limited knowledge among disadvantaged women (Okinyi, 2019) further hinder their engagement with radio messages. In HBM terms, illiteracy can reduce self-efficacy, the confidence to engage with, interpret and act upon information, thereby lowering participation rates. Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (2002) also recognise literacy as a critical enabler of empowerment, as it

enhances the capacity to interpret media content and contribute to dialogues critically. These findings further resonate with Okinyi's (2019) observation that women's low self-esteem, often linked to their lack of formal education, reduces their willingness to speak in public forums, even when invited.

Patriarchal structures, embedded in both gendered social norms and community radio organisational frameworks (O'Brien, 2018), further marginalise women. In C4D, such gendered power dynamics are seen as structural constraints that must be dismantled to achieve inclusive communication. In the HBM model, patriarchal control over decision making can be conceptualised as an external barrier that restricts women's perceived autonomy to act upon health and development cues.

At a broader societal level, women's minimal decision-making power within families and communities perpetuates their exclusion from public communication spaces (Ishengoma, 2024). This also mirrors C4D's assertion that participatory media cannot fulfil its developmental role unless it actively challenges and transforms these entrenched social hierarchies. Addressing these financial, educational and social barriers, therefore, requires a multifaceted approach grounded in both C4D and HBM principles: economic empowerment programmes to reduce perceived financial barriers; literacy and capacity-building initiatives to increase self-efficacy; and deliberate gender-transformative strategies to dismantle patriarchal norms that marginalise women in media spaces.

CONCLUSION

This article highlights the critical role of community radio in efforts to improve maternal health, a significant concern in many rural areas of African countries. With a specific focus on Tanzania, it underscores the significance of community radio in raising awareness and educating rural populations about maternal health as a key strategy for reducing maternal mortality. Using Sibuka FM, Uvinza FM and Mazingira FM as case studies, the article demonstrates how these community radio stations have contributed to initiatives aimed at addressing maternal health challenges. This has been achieved through developing and implementing policies aligned with community needs, where maternal health is a key concern, conducting maternal health campaigns, producing specialised radio programmes and forming partnerships with maternal health stakeholders to tackle challenges in rural areas.

These findings support the C4D theory, which emphasises the role of community media in promoting participatory communication, empowering marginalised groups and addressing structural inequalities. At the same time, the barriers identified – illiteracy, financial constraints, patriarchal structures and family responsibilities – reflect key constructs of the HBM, particularly perceived barriers and self-efficacy, which help explain why access to and participation in radio campaigns remain limited for many women despite the availability of information. The study therefore suggests that enhancing rural women's access to and participation in community radio dialogues on maternal health issues is essential to improving maternal health outcomes. However, achieving this requires a coordinated effort among multiple stakeholders, as highlighted by both C4D and HBM perspectives, to address key barriers such as economic challenges, limited education and patriarchal systems that restrict women's full participation and access to radio messages. However, while this study provides valuable insights into community radio initiatives for maternal health, further research is needed to assess the level of community engagement in radio dialogues on maternal health, as well as to examine the sustainability challenges and plans for community radio stations in addressing maternal health issues.

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Ethnic Stereotypes on South African Black Twitter: A Virtual Ethnographic Study of Zulu, Venda and Pedi Representations

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Abstract

Social media platforms have emerged as dynamic spaces for expressing diverse voices and negotiating identities. Among these platforms, X (formerly Twitter) stands out as a powerful medium where users engage in real-time conversations, shape narratives and participate in discussions on various topics. In the South African context, X has become a significant arena for public discourse, reflecting the complexities of a nation marked by cultural diversity and a history of social stratification. This article examines South African Black Twitter, a distinctive digital subculture that has gained prominence in shaping public opinion and influencing societal conversations. The focus is on critically analysing ethnic stereotypes within this digital space, specifically examining how Zulu, Venda and Pedi ethnicities are represented and stereotyped. While South Africa's multicultural landscape is celebrated for its diversity, it is not immune to the perpetuation of stereotypes, some of which are expressed on social media platforms such as X. By analysing a series of tweets, memes and graphics interchange formats collected through virtual ethnography, the study elucidates how the understanding and representation of these three ethnic groups in South Africa are embedded with stereotypes.

Keywords

Black Twitter, ethnic stereotypes, Pedi , social media, South Africa, Venda, virtual ethnography, Zulu

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, social media platforms have become powerful arenas for shaping public discourse, influencing identity formation and constructing cultural narratives. Among these platforms, X (formerly Twitter) has emerged as a crucial space for discussions on ethnicity, race and cultural identity, particularly within historically marginalised communities. In South Africa, Black Twitter has developed into a dynamic and influential subculture where users engage in conversations that affirm, challenge and negotiate ethnic identities (Aiseng, 2024). While this space fosters solidarity and cultural expression, it also serves as a platform for the reinforcement and circulation of ethnic stereotypes, some of which contribute to divisive and exclusionary narratives.

This article critically examines how ethnic stereotypes about Zulu, Venda and Pedi people are constructed, disseminated and engaged with on South African Black Twitter. Although South Africa is often celebrated as a "rainbow nation" that embraces cultural diversity, ethnic stereotypes remain deeply ingrained in social interactions and media discourse (Tewolde, 2024). The rise of social media has amplified the reach and intensity of these stereotypes, allowing them to spread rapidly across digital spaces in ways that both reinforce and contest longstanding biases (Intravia & Pickett, 2019). Using a virtual ethnographic approach, this study analyses tweets, memes and graphics interchange formats (GIFs) to identify dominant themes in ethnic stereotyping, explore how users interact with these representations and assess their broader implications for social cohesion and identity politics in South Africa.

Black Twitter represents a distinct subculture within the X platform and is characterised by frequent

use of hashtags (Lee, 2017). These hashtags, often centred on themes related to Black culture and societal issues, provide a platform for humour, social commentary and expressions of frustration among Black individuals. As a virtual community, Black Twitter serves as both a public and private forum that enables social movements (Klassen et al., 2021). Its members self-identify as Black, actively generating culturally significant content, sharing information and engaging in discussions about Black identity. Black Twitter not only fosters social connections but also challenges mainstream media narratives by presenting alternative viewpoints and critiquing negative representations of Black people in traditional media (Klassen et al., 2021).

While "Black Twitter" globally refers to a loosely connected network of users – primarily African American – who engage in online discourse centred on Black culture, identity and politics (Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013), South African Black Twitter represents a localised variant of this subculture. It is distinguished by its focus on South Africa-specific socio-political dynamics, cultural vernaculars such as "Mzansi humour" and the intersection of race and ethnicity in public discourse (Aiseng, 2024). Although informed by the broader ethos of Black Twitter, the South African iteration is shaped by unique local histories, including apartheid legacies, ethnic pluralism and vernacular language practices. This study uses "South African Black Twitter" to refer specifically to this geographically and culturally bound digital subculture.

Black Twitter has emerged as one of the most influential digital subcultures globally, particularly in the United States (US), where it serves as a platform for political discourse, cultural expression and social activism (Aiseng, 2024; Mpofu, 2019). As a loosely connected but highly engaged online community, Black Twitter amplifies issues related to race, identity and marginalisation, often shaping mainstream narratives through viral discussions (Aiseng, 2024; Mpofu, 2019).

In South Africa, Black Twitter has become an essential space for public debate on political, cultural and ethnic identity (Aiseng, 2024), making it a critical site for studying the production and circulation of ethnic stereotypes. According to the SA Social Media Landscape Report 2024 by Ornico, X had over 4.1 million active users in South Africa in 2024. While precise statistics for Black Twitter in South Africa are limited, a significant portion of these users engage in discussions centred on identity politics, social justice and humour-driven discourse (Aiseng, 2024).

Unlike other social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, X's algorithm promotes real-time, text-based conversations and facilitates the viral spread of ideas through hashtags, retweets and quote tweets. This makes it particularly useful for analysing discourse formation and stereotype propagation in digital communities. Furthermore, the platform's public nature allows for the collection of authentic and spontaneous interactions, unlike private or semi-private platforms where discourse may be curated or censored.

Given its role in shaping social and cultural narratives in South Africa (Aiseng, 2024), Black Twitter is uniquely positioned as a powerful digital space where ethnic stereotypes are both challenged and reinforced. This study focuses on Black Twitter because it offers unparalleled access to discussions where ethnicity is negotiated, contested and performed in real time.

The platform rebranded from "Twitter" to "X" in 2023, yet this study retains the term "Black Twitter" due to its enduring socio-cultural significance (Aiseng, 2025a). The phrase "Black Twitter" has become a discursive and cultural marker that exceeds the platform's corporate identity; it denotes a community practice and a way of engaging with Blackness in the digital space (Aiseng, 2025a). Therefore, its use here is conceptual rather than purely platform-specific.

Black Twitter plays a significant role in shaping public narratives on ethnicity and culture, but there has been little academic inquiry into how ethnic stereotypes are produced, circulated and contested within this digital space. The absence of such analysis limits our understanding of how social media functions as both a site of resistance and a vehicle for reinforcing ethnic prejudices. This study addresses this gap by investigating the mechanisms through which ethnic stereotypes manifest in online discourse, offering a nuanced exploration of how social media users navigate, challenge or perpetuate these representations.

This study was guided by the following key research questions:

1. How are ethnic stereotypes constructed and circulated on South African Black Twitter?
2. What dominant themes emerge in ethnic stereotyping within online discourse?

By examining these questions, the study contributes to broader discussions on digital culture, ethnic representation and the role of social media in shaping contemporary identity politics. It provides critical insights into how South African Black Twitter functions as both a space for cultural affirmation and a battleground for contested narratives about ethnicity.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

The mass media have always been more than mere outlets for entertainment and information; they serve as powerful conduits for cultural expression and oppression, with the potential to cause significant harm (Ward, 2020). Stvrtecka et al. (2024) argue that media are abstract systems and socialising tools that shape societal norms, values and behaviours, often in subtle ways. These platforms provide frameworks through which individuals interpret reality, thus influencing perceptions, ideologies and the transmission of culture. They also play a pivotal role in identity formation and the reinforcement or challenge of social structures. However, this power raises concerns, particularly about how media perpetuate stereotypes, biases and social inequalities. This underscores the need for critical scholarly engagement. Understanding the media's role in shaping these representations is crucial to deconstructing the racial and ethnic stereotypes they perpetuate (Castaneda, 2018).

While stereotypes are often associated with marginalised groups, they also target numerically dominant groups, such as the Zulu, who constitute South Africa's largest ethnic group (Aiseng, 2025a). As Castaneda (2018) notes, stereotypes can affect any ethnic group, reinforcing social divisions by framing even majority groups as threats or outsiders. In this study, tweets targeting Zulu people, such as those which label them as an "unnecessary tribe" despite their demographic dominance, illustrate how stereotypes function to marginalise groups regardless of their size or influence. This dynamic highlights the pervasive nature of ethnic stereotyping in digital spaces, where historical power imbalances and cultural narratives shape perceptions of both majority and minority ethnic identities.

Increasing research has focused on issues of race and ethnicity in digital spaces (Dixon, 2017; Intravia & Pickett, 2019; Nakamura, 2002; Sharma, 2013). Nakamura (2007) suggests that social media platforms, online communication methods and digital media are deeply embedded with ideological influences that reflect and exacerbate racial and ethnic conflicts. These platforms are far from neutral; they are infused with ideologies that both shape and are shaped by ongoing racial and ethnic debates. The content and interactions on these platforms often amplify existing social tensions, which reinforces or challenges stereotypes (Sharma, 2013). As a result, the ideologies present in these digital spaces significantly impact how racial and ethnic issues are contested and represented online. Lovink (2011) critiques the notion that the virtual world liberates individuals from their real-world identities, revealing it to be an illusion.

Stvrtecka et al. (2024) highlight significant negative phenomena on digital platforms, including the radicalisation of opinions and the formation of communities that create hostile environments. These spaces, often fuelled by provocative content such as memes and inflammatory posts, become breeding grounds for extreme ideologies. As Smieško (cited in Stvrtecka et al., 2024) observes, extremism adapts to technological advancements, utilising the Internet to spread ideas, recruit followers and organise activities offline. This digital expansion enhances the reach of these ideologies, posing substantial threats to societal stability.

While the Internet allows for global connectivity and "network neighbours", it also sparks cognitive conflicts and regional cultural differences, often leading to online disputes (Li, 2023). Stereotypes are a prominent manifestation of these conflicts. Online users frequently present their cultural patterns as superior or universally valid (Stvrtecka et al., 2024), which can fuel nationalism, chauvinism and ethnocentrism in both mild and radical forms. The nature of online communication, with its varying levels of user anonymity, indirect interactions and limited control over hate speech, facilitates the spread of these views.

Globally, there is increasing evidence of the marginalisation of temporary migrant, refugee and

immigrant populations, often driven by national policies and public sentiments that discriminate against foreigners (Devakumar et al., 2020). These discriminatory perceptions are reflected in social media, where hostile narratives targeting immigrant groups perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce societal biases. These digital platforms have become breeding grounds for xenophobia and racism, exacerbating tensions and contributing to the ongoing marginalisation of vulnerable populations.

Despite the opportunity for diverse perspectives, marginalising stereotypes remain pervasive in online discourse. This is amplified by the rapid spread of content on social media platforms (Dobson & Knezevic, 2018). Social media's expansive reach accelerates the dissemination of stereotypical content, which reinforces and perpetuates existing biases. Research shows that exposure to such content not only strengthens stereotypes among individuals predisposed to these views but also spreads harmful perceptions to new audiences (Turetsky & Riddle, 2018).

Numerous studies have analysed the impact of social media platforms such as X on society (Bouvier, 2020; Florini, 2014; Tufekci, 2017). While these studies initially sparked optimism regarding the democratising potential of platforms such as X (Bouvier, 2020), closer scrutiny reveals their involvement in perpetuating racial sentiments, ethnic animosity, homophobic ideologies (Makombe et al., 2020) and sexist stereotypes (De Ridder, 2017; Gerrard & Thornham, 2020). The dynamics of these platforms raise questions about how much attention has been given to their profound influence on identity markers. This article addresses the gap in understanding how ethnic stereotypes are produced and disseminated on South African Black Twitter, despite the growing influence of this digital space.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnicity, digital media and stereotyping in South Africa

The convergence of ethnicity and digital media has emerged as a critical field of study in Africa, where colonial legacies continue to influence socio-political identities and fuel intergroup tensions (Ekeh, 1975; Mamdani, 1996). In South Africa, ethnic identities have been profoundly shaped by historical state interventions, notably through apartheid policies that codified linguistic and tribal distinctions to entrench social hierarchies (Jensen, 2008; Posel, 2001). These entrenched divisions persist in contemporary digital arenas, particularly on social media platforms, where ethnic stereotypes are perpetuated, challenged and reshaped in dynamic ways. The accessibility and interactivity of these platforms amplify both the visibility and the complexity of ethnic discourses, making them a vital site for examining how historical prejudices intersect with modern communication technologies.

South African media scholarship has extensively explored race and representation, offering robust analyses of how media constructs racial identities (Chiumbu, 2016; Nyamnjoh, 2010; Wasserman, 2010). However, the specific phenomenon of intra-Black ethnic stereotyping in digital contexts has received less scrutiny. Social media platforms have become central spaces for articulating interethnic rivalries, often cloaked in humour, satire or expressions of cultural pride (Bosch, 2017). X, in particular, plays a pivotal role in these dynamics, with "Black Twitter" communities serving as vibrant hubs for discussions about ethnicity. These communities navigate a delicate balance between celebrating cultural identities and inadvertently reinforcing harmful stereotypes through playful or critical exchanges.

Despite the growing relevance of Black Twitter, research focused on ethnic stereotyping within South African online spaces remains limited. Hove (2022) has explored how social media can both foster ethnic pride and propagate derogatory tribal labelling, highlighting the dual nature of digital platforms as spaces of affirmation and division. Similarly, Aiseng (2025b) has illuminated how language ideologies in South African Black Twitter often favour colonial principles of hierarchy, superiority, power and segregation of certain groups over others, which reflects historical efforts to marginalise some indigenous languages in favour of others. Such studies underscore that digital platforms do not merely reflect existing prejudices but actively reshape them through new forms of expression, such as memes, hashtags and viral threads. These digital artifacts often draw on longstanding cultural narratives, adapting them to contemporary contexts in ways that both preserve and transform ethnic stereotypes.

Beyond stereotyping, research on digital hate speech and xenophobia in South Africa sheds light on the broader challenges surrounding ethnic and national identities in online environments. Wasserman (2020) and Bosch (2020) highlight that the absence of traditional editorial gatekeeping on social media platforms facilitates the rapid spread of inflammatory discourse. This lack of oversight allows divisive rhetoric to flourish, often unchecked, as platforms prioritise user engagement over content moderation. A key manifestation of this issue is the normalisation of ethnic slurs and humorous stereotyping, which frequently evade moderation due to their subtle, ironic or culturally coded presentation (Daniels, 2018). Such content, often framed as playful or satirical, can perpetuate harmful biases by embedding negative ethnic perceptions in everyday digital interactions. This reinforces divisions within South Africa's diverse society. For instance, coded language or playful jabs at ethnic groups may appear benign but can reinforce harmful biases by normalising negative perceptions in public discourse. This dynamic is amplified by algorithmic systems that prioritise engagement, often elevating provocative content to wider audiences (Gillespie, 2018).

Comparative studies from other African contexts reveal parallel trends. In Nigeria, Ajetunmobi et al. (2024) found that X both mirrors offline ethnic biases and provides spaces for challenging them, with users engaging in both antagonistic and affirmative discourses. Similarly, Adegoju (2023) analyses Nigerian online responses to ethnic attacks, revealing how hate speech employs rhetorical devices such as metaphors and hyperbole to dehumanise targets, which escalates intergroup tensions. These findings highlight the broader role of digital platforms in amplifying societal tensions through their design, which rewards virality and polarisation. In South Africa, such dynamics are compounded by the country's unique history of racial and ethnic engineering that continues to shape how groups perceive and represent one another online.

Scholars have also debated the emancipatory potential of digital platforms. Some, like Bosch (2017), argue that social media empowers marginalised voices by providing spaces for cultural affirmation and political activism. Others, such as Hove (2022) and Aiseng (2025b), warn that these platforms can perpetuate exclusionary narratives and symbolic violence, particularly when stereotypes are repackaged as humour or critique. This tension is especially pronounced on South African Black Twitter, where humour and mockery serve as tools for both resisting dominant narratives and reinforcing intra-group divisions. For example, memes targeting Zulu cultural practices may be intended as light-hearted commentary but can inadvertently perpetuate perceptions of ethnic inferiority or difference.

A significant gap persists in the literature concerning the production and circulation of intra-Black ethnic stereotypes in South African digital spaces. Existing studies tend to focus on broader racial dynamics (for example, Black/White binaries), xenophobic prejudice or general identity politics, leaving the specific mechanisms of ethnic stereotyping underexplored. This study addressed this lacuna by investigating how South African Black Twitter constructs, disseminates and contests stereotypes about ethnic groups, with a particular focus on representations of the Zulu people, Venda people and Pedi people. It examines the interplay of humour, memes and hashtag activism with historical narratives of power, identity and belonging, offering a nuanced perspective on how digital platforms mediate South Africa's complex ethnic politics. By situating these dynamics within the broader socio-historical context of colonial and apartheid-era divisions, the study illuminates the enduring impact of structural inequalities on contemporary digital discourses and the potential of platforms such as Black Twitter to both challenge and perpetuate these legacies.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Media stereotypes

Stereotypes, defined as oversimplified beliefs about social groups (Kashima, 2000), are powerful discursive tools that shape societal perceptions and intergroup relations through media representations (Hall, 2018). According to Hall's theory of representation, stereotypes construct social groups as the "Other", positioning them as outsiders within cultural or national narratives, thereby reinforcing social hierarchies

(Hall, 2018). In the context of South African Black Twitter, ethnic stereotypes marginalise groups such as the Zulu, Venda and Pedi, undermining the post-apartheid ideal of a unified "rainbow nation". Media narratives, including those on digital platforms, are not neutral but actively shape perceptions of race and ethnicity, often perpetuating harmful biases through linguistic and visual content such as memes and tweets (Ramasubramanian & Sousa, 2019). The Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002) further illuminates how stereotypes reflect perceived group status and competition, categorising groups based on competence and warmth. In South Africa, these dynamics are amplified by the country's unique socio-historical context, where colonial and apartheid policies entrenched ethnic divisions. This contrasts sharply with the race-centric stereotypes prevalent in US media.

Unlike US media, where stereotypes primarily target broad racial categories (for example, African Americans as criminal or athletic) rooted in histories of slavery and immigration (Dixon et al., 2019), South African stereotypes are deeply tied to ethnic and tribal identities shaped by colonial "divide and rule" strategies and apartheid's Bantustan policies (Mamdani, 1996). During apartheid, the creation of ethnically segregated homelands, such as KwaZulu, Venda and Bophuthatswana, codified tribal distinctions, fostering perceptions of groups such as the Zulu as politically dominant, the Venda as marginal and mystical, and the Pedi as rural and backward (Evans, 2012). These historical constructions persist in contemporary digital spaces, where platforms such as X amplify stereotypes through viral mechanisms that include hashtags, retweets and quote tweets (Gillespie, 2018). The absence of traditional editorial gatekeeping on social media allows these narratives to spread rapidly, often embedding colonial-era biases in humorous or satirical content that normalises ethnic prejudice (Daniels, 2018).

Moreover, ethnic stereotypes on South African Black Twitter intersect with other identity markers, such as gender, class and region, adding complexity to their impact. For instance, stereotypes about Pedi women as hypersexual or Venda individuals as practitioners of witchcraft reflect gendered and regional biases that align with feminist media studies which highlight the compounded marginalisation of women from ethnic minorities (Crenshaw, 1991; Gerrard & Thornham, 2020). By applying content analysis, this study examined how Black Twitter's linguistic and visual content constructs these intersecting stereotypes, and how it perpetuates power imbalances in South Africa's multicultural society.

The distinct stereotypes that target Zulu, Venda and Pedi ethnic groups on South African Black Twitter are rooted in historical and cultural narratives shaped by colonial and apartheid policies that continue to influence contemporary digital discourse. These stereotypes reflect not only ethnic divisions but also the interplay of power, status and cultural representation in a post-apartheid context. Below, the unique historical and cultural roots of stereotypes for each group are outlined, drawing on the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002) and historical scholarship to frame their significance:

- **Zulu:** Stereotypes portraying Zulu people as aggressive and dominant stem from their historical role in resistance movements, notably under King Shaka Zulu, whose legacy as a formidable warrior leader has been both celebrated and weaponised (Hamilton, 1998). As South Africa's largest ethnic group, constituting approximately 22% of the population (Aiseng, 2025a), Zulu people are often framed as a threat to other groups, a perception amplified by their political influence during and after apartheid (Castaneda, 2018). According to the Stereotype Content Model, Zulu people are stereotyped as high competence but low warmth, reflecting their perceived dominance but also social undesirability (Fiske et al., 2002). On Black Twitter, this manifests in tweets that mock Zulu linguistic pride or frame their cultural practices as outdated, which reinforces colonial narratives that dismiss African traditions as primitive (Mamdani, 1996). For example, the portrayal of Zulu culture as "loud singing and stomping" echoes historical efforts to trivialise their resistance heritage, positioning them as culturally excessive or threatening.
- **Venda:** Stereotypes of mysticism and isolation reflect colonial portrayals of the Venda people as geographically and culturally peripheral, often tied to exoticised spiritual practices (Nguyen, 2022). Historically, the Venda, a numerically smaller group concentrated in Limpopo, were marginalised through the apartheid-era Venda Bantustan, which reinforced their image as remote and disconnected from South Africa's urban centres (Evans, 2012). The Stereotype Content Model

frames Venda people as low competence and low warmth, casting them as mysterious outsiders whose cultural practices, such as traditional healing, are reduced to "witchcraft" or "juju" (Fiske et al., 2002). On Black Twitter, tweets such as "Venda people and their weird rituals" perpetuate these colonial tropes, exoticising Venda identity and marginalising their cultural contributions. This aligns with Nyamnjoh's (2010) argument that African media often amplify colonial-era stereotypes and undermine minority groups' legitimacy in national discourses.

- **Pedi:** Stereotypes of rural backwardness and religious fanaticism are linked to the apartheid-era marginalisation of the Pedi homeland (Lebowa) and the prominence of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) in Pedi cultural identity (Evans, 2012). Historically, the Pedi people were portrayed as rural and resistant to modernisation, a narrative rooted in colonial efforts to undermine their anti-colonial resistance under leaders such as King Sekhukhune (Mamdani, 1996). The Stereotype Content Model positions Pedi people as low competence but high warmth, reflecting perceptions of them as traditionalist and community-oriented but intellectually inferior (Fiske et al., 2002). On Black Twitter, tweets ridiculing ZCC practices or Pedi linguistic abilities, such as "Pedi men can't speak proper English", draw on these historical distortions, framing Pedi identity as backward and incompatible with urban, English-centric modernity (Lippi-Green, 2012). Gendered stereotypes, such as those that sexualise Pedi women, further intersect with ethnic prejudice, which compounds their marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1991).

By situating these group-specific stereotypes within South Africa's socio-historical context, this framework highlights how Black Twitter both reflects and reshapes colonial and apartheid-era narratives. Unlike US Black Twitter, which often focuses on countering anti-Black racism through hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter (Florini, 2014), South African Black Twitter navigates intra-Black ethnic tensions, where historical power dynamics and cultural representations shape distinct stereotype profiles. This localised analysis underscores the need to examine how digital platforms mediate ethnic identities in post-apartheid South Africa, and the analysis offers insights into their role in perpetuating or challenging social divisions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative content analysis of X posts associated with ethnic discourse on South African Black Twitter to understand how ethnic stereotypes are constructed, circulated and contested within this subculture. To ensure cultural and geographic relevance, South African Black Twitter is identified through:

- Use of geotagged content or references to South African contexts (for example, "eKasi", "ANC", "Mzansi");
- Hashtags widely recognised by South African X users, such as #BlackTwitterSA, #MzansiTwitter and #Satafrika;
- Comments in or involving South African languages or localised slang (for example, isiZulu, Setswana, Sepedi expressions);
- Engagement with distinctly South African themes, such as #LoadShedding, #FeesMustFall or #PhakamaRamaphosa.

Participation in these hashtag communities does not guarantee that a user is Black or South African. However, users' self-presentation, language use, cultural references and interaction with South African public discourse served as criteria to contextualise participation on South African Black Twitter. This interpretive approach aligns with studies that use linguistic, cultural and temporal cues to approximate demographic identity in social media research (Aiseng, 2024; 2025a; 2025b; Mpofu, 2019).

Hashtag and sample selection

A purposive sampling method was employed to identify tweets representing ethnic discourse within South African Black Twitter. A dataset of 848 tweets was collected using the X Advanced Search function and the Python-based tool Twint, covering the period from June 2023 to June 2025. The initial search

included hashtags such as #BlackTwitterSA, #MzansiTwitter, #Zulu, #Venda, #Pedi, #TribalismZA and #StereotypeZA. The hashtags were selected for the following reasons:

- They are commonly used to tag conversations explicitly referencing ethnicity, tribalism or cultural identity;
- They reflect distinct South African ethnic identifiers (Zulu, Pedi, Venda);
- They were active during national trending events (public holidays, viral incidents) that heightened ethnic discourse.

Tweets were filtered to exclude memes without accompanying commentary, automated posts and duplicated content. From the 848 tweets collected, a final sample of 180 tweets was selected for in-depth thematic analysis. However, only 30 of these tweets are presented here. These 30 tweets were purposefully chosen based on the following:

- Richness of content in terms of stereotype articulation;
- Inclusion of user engagement (likes, comments, retweets);
- Use of ethnic labels or identifiers;
- Clarity of language and interpretability within a cultural context.

To comply with ethical standards, all identifying information (such as usernames, profile details) was removed from the tweets that were analysed in this study to protect user privacy. While the sample of 30 tweets is small, it aligns with qualitative best practices and emphasises depth over breadth (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The selected tweets enabled detailed discourse and semiotic analysis, as is suitable for exploratory studies of cultural representation. However, the limited sample size is acknowledged, and future studies could expand the scope for quantitative robustness.

Selection of ethnic groups

Three intersecting criteria guided the focus on Zulu, Pedi and Venda ethnic groups:

1. Frequency of mentions in the broader 848-tweet dataset;
2. Historical and political salience in South African identity discourses;
3. Divergence in the nature of stereotypes observed in pilot sampling.

Zulu identity often dominates cultural and political discourse due to its historical prominence in national leadership and media. Pedi identity, while less prominent in mainstream media, holds significant cultural and historical importance, particularly in relation to resistance movements and religious practices such as the ZCC. Venda, though numerically smaller, frequently appears in stereotypical discussions, often involving exoticisation or cultural mystique. Although the study does not claim that these groups are more significant than others, their visibility on South African Black Twitter discourse during the data collection period justifies their inclusion. This selection enables comparative analysis of diverse stereotypes within the same digital ecosystem. Such stereotypes range from hypermasculinity (Zulu) to religious and historical misrepresentation (Pedi) and mysticism (Venda).

ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

Tweets were analysed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each tweet was coded inductively for dominant themes (such as power, humour, exclusion), discursive strategies (such as exaggeration, sarcasm, use of vernacular) and stereotype type (behavioural, occupational, cultural). Codes were refined iteratively, and emerging patterns were mapped against existing literature on stereotype formation and ethnic representation. Thematic categories were developed through multiple coding rounds, with findings cross-checked by a second coder for intercoder reliability. While the study does not generalise beyond its sample, it provides deep, contextual insight into the mechanisms and implications of ethnic stereotyping on South African Black Twitter.

FINDINGS AND DATA PRESENTATION

This section presents the findings from a qualitative thematic analysis of 30 purposefully sampled tweets collected from South African Black Twitter between June 2023 and June 2025. The analysis addresses the

following research questions: (1) How are ethnic stereotypes constructed and circulated on South African Black Twitter? and (2) What dominant themes emerge in ethnic stereotyping within online discourse? Unlike US Black Twitter, which often challenges race-centric stereotypes (for example, African Americans as criminal or athletic) through hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter (Dixon et al., 2019), South African Black Twitter focuses on intra-Black ethnic divisions, reflecting apartheid's legacy of tribal segregation. The findings are organised into three subheadings, each focusing on stereotypes associated with Zulu, Venda and Pedi ethnic groups, followed by a comparative analysis to highlight their distinct profiles. Each subheading examines discursive strategies (humour, sarcasm, exaggeration), their amplification through X's platform affordances (hashtags, retweets) and intersections with gender, class and regional identities. The findings reflect patterns within the sampled discourse and do not claim to represent the entire South African population.

ETHNIC STEREOTYPES ASSOCIATED WITH ZULU PEOPLE, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

The analysis identifies three dominant stereotype themes that target Zulu people: linguistic mockery, cultural simplification and aggression/exclusion. These stereotypes, rooted in the Zulu people's historical prominence as a politically dominant group and their demographic majority, are constructed through discursive strategies such as humour and exaggeration, which are amplified by X's viral mechanics.

Linguistic mockery

Tweets that mock isiZulu pronunciation and naming conventions use humour and exaggeration to trivialise linguistic identity and reinforce English as the standard of modernity (Lippi-Green, 2012). For example, *"Why do Zulu names sound like a Wi-Fi password? Sibusiso, Thanduxolo, what's next?* 😅*"* employs exaggeration to liken Zulu names to incomprehensible codes, while *"Dear Zulu people: it's Bundle of Joy, not Bandile noJohn"* uses sarcastic humour to frame isiZulu speakers as linguistically deficient. These tweets, often tagged with #ZuluTwitter, gain traction through retweets and quote tweets, amplifying their reach and normalising linguistic prejudice. This strategy reflects colonial hierarchies that prioritise English over indigenous languages, which marginalises Zulu speakers in digital spaces (Mamdani, 1996). This dynamic aligns with Lippi-Green's (2012) concept of "language ideology", in which dominant languages are upheld as superior, while indigenous languages are devalued. This reinforces systemic inequalities in both online and offline contexts.

Cultural simplification and negative traditionalism

Tweets on X often reduce Zulu cultural practices to simplistic or regressive stereotypes through ironic and dismissive commentary. This perpetuates colonial narratives that frame African traditions as inferior (Mamdani, 1996). For example, tweets such as *"Zulu culture is just loud singing and stomping, no depth to it"* or *"Zulus still living like it's 1800 with their spears and shields* 😂 *#ModernizeAlready"* employ irony to portray Zulu traditions as primitive and irrelevant in modern contexts. The hashtag #ModernizeAlready amplifies this narrative by encouraging user engagement that reinforces Eurocentric standards of cultural legitimacy. Such portrayals erase the richness and complexity of Zulu cultural heritage, including its historical significance in resistance movements under leaders such as Shaka Zulu (Hamilton, 1998). Moreover, these representations intersect with regional biases, often depicting Zulu people as rural and disconnected from urban sophistication, which further marginalises their cultural identity in digital spaces.

Aggression and exclusionary rhetoric

Despite their demographic majority in South Africa, Zulu people are frequently stereotyped as aggressive and socially undesirable, a narrative rooted in their historical warrior legacy (Castaneda, 2018) and compounded by intersectional biases related to ethnicity, class and regional identity. Social media posts on platforms such as X amplify these stereotypes through hyperbolic and exclusionary rhetoric. For instance, tweets such as *"Zulus are too aggressive, always ready to fight over nothing. Chill, it's not a warzone"* exaggerate Zulu behaviour to portray them as inherently violent, while others, such as

"Zulus are unnecessary tribe in South Africa tbh", dismiss their cultural and social significance within the national fabric. More extreme examples, such as *"my colleague said Zulus killed Jesus, and now God is punishing them"*, scapegoat Zulu people during crises such as the 2022 KwaZulu-Natal floods, exploiting hashtags such as #ZuluTwitter to spread divisive narratives. These portrayals align with the Stereotype Content Model, which positions Zulu people as high in competence but low in warmth (Fiske et al., 2002), framing them as dominant and socially threatening. This perception intersects with class and regional biases, often depicting Zulu people as rural, uneducated or overly traditional, which marginalises them in urban, cosmopolitan contexts (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, the stereotype of aggression is amplified for Zulu men, reinforcing gendered narratives that align with colonial tropes of African masculinity as hyper-aggressive (Morrell, 1998). Similarly, Zulu women may face intersecting biases that portray them as subservient or overly traditional, further entrenching their marginalisation in digital and social spheres. These intersectional dynamics not only perpetuate linguistic and cultural prejudice but also reinforce systemic inequalities by aligning Zulu identity with negative social attributes, which undermines their contributions to South Africa's multicultural landscape.

ETHNIC STEREOTYPES ASSOCIATED WITH VENDA PEOPLE, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Venda stereotypes centre on mysticism, isolation and linguistic ridicule, which reflects their historical marginalisation as a numerically smaller group in the apartheid-era Venda Bantustan (Evans, 2012). These stereotypes are constructed through sarcasm and exoticisation, and they are amplified by X's engagement-driven algorithms.

Mysticism and exoticism

Sarcastic posts on platforms such as X, such as *"Venda people are going to eat us one day",* revive colonial cannibal tropes to dehumanise and exoticise Venda identity, while others such as *"Venda culture is all about juju and strange dances, nothing modern about it"* and *"Venda people and their weird rituals, always casting spells in the bush 😂 #WitchcraftVibes"* reduce Venda spiritual practices to archaic, superstitious stereotypes. These portrayals, amplified through hashtags such as #VendaTwitter, align with Nguyen's (2022) argument that digital stereotypes project societal anxieties onto minority cultures, framing Venda traditions as alien and inferior. This intersectional marginalisation compounds biases by intertwining ethnicity with regional and cultural "otherness", portraying Venda people as rural and disconnected from modernity. This normalises prejudice and marginalises Venda identity in South Africa's multicultural digital landscape.

Isolation and exclusion

Tweets such as *"Venda is like another country, nobody knows what they're doing up there",* perpetuate the stereotype of Venda as geographically and culturally peripheral, echoing apartheid-era spatial segregation that isolated communities such as Venda to marginalise their influence (Mamdani, 1996). Amplified by hashtags such as #Satafrika, these narratives diminish Venda contributions to South Africa's national identity, framing them as detached from the broader socio-cultural landscape. These stereotypes intersect with class and regional biases, depicting Venda people as predominantly rural and disconnected from urban modernity. This contrasts with US Black Twitter's focus on racial discourses, which often centre urban experiences and systemic racism (Florini, 2014). By portraying Venda identity as backward or irrelevant, these posts reinforce systemic exclusion, undermining Venda cultural and economic contributions in South Africa's diverse digital and social spheres.

Ridicule of language/names and intellectual inferiority

Tweets that mock Venda names and perceived cognitive capacity, such as *"Why do Venda names sound like a secret code? Mulalo, Tshifhiwa ... just say John! 😅",* use humour to pressure assimilation into Western naming conventions, trivialising Venda linguistic identity. Similarly, tweets such as *"Is this how Venda people think?",* often linked to unrelated incidents, insinuate irrationality or intellectual inferiority.

Amplified through reposts and hashtags, these narratives resonate with Lippi-Green's (2012) argument that language is weaponised for social exclusion, framing Venda speakers as outsiders in mainstream discourse. These linguistic stereotypes intertwine with class-based biases, portraying Venda individuals as rural and intellectually deficient within South Africa's urban-centric social hierarchy.

ETHNIC STEREOTYPES ASSOCIATED WITH PEDI PEOPLE, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Pedi stereotypes focus on historical distortion, religious ridicule and linguistic/gender-based prejudice rooted in the apartheid-era marginalisation of the Lebowa homeland and the prominence of the ZCC (Evans, 2012). These stereotypes are constructed through irony and exaggeration, and they are amplified by X's platform dynamics.

Historical distortion

Social media posts on platforms such as X, such as *"o bolailwe ke potata"* (he was killed by sweet potato), employ irony to trivialise the legacy of King Sekhukhune, a pivotal figure in Pedi anti-colonial resistance, which reduces his historical significance to a humorous anecdote. Similarly, posts such as *"Pedi Chiefs are just old guys in funny hats pretending to be important. 😂 #NoHistoryHere"* mock traditional Pedi leadership as performative and irrelevant, which undermines their cultural authority. These distortions resonate with Mamdani's (1996) argument that colonial powers erased African histories to legitimise domination, a tactic echoed in digital spaces to delegitimise Pedi heritage. These narratives intersect with ethnic and class biases, portraying Pedi cultural practices as outdated and rural, thus marginalising their role in South Africa's post-apartheid national identity. By targeting Pedi-specific history and leadership, these posts, amplified through hashtags such as #NoHistoryHere, reinforce systemic exclusion, diminishing the Pedi community's cultural legitimacy in contemporary digital and societal contexts.

Religious ridicule

The ZCC, a central institution in Pedi identity, is caricatured through ironic tweets such as *"Pedi: ZCC. Into Witchcraft. Stupid. Carvella. Gold teeth",* which reduce a respected spiritual movement to superstition and materialism. Others, such as *"Pedi people and their ZCC nonsense, always praying loudly like it's a concert 🙄",* mock communal worship as disruptive, echoing colonial disdain for African spirituality (Mamdani, 1996). These portrayals align with Nguyen's (2022) argument that digital stereotypes project societal anxieties onto minority cultures, framing the ZCC as irrational and backward. These narratives intersect with ethnic and class biases, depicting Pedi ZCC members as rural, unrefined and disconnected from urban sophistication. Amplified through retweets and hashtags, such posts marginalise Pedi spiritual identity, undermining the ZCC's cultural and historical significance in South Africa's post-apartheid context.

Linguistic/Gender-based prejudice and negative physical stereotyping

Noticeably, some tweets also perpetuate linguistic and gendered stereotypes that marginalise Pedi identity, intersecting with ethnicity, gender and colourism to reinforce systemic exclusion. Tweets such as *"Pedi men can't speak proper English, always butchering words on radio"* exaggerate perceived deficiencies in English proficiency to imply intellectual inferiority among Pedi men. This aligns with Lippi-Green's (2012) argument that language is used as a tool for social exclusion. This linguistic mockery positions Pedi men as less competent within South Africa's urban-centric, English-dominated social hierarchy. Concurrently, gendered stereotypes such as *"Women love sex"* hypersexualise Pedi women, echoing a patriarchal-colonial legacy that fetishises Black women's bodies as objects of desire (Ramasubramanian & Sousa, 2019). Such portrayals reduce Pedi women to sexual stereotypes, stripping them of agency and reinforcing gendered power imbalances. In addition, posts such as *"Lightskin Pedi people look so evil sometimes or ke nna fela?"* (light-skin Pedi people look so evil sometimes or is it just me?) weaponise physical appearance, intertwining ethnicity with colourism to stigmatise light-skinned Pedi individuals as untrustworthy or malevolent. This reflects broader societal biases where skin tone intersects with ethnic

identity to perpetuate intra-community prejudice (Hunter, 2007).

The stereotypes that target Zulu, Venda and Pedi groups on South African Black Twitter, as observed on platforms such as X, reveal distinct patterns shaped by historical, socio-political and intersectional dynamics that are rooted in apartheid's legacy of tribal segregation (Mamdani, 1996). These patterns leverage humour, sarcasm and colonial tropes to marginalise each group's cultural identity while fostering intra-Black rivalries in digital spaces.

Intersectionality shapes these stereotypes distinctly. Zulu men are disproportionately targeted for aggression, aligning with colonial tropes of African masculinity (Morrell, 1998). Venda stereotypes, applied broadly across genders, focus on cultural "otherness", while Pedi women are hypersexualised and Pedi men are mocked for linguistic deficiencies, such as *"Pedi men can't speak proper English, always butchering words on radio".* Colourism further complicates these dynamics, as seen in posts such as *"Lightskin Pedi people look so evil sometimes or ke nna fela?"* which stigmatise light-skinned Pedi individuals (Hunter, 2007). These intersectional biases – ethnicity, gender, class and skin tone – reinforce marginalisation within South Africa's urban-centric social hierarchy.

The affordances of X, including hashtags, retweets and quote posts, amplify these stereotypes by prioritising engagement. This embeds colonial and apartheid-era narratives in humorous digital discourse (Gillespie, 2018). Hashtags such as #ZuluTwitter, #VendaTwitter and #Satafrika enhance virality, while emojis (such as 😅, 🙄) add a veneer of levity to prejudicial content.

CONCLUSION

This virtual ethnographic study explored the construction and circulation of and engagement with ethnic stereotypes on South African Black Twitter, focusing on representations of Zulu, Venda and Pedi ethnic groups through a qualitative thematic analysis of 30 purposefully sampled tweets from June 2023 to June 2025. Guided by two research questions – (1) How are ethnic stereotypes constructed and circulated on South African Black Twitter? and (2) What dominant themes emerge in ethnic stereotyping within online discourse? – the findings offer tentative insights into the complex interplay of digital discourse, historical legacies and identity politics in post-apartheid South Africa.

Regarding the first research question, the study suggests that ethnic stereotypes are constructed and circulated through discursive strategies such as humour, sarcasm and irony, and they are amplified by X's viral features such as hashtags (#ZuluTwitter, #VendaTwitter) and retweets. These strategies, rooted in colonial and apartheid-era narratives (Mamdani, 1996), are not static but dynamically shaped by user interactions and platform affordances (Gillespie, 2018). The findings also highlight intersectional dimensions, with stereotypes intersecting with gender (for example, sexualisation of Pedi women) and class (for example, rural stereotypes for Venda), suggesting that ethnic identity is negotiated alongside other social categories (Crenshaw, 1991). However, these insights are specific to the sampled tweets and may not fully capture the diversity of South African Black Twitter discourse.

For the second research question, the analysis points to dominant themes of linguistic inferiority, cultural exoticisation and historical distortion, which vary across groups. Zulu stereotypes emphasise aggression and linguistic mockery, reflecting their historical dominance (Castaneda, 2018); Venda stereotypes focus on mysticism and isolation tied to colonial marginalisation (Nguyen, 2022); and Pedi stereotypes centre on rural backwardness and religious ridicule linked to apartheid-era policies (Evans, 2012). South African Black Twitter reveals intra-Black ethnic tensions, shaped by apartheid's legacy of tribal segregation. These themes, while prominent in the dataset, are exploratory and suggest patterns rather than definitive truths about ethnic stereotyping in digital spaces.

This study illuminates South African Black Twitter as a dynamic arena where ethnic stereotypes are both perpetuated and contested, reflecting the platform's dual role as a space for cultural affirmation and division. The findings are limited by the small sample size (30 tweets) and the interpretive nature of virtual ethnography, which restricts generalisability. In addition, the study focuses on negative stereotypes and may underrepresent counter-narratives, such as hashtags #ProudlyZulu or #VendaVibes, which resist marginalisation. Future research could explore these counter-narratives, employ larger datasets or use

mixed methods to examine how platform algorithms shape stereotype circulation. By highlighting the provisional nature of these findings, this study contributes to ongoing discussions about digital culture, ethnic representation and the role of social media in navigating South Africa's complex identity politics. The study findings invite further exploration into fostering inclusive online spaces.

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Consuming the Romantic Utopia in Africa Through Reality Television: Our Perfect Wedding

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Abstract

Reality television has challenged our understanding of modern life since its rapid rise in the early 2000s. Reality wedding shows, in particular, claim to portray the authentic expression of love shared by the participants. Research within this genre of reality television has mainly focused on audience reception as well as engagement with the content. However, the steady proliferation of reality wedding shows in Africa has gone largely uncritically celebrated as a sign of romantic love in the continent. Through a multimodal critical discourse analysis of episodes from the South African, Kenyan and Nigerian wedding show *Our Perfect Wedding*, we argue that the production choices of wedding reality shows are not value free but represent a profit logic co-opting of love by consumerist capitalism in order to perpetuate its existence even within non-Western contexts. We borrow from the concepts of conspicuous consumption and utopia to argue that audiences of reality television wedding shows in Africa are invited to consume displays of opulent consumption under the guise of celebrating utopian love.

Keywords

Consumption, leisure class, love, multimodal critical discourse analysis, wedding reality TV

INTRODUCTION

Weddings have undoubtedly entered the sphere of popular culture (Mupotsa, 2014). The fact that wedding ceremonies are a multi-billion-dollar industry the world over, offers a good opportunity for leveraging weddings as reality television content within a modern capitalist society. The popularity of wedding reality television (WRTV) shows such as *Say Yes to the Dress* and *Married at First Sight* (*New York Times*, 2015) affirms this argument. In South Africa alone, at the time of writing, three popular locally produced reality television shows on weddings were airing simultaneously on different television channels, namely *Traditional Wedding, Wedding Insider* and *Our Perfect Wedding* (OPW). The latter, which airs on Sunday evenings with a viewership exceeding 1.4 million, is the fourth most-watched television programme on MultiChoice's DSTV. This makes it the ideal focus of this article. This show's success has led to localised adaptations in Kenya and Nigeria, thus making OPW a rich site for comparative analysis across the continent. The most notable feature across these WRTV shows is the conspicuous display of consumerism. The significance of this stems from the fact that weddings in Africa have historically been ceremonies that placed great emphasis on cultural values as opposed to consumerism (Mbunyuza-Memani, 2018). These ceremonies typically involved the families exchanging gifts through a colourful festive celebration

of traditional music and dance. The ceremonies mainly focused on the festive as well as jovial mood of the two families coming together (Mupotsa, 2014). At this stage, the bridewealth would have been exchanged in the form of cattle or other livestock. The ceremony would take place in the homes of the bride and groom, consisting of simple decorations and traditional attire. The introduction of Western culture in the African context transformed traditional weddings to include "white weddings". Indeed, the notion of white weddings comes from the fact that the wedding dress is a white colour, symbolising Western notions of Christian purity (Ingraham, 2008). The presence of white weddings in South Africa is linked to colonialism and the rise in "church weddings" from the late 1800s onwards. By the 1930s, white weddings had become even more commonplace (Erlank, 2014). The inclusion of these white weddings created cost implications that were historically foreign. Therefore, it has become a norm to see on television the depiction of both white weddings and, on a small scale, traditional African weddings.

This article argues that the production practices of WRTV are not neutral or value free. Instead, they are embedded within a media economy that commodifies intimacy and romance, aligning the planning and performance of weddings with broader capitalist logics (Dunak, 2013; Ingraham, 2008). While previous studies have pointed to the commercialisation of weddings and romance in global contexts (Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008; Vertoont, 2017), we contend that more focused analysis is needed in the African context, where the spectacularisation of consumption intersects with local cultural expectations and economic aspirations (Deery, 2015; Hill, 2020).

In particular, the hybridisation of traditional African and Western wedding aesthetics in OPW raises important questions about class, taste and cultural performance in emerging African middle classes. This article explores how reality television serves as a vehicle through which capitalism co-opts love, reproducing consumer desires and social aspirations. We adopt multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) to investigate these dynamics and to make sense of how weddings are both performed and judged on screen. In doing so, we critically examine the formatting of WRTV as a genre, paying close attention to its narrative structures and visual strategies that align with romance literature and romantic film conventions.

We focus specifically on OPW as it appears in three African countries: South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria. While OPW began as a South African production aired on Mzansi Magic (a Multichoice-owned channel), its franchising to other African countries, including Zambia, Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria, underscores the regional spread of consumerist wedding ideals and the format's adaptability to diverse cultural contexts. Yet, the selection of these three countries is not only based on availability but also reflects differing socio-economic and cultural positions within the continent. We aim to offer a comparative lens on how love, class and consumption are mediated and visualised in these different national contexts.

To this end, the article asks the following research questions:

Q1: How does capitalism co-opt love through reality television as depicted on *Our Perfect Wedding*?

Q2: What are the links between utopia, mass self-communication and consumption on reality television as depicted on *Our Perfect Wedding*?

THE CONSPICUOUS KIND OF LOVE

Contemporary society seems to have produced an often uninterrogated association between love and spending. For instance, February, dubbed the month of love, offers a key example of conspicuous commercial gift-giving rituals in the form of roses, chocolates, jewellery and the like, which are sold as symbols of romance (Zayas et al., 2017). The concept of conspicuous consumption captures this interplay.

The concept of conspicuous consumption was coined by Thorstein Veblen (1899) in his seminal work, *The theory of the leisure class*. Veblen (1899) offers a critique of the nineteenth-century American consumer society. He looks at the extent to which the need for personal recognition, which to him translated to honour, rested on public displays of material acquisition. The book was written amid precarious economic conditions and social upheavals in the United States of America as a result of rapid industrialisation that saw the growth of industries such as coal mining and steel production. This resulted in the creation of gargantuan fortunes for the owners who founded these industries (Posel & Van Wyk, 2019:5).

Veblen (1899) particularly focused on the class distinctions that were evident during this time. The super-rich founded their own elite schools and private clubs, lived in mansions decorated with rare artworks and had well-dressed servants in their homes (Posel & Van Wyk, 2019:5). The phrase "conspicuous consumption" was coined to explain the use of certain goods by the wealthy to distinguish them from the poor, by drawing attention to their wealth and thereby elevating their social status. Conspicuous consumption – also known as the "Veblen effect" – referred to the purchase of expensive "luxurious" goods that had equivalent functional capabilities when compared to their less costly option (Charoenrook & Thakor, 2008). A conspicuous item is thus an item that is consumed or owned primarily for its ability to bestow a high social status on an individual (Charoenrook & Thakor, 2008).

Such goods served a social signalling purpose: not merely to demonstrate wealth, but to affirm social belonging and elevate one's position relative to others. Over time, this logic has expanded beyond wealth to encompass performances of gender, partner selection and even notions of personal freedom (Banerjee & Duflo, 2007; Moav & Neeman, 2010; Smit, 2016). Today, even people with limited means may engage in conspicuous consumption, revealing its broader role in shaping identity and desire within capitalist society.

Importantly, love has not escaped this commodification. Wang (2014) notes that in modern relationships, conspicuous consumption is often used to signal romantic commitment. Eva Illouz (1997) identifies several strategies through which capitalist culture fused romance with consumption during the twentieth century. Among these strategies was the rise of advertising photography in the 1930s, which embedded romantic love into the realism of mass culture (Dunak, 2013). The photographic close-up became a visual device that enhanced emotional identification with characters, narrowing the distance between subject and audience (Boden, 2024). Simultaneously, the use of famous movie star couples in advertisements helped elevate romantic love to a glamorous ideal, associating it with status and aspiration (Ingraham, 2008). These representations often circulated through a small but influential set of highly respected "icons" that produced widely recognised romantic stereotypes, which permeated people's imaginations and expectations (Illouz, 1997).

According to Illouz (1997:2), "in the modern capitalist world, romantic love has become an intimate, indispensable part of the democratic ideal of affluence that has accompanied the emergence of the mass market, thereby offering a collective utopia cutting across and transcending social divisions". Love has not merely been shaped by capitalism; it has been actively restructured by it. Commodities have taken on emotional significance and are central to romantic experiences. Illouz (1997:37) explains that the association of romance and consumption relies on a two-level romanticisation of commodities. The first level is candid consumption, where individuals consume products directly associated with romance (Illouz, 1997). The second level is oblique consumption, where couples engage in shared experiences such as leisure and entertainment that are structured around consumption (Illouz, 1997). Wedding ceremonies, especially in Western societies, exemplify this dual commodification of love.

THE WEDDING DAY

While weddings are widely viewed as beautiful celebrations of love, they have also become stages for capitalist spectacles. The idea of big fat South African weddings, for example, captures this interest in mediated representations of elaborate weddings that reflect conspicuous consumption (Mupotsa, 2014). Similarly, Smit (2016:63) argues that the wedding has become a "site for the demonstration of taste, social mobility, and success through conspicuous consumption for black middle-class South Africans". Thus, social-class positioning and weddings have become linked.

The consequence of this link inherent in the association of values of performance is that some may decide to put off wedding ceremonies or never even get married, due to being financially unstable. This trend has also been observed by Pauli (2011:153), who notes that wedding ceremonies that have become, in part, costly celebrations of class distinction, are making it difficult for most people in Africa to get married, resulting in a drastic decline in wedding rates. A similar observation has been made by Masquelier (2005) regarding young men of Dogondoutchi, a rural town of Niger, who tend to delay marriage due to

the financial implications of what can be considered predominantly extravagant ceremonies. While the reasons for the decline in marriages are multiple and complex, it appears that finances play a significantly unique role in enabling or inhibiting marriage. To this end, Hunter (2010:695) decries African marriage as being a middle-class institution in many respects.

Reality television shows offer a platform necessary for the display and performance of such class distinctions. Mupotsa (2014), in reading the black consumer in contemporary South Africa, argues that the mediation of weddings is a site of liminality that offers those who are getting married the "opportunity to be on stage and perform an aspired self". Since audiences are invited to watch such displays, there is then a simultaneous consumption that takes place. The couple displays acts of consumption to perform love, while the audiences consume these displays through spectatorship. Therefore, the site of WRTV offers an opportunity to promote both the displays and consumption of the "marketised utopia" (Ingraham, 2008).

SHOWING REALITY? THE FORMAT AND APPEAL OF WEDDING REALITY TELEVISION

In its simplest form, WRTV refers to reality television shows that are focused on real-life weddings. The world over, WRTV has gained popularity among television viewers. In South Africa, in 2021 there were three locally produced WRTV shows simultaneously airing on different channels (Mzansi Magic, Showmax and Moja Love). Nigeria has four wedding/love-related television shows, while Kenya currently has two. This suggests a growing popularity of these shows in Africa. Although reasons for people's media consumption patterns are varied and too many to consider in this article, Hefner (2015) suggests two useful possibilities. Firstly, the motivations of some audiences are linked to their beliefs about romance and love. As such, there is an element of identification with the characters in WRTV. The second motivation is entertainment, which means that audiences find some affective fulfilment in watching WRTV (Hefner, 2015).

The entertainment element that is attached to WRTV viewership conjures up emotions of "enrapturement" by portraying a fairy tale with a perfect ending (Giorgio in Hefner, 2015). The idea of a fairy tale is also captured by other scholars who present the wedding ceremony as a site of perfection and celebration (Mupotsa, 2014; Sgroi, 2006). An interesting perspective on the consumption of WRTV is brought forth by Engstrom and Baldrige (2006) who argue that WRTV, which portrays the idea of a perfect wedding, may reinforce ideals of femininity and consumerism for female audiences. A view similar to this is advanced by Brown (1994) who claims that weddings serve capitalism by helping create an industry based on women's fantasies of status and security built around marriage, symbolised in the wedding as a consumption practice. With this being the case, "weddings provide ample room to manufacture consumer desires" (Walsh, 2005). Given the nature of weddings, WRTV comes into fertile ground within the sphere of wedding imaginary (Sgroi, 2006).

According to Sgroi (2006), reality television naturalises consumption practices that are linked to the idea of the wedding imaginary. For Sgroi (2006), a show such as *Trista and Ryan's Wedding* places a lot of emphasis and glorification on consumption and shopping, to an extent that the wedding as an event idealises consumption. Sgroi (2006) discusses how the narrative of reality shows influences the structure of the shots and the episodes of each programme. Therefore, the meaning of these shows could be better understood by examining their underlying narrative.

While a narrative is, in essence, a story holistically told, it also includes how the story is communicated to an audience (Sgroi , 2006). Given the supposed reality of reality television, it therefore follows that such programmes have embedded in them the potential to influence their audiences through its underlying narratives (Deery, 2016).

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION AND CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

Ouellette and Hay (2008) observe that reality television has increasingly become the platform for reinforcing the ideals of capitalism around consumption and social status. In being exposed to reality shows such as OPW, the audience may experience the intersection of love expressed as a romantic utopia through consumption. This idea is espoused by Illouz (1997), who argues that romantic relationships are

commodified through structures of capitalism and hidden behind the banner of a consumer culture. In this sense, the expression of love is linked to notions of excess and consumption.

Veblen's (1899) theory of conspicuous consumption is central to understanding the dynamics at play in OPW. Weddings on the show are framed as opportunities for couples to engage in public displays of wealth, using material goods to signal social status and success. However, the ways in which conspicuous consumption is expressed vary across cultural contexts. In South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, weddings reflect not only global capitalist ideals but also local cultural traditions, creating hybrid forms of consumption that blend tradition with modern consumerism (Featherstone, 1991).

In all three countries mentioned above, OPW illustrates how love is commodified through the spectacle of weddings. The show presents weddings as public performances where material wealth and social status are central to the narrative. However, the commodification of love takes on different forms in each cultural context. In South Africa, weddings predominantly reflect the country's socio-economic inequalities, where weddings become symbolic of upward mobility and social status (Smit, 2016). As a result, significant emphasis in planning a wedding is placed on the extravagance of the event, from designer gowns to luxury venues, framing love as something that can be achieved through consumption (Illouz, 1997).

While Nigeria is known for elaborate weddings with long guest lists, the WRTV show portrays more of this aspect through packaging the content in a much more flamboyant and excess-emphasising manner in line with the country's reputation for public celebrations (Nnagbo, 2020). Nigerian weddings are known for being affairs of opulence. As such, the framing of love in this instance, as in South Africa, is a public performance of wealth, success and upward mobility, symbolised through Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption. Essentially, in this context, love becomes measurable through grandiose gestures of conspicuous consumption: the garments, the venue, the décor, the procession, the rings, and just about anything that evidences wealth. As such, a suggestive link between love and material abundance is created.

Kenyan weddings are also known for splendour (Olanga et al., 2015). However, they normally present a more hybrid approach, blending modern consumerism and traditional practices without an overemphasis on either of the ceremonies and being equally conspicuous. Weddings often feature elements of local customs, such as traditional attire and rituals, alongside Western symbols of luxury while celebrating the notion of luxury in the African context (Iqani & Dosekun, 2019; Iqani, 2023). This creates a hybrid form of commodification, where both love and tradition are reimagined as consumable media content. Ewen (1988) highlights how capitalism often rebrands cultural traditions into products that can be displayed and consumed, a dynamic that is evident in Kenyan weddings.

METHODOLOGY

To effectively explore the underlying consumerist representations on OPW, the study adapted a MCDA toolkit as advanced by Machin and Mayir (2012). MCDA not only results in a better understanding of media texts (Coskun, 2015), but also has been shown to be particularly productive for analysis of reality television (Monson et al., 2016; Mbunyuza-Memani, 2018). This is because MCDA attempts to analyse how both the linguistic and the visual choices in a given text may convey a particular ideological meaning to audiences (O'Halloran, 2004; Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2008). In other words, there are taken-for-granted underlying meanings in any given text that are denaturalised through MCDA (Coskun, 2015). The single focus on language that characterises critical discourse analysis is thus counterbalanced by incorporating the visual semiotic choices in communicative texts.

The toolkit by Machin and Mayir (2012) that the study adopted consists of focusing on the visual choices in the placing of objects and depiction of settings as well as how participants are represented both visually and linguistically. This left three elements to focus on in the analysis of a text: objects, settings and participants. The study then distilled the elements into fine-grained characteristics to create a coding scheme for the data. Objects and settings were grouped into seven visual choices and the representations of participants into 10 linguistic choices as well as seven visual choices.

The study sampled one typical episode from each of the recent seasons of OPW South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria as this has been shown to be a good approach for making qualitative sense out of a large set of reality television data (Smit & Monson, 2016). South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria form the sampled countries as this gives us a spread of the African continent geographically, allowing for a glimpse at the multifaceted approach to weddings across the African continent. Therefore, the countries possibly give us a spread of west, east and southern African cultural permutations of the symbolic manifestations of weddings. Episode one from Season 14 of OPW South Africa, episode one from Season 16 of OPW Kenya and episode four of Season 2 of OPW Nigeria were purposively sampled. These three episodes featured participants who were characteristically chosen for many of the OPW episodes: middle-class heterosexual couples. This choice was made in order to give a thick descriptive account within this context. The show does, however, feature participants that are both interracial and self-identifying with the LGBTQI+ community. These nuances deserve specific attention in which to explore the discourses around intersectionality that are beyond the scope of this article. These were also the most recent, publicly available seasons and episodes from the three countries chosen.

The three different episodes were watched several times while making descriptive notes through the toolkit above. This was done within the context of having a sense of the seasons of OPW thus far. The show, like many other reality shows, is very formulaic, consisting of introducing the couple, following them while they prepare for their wedding and finally culminating in the wedding day. Therefore, the episodes were separated into three broad sequences for the purposes of analysis.

The first scene opens with the host of the show in a medium shot (except OPW Nigeria, where it is just narration and no host is shown), greeting the viewers and giving them an idea of who the couple is for the episode they are about see. Scene two opens with the host inviting the viewers to come along as she follows the couple for the day as they secure the items on their wish list. The viewer, by implication, gets to join in this behind-the-scenes moment of the wedding as the couple finalises their preparations for the "big day". The third and final act is the day of the wedding itself. Typically, on OPW, this would consist of two ceremonies: the white wedding followed by a traditional African wedding ceremony depending on the country franchise. The couple would change from Western attire to their chosen traditional garb based on their chosen ethnic identification. Finally, the camera shows very brief snippets of the traditional wedding before the couple stands in front of the host to declare "Yes this was our perfect wedding".

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the selected OPW episodes from South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria reveals that the show operates as a spectacle of commodified romantic utopia. Across the three country editions, the representation of weddings consistently reinforces the values of conspicuous consumption, capitalist ideology and middle-class aspiration. Drawing from Veblen's (1899) concept of conspicuous consumption and Marxist critiques of commodification, we argue that love is not only performed but also purchased, displayed and consumed within the show. In this context, romantic love is presented not as an emotional or spiritual bond but as a consumable ideal, realised through opulence and material display.

Veblen's theory of the leisure class helps explain how wedding ceremonies become stages for social distinction. The symbolic use of luxury goods, such as designer dresses, elaborate cakes, high-end décor and upscale venues, serves to signal the social status of the couples, aligning their identity with the aspirations of the middle class. As Veblen (1899) notes, the acquisition and public display of non-essential goods is central to achieving honour and prestige. In OPW, the public spectacle of the wedding functions similarly: the more luxurious the celebration, the more successfully love is validated and social standing affirmed. The repeated framing of weddings through close-ups of commodities and through celebrity hosts further accentuates the commodification of the scene.

From a Marxist perspective, the show contributes to the reification of social relationships through commodity fetishism. Love becomes abstracted from the people involved and instead becomes synonymous with objects (Illouz, 1997). The wedding becomes a site for labour and production of fantasy, where the couple, vendors, producers and audiences are all engaged in producing and consuming

the spectacle of love. This aligns with Marx's assertion that in capitalist societies, social relationships between people assume the form of relations between things (Marx, 1867). As such, love is less about the interpersonal journey between the couple and more about the acquisition of the visual and material symbols of a "perfect" wedding. We discuss this position by segmenting the findings into three acts of the show: Act One; Act Two; and Act Three.

ACT ONE: INTRODUCTION OF THE COUPLE AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF ROMANCE

The scene opens with the host, Khaya Dladla, for OPW South Africa and Angi Mlay in OPW Kenya introducing themselves to the viewers. As they do so, the camera moves from a medium to a close shot of the host. In OPW Nigeria, there is only a voice over of the host but no visuals. This style between close and medium shots is maintained, while the host presents an open posture, looking directly into the camera. The setting is outside, while the host describes the city they are in to meet the participants for the episode. There is subtle lively music as they explain how the couple, Sibongile, the bride, and Raymond, the groom in OPW South Africa, have overcome great obstacles through love that will culminate in the wedding the viewers are about to witness. This opening is similar for Steve and Zeeh in OPW Kenya, as well as for Collins and Tracy in OPW Nigeria. From the onset, the presentation of the setting and the participants suggests a relaxed, personal and inviting atmosphere for the viewer. The audience is invited to enter into a close, albeit transient, relationship with the participants they are about to meet.

Before the couples appear on screen for the first time, the audience has a brief montage of what is about to come in the episode from key moments in each scene. The audience is then introduced to the couples, who are interviewed separately in different indoor locations in OPW Kenya. The setting is thus uncluttered as the focus is now on the couple and the intimate information that they are about to provide to the viewers about their love story. Tracy sums up her love story with Collins in the following manner on OPW Nigeria: "The journey has been smooth, crazy, good and enjoyable". The slight side angle of the camera as it moves between medium and close shots suggests a sense that the audience is equal with the couple and should assume oneness with them.

The audience is also provided with cutaways to the friends of the couple who confirm different parts of the couple's story and give their impressions about the couple through talking heads. This serves both a function of specification and personalisation of the couple's story by choosing to provide these testimonials from the couples' mutual friends. The audience is invited to consume the romantic recollections of all the couples' love experiences that are about to be celebrated through the wedding. Here, the show also links the couples' love stories with the preparations for the wedding (Ingraham, 2008). However, the couple provides the audience with a retrospective account of the love journey without the producers asking them about what they expect of future married life. By separating the wedding from marriage, the show is able to allow the audience to fully immerse themselves in the consumption of romance (Boden, 2003), without entering in the specific risks and difficulties associated with married life. In this manner, wedding industries, such as reality dating media, play into the narrative that marriage life is divorced from the wedding itself (Illouz, 1997).

The introductory act closes with the couples announcing that their wish list consists of décor, the cake and wedding attire, thus setting the viewer up in anticipation for scene two where the camera follows the couple as they "acquire" these three items. This marks a break in the consumption of romantic emotion, shifting focus to the commodities and consumption habits of the couple that the audience is about to consume. The show clearly focuses on the symbols that make up white modern weddings (Boden, 2024) to punctuate its selling point.

The use of personalisation in Act One also points to both the shared middle-class identity of the couples with the audience as well as their simultaneous uniqueness through the choice of how their narrative is presented (Engstrom & Baldrige, 2006). The middle-class identity of the couple provides them access to the affordances of the opulent white wedding that follows in the show, while their narrated love story presumably humanises them so that they are relatable to the audience. Ultimately, as the stars of the show, their stardom finds culmination in their performance of middle-class identity through the editing choices in the show (Deery, 2015).

ACT TWO: THE CONSTRUCTION OF UTOPIA THROUGH CONSUMPTION

From here on, the camera shows the couple engaged in action as they attempt to pull off the perfect wedding. The act opens with the host giving viewers an introduction of what is about to happen and that this is the day before the wedding. This is also emphasised with iconography (Illouz, 1997) on the bottom of the screen "one day before the wedding" or "two days to go" in the case of OPW Kenya. The host enters the room where the first item on the couples' wish list is about to be discussed with the expert. This is the cake tasting for OPW SA and deciding on décor in OPW Kenya. After pleasantries are exchanged, the host asks about the choice and thinking behind the design. This all helps to create a particular ambience as the moment is enjoyed by both viewers and participants alike. The camera gives us close-ups during these moments while upbeat music is playing softly in the background. Individualisation is emphasised throughout this process and the costs to achieve this beauty are not mentioned (Machin & Mayir, 2012). Again, a slight side angle is used when the camera shows the couple, except where close shots are used. The moment closes off with the host complimenting the expert on having accomplished "wonderful work". The act closes with the host inviting the viewers to come along to the next destination on the wish list with an exuberant "let's go". As they walk out, a checklist is shown on the side of the screen and the item the couple has just completed is ticked off. This primes the audience and helps them to remember that there are more items on the wish list that have yet to be completed, creating anticipation (Deery, 2015). The camera cuts away to the next part of the item on the wish list that the couple needs to check off.

Next, the camera focuses the couple and the host walking into the final location to meet the expert who will be helping them. The host asks the expert what brief was given to her by the couple, followed by an explanation of the decoration theme. In OPW Nigeria, we are told the names of the events planner, cake designer and the decorator. The audience thus gets to hear from them through interviews about their thought processes for the event. The cake designer even comments "I had sleepless nights" about preparing the cake. The camera provides the audience with close-up shots as the explanation by the expert is given. Lastly, the host asks if the couple is happy. Once more, the costs are suppressed in this segment of the scene. The host closes the moment off by assuring the viewers that all items in the wish list are complete and all is ready for the wedding. Thus, throughout the entire Act Two, the couple is depicted as agentic actors (Machin & Mayir, 2012) who are engaged in the process of working to create their own perfection through procuring the items they set out to secure for the wedding. In other words, the act of consumption is directly linked to the couple working to create their own beautiful celebration of love through acts of commodification (Boden, 2024).

The use of visual settings and object choices in the show are ideologically loaded (Machin & Mayir, 2012). The repeated emphasis on aesthetic value and emotional gratification, without any mention of cost, reflects a disarticulation of economic reality from consumption. This aesthetic abstraction is a form of what Marx called commodity fetishism: the elevation of goods to sacred status, divorced from the labour and value systems that produce them (Kopytoff, 1986).

Illouz's (1997) concept of romantic utopia is pertinent here. The material objects (cake, attire, décor) are not merely practical requirements; they are imbued with emotional meaning and symbolic power through performance of ritualised dialogues (Ingraham, 2008). These are what Illouz (1997) terms "emotional commodities" that are objects that have value not in their utility, but in their capacity to signify and evoke sentiments of romance. This is purely because there is a subtle assumption that the wedding ceremony cannot be complete without these icons, which serve the role of utopia. According to Illouz (1997:48):

> Utopia uses powerful emotional symbols, metaphors, and stories that infuse both the group and the individual imagination; it has binding power in that it orients individual and collective action. But for utopian symbols to have binding power, they must rest on a configuration of social relations that makes them relevant to the social order.

Veblen's theory (1899) also offers a useful lens. The procurement of lavish wedding items demonstrates the performative nature of class. The couple, as members of the black middle class, engages in what

Veblen termed "pecuniary emulation", adopting the consumption patterns of the leisure class to signal their social standing. In doing so, they conform to the aspirational ideals of a post-apartheid society that links freedom with economic participation and consumption (Smit, 2016).

ACT THREE: THE WEDDING DAY AND THE FINAL PERFORMANCE OF ROMANTIC UTOPIA

The third act opens with lively music and the establishing shots of the exterior of the wedding venue and a reminder on the left of the screen that this is the wedding day. The host greets the viewers and confirms that they are indeed at the wedding venue. This is overlaid with long frames of the wedding venue entrance clearly visible. The host first visits the bride-to-be. The bride is alone with the stylist, and explains the inspiration behind the wedding dress she chose. This is overlaid with close-up shots of the dress and shoes that are hung ceremoniously next to the bride-to-be. These visuals play a crucial role in producing what Deery (2015) calls "consumption spectacle".

In contrast, the host then visits the groom and his groomsmen who are already dressed and ready for the ceremony. Here, the groomsmen and the groom are presented as a group and not individualised because their function is currently to show us the attire as it relates to the importance of the day itself. Both close and medium angles are used with a slight side angle to create closeness and intimacy with the viewer while foregrounding the attire itself.

The audience is then shown the bridal party entering the venue for the matrimonial ceremony, shot using bright lighting, an emphasis on the setting through medium shots and cutaways as well as the creation of closeness with the use of close shots. The audience is given a snapshot of the ceremony but from an intimate vantage point. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the camera cuts to the host facing the audience and declaring that the couple is now officially married. The viewers then experience the transition to the reception hall with its décor. Since the audience has been primed with a bit of the décor during Act Two, this is an opportunity for the audience to see it first and to evaluate its standards of perfection. The décor, mainly the table settings and the draping, in all the episodes gives a sense of glamour and splendour.

In the third and final scene of the episodes, the emphasis on objects and settings that are related to the wedding become more pronounced (Machin & Mayir, 2012). Conspicuous consumption here is undoubtedly evident (Veblen, 1899). The conspicuous display of extravagance amid the expression of love suggests the "marketising" of romantic love (Ingraham, 2008). This marketisation links to the idea of capitalism that presents a romantic utopia that is associated with consumption (Illouz, 1997). The emphasis on consumption and, by extension, opulence is made possible through the settings within the wedding venue as well as the chosen camera angles. The emphasis on close-ups creates a sense of closeness and familiarity for the audience. This is important for encouraging the audience to both consume the content and aspire to realise in their own lives the consumption spectacle of the romantic utopia that the couple is enacting (Dunak, 2013).

Consequently, another aspect of conspicuous consumption that is evident in the episodes is leisure activity (Veblen, 1899) itself. This is what is known as oblique consumption, which involves the couple engaging in the consumption of leisure (Illouz, 1997). The ability to waste time, not necessarily habitual idleness, but to engage in conspicuous leisure through a wedding banquet with guests is synonymous with the idea of leisure. While such matrimonial gatherings seek to celebrate love, "big fat weddings" also do the work of performing the expression of social status, in this case, the black middle class (Mupotsa, 2014). As Smit (2016) argues, the wedding ceremony in its opulence also provides the couple with the opportunity to enact their sense of freedom in post-apartheid South Africa. The audience is then shown the wedding party entering the reception hall with song and dance. This gives a sense of movement and being engaged in activity. The ability to change attire for the sake of changing is not missed on the audience; as the host never questions this, it is assumed to be a normal part of the process. The focus on the wedding seems to be more on the Western wedding than on the traditional wedding. This is evident in the fact that the couple chose to wear their traditional attire and danced back into the hall, a scene that was briefly featured in the OPW South Africa episode. It must be clarified that the change

from Western attire to traditional clothes is indeed not a traditional wedding in the true sense, but just a change of clothes to go back into the white wedding reception with different attire. This means that there is a deliberate choice to favour the depiction of white weddings rather than traditional weddings. White weddings typically have more consumerist iconography (Illouz, 1997), and this choice makes more sense from a particularisation point. For instance, the Nguni traditional wedding (called Umembeso) is very simple in that blankets and small gifts are exchanged by the two families in the yard, while accompanied by singing and traditional dance (Mupotsa, 2014). There is therefore no decoration, lavish venue and costly attire that are typical in a white wedding.

Episode four in Season 2 of OPW Nigeria also features a traditional wedding between Collins and Tracy. This comes before the white wedding and is only given four minutes of screen time, including the bride's preparation. The ceremony happens at Collins' house with his family welcoming Tracy. There is no wish list on details about the choice of attire provided in this short segment. In this way, the traditional wedding is made less prominent to the audience. Mbunyuza-Memani (2018:26) argues that this "displaces cultural diversity and stays within the strategy of reproducing sameness by dominantly focusing on white weddings". This article, therefore, extends this argument by proposing that this may reproduce homogeneity in the perception of Western romantic love by associating it with consumption-laden Western ideals of capitalism. As such, OPW demonstrates the notion of the romantic utopia in which love is co-opted by capitalism (Ingraham, 2008).

The last moments of the white wedding reception in the reception hall shows everyone dancing while there is music in the background. The communal nature of these activities is emphasised, while the angles used do not give the audience an intimate sense of the action but an impersonal and necessary part of enjoying perfection in a grand finale section. The scene closes off with the newlyweds standing, or sitting in the case of OPW Nigeria, facing the host as she asks how they evaluate the entire experience. The couples then face the camera for the first time to address the viewers and confirm that this "was our perfect wedding".

This article argues that OPW franchises in Africa have become part of the wedding industry that makes money from promoting consumerist ideals of weddings depicting the rising middle class (Smit, 2016). The entertainment element that is attached to WRTV viewership conjures up emotions of "enrapturement" by portraying a fairy tale with a perfect ending (Giorgio in Hefner, 2015). The idea of a fairy tale is also captured by other scholars who present the wedding ceremony as a site of perfection and celebration (Mupotsa, 2014; Sgroi, 2006). The show makes financial gain from a larger viewership through advertising revenue, while promoting utopian ideals of weddings and focusing deliberately on its consumption choices of the couples on the show (Illouz, 1997).

CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISONS AND BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Although the OPW format of the three sampled episodes is consistent across three countries, the representation of weddings varies slightly. In South Africa, the wedding is positioned against a backdrop of socio-economic inequality, with extravagance used as a tool for asserting upward mobility. In Kenya, the wedding incorporates both modern and traditional elements but still conforms to Western aesthetic norms. The Nigerian episodes are the most flamboyant, emphasising spectacle and scale in ways that accentuate wealth.

What binds all three franchises is a deep-seated alignment with capitalist ideals. The cultural specificity of African weddings is underplayed in favour of a homogenised, consumption-driven narrative. This reveals the transnational nature of romantic capitalism, where wedding ceremonies become global commodities, mediated through television and anchored in visual spectacle.

Ultimately, the sampled episodes of OPW serve as a microcosm of capitalist ideology in African settings that does not merely reflect wedding culture, but shapes and produces it for the audience. Through the lens of MCDA, and drawing on Veblen and Marx, the article argues that the show enacts a discursive regime in which love is equated with consumption, emotion is commodified and cultural specificity is subordinated to capitalist homogeneity. It is in this entanglement of love and capital that the romantic utopia of OPW finds its most enduring and problematic expression.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we set out to discuss the depiction of love in wedding celebrations and its subsequent co-option by capitalism in the reality wedding shows OPW South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria. To this end, the article utilised MCDA to dissect a typical episode from each show's current season. The analysis revealed three distinct scenes that the producers chose to show the audiences. The first is the attempt to cause the audiences to identify with the couple through personalisation. The second theme is an emphasis on the symbols of utopia around which romance and marketisation meet. The final theme is an emphasis on leisure through the enjoyment of the symbols highlighted in the second theme. Therefore, the article argues that the show's production decisions and logic co-opt the themes of love to promot e consumption and to display the consumption of symbols of Western utopia. The perpetual insistence on love being displayed through the buying and selling of goods ultimately serves to unwittingly limit access to love to those who cannot summit the financial barriers to its entry. Bringing this point to light may help to highlight a much-needed debate about how media may reify social exclusion in the context of romance and help to entrench love as an exclusive privilege of the affluent few.

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