

UNIVERSITY OF MEDIA, ARTS AND COMMUNICATION (UniMAC)
INSTITUTE OF JOURNALISM

IMPACT OF AUDIENCE PERCEPTION ON NEWS CONSUMPTION HABITS
IN GHANA: A STUDY OF SOME AUDIENCES IN ACCRA, KUMASI,
TAKORADI AND TAMALE.

LORRETTA ACHEAMPONGMAA DUODU

DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA STUDIES

SEPTEMBER 2025

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BY

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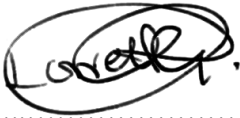
DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA STUDIES

SEPTEMBER 2025

DECLARATION

STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, Lorretta Acheampongmaa Duodu, declare that this dissertation, except quotations and references contained in published works, which have all been identified and duly acknowledged, is entirely my original work, and it has not been submitted, either in part or whole, for another degree elsewhere. Therefore, I bear the responsibility for any shortcomings.



DATE: 9 / 1 2 / 2 0 2 5

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SUPERVISORS' DECLARATION

We, the undersigned supervisors, declare that we supervised the preparation and presentation of this work in accordance with the guidelines for the supervision of PhD theses as laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication (UniMAC).

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(Supervisor)

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between audience perception of news credibility, exposure to misinformation, and news consumption habits within Ghana's evolving media environment. Guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, Media Dependency Theory, and the Spiral of Silence Theory, the research explored how demographic factors moderate and how misinformation exposure mediates the link between perceived credibility and media use. A quantitative research design was employed, using structured questionnaires to collect data from a cross-section of respondents across major regions in Ghana. Data was analyzed using Smart PLS for Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The results showed that audience perception of news credibility significantly predicts news consumption habits across traditional and digital platforms. Demographic factors such as age, education, and location significantly influenced how audiences perceive news credibility and moderated the strength of perception-consumption relationships. Furthermore, misinformation exposure was found to mediate the relationship between perception and consumption, with high exposure levels reducing trust across media types. The findings highlight that media credibility is a key driver of sustained audience engagement, while misinformation poses a serious threat to both traditional and digital news platforms. The study recommends strengthening media literacy initiatives, enhancing journalistic transparency, and promoting cross-platform verification behaviors to build public trust and ensure the long-term sustainability of Ghana's news media ecosystem.

Keywords: Audience Perception, Credibility, Misinformation, Trust, News Consumption, Ghana

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

News consumption is widely recognized as a cornerstone of civic engagement and democratic participation. An informed citizenry is essential for the functioning of representative government, as access to timely and accurate information enables people to make reasoned political choices, evaluate the performance of public officials, and hold leaders accountable through electoral and other participatory mechanisms (Curran, 2011; Strömbäck, 2005). Beyond politics, regular exposure to news contributes to social cohesion by sustaining a shared understanding of public affairs and by fostering deliberation on issues of collective importance. Scholars have long argued that societies with diverse and independent news media cultivate higher levels of political knowledge and more active participation in civic life (Norris, 2000; Strömbäck & Kaid, 2014). In this sense, news functions not merely as a conduit of facts but as an institution that helps shape the norms, expectations, and discourses that underpin democratic culture.

For much of the twentieth century, the mass media, principally newspapers, radio, and television—occupied a dominant position in this process. These legacy outlets exercised near-exclusive control over the collection, verification, and dissemination of news, operating within professional norms of objectivity and public service (McQuail, 2010). Their gatekeeping role ensured that most citizens encountered a relatively uniform set of stories and perspectives, which, while not free from bias, offered a broadly shared informational base for public debate (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The

rhythms of daily newspapers, scheduled radio bulletins, and evening television broadcasts created a common temporal structure for news consumption that reinforced collective attention to major events.

During the past two decades, however, the global information landscape has been reshaped by rapid technological change and the growth of networked digital communication. Traditional mass media now coexist with a wide array of digital platforms, including dedicated online news portals, social networking services such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), video-sharing sites, podcasts, and instant-messaging applications (Newman et al., 2023). These platforms have dramatically expanded the volume, speed, and reach of information flows. They allow audiences to access news at any time and from virtually any location, dissolving the temporal and geographic constraints that once defined news cycles (Chadwick, 2017). The result is a media environment in which individuals can personalize their news diet, moving fluidly between professional journalism, citizen reporting, and algorithmically curated feeds.

While this expansion of channels has increased audience choice and facilitated new forms of participation, it has also generated significant concerns. The sheer abundance of information complicates the task of assessing accuracy and reliability, while the rise of non-professional content creators introduces competing standards of evidence and accountability (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). Social media algorithms that prioritize engagement can amplify sensational or polarizing material, fostering echo chambers and selective exposure (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). Scholars warn that these dynamics risk eroding trust in established news institutions and undermining the deliberative functions that journalism has traditionally provided (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). Consequently, the contemporary audience faces not only an unprecedented variety

of news sources but also the challenge of navigating questions of credibility, bias, and relevance in a rapidly shifting digital ecosystem.

Audience perception, defined as the set of judgments and attitudes that individuals form toward media institutions and their content, plays a decisive role in shaping news consumption habits (McQuail, 2010). Perceptions of credibility, bias, professionalism, and relevance influence where, how, and when audiences access news (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). These perceptions are not static. They evolve in response to technological innovations, social experiences, and political contexts, and they often determine the intensity of attention that audiences devote to specific media sources (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014).

Global research shows that media audiences are increasingly fragmented as digital technologies redefine both the production and consumption of information (Napoli, 2011). While traditional outlets continue to provide important agenda-setting and public-service functions, their authority is contested by user-generated content and algorithmically curated feeds (Thorson & Wells, 2016). In Africa this fragmentation is particularly visible. Rapid mobile-phone penetration and relatively affordable data packages have enabled large segments of the population to rely on social media for real-time updates, even as concerns about misinformation and declining trust in professional journalism have intensified (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019; Mare, 2020).

Ghana provides a significant context for studying these developments. The country maintains a vibrant and liberalized media environment supported by constitutional guarantees of press freedom (Gadzekpo, 2017). Radio remains the most accessible source of information nationwide, and television continues to attract broad audiences (National Communications Authority, 2022). Yet recent surveys show a steady rise in the use of digital platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly

Twitter), WhatsApp, and online news portals, especially among younger demographics and urban residents (Pew Research Center, 2022; Ghana Statistical Service, 2023). This coexistence of legacy and digital media suggests that audience perception is not a passive response to supply. Rather, it reflects active, context-specific processes shaped by cultural norms, technological affordances, and individual motivations (Livingstone, 2004).

Two theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for examining these dynamics. The Uses and Gratifications Theory conceptualizes audiences as active participants who select media to satisfy cognitive, affective, personal, and social needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Ruggiero, 2000). From this perspective, perceptions of credibility and relevance directly influence the gratifications sought and the choice of news sources. Complementing this view, the Agenda-Setting Theory posits that while the media may not dictate what people think, it significantly influences what they think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004). Audience perception operates as a mediating mechanism between agenda setting and individual consumption habits, shaping how salient issues are received and acted upon.

The interaction of these theoretical approaches underscores the central research problem of this study: how perceptions of credibility, bias, and trust determine the pathways of news consumption in a rapidly digitizing media environment. Examining these relationships within Ghana fills a regional gap in the literature and contributes to broader debates on democratic participation, information integrity, and the future of journalism (Waisbord, 2018; Nielsen & Fletcher, 2020). By investigating the impact of audience perception on news consumption habits, the study aims to generate empirical evidence that can inform media policy, guide newsroom strategies, and strengthen theoretical understanding of contemporary audience behavior.

1.2 Problem Statement

Ghana's media landscape has undergone a far-reaching transformation over the past two decades, reshaping how citizens encounter, interpret and respond to news. The liberalization of broadcasting in the 1990s opened the door to a proliferation of private radio and television stations, while subsequent reforms encouraged the growth of independent newspapers and online news outlets (Gadzekpo, 2017; National Communications Authority [NCA], 2022). This expansion coincided with rapid urbanization, rising literacy rates and increasing political pluralism, creating a dynamic and highly competitive media environment that differs markedly from the tightly regulated systems of earlier decades. Today, Ghanaians can draw information from newspapers, terrestrial radio and television, dedicated online portals and an ever-widening range of social media platforms including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok (Pew Research Center, 2022; Ghana Statistical Service, 2023). The sheer variety of channels offers audiences unprecedented opportunities to follow current affairs and to participate in public debate.

While this abundance of sources has undoubtedly improved access to information, it has also introduced a new set of challenges that touch the very heart of democratic communication. Researchers and practitioners alike point to a gradual erosion of public trust in mainstream journalism, a phenomenon mirrored in many parts of the world (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Newman et al., 2023). In Ghana, accusations of sensationalism, political partisanship and commercial influence have raised doubts about the independence and reliability of legacy media. Newsrooms face pressure to break stories quickly, sometimes at the expense of careful verification, while commercial imperatives encourage attention-grabbing headlines that may blur the line between fact and opinion. These tendencies, though not unique to Ghana, have contributed to a

more skeptical public and a growing perception that established outlets do not always serve the public interest.

At the same time, the widespread diffusion of affordable mobile internet has altered how people discover and share news, especially among younger generations who have grown up with smartphones as their primary gateway to information. Social networking sites and instant-messaging applications now function not only as conduits for professional journalism but also as arenas where rumors, partisan narratives and fabricated stories circulate with ease (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). During national elections, public-health crises and moments of political tension, misleading or deliberately false content can spread quickly across WhatsApp groups and other peer-to-peer networks, sometimes outpacing efforts by journalists and fact-checkers to correct the record. The participatory nature of these platforms, while empowering, makes it difficult for audiences to distinguish verified information from speculation or propaganda.

These developments illustrate a complex dilemma. On one hand, the digital turn has democratized the flow of information and enabled citizens to voice their opinions in ways unimaginable a generation ago. On the other, it has fragmented audiences, weakened traditional gatekeeping functions and heightened the risk of misinformation. For Ghana, a country with a vibrant but often polarised political culture, the implications are profound. Understanding how citizens assess the credibility, bias and relevance of different news sources is therefore not merely an academic exercise. It is central to sustaining public trust, supporting responsible journalism and ensuring that democratic deliberation rests on a foundation of accurate and widely accepted information.

Findings from comparative studies highlight a worldwide decline in confidence in traditional news institutions, a pattern that has been documented across both mature and emerging democracies (Newman et al., 2023). Ghana reflects this global trend in striking ways. Surveys conducted by the Media Foundation for West Africa and Afrobarometer consistently show that while radio and television remain the most frequently used sources of news, public confidence in these outlets has weakened over time (Gyimah-Boadi et al., 2021; Media Foundation for West Africa [MFWA], 2022). Many citizens view mainstream broadcasters and newspapers as susceptible to political influence, commercial pressure or sensational reporting, and these perceptions have fueled a gradual but noticeable skepticism regarding the credibility of established media institutions. Allegations of partisan framing, selective reporting and the prioritization of entertainment over rigorous journalism have become familiar points of criticism in public discourse, further eroding the long-standing trust once enjoyed by national radio and television networks.

The erosion of confidence in legacy media has coincided with a dramatic shift in the technological and economic conditions of news production and distribution. The rapid expansion of affordable mobile internet, combined with high rates of smartphone adoption, has encouraged audiences—particularly younger and urban populations—to rely heavily on social media as their primary gateway to breaking news and political updates (Boateng & Amankwah, 2020). For many Ghanaians, especially students and early-career professionals, platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) now serve as personalized news dashboards, delivering a continuous stream of headlines, commentary and live video. These networks enable users not only to receive information quickly but also to remix, comment on and redistribute it within their own communities, creating a participatory media culture that differs fundamentally from the one-way communication model of traditional broadcasting.

While these digital platforms broaden opportunities for civic engagement and allow users to share information almost instantaneously, they also create fertile ground for the circulation of unverified or deliberately false content. Scholars and practitioners have documented how misinformation and disinformation flourish in these online spaces, particularly during election periods and public health emergencies when the appetite for timely updates is high and the verification of sources is often neglected (Ahiabenu, Ofosu-Peko, & Sam, 2018; Sarpong & Teye, 2021). The combination of algorithm-driven feeds, peer-to-peer messaging and the speed of viral dissemination makes it easy for rumors, doctored images and fabricated stories to reach wide audiences before corrective information can be issued. Fact-checking organizations and professional journalists work to counter these narratives, but the sheer volume and velocity of digital content often outpace their efforts.

Together, these developments present a complex challenge for Ghana's democratic communication environment. On one hand, the growth of digital platforms has opened spaces for marginalized voices and enhanced the immediacy of public debate. On the other, it has undermined the traditional markers of journalistic credibility and blurred the boundary between verified reporting and speculative commentary. Understanding how Ghanaian audiences navigate this shifting information ecosystem, that is, how they judge credibility, identify bias and decide whom to trust has become essential for strengthening the role of journalism, protecting the integrity of public discourse and ensuring that citizens can make informed decisions in an era of rapid technological change.

Although a growing body of international scholarship explores how audience perceptions of credibility and bias influence news consumption patterns (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007; Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014), most of this work originates in North America, Europe, and

parts of Asia. These regions differ from Ghana in regulatory frameworks, literacy levels, and the interaction between oral and digital traditions. Ghanaian audiences frequently blend interpersonal communication that is often called “word-of-mouth journalism” with both legacy and online media. This practice shapes how information is received, interpreted, and trusted (Hasty, 2005; Gadzekpo, 2017). Theoretical assumptions and empirical findings derived from Western contexts therefore risk overlooking the cultural and social factors that guide credibility assessments and influence patterns of news use in Ghana and other West African societies.

The absence of context-specific evidence has important practical consequences. Without a detailed understanding of how Ghanaian audiences evaluate credibility, detect bias, and decide which sources to follow, policymakers and regulators struggle to design effective strategies that safeguard information integrity and sustain trust in journalism (Waisbord, 2018). Media literacy campaigns and initiatives to counter misinformation may also fail if they do not reflect the motivations, habits, and evaluative criteria of the local population. Furthermore, newsroom managers and editors need empirical insights into audience perceptions in order to maintain relevance and to reinforce professional standards in an environment where audiences can shift to alternative sources at any moment.

An in-depth investigation of the impact of audience perception on news consumption is therefore critical. Such a study will provide evidence to guide regulatory frameworks, inform newsroom practice, and support the democratic role of the press in a rapidly evolving Ghanaian media environment. By grounding analysis in the specific social and cultural realities of Ghana, this research will contribute to the wider literature on media trust and audience behavior while offering practical recommendations for sustaining credible journalism in an age of digital abundance.

1.3 Research Objectives

The study seeks to examine the impact of audience perception on news consumption habits.

Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. Investigate the factors that influence audience perceptions of news credibility in Ghana.
2. Examine the relationship between audience perception and preferred news platforms (television, radio, online, and social media).
3. Explore how demographic characteristics (age, education, occupation) shape perceptions and news consumption patterns.
4. Assess the implications of audience perceptions for the future of traditional and digital news platforms in Ghana.

1.4 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What factors influence audience perceptions of news credibility in Ghana?
2. How do perceptions of credibility, trust, and bias affect preferred news platforms?
3. How do demographic factors influence audience perceptions and consumption habits?
4. What are the implications of audience perception for the sustainability of traditional and digital news platforms?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The findings of this research will be valuable to a wide range of stakeholders who influence or depend on the flow of reliable information in Ghana. For media practitioners such as journalists, editors, producers and digital content managers, the study will offer a detailed understanding of how audiences judge credibility and decide which platforms to trust, providing evidence to guide newsroom policies on accuracy, transparency and engagement in an increasingly competitive environment. Policymakers and regulators, including the National Communications Authority and the Ministry of Information, can draw on the results to design effective media literacy campaigns, strengthen fact-checking initiatives and develop interventions that limit the spread of misinformation while promoting informed democratic participation. Scholars and researchers in communication, political science and African studies will benefit from the empirical insights generated in a context that has received comparatively little academic attention, thereby extending theoretical models of media trust and audience behavior to the sub-Saharan African setting. Civil society organizations and educators may also use the findings to design programs that cultivate critical thinking and responsible information sharing among citizens, particularly younger audiences who increasingly rely on digital platforms. In sum, this study provides practical guidance for those who produce news, those who regulate it, those who study it and the audiences who depend on it, offering an evidence-based understanding of how Ghanaians perceive and choose their news sources and thereby supporting efforts to strengthen democratic discourse and sustain a vibrant and trustworthy media ecosystem.

1.6 Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study focuses on news consumers in Ghana, with particular attention to urban centers such as Accra, Kumasi, Tamale and Takoradi where both traditional and digital platforms are widely used and where patterns of media convergence are most visible. The research will examine a cross-section of the population that includes young adults, middle-aged individuals and older citizens in order to capture generational differences in news habits and perceptions of credibility. It will investigate audience assessments of news trustworthiness, perceived bias and the relevance of content across three principal categories of platforms: terrestrial television, radio and online outlets, including social media networks and dedicated news websites. Entertainment content, lifestyle programming and other forms of non-news media fall outside the scope of the analysis, as the primary concern is the consumption of current-affairs information that influences civic participation and public discourse.

The study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, by concentrating on urban areas, it may not fully reflect the experiences of rural audiences who rely more heavily on community radio and interpersonal communication, and whose internet access remains limited. Second, the research focuses on perceptions and self-reported behaviors rather than direct observation of media use, which introduces the possibility of recall bias or socially desirable responses from participants. Third, the analysis is confined to Ghana and does not attempt cross-national comparisons, so the findings should be interpreted within the country's specific socio-cultural and regulatory environment. Finally, while the study explores relationships between audience perception and patterns of news consumption, it does not measure the long-term effects of these habits on political participation or democratic outcomes. These boundaries are necessary to maintain methodological clarity and feasibility, but they also highlight opportunities for future

research that might include longitudinal designs, rural populations or comparative studies across West Africa.

1.7 Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into six interconnected chapters, each designed to guide the reader logically from the broad context of the research to its final conclusions and recommendations. Chapter One provides the foundation by introducing the study, setting out the background and rationale, articulating the research problem, stating the objectives and research questions, and explaining the significance, scope, and limitations of the work. This opening chapter also outlines the theoretical and practical motivations that frame the inquiry.

Chapter Two offers a comprehensive review of related literature and theoretical perspectives. It examines key concepts of news credibility, audience perception, and media consumption, drawing on both global scholarship and studies specific to Africa and Ghana. Competing theories of media effects and audience behavior are critically analyzed to build a conceptual framework that informs the subsequent empirical investigation.

Chapter Three describes the research methodology in detail. It explains the research design, sampling strategy, data-collection instruments, and analytical procedures, providing justification for each methodological choice. Attention is given to issues of validity, reliability, and ethical considerations to ensure that the study meets accepted standards of academic rigor.

Chapter Four presents the empirical results. Quantitative and qualitative findings are reported systematically, using tables, charts, and narrative explanations to illustrate patterns in audience perceptions of credibility, bias, and relevance across different media platforms.

Finally, Chapter Five interprets and discusses these findings in relation to the theoretical framework and the body of literature reviewed earlier. It highlights points of convergence and divergence with previous studies and explores the implications of the results for media practice, public policy, and scholarly debates about news trust and consumption in Ghana and similar contexts.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the scholarship and theoretical foundations relevant to the study of audience perception and news consumption in Ghana's evolving media landscape. The literature review serves several key purposes: it situates the research within established academic debates, clarifies the conceptual lenses through which audience behavior is analysed, and identifies the knowledge gaps that this investigation seeks to address.

The discussion begins with an overview of major theoretical perspectives that explain how and why audiences choose particular media, how they evaluate credibility, and how these choices shape public discourse. Central among these are the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which examines the motivations behind media use; the Agenda-Setting Theory, which explores how media influence the salience of issues in public opinion; the Media Dependency Theory, which considers the extent to which individuals rely on media to understand and navigate their social environment; and the Spiral of Silence Theory, which investigates how perceptions of majority opinion can suppress the expression of minority views. Together, these frameworks provide a robust foundation for analyzing the interplay between audience needs, perceived credibility, and patterns of news consumption.

Following the theoretical discussion, the chapter surveys empirical studies from both global and Ghanaian contexts. It highlights research on media credibility, trust, and bias, paying particular attention to how these factors guide audience engagement with television, radio, online news

portals, and social media platforms. The review also examines how demographic characteristics including age, education, gender, and occupation influence media habits and shape perceptions of reliability and relevance. Insights from comparative and regional studies help to illustrate similarities and differences between Ghana and other societies where media ecosystems are undergoing rapid digital transformation.

The chapter concludes by identifying critical gaps in the existing literature. While a substantial body of work addresses audience perception and media trust in Europe, North America, and parts of Asia, relatively few studies have explored these dynamics within West African contexts, where oral traditions, mobile internet expansion, and political communication patterns present unique challenges and opportunities. By articulating these gaps, the review underscores the importance of a context-specific investigation into how Ghanaian audiences assess news credibility and how these assessments influence their consumption choices.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Understanding how audience perception influences news consumption requires a conceptual foundation that explains not only why people choose particular media but also how those choices are shaped by credibility judgments, social context, and the dynamics of information flow. This study draws on four complementary theories which are Uses and Gratifications, Agenda-Setting, Media Dependency, and Spiral of Silence to capture the multidimensional character of media-audience relationships. Together these frameworks help to explain the motives behind media selection, the influence of editorial priorities, the conditions that heighten reliance on specific platforms, and the social pressures that govern public expression.

2.2.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) remains one of the most enduring frameworks for understanding why people actively engage with specific media channels. Originating in the early 1970s, the theory shifted scholarly attention from the effects of media on passive audiences to the purposeful choices made by media users themselves. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) argued that individuals are goal-oriented actors who deliberately select media to satisfy a variety of cognitive, affective, personal, and social needs. Early elaborations of the theory identified key gratifications such as surveillance (seeking timely and accurate information about the world), diversion and entertainment (relaxation or escape), personal identity reinforcement (strengthening values and self-concept), and social integration (connecting with family, friends, or broader communities) (Rubin, 1983; Palmgreen, 1984; Ruggiero, 2000).

Contemporary scholarship has expanded these categories to reflect the interactive and participatory nature of the digital era. Sundar and Limperos (2013) emphasize new gratifications linked to technological affordances such as modality (multimedia formats), agency (user control), interactivity, and navigability. These dimensions are particularly relevant to news consumption in environments where audiences can customize their feeds, comment on stories, and share content across networks. Modern researchers further argue that news audiences evaluate platforms according to credibility, immediacy, transparency, and relevance to everyday life (Lee, 2013; Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010). Such evaluative processes underline the agency that UGT describes: individuals do not simply absorb information but weigh the perceived trustworthiness and personal utility of each outlet.

Generational differences illustrate these dynamics vividly. Younger cohorts consistently demonstrate a preference for digital platforms that offer speed, interactivity, and diverse perspectives, aligning with their desire for on-demand information and participatory engagement (Westlund & Färdigh, 2015; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2015). Social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram provide the immediacy and peer validation that many young users value (Hermida et al., 2012; Tandoc & Johnson, 2016). Conversely, older audiences often maintain habitual relationships with legacy outlets such as television, radio, and print newspapers, valuing their established reputation, editorial oversight, and perceived authority (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2013; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017).

Evidence from Africa reinforces these global patterns. In Ghana, Tettey (2017) observes that young adults turn to social media for political updates and real-time dialogue, while middle-aged and older citizens continue to rely heavily on radio and print for public affairs. Similar findings are reported in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa, where researchers note that although mobile internet has expanded access, trust in community radio and national broadcasters remains strong among older demographics and rural populations (Wasserman & Garman, 2014; Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019). These studies highlight how UGT can explain both convergence and divergence in news habits across age groups, socio-economic strata, and technological contexts.

Moreover, UGT has been adapted to examine how users negotiate credibility in an era of misinformation. Research by Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) shows that many social media users engage in “selective verification,” cross-checking stories across multiple outlets to satisfy their need for accuracy, a behavior consistent with UGT’s emphasis on active audience agency. In Ghana, Nyarko (2021) reports that urban youth frequently verify breaking news through trusted

radio stations or established online portals before sharing, demonstrating how gratifications of surveillance and social responsibility intersect in digital environments.

Taken together, these studies affirm the continuing relevance of UGT for analyzing contemporary news consumption. The theory captures not only the psychological motivations behind media choice but also the evaluative judgments which are credibility, relevance and immediacy that shape those choices. By recognizing audiences as discerning and self-directed, UGT provides a robust conceptual lens for this dissertation's examination of how Ghanaian news consumers navigate a crowded media environment and how their perceptions of trustworthiness influence platform selection and patterns of engagement.

2.2.2 Agenda-Setting Theory

The Agenda-Setting Theory, first articulated by McCombs and Shaw (1972), remains one of the most widely cited explanations of how news media shape public priorities. The central proposition is that the media may not tell people what to think, but they are remarkably effective in telling people what to think about. Over time, the theory has evolved to incorporate two distinct but related dimensions. First-level agenda setting refers to the ability of news outlets to influence the perceived importance of issues through the frequency and prominence of coverage. Second-level agenda setting, often discussed as attribute agenda setting or framing, concerns the media's power to highlight specific aspects or characteristics of an issue, thereby shaping how it is understood (McCombs, 2004; Sheafer & Weimann, 2005). Contemporary scholarship has further extended the model to include network agenda setting, which examines how media link issues together in complex associative networks that guide public interpretation (Guo & McCombs, 2011; Vargo et al., 2014).

A key assumption of agenda setting is that its influence depends heavily on audience trust and the perceived credibility of the source. When audiences consider a news organization accurate, balanced, and independent, they are more likely to treat the issues emphasized in its reporting as socially significant (Wanta & Hu, 1994; Lee, 2010). Conversely, when they perceive bias, sensationalism, or political interference, they may resist or even counter the suggested agenda by seeking alternative perspectives (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Craft, Vos, & Wolfgang, 2016). Recent studies underscore that in a fragmented, digital information environment, credibility assessments act as a gate through which agenda-setting effects must pass (Meraz, 2011; Feezell, 2018). Social media and algorithmically curated feeds further complicate the process, as they allow individuals to customise exposure and amplify peer-to-peer influence, often reducing the traditional media's power to define a single public agenda (Weeks et al., 2017; Valenzuela et al., 2019).

Ghana's media landscape illustrates these dynamics in a particularly vivid way. Since the liberalisation of broadcasting in the 1990s, the country has developed a diverse and competitive press system marked by both vibrant watchdog journalism and persistent political parallelism (Gadzekpo, 2017; National Communications Authority [NCA], 2022). Research by the Media Foundation for West Africa (2022) shows that many citizens perceive certain outlets as aligned with partisan interests, especially during election cycles, which affects the weight they give to issues highlighted by those outlets. Studies of African media more broadly demonstrate similar patterns: when audiences suspect partisan framing, they often rely on interpersonal networks, community radio, or social platforms to set their own agendas (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019; Nyarko, 2021).

Moreover, the rise of digital and mobile communication has introduced a "hybrid" agenda-setting environment in Ghana, where traditional broadcasters, online news portals, and social media actors

simultaneously compete and collaborate to shape public discourse (Chadwick, 2017; Osei-Owusu, 2020). Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp enable citizens to circulate stories and commentary at high speed, sometimes elevating issues to national prominence before legacy media respond. During events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 general elections, social media conversations frequently set the initial agenda, which mainstream outlets then followed (Boateng & Amankwah, 2020; Sarpong & Teye, 2021). These developments illustrate what Vargo et al. (2014) describe as an “intermedia agenda-setting” process, where digital actors and traditional journalists influence each other in real time.

The agenda-setting process in Ghana cannot be understood simply as a top-down flow from established newsrooms to a passive audience. It is a negotiated and dynamic interaction in which perceptions of credibility, political independence, and professional standards determine whether audiences accept or reject the salience cues provided by the media. By situating Ghana within the broader literature on first-, second-, and network-level agenda setting, this study recognizes that the country’s citizens now participate actively in defining the public agenda, challenging the once-stable hierarchy of influence envisioned in the early formulations of the theory (McCombs, 2014; Feezell, 2018; Valenzuela et al., 2019).

2.2.3 Media Dependency Theory

The Media Dependency Theory, formulated by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), offers a valuable lens for understanding how and why audiences turn to particular news sources. The theory proposes that the influence of media on individuals and society increases in proportion to the degree to which people rely on those media to understand their environment, make decisions, and achieve everyday goals. In other words, the more individuals feel they need the information

provided by a medium, the greater the potential for that medium to shape their perceptions and behavior. Later scholars have refined the concept, noting that dependency is not static but varies across time and circumstance, intensifying during periods of rapid social change, political instability, or crisis when uncertainty is high and credible information becomes essential (Loges, 1994; Lowrey, 2004; Chung & Kim, 2016).

Central to this framework is the perception of credibility. Audiences rarely depend on a source they consider unreliable. Patwardhan and Yang (2003) emphasize that trustworthiness, accuracy, and relevance are key determinants of whether a medium becomes indispensable. Contemporary studies have reached similar conclusions, showing that in fragmented digital environments audiences engage in what Stroud (2017) calls “selective dependence,” whereby they diversify information sources but continue to privilege those perceived as authoritative (Tsfati & Cappella, 2020; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). The growth of fact-checking initiatives and real-time verification tools in newsrooms around the world can be interpreted as efforts to maintain this crucial credibility that sustains dependency (Graves & Anderson, 2020).

In the Ghanaian context, the dynamics described by Media Dependency Theory are clearly observable. Radio, because of its wide geographic reach, affordability, and use of multiple local languages, remains the single most relied-upon medium for news and civic information (Gadzekpo, 2017; Media Foundation for West Africa [MFWA], 2022). During national elections, citizens across rural and urban areas consistently turn to trusted radio stations and state broadcasters for live updates and analysis (Arthur & Yeboah, 2019). This pattern of reliance was especially pronounced during moments of national uncertainty such as the 2016 and 2020 elections, when the Electoral Commission’s official announcements were closely followed on radio and television before being shared across social media.

Periods of public health crisis further underscore these dynamics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ghanaians demonstrated heightened dependency on news outlets with reputations for accuracy and institutional legitimacy. Nyarko (2021) found that the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation and established private stations such as Joy FM became primary sources for daily updates, while Ministry of Health briefings disseminated through both traditional and digital platforms reinforced the credibility of these outlets. Similar patterns emerged during localized emergencies, including flooding in Accra and cholera outbreaks, when timely and reliable radio bulletins were critical for public safety (Boateng & Amankwah, 2020).

Digital media have complicated but not eliminated these dependencies. Mobile internet penetration and the popularity of platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp mean that many Ghanaians now supplement traditional sources with online news and peer-to-peer updates (Pew Research Center, 2022). Yet even in digital spaces, dependency is mediated by perceptions of trust. Recent work by Frempong and Anokwa (2022) highlights that users gravitate toward online portals affiliated with established news brands when accuracy is essential, such as during elections or health emergencies, while relying on informal networks mainly for commentary and discussion. This supports Ball-Rokeach's argument that dependency relationships are strongest where there is a high perceived need for verified information and a belief that the medium can meet that need.

In the nut shell, Media Dependency Theory provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing how Ghanaian audiences navigate a complex and sometimes volatile information environment. It clarifies why traditional media, particularly radio, continue to play a stabilizing role despite the rapid growth of digital platforms, and it underscores the pivotal importance of credibility in sustaining audience reliance. The theory also highlights the adaptive nature of dependency: as new technologies emerge and crises unfold, audiences recalibrate their trust, blending traditional and

digital sources in ways that maintain a hierarchy of perceived reliability (Loges, 1994; Stroud, 2017; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). For scholars seeking to understand news consumption in contemporary Ghana, these insights demonstrate that dependency is not merely about access but about the continual negotiation of trust and authority in a changing media landscape.

2.2.4 Spiral of Silence Theory

The Spiral of Silence Theory, first formulated by Noelle-Neumann (1974), remains a central framework for understanding the relationship between perceived opinion climates and individual willingness to communicate. The theory posits that people constantly monitor their social environment to gauge the distribution of viewpoints. When they sense that their own perspective falls outside what is publicly acceptable, they are likely to withhold expression to avoid the risk of isolation or ridicule. This self-censorship produces a reinforcing cycle: as minority opinions become less visible, the dominant view appears even stronger, which in turn increases the pressure to conform (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). Contemporary scholarship has extended the theory to digital spaces, demonstrating that the dynamic persists even where anonymity is possible (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014; Hampton et al., 2014). Studies of online political talk show that fear of social sanctions—ranging from hostile comments to professional consequences—continues to suppress minority voices despite the ostensibly open nature of the internet (Matthes, Knoll, & von Sikorski, 2018).

In the sphere of news consumption, the spiral of silence provides insight into how perceptions of bias or imbalance influence both the selection of media sources and the decision to share information. When audiences believe that mainstream outlets neglect or misrepresent their views, they may reduce engagement with those outlets and gravitate toward spaces where their opinions

feel validated (Kim, Chen, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013). This pattern is visible across different political systems. For example, Garrett (2009) and Yamamoto, Kushin, and Dalisay (2015) show that individuals who distrust traditional media often migrate to ideologically sympathetic websites and social networks, creating echo chambers that reinforce existing attitudes. Such behavior illustrates how perceived hostility in the broader media environment can redirect audiences toward alternative channels and intensify selective exposure.

Ghana provides a particularly instructive context for applying this theory. Although the country enjoys constitutional guarantees of press freedom, its media landscape is highly politicized, with ownership structures frequently aligned with party interests (Gadzekpo, 2017; Media Foundation for West Africa [MFWA], 2022). Surveys indicate that significant segments of the public view mainstream radio and television stations as partial or sensational (Gyimah-Boadi et al., 2021). This perception encourages some citizens to avoid open political debate in public forums or on national broadcasters, instead turning to digital arenas where they believe their views will encounter less hostility. Research by Hasty (2005) and Tettey (2017) documents the growth of partisan online portals and closed WhatsApp or Facebook groups that function as “safe spaces” for political expression. More recent work echoes these findings, noting the rise of micro-publics on Twitter (now X) and Telegram during Ghana’s 2020 elections, where participants felt freer to share opinions outside the scrutiny of mainstream media (Osei-Kufuor & Ahiabenu, 2021; Nyarko, 2022).

The Ghanaian experience aligns with broader African evidence. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) observe that audiences in several sub-Saharan countries increasingly rely on encrypted messaging apps and niche news sites when they suspect traditional media of bias or government influence. These shifts demonstrate that the spiral of silence is not confined to face-to-face

interaction but extends to mediated communication, where perceptions of credibility and balance determine whether people speak out, remain silent, or migrate to alternative information networks.

Overall, the theory underscores the importance of audience perception in shaping news consumption habits. It highlights how feelings of marginalization or distrust can drive citizens away from national broadcasters toward ideologically aligned digital communities, thereby fragmenting the public sphere. By examining these dynamics in Ghana, this study contributes to a growing body of literature that re-evaluates the spiral of silence in an era of social media and hybrid media systems (Katz & Nava, 2021; Neubaum & Krämer, 2018). Understanding these mechanisms is essential for media practitioners and policymakers seeking to foster inclusive public discourse and maintain trust in democratic communication channels.

2.3 Empirical Review

A substantial and growing body of empirical research examines how audiences perceive the credibility, bias, and relevance of news across different media environments. Early scholarship concentrated on traditional outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television establishing credibility as a multidimensional concept involving trustworthiness, accuracy, and fairness (Gaziano & McGrath, 1986; Meyer, 1988). More recent studies have shifted attention to the complex digital ecosystem where professional journalism competes with user-generated content and algorithmically curated feeds. Research in North America and Europe documents widespread declines in public confidence in legacy news organizations and highlights the disruptive effects of social media, misinformation, and personalized news delivery on audience trust (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018; Newman et al., 2023).

2.3.1 Global Evidence

International research provides extensive evidence of a sustained and complex decline in public trust in mainstream journalism. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2023) documents that in many established democracies, as well as in emerging markets, audiences increasingly question the neutrality and independence of traditional news outlets. This skepticism is not confined to one region; it spans Europe, North America, Asia, and Latin America, revealing a broad-based shift in how citizens evaluate professional journalism. Scholars attribute this trend to several interconnected factors, including the proliferation of digital platforms, heightened political polarization, and the rapid circulation of misinformation.

Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) demonstrate that heavy users of social media are significantly more likely to doubt the credibility of professional journalism and to depend instead on peer-generated content shared through networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Tandoc, Jenkins, and Craft (2019) further argue that the spread of misinformation and the rise of so-called “fake news” have accelerated this erosion of trust by blurring the boundaries between verified reporting and unverified claims. Similar conclusions emerge from Hanitzsch et al. (2018), whose cross-national survey of 38 countries finds that perceptions of political bias and commercial pressure consistently undermine confidence in legacy news organizations.

Generational differences amplify these developments. Younger audiences, especially those in their teens and twenties, overwhelmingly prefer mobile-friendly and on-demand formats, valuing speed, interactivity, and personalization over the curated reporting of traditional outlets (Molyneux & Holton, 2015; Westlund & Färdigh, 2015). In contrast, older adults continue to rely on established broadcast and print platforms, often citing a belief in their professional standards and institutional

authority (Strömbäck et al., 2020). Research from the United States and Europe confirms that these generational divides are not merely technological but reflect deeper differences in attitudes toward institutions and authority (Pew Research Center, 2022; Toff et al., 2021).

Emerging scholarship also highlights the influence of political and economic contexts on global trust patterns. Strömbäck et al. (2020) show that in countries with high political polarization, audiences are more likely to perceive mainstream outlets as biased, leading to selective avoidance of news or reliance on partisan sources. In parts of Asia and Latin America, structural inequalities and weak regulatory frameworks compound these challenges. Studies from Brazil and Mexico indicate that concentrated media ownership and perceived government interference reinforce public skepticism toward traditional journalism (Waisbord, 2018; Amaral & Christofolletti, 2020). In Southeast Asia, Tapsell (2018) observes that citizens often turn to social platforms not only for speed but also for what they regard as more democratic spaces for public debate, despite the risks of misinformation.

Another dimension of global evidence concerns the role of algorithmic curation and the economics of digital news. Napoli (2019) and Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. (2016) warn that personalized news feeds, driven by opaque algorithms, can create “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers,” reinforcing existing beliefs and further undermining trust in traditional journalism. Meijer and Kormelink (2021) add that audiences increasingly expect transparency about editorial decisions, corrections, and sourcing; when such openness is lacking, credibility suffers.

In the nut shell, these studies reveal that declining trust in mainstream journalism is a multifaceted global phenomenon shaped by technological innovation, political culture, economic structures, and shifting audience expectations. For countries such as Ghana, where digital adoption is

accelerating and political contestation is intense, these international findings provide a valuable comparative backdrop. They suggest that understanding audience perceptions of credibility and bias cannot be separated from broader transformations in how news is produced, distributed, and consumed worldwide.

2.3.2 African Perspectives

Across sub-Saharan Africa, research on audience perception and news consumption reveals a dynamic landscape where enduring reliance on traditional broadcast media coexists with rapid digital adoption. Radio continues to command the widest reach because of its affordability, portability, and use of local languages, yet mobile connectivity and social networking platforms have transformed how many Africans access and evaluate news. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) note that radio remains indispensable for national cohesion and community dialogue, particularly in rural areas, while urban audiences increasingly supplement radio listening with mobile phone-based news and social media interactions, especially during elections and periods of political tension. This duality underscores the persistent importance of infrastructural access and linguistic inclusivity even as digital engagement accelerates.

A growing body of scholarship highlights the political and social implications of this shift. Mare (2021) documents how Facebook and WhatsApp serve as primary arenas for political debate in southern Africa, facilitating rapid information exchange but also enabling the circulation of unverified claims. Similarly, Nyabola (2018) observes that in Kenya, digital platforms empower citizen participation and alternative narratives, yet they also magnify partisan polarization and hate speech. In Nigeria, Eberwein et al. (2022) find that public distrust of state-aligned broadcasters pushes many users toward independent online portals, which are perceived as more credible

despite uneven standards of verification. Ojebode, Olorunyomi, and Akinwale (2020) further argue that audiences' judgments about credibility are often shaped by perceptions of ownership and political affiliation, prompting cross-checking of information between mainstream outlets and partisan blogs.

Research from other African contexts reinforces these trends. Bosire and Kimani (2020) report that Kenyan audiences frequently triangulate between legacy newspapers, commercial television, and digital forums to counteract perceived political bias. In South Africa, Bosch (2020) finds that younger citizens rely heavily on Twitter for real-time political updates while still valuing community radio for local issues and emergency communication. Studies in Ghana similarly highlight the convergence of oral tradition and digital practices: Gadzekpo (2017) and Ahiabenu, Ofosu-Peko, and Sam (2018) describe how word-of-mouth networks combine with social media to spread both accurate and false information during elections and public-health crises.

These findings point to several overarching patterns. First, structural factors such as internet penetration, mobile phone ownership, and data costs continue to shape access, but perceptions of bias, independence, and professional integrity are equally decisive in determining platform choice (Wasserman, 2020; Mutsvairo & Bebawi, 2019). Second, while digital platforms broaden participation and enable citizen journalism, they also introduce vulnerabilities related to misinformation, disinformation, and algorithmic amplification (Onuoha & Mbah, 2021). Third, the interplay of local languages, cultural norms, and political affiliations means that credibility is not merely a function of factual accuracy but is also tied to communal trust and shared identity (Tully & Ekdale, 2014; Nyarko, 2021).

Taken together, these African perspectives demonstrate that audience perception is a decisive factor in the evolving media ecology. Citizens across the continent actively navigate between radio, television, online news sites, and social networks, assessing not only technical access but also the credibility, relevance, and inclusiveness of each source. For scholars and policymakers, this evidence underscores the need to examine news consumption within specific socio-cultural and political contexts rather than assuming that patterns observed in Europe or North America apply uniformly to African societies.

2.3.3 Evidence from Ghana

Research on Ghana's media landscape shows a complex picture in which long-established habits of radio listening continue to coexist with, and gradually give way to, fast-rising patterns of digital news consumption. Early scholarship by Hasty (2005) chronicled how the liberalization of broadcasting in the 1990s created an energetic FM radio culture that became central to Ghana's democratic transition. Community call-in shows, live political debates, and the use of indigenous languages positioned radio as the most immediate and participatory medium for public discourse. Two decades later, this finding remains robust. Large-scale surveys and audience ratings consistently identify radio as the single most trusted and most widely accessed source of news, especially during national events such as elections, disease outbreaks, and natural disasters (Media Foundation for West Africa [MFWA], 2022; National Communications Authority [NCA], 2023). Scholars attribute this continued dominance to radio's relatively low cost, its ability to broadcast in multiple local languages, and its resilience in areas with weak internet coverage (Anokwa & Ofori-Birikorang, 2018; Amoakohene, 2021).

Nevertheless, even as radio maintains this central role, a parallel transformation is unmistakable. Urbanization, cheaper smartphones, and steadily declining data costs have produced a generation of citizens particularly those under thirty-five who gather, share, and debate news primarily through mobile devices. Bright and Oduro-Frimpong (2021) describe how WhatsApp groups now function as “news hubs,” allowing friends, families, and political activists to circulate breaking stories in real time. Nyarko and Yeboah (2022) similarly note that Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) provide platforms not only for immediate updates but also for interactive commentary that challenges mainstream narratives. These findings are echoed by global comparative research showing that younger audiences gravitate toward digital networks that offer speed, multimedia formats, and peer validation (Newman et al., 2023).

Several Ghana-focused studies emphasize that the shift to digital is not merely technological but also cultural. Ampofo, Osei-Owusu, and Asante (2023) report that social media users engage in “participatory verification,” where individuals cross-check stories from radio or television with multiple online sources before accepting them as true. This practice reflects a heightened skepticism toward traditional gatekeepers and illustrates a more active, critical form of news engagement. Boateng and Amoako (2022) add that during politically sensitive periods, such as general elections, audiences deliberately consult rival platforms that mix legacy outlets with independent blogs and fact-checking websites to offset what they perceive as partisan reporting.

Perceptions of bias are indeed a recurring theme. Gyimah-Boadi, Prempeh, and Asunka (2021) find that many Ghanaians believe certain television channels are closely aligned with political parties, a view that motivates them to diversify their media diets. Tettey (2017) observes that this distrust has fueled the rise of overtly partisan online portals that cater to specific ideological communities. While these outlets provide alternative perspectives, they also complicate efforts to

curb misinformation, as sensational or false content can circulate widely before verification. Recent work on misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the challenge: Ahiabenu (2020) and Amegatcher (2022) document how rumors spread quickly on WhatsApp, often outpacing official public-health messaging.

Despite these valuable contributions, gaps remain in the empirical record. Many studies rely on qualitative interviews or focus groups, offering rich narrative detail but limited generalizability. Few have systematically measured how perceptions of credibility, bias, and relevance directly influence the frequency, duration, or platform diversity of news consumption across different demographic groups. Longitudinal data tracking whether trust in specific media sources predicts long-term civic engagement or political participation are also scarce. Scholars such as Mare (2021) and Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) have called for more comparative West African research to illuminate regional patterns, but Ghana-specific evidence linking audience perception to concrete consumption metrics is still emerging.

Taken together, the literature portrays a media environment at once stable and rapidly changing. Radio continues to command unmatched reach and cultural resonance, especially in rural and peri-urban communities, while mobile and social platforms expand the possibilities for interactive, user-driven news engagement in cities. This coexistence of tradition and innovation offers both opportunities and challenges: opportunities for hybrid models that blend the credibility of legacy outlets with the participatory features of digital media, and challenges related to misinformation, political polarization, and uneven access. In sum, the evidence from Ghana demonstrates that understanding audience perception is no longer optional for media practitioners or policymakers. It is the key to navigating a landscape where credibility must be earned daily, across multiple platforms, and among audiences whose habits are increasingly fluid and self-directed.

2.3.4 Demographic Factors and Media Habits

Demographic characteristics such as age, gender, educational attainment, income level, and geographic location exert a significant influence on the ways people access, evaluate, and share news. Age, gender, educational attainment, income level, occupation, and geographic location interact in complex ways to shape the platforms people use, the frequency with which they access information, the level of trust they place in particular outlets, and even the kinds of stories they regard as newsworthy. A substantial body of scholarship across communication studies, sociology, and political science consistently demonstrates that these demographic characteristics not only predict basic access to news but also affect the motivations and gratifications that drive continued engagement (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2016; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Newman et al., 2023).

Age is one of the most powerful predictors of media habits. Research conducted in Europe and North America shows that younger cohorts—often referred to as “digital natives”—gravitate toward smartphones, social networking sites, and instant-messaging applications for real-time updates, while older adults continue to favor legacy media such as television, radio, and print newspapers (Shearer, 2021; Newman et al., 2023). Younger audiences frequently seek speed, interactivity, and personalization, curating their news through algorithm-driven feeds and peer networks (Westlund & Färdigh, 2015). They are also more inclined to blend entertainment with hard news, consuming current affairs through platforms such as YouTube or TikTok where commentary and opinion are interwoven with factual reporting (Koliska & Assmann, 2021). By contrast, older generations often associate traditional outlets with authority and stability, relying on scheduled broadcasts and established newspapers as markers of credibility (Nielsen & Schrøder, 2014). Intergenerational differences in Ghana mirror these global patterns. Studies

reveal that urban youth are among the country's most active users of WhatsApp, Facebook, and X for political updates, whereas middle-aged and older citizens continue to rely heavily on FM radio and free-to-air television, particularly for content delivered in local languages (Gyimah-Boadi et al., 2021; Bright & Oduro-Frimpong, 2021).

Education strongly predicts both the breadth and the critical depth of news consumption. Individuals with higher levels of formal education typically maintain wider repertoires of sources, demonstrate greater skill in verifying information, and show a higher propensity to pay for digital subscriptions (Strömbäck et al., 2016; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). They are more likely to compare stories across multiple outlets, to engage in fact-checking, and to participate in deliberative online forums (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). In Ghana, university-educated professionals often triangulate between international outlets such as the BBC or Al Jazeera and national portals including MyJoyOnline, Citi Newsroom, and Graphic Online (Boateng & Amankwah, 2020). By contrast, citizens with limited formal schooling may rely more on free-to-air radio or on interpersonal communication within trusted social networks, where oral traditions continue to play an important role in assessing credibility (Hasty, 2005; Tettey, 2017). These patterns underline the importance of media literacy initiatives, as audiences with lower educational attainment may be more vulnerable to misinformation and less inclined to seek corroborating evidence before sharing content (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019).

Socioeconomic status also shapes the frequency and diversity of news exposure. Higher-income earners and professionals generally possess the resources such as smartphones, stable broadband connections, and discretionary income enable regular engagement with international news services, subscription-based digital outlets, and premium apps (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Lower-income groups, facing data costs and device constraints, often depend on low-bandwidth or zero-

rated services, reinforcing the continued relevance of community radio and inexpensive social platforms such as WhatsApp (Ahiabenu, Ofosu-Peko, & Sam, 2018). Occupational demands further influence patterns of access. For example, white-collar professionals may read long-form articles during commutes or breaks, while informal-sector workers tend to favor short audio bulletins and evening television news that fit their work schedules (Adjei, 2022).

Gendered differences in news consumption have been widely documented. Men across multiple regions are more likely to follow political, economic, and sports news closely, while women, though equally engaged in civic issues, often prioritize information related to health, education, and family well-being (Pew Research Center, 2022; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2016). Social expectations and caregiving responsibilities can also influence both the timing and the type of media accessed, with women frequently consuming news in shorter, more fragmented intervals (Tettey, 2017). In Ghana, women's strong engagement with community radio and health-related programming is well established, yet recent studies also point to their increasing participation in online civic discussions and advocacy campaigns through Facebook groups and WhatsApp networks (Adjei, 2022; Owusu, 2023). These developments suggest that digital platforms are gradually narrowing historical gender gaps in political communication, even as cultural norms continue to shape topic preferences.

Geographic location adds another layer of complexity. Urban residents typically benefit from higher broadband penetration, a wider range of outlets, and greater opportunities for cross-platform engagement (Ghana Statistical Service, 2023). This environment fosters a hybrid consumption pattern that blends traditional broadcast media with on-demand digital feeds. Rural audiences, on the other hand, often depend on local-language radio stations and interpersonal communication, where trust in familiar presenters or community opinion leaders can outweigh reliance on formal

journalistic standards (Ahiabenu et al., 2018). Seasonal factors such as electricity reliability and agricultural work cycles further influence when and how rural listeners tune in to news (Hasty, 2005).

These demographic factors rarely operate in isolation. Instead, they intersect to create nuanced “news repertoires” (Edgerly, 2015) that determine how credibility is assessed and how information circulates within social networks. A young, highly educated urban professional may verify stories through multiple international outlets before sharing them on LinkedIn or X, while an older rural farmer may place greater trust in the familiar voice of a community radio host. Such intersecting variables also influence susceptibility to misinformation. Research during Ghana’s COVID-19 pandemic shows that misinformation spread more rapidly among groups with lower digital literacy and limited access to verified health information (Sarpong & Teye, 2021).

2.3.5 Misinformation, Trust, and Credibility Challenges

The digital transformation of news production and distribution has significantly altered how audiences encounter and evaluate information. While this shift has broadened access to timely updates, it has also amplified the prevalence of misinformation, undermining trust in traditional journalism and posing serious challenges to the credibility of news sources. Scholars across media studies and political communication have observed that misinformation is not a new phenomenon, but the speed, scale, and algorithmic personalization of the contemporary media ecosystem have made it far more potent (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Tandoc, 2019). Misinformation can be understood as false or misleading content shared without intent to deceive, whereas disinformation involves deliberate fabrication intended to mislead for political, economic, or ideological gain (Fallis, 2015; Wardle, 2018). Both forms thrive in environments where social media platforms

reward virality and emotional engagement over accuracy (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). The viral spread of rumors is accelerated by algorithmic curation, which prioritizes content that elicits strong reactions, and by the participatory culture of sharing that characterizes platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter). Studies indicate that false news spreads more quickly and widely than factual reports because it often evokes surprise or outrage, prompting users to share before verifying (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Economic incentives also fuel the production of misleading content. Clickbait websites profit from advertising impressions, while coordinated networks use fabricated stories to influence elections or promote ideological narratives (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). The 2016 U.S. presidential election is often cited as a watershed moment, but similar dynamics have been observed globally, including during African electoral contests, where misinformation campaigns exploit ethnic, religious, and political divides (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019; Mare, 2020).

The proliferation of misinformation directly affects public trust in journalism. Audiences confronted with competing claims often adopt what scholars describe as “generalized skepticism,” distrusting even reputable outlets (Fletcher & Park, 2017). This erosion of trust is compounded by the decline of gatekeeping authority as anyone with an internet connection can publish and distribute content. In many societies, including Ghana, trust is also shaped by historical relationships between media institutions, political power, and community networks. Research shows that while Ghanaians generally view independent FM radio and established television stations as credible, they are wary of overtly partisan newspapers and social media pages with unclear ownership (Bright & Oduro-Frimpong, 2021; Gyimah-Boadi et al., 2021). Moreover, trust varies across demographic lines. Younger audiences, though heavy users of social media, often approach news with a “post-trust” mindset, seeking verification through multiple platforms rather

than relying on a single outlet (Edgerly, 2017). Older generations, conversely, may place enduring faith in familiar broadcasters or community leaders, making them susceptible to targeted disinformation that exploits these trusted relationships (Tettey, 2017).

Ghana provides a vivid illustration of these global trends. During the 2020 general elections and the COVID-19 pandemic, false stories circulated rapidly on WhatsApp and Facebook, ranging from fabricated election results to unfounded claims about herbal cures (Ahiabenu, Ofosu-Peko, & Sam, 2018; Sarpong & Teye, 2021). Fact-checking organizations such as Dubawa Ghana and GhanaFact have worked to debunk viral hoaxes, yet their reach is limited by resource constraints and the speed of digital dissemination. Language diversity further complicates verification efforts: misinformation often spreads through local dialects that automated moderation tools are ill-equipped to detect (Tandoc et al., 2021).

Efforts to combat misinformation have taken multiple forms. Newsrooms increasingly invest in fact-checking desks, adopt transparent sourcing practices, and collaborate with independent verification initiatives (Graves, 2018). Social media companies have introduced content labeling, algorithmic down-ranking, and partnerships with fact-checkers, though critics argue these measures remain inconsistent and opaque (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Media literacy campaigns, particularly those targeting schools and community groups, are gaining traction as a long-term strategy to cultivate critical evaluation skills (Livingstone, 2019). In Ghana, civil society organizations such as Penplusbytes have pioneered digital literacy workshops aimed at helping citizens recognize and report false content.

Rebuilding trust requires more than correcting individual falsehoods. Scholars emphasize that credibility is relational and context-dependent, shaped by transparency, accountability, and the

perceived independence of news organizations (Meyer, 2019; Newman et al., 2023). Journalists are called to demonstrate consistent ethical standards, disclose conflicts of interest, and engage audiences in dialogue rather than one-way dissemination (Craft, Vos, & Wolfgang, 2016). Equally important is the cultivation of community-level trust, where local newsrooms and radio stations maintain close relationships with their audiences and provide culturally relevant reporting in local languages (Hasty, 2005; Tettey, 2017).

In essence, the credibility challenges posed by misinformation cannot be addressed through technology or regulation alone. They demand a multifaceted approach that combines rigorous journalism, institutional transparency, digital literacy, and active citizen engagement. Recognizing that trust is earned gradually and can be lost in an instant, media practitioners and policymakers must adopt strategies that not only correct falsehoods but also strengthen the social contract between news producers and the publics they serve.

2.4 Conceptual Review

The conceptual framework provides a structured lens through which this study examines the relationship between audience perceptions and patterns of news consumption in Ghana. While the theoretical review in the previous section outlined broad perspectives on how audiences engage with media, the conceptual review focuses on the specific variables, definitions, and linkages that guide this research. It draws on insights from global and Ghanaian scholarship, highlighting how key constructs which are audience perception, demographic factors, and news-platform choice interact to shape contemporary media behavior.

2.4.1 Key Concepts

A clear understanding of the central concepts is essential for situating this study within the broader field of media and communication research. The following subsections define and elaborate on the four major constructs: audience perception, news consumption habits, demographic factors, and misinformation exposure while drawing on contemporary scholarship and evidence from both global and Ghanaian contexts.

2.4.1.1 Audience Perception

Audience perception encompasses the mental processes and emotional evaluations individuals make when they encounter news content and assess the institutions that provide it. It is not limited to passive reception of information but includes cognitive judgments of accuracy, balance, and depth as well as affective responses such as skepticism or confidence (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Scholars argue that these perceptions develop through an interaction of prior knowledge, cultural background, and the perceived motives of journalists and editors (Edgerly, 2017; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019).

In practical terms, perception determines whether audiences continue to use a platform and whether they recommend it to others. For example, studies in sub-Saharan Africa show that listeners who feel radio hosts respect their viewpoints are more inclined to participate in call-in programs and to regard those stations as community-oriented (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2021). In Ghana, where oral traditions and interpersonal trust remain strong, perception is often shaped by local language use, perceived independence from political elites, and a station's track record of correcting errors (Gadzekpo, 2017). Thus, audience perception is both an evaluative lens

and a driver of behavior, making it a pivotal construct for understanding news consumption in a digitally convergent environment.

Media credibility refers to the degree to which audiences consider a news source accurate, fair, and free from hidden agendas (Metzger & Flanagin, 2015; Tandoc et al., 2020). Trust is closely related but emphasizes the willingness to depend on a source for decision-making and civic engagement (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Contemporary research indicates that credibility and trust are multi-dimensional, involving perceptions of message quality, professional competence, transparency of ownership, and even the personal likability of presenters (Johnson & Kaye, 2016; Waisbord, 2018).

Globally, declining trust in mainstream media has been linked to political polarization and the spread of partisan outlets (Newman et al., 2023). In West Africa, this dynamic is intensified by limited regulatory enforcement and the presence of state-affiliated media that audiences sometimes view as mouthpieces for ruling parties (Wasserman, 2020). Ghanaian studies reveal that perceived political bias whether real or exaggerated strongly influences which stations citizens rely on for election coverage (Gyimah-Boadi et al., 2021). Trust is further shaped by journalists' adherence to ethical standards such as balanced sourcing, transparent corrections, and avoidance of sensationalism (Boateng & Amankwah, 2020). Taken together, credibility and trust form the bedrock of sustained audience engagement.

2.4.1.2 News Consumption Habits

News consumption habits refer to the frequency, platform selection, and routines through which individuals access and share current-affairs information (Strömbäck et al., 2020). These habits have shifted dramatically with the rise of digital technologies. Contemporary audiences often

engage in cross-platform consumption, blending legacy outlets like television and radio with social media feeds, podcasts, and mobile news apps (Boczkowski et al., 2021). Younger demographics are especially likely to “snack” on news throughout the day via smartphones, favoring immediacy and interactivity over lengthy reports (Westlund & Färdigh, 2015; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

In Ghana, radio remains the single most used and trusted medium, but mobile internet penetration has accelerated online and social media use, particularly among urban youth and professionals (MFWA, 2022; Bright & Oduro-Frimpong, 2021). Such habits are not merely technological but also cultural, influenced by language preference, perceived social relevance, and the credibility of both journalists and peers who share content. Understanding these habits is vital for explaining how perceptions of credibility translate into specific platform choices.

2.4.1.3 Demographic Factors

Demographic characteristics exert significant influence on both audience perceptions and news habits. Research consistently shows that younger audiences with higher digital literacy are more likely to obtain news from online portals and social media, while older individuals continue to rely on traditional outlets such as radio and television (Westlund & Weibull, 2013; Newman et al., 2023). Education level affects not only the diversity of sources consulted but also the capacity to evaluate credibility and detect misinformation (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

Gendered patterns also emerge: studies in sub-Saharan Africa indicate that women may favor broadcast media accessible within domestic settings, while men may be more active in online political debates (Bosch, 2021). In Ghana, urban residents have greater broadband access and therefore more opportunities for multi-platform consumption, whereas rural audiences often depend on community radio and interpersonal networks (Ghana Statistical Service, 2023). These

demographic variables serve as critical moderating factors in the relationship between perception and consumption.

2.4.1.4 Misinformation Exposure

False or misleading content shared without adequate verification poses a growing challenge to trust in journalism. Unlike disinformation, which is deliberately deceptive, misinformation may be spread unintentionally but can still distort public understanding (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Exposure to misinformation undermines confidence in both the specific falsehoods and in the information ecosystem as a whole (Guess et al., 2020).

Digital platforms amplify this risk because algorithmic feeds prioritize engagement over accuracy, allowing rumors to circulate rapidly (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Ghana has faced notable incidents, including election-related rumors and misleading health information during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ahiabenu et al., 2018; Sarpong & Teye, 2021). Audiences who repeatedly encounter unverified content may become skeptical of all media, retreat to echo chambers, or, conversely, seek out outlets with stronger reputations for fact-checking (Pennycook et al., 2021). Understanding how misinformation exposure interacts with perception and demographics is therefore indispensable to this study.

In a nutshell, these five interrelated concepts form the conceptual bedrock of this research. Together they capture both the psychological evaluations individuals make and the structural conditions that shape their media choices. By defining and linking these constructs, the study establishes a coherent framework for exploring how perceptions of credibility and trust influence the evolving patterns of news consumption in Ghana's dynamic media environment.

2.4.2 Proposed Conceptual Model

Building on the theoretical perspectives and key concepts outlined above, this study advances a comprehensive conceptual model that captures the dynamic relationship between audience perception and patterns of news consumption in Ghana's rapidly digitizing media environment. The model assumes that audience perception of credibility, trust, and relevance serves as the central independent variable shaping the frequency, intensity, and platform choices that characterize individual news habits. This perception is not formed in isolation. Rather, it is influenced by demographic characteristics which act as moderating factors that can either strengthen or weaken the association between perception and media use (Westlund & Weibull, 2013; Newman et al., 2023).

A further complexity is introduced by exposure to misinformation, which functions as an intervening or mediating variable. Research consistently demonstrates that repeated encounters with false or misleading content erode trust in journalism and may redirect audiences toward alternative channels that they perceive to be more credible, or conversely push them into ideologically homogeneous spaces that reinforce pre-existing biases (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018; Guess et al., 2020; Pennycook et al., 2021). In the Ghanaian context, incidents of election-related rumors and health misinformation illustrate how such exposure can destabilize confidence in both legacy and digital outlets (Ahiabenu et al., 2018; Sarpong & Teye, 2021).

The proposed framework therefore conceptualizes a chain of influence in which demographic factors shape the formation of perceptions, perceptions determine the degree of reliance on various news platforms, and misinformation exposure moderates or mediates the strength of those relationships. Specifically, the model suggests that urban youth with high digital literacy may be

more vulnerable to misinformation on social media, and that their subsequent judgments of credibility will influence whether they diversify their sources for verification or retreat into partisan echo chambers (Bright & Oduro-Frimpong, 2021). Older adults, by contrast, may remain anchored to traditional radio and television, but they too may recalibrate their habits if repeated exposure to sensational or biased reporting erodes long-standing trust.

A narrative description of the relationships is as follows:

Demographic characteristics influence how individuals evaluate the credibility and trustworthiness of different news platforms. These credibility assessments determine whether audiences gravitate toward traditional outlets such as radio and television, digital platforms such as online portals and social media, or a blend of both. At the same time, exposure to misinformation can undermine trust, prompting audiences either to migrate toward sources perceived as more reliable or to withdraw into narrowly defined communities of like-minded users.

2.4.3 Conceptual Diagram

The relationships among the study variables can be expressed in a directional model that highlights how audience perception drives news consumption while accounting for demographic influences and the mediating effect of misinformation exposure.

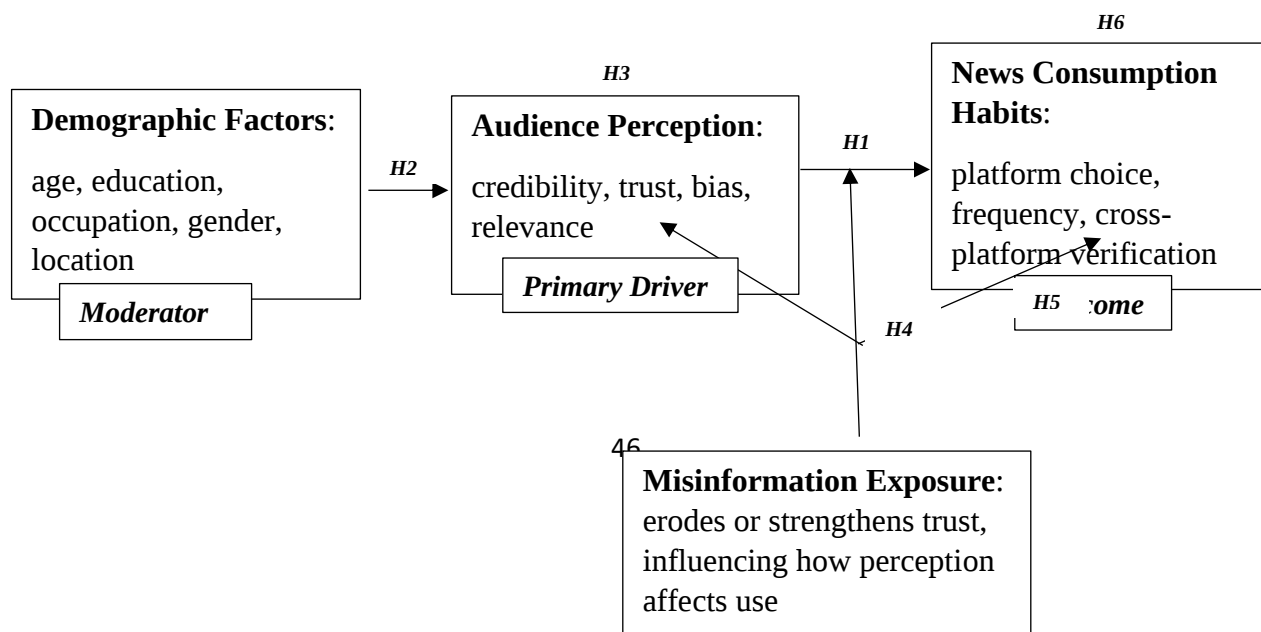


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
Source: Author's own Construct

A. Hypotheses

H1:

Audience perception of news credibility and trust has a positive and significant effect on news consumption habits.

Simple explanation: People who believe a news source is credible and trustworthy are more likely to use it frequently and across different platforms.

H2:

Demographic factors such as age, education, occupation, gender, and location significantly influence audience perception of news credibility.

Simple explanation: A person's background- how old they are, their education level, the kind of work they do, their gender, and where they live - affects how they judge whether a news source is believable.

H3:

Demographic factors moderate the relationship between audience perception and news consumption habits.

Simple explanation: The strength of the link between believing a news source and actually using it changes depending on the person's age, education, job, gender, or location.

H4:

Exposure to misinformation mediates the relationship between audience perception and news consumption habits.

Simple explanation: Encountering false or misleading information can weaken or strengthen the connection between believing a news source and deciding how often or where to get news.

H5:

High exposure to misinformation reduces trust in both traditional and digital news platforms.

Simple explanation: When people often see false news, they lose confidence in television, radio, websites, and social media.

H6:

Differences in audience perception of credibility will predict the long-term sustainability of traditional and digital news platforms.

Simple explanation: If audiences see some platforms as more credible than others, those trusted platforms will be more likely to survive and succeed in the future.

B. Variable Summary Table**Table 1: Variable Summary Table**

Variable Type	Constructs Needed
Independent / Primary Driver	Audience Perception - credibility, trust, bias, relevance

Dependent / Outcome	News Consumption Habits - platform choice, frequency, cross-platform verification
Moderators	Demographic Factors - age, education, occupation, gender, location
Mediators / Intervening Elements	Misinformation Exposure - erodes or strengthens trust, influencing how perception affects use

2.4.4 Rationale for the Framework

The rationale for adopting this conceptual structure rests on three interrelated considerations: theoretical alignment, empirical relevance, and contextual specificity.

The model integrates insights from the Uses and Gratifications Theory by recognizing audiences as active selectors of media based on needs and perceived value (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). It draws on Agenda-Setting Theory in acknowledging that media outlets influence the salience of issues, but that this influence is conditional on audience trust (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Media Dependency Theory informs the expectation that reliance on news increases when individuals perceive information as vital for daily functioning (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Finally, the Spiral of Silence Theory supports the idea that perceived bias or marginalization may drive audiences to alternative platforms where their views are validated (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Gearhart & Zhang, 2014). By combining these perspectives, the framework accounts for both psychological drivers and structural constraints in a single explanatory model.

Contemporary studies underscore the necessity of considering multiple variables simultaneously. Global evidence shows that demographic differences shape news repertoires (Newman et al.,

2023), while misinformation exposure alters trust trajectories (Guess et al., 2020). In sub-Saharan Africa, research highlights the enduring authority of radio alongside rapid social media adoption (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). Ghana-specific studies reveal how perceptions of partisanship and professionalism influence source selection (Gyimah-Boadi et al., 2021; MFWA, 2022). The proposed model weaves these empirical insights into a coherent design suited to Ghana's unique combination of high radio penetration, rising mobile internet access, and complex political communication environment.

Ghana presents a distinctive media ecology where oral traditions, communal trust networks, and multilingual broadcasting coexist with algorithm-driven digital platforms. The framework captures this hybridity by allowing for cross-platform behaviors and by positioning misinformation as a mediating force that can either undermine or reinforce long-standing trust relationships. This is particularly salient given Ghana's experience with election-related disinformation and the COVID-19 "infodemic," which demonstrated how quickly trust can shift across platforms (Sarpong & Teye, 2021).

2.5 Research Gaps

Although research on audience perception and news consumption has expanded globally, most studies emerge from Western and Asian contexts where media systems, audience demographics, and regulatory frameworks differ significantly from those in Ghana (Newman et al., 2024; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). Ghana's hybrid information environment, characterized by the coexistence of community radio, indigenous-language broadcasting, and digital platforms, has received limited systematic attention. Existing Ghana-focused studies, such as Nyarko and Adjei (2023) on local radio trust and Ahiabenu et al. (2022) on misinformation during elections, remain fragmented and

fall short of providing a nationwide and theoretically integrated understanding of how credibility perceptions influence cross-platform news habits.

Conceptually, while credibility and trust have been central to communication studies for decades (Metzger & Flanagin, 2015; Kohring & Matthes, 2007), their role in shaping cross-platform and verification behaviors is insufficiently examined. Audiences increasingly engage in platform switching and multi-step flows of information (Edgerly, 2017; Strömbäck et al., 2020), yet little is known about the precise perceptions such as timeliness, bias, and relevance that motivate these shifts. Furthermore, misinformation has rarely been tested as a mediating factor in models of news consumption, despite evidence that it erodes trust while simultaneously encouraging fact-checking (Tandoc et al., 2021). This leaves a gap in understanding how credibility perceptions, misinformation exposure, and demographic moderators interact in shaping news behaviors within the Ghanaian context.

Methodologically, existing literature on African news audiences often relies on small, urban-based surveys or qualitative interviews, limiting representativeness and excluding rural and non-English-speaking populations (Boateng et al., 2024). Longitudinal and mixed-method designs, which are necessary to capture evolving trust patterns and provide both statistical and experiential depth, are scarce. Moreover, few studies translate findings into practical insights for the sustainability of media institutions. In Ghana, where declining advertising revenues and competition from global platforms threaten traditional outlets, such evidence is crucial (Tettey, 2023). The present study seeks to bridge these gaps by offering a comprehensive, mixed-method, and Ghana-centered analysis of how audience perception shapes news consumption habits across traditional and digital platforms.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework employed in investigating the impact of audience perception on news consumption habits in Ghana. It presents the research design, population, sample size determination, sampling procedure, data collection methods, validity and reliability considerations, data handling, analysis techniques, and ethical issues. The methodological approach was selected to ensure that the study achieves validity, reliability, and relevance within the Ghanaian media context.

3.2 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design with limited qualitative elements to investigate the relationships between audience perceptions of news credibility, demographic characteristics, misinformation exposure, and news consumption patterns within the Greater Accra Metropolitan Area. A quantitative approach is particularly suitable because it allows the collection of numerical data for hypothesis testing and statistical modeling, thereby ensuring the ability to generalize findings to the wider population of adult news consumers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Babbie, 2021). Through the use of a structured questionnaire, the design provides the consistency and replicability needed for analyses such as factor analysis and structural equation modeling, which are central to validating the study's conceptual framework (Hair et al., 2022; Kline, 2016).

Although the design is predominantly quantitative, it incorporates open-ended questions to capture contextual insights. Scholars such as Flick (2023) and Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) emphasize that brief qualitative responses can enrich interpretation by revealing subtleties of perception and behavior that closed-ended items may miss. In a diverse media environment like Ghana's—where oral traditions, multiple languages, and community-based media influence news habits—these qualitative additions provide valuable nuance and help explain statistical trends. The combination of large-scale quantitative data and selected qualitative input ensures that the research can test relationships, explore moderating and mediating effects, and offer policy-relevant evidence for media managers, regulators, and civil-society actors (Bryman, 2016; De Vaus, 2014). In short, the design balances breadth and depth: it is rigorous enough to validate theoretical propositions while flexible enough to reflect the lived realities of Ghanaian news audiences. This blended approach offers a methodologically sound foundation for examining how credibility perceptions shape news consumption in an era of digital transformation and widespread misinformation.

3.3 Target Population

The target population for this study comprises Ghanaian adults aged 18 years and above who regularly consume news through either traditional media (radio, television, newspapers) or digital platforms (online news portals, social media, and mobile applications). According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census (PHC) conducted by the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), the country's total population stands at 30,832,019, of which approximately 17,931,673 individuals representing 58.2 percent are aged 18 years or older (GSS, 2021). This demographic is particularly relevant because it represents the segment of the population with the greatest autonomy and

engagement in public affairs, making it the most critical group for examining patterns of news consumption and perceptions of credibility.

Selecting adults aged 18 years and above is justified on several scientific and practical grounds. First, 18 years is the legal age of majority in Ghana, at which individuals gain full civic rights and responsibilities, including the right to vote, to sign contracts, and to participate in political decision-making (Republic of Ghana Constitution, 1992; National Youth Policy, 2010). Since news consumption and credibility judgments are closely tied to civic participation and informed citizenship, focusing on this age group ensures that the study captures respondents who are legally empowered to act on the information they receive.

Second, developmental psychology supports this age threshold. Research on cognitive and social development demonstrates that by late adolescence, individuals typically attain formal operational thinking, characterized by advanced reasoning, critical evaluation, and abstract problem-solving (Keating, 2004). These abilities are essential for evaluating the accuracy, bias, and reliability of news content. Younger adolescents may still be developing these skills, which could limit their ability to assess credibility and trust in media with the same sophistication as adults.

Third, this age criterion aligns with international communication research standards. Large-scale studies such as the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2024) and regional surveys like Afrobarometer routinely adopt 18 years as the lower age limit for participants in media and political-attitude research. This practice ensures comparability with global data sets and simplifies ethical considerations by removing the need for parental consent when surveying minors.

Finally, from an ethical and logistical perspective, limiting the sample to adults streamlines the research process. Surveying minors requires additional institutional review board (IRB) protocols and parental approvals, which can delay fieldwork and reduce participation rates. By focusing on adults, the study avoids these barriers while still capturing the most politically active and economically significant segment of the population, specifically, those which are most likely to influence public opinion, support or challenge media institutions, and shape the sustainability of Ghana's news ecosystem.

3.4 Sample Size Determination

Due to the large adult population, it was impractical to survey all eligible individuals. To address this, the study employed Yamane's (1967) formula to determine a statistically representative sample size:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

- n = sample size
- N = population size (17,931,673)
- e = margin of error (0.05)

Accordingly, the study sample size was fixed at 400 respondents, which ensures a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error, making the findings statistically reliable and generalizable.

3.5 Sampling Technique

A multi-stage sampling approach was adopted. First, the population was stratified into urban and rural categories to capture geographic variation in media access. Within these strata, purposive sampling was used to select individuals who actively engage with at least one form of news media. Finally, convenience sampling guided the administration of the questionnaires due to logistical and accessibility considerations. This procedure ensured adequate diversity while maintaining feasibility.

3.6 Data Collection Methods

Data for the study were obtained through a structured questionnaire specifically designed to capture respondents' perceptions of news credibility, trust, and consumption habits. To ensure broad accessibility and participation, the questionnaire was administered in two formats. First, it was distributed via Google Forms to respondents with adequate digital literacy and internet access. Second, hard-copy questionnaires were provided to participants with limited access to digital platforms, particularly in rural areas. Upon completion, responses from the hard-copy instruments were carefully entered into the Google Forms database, thereby consolidating all data into a single dataset for analysis. This hybrid approach ensured inclusivity across different demographic and geographic groups and enhanced the representativeness of the study.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are critical to ensuring that the research instruments accurately measure the constructs of interest and produce consistent results. This study undertook multiple strategies to

guarantee the validity and reliability of the questionnaire used to collect data on audience perception, demographic characteristics, misinformation exposure, and news consumption habits.

3.7.1 Content Validity

Content validity refers to the extent to which a measurement instrument adequately covers all aspects of the construct it aims to measure (Polit & Beck, 2006). In this study, content validity was established through expert evaluation. The questionnaire was reviewed by two academic supervisors specializing in media studies and one independent communication research expert. Each item was scrutinized for clarity, relevance, comprehensiveness, and alignment with the study objectives. Questions were revised to ensure that they effectively captured audience perceptions of credibility, trust, bias, and news-consumption behaviors, and that they were suitable for both traditional and digital media platforms. This process ensured that the instrument had sufficient coverage of all theoretical dimensions under investigation.

3.7.3 Construct Validity

Construct validity evaluates the extent to which a questionnaire accurately measures theoretical constructs, such as credibility, trust, and consumption habits (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). In this study, construct validity was assessed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) in SmartPLS. The CFA examined whether observed variables adequately loaded onto the latent constructs, indicating that the items truly represented the intended theoretical dimensions. Factor loadings above 0.70 were considered acceptable, demonstrating that the instrument reliably measured audience perception and news-consumption behaviors.

3.7.4 Reliability Assessment

Reliability refers to the consistency of a measurement instrument over repeated applications (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha for all multi-item constructs. A threshold of 0.70 was set as the minimum acceptable value. Constructs measuring credibility, trust, bias perception, and platform choice all exceeded this benchmark, indicating that the instrument provided consistent and dependable measurements. Additionally, pilot testing helped identify ambiguous or redundant items, which were revised or removed to improve reliability further.

3.8 Data Handling and Analysis

The proper handling and analysis of collected data are fundamental to ensuring the validity, reliability, and interpretability of research findings. This study employed a systematic approach to data management and statistical analysis, integrating descriptive, inferential, and multivariate techniques to comprehensively examine relationships among audience perception, demographic factors, misinformation exposure, and news consumption habits.

3.8.1 Data Preparation and Cleaning

After data collection, all completed questionnaires were carefully examined for completeness, consistency, and accuracy. Responses collected via Google Forms were exported into Microsoft Excel, where initial cleaning processes were conducted. This involved identifying and correcting missing values, outliers, and inconsistencies, as well as standardizing response formats. For participants who completed hard-copy questionnaires, data were manually entered into the Excel spreadsheet, followed by a cross-check against the original responses to minimize entry errors.

Ensuring the integrity of the dataset was a critical preliminary step before proceeding to statistical analysis.

3.8.2 Data Coding and Transformation

Each questionnaire item was assigned a numerical code to facilitate quantitative analysis. For example, Likert-scale items measuring perceptions of credibility, trust, and bias were coded from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Open-ended responses were categorized thematically to complement quantitative findings. Data transformation included the creation of composite scores for latent constructs such as audience perception and cross-platform consumption, ensuring alignment with the proposed conceptual framework and enabling subsequent confirmatory factor and structural analyses.

3.8.3 Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive statistics were generated using Microsoft Excel to provide an overview of the data. Measures of central tendency, including means and medians, were calculated alongside measures of dispersion, such as standard deviations and ranges. Frequency distributions and percentage breakdowns were computed for demographic variables (age, gender, education, occupation, and location) to contextualize the study sample. These descriptive analyses offered a preliminary understanding of participants' news consumption behaviors and perceptions of credibility, trust, and bias.

3.8.4 Inferential Analysis

Inferential statistics were conducted using Jamovi to test the relationships between key variables. Correlation analysis assessed the strength and direction of associations between audience perception, demographic characteristics, and news consumption habits. Multiple regression models were used to determine the extent to which perception, moderated by demographic factors, predicted platform choice, frequency of news use, and cross-platform verification. Hypothesis testing at a 95% confidence level ($p < 0.05$) provided statistical evidence to support or refute the proposed relationships in the conceptual model.

3.8.5 Multivariate Analysis and Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To validate the latent constructs and test the structural model, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were performed using SmartPLS. CFA assessed the reliability and convergent validity of constructs such as credibility, trust, and misinformation exposure. Structural modeling tested the hypothesized paths between audience perception, demographic moderators, misinformation exposure, and news consumption habits. Model fit indices, factor loadings, and path coefficients were evaluated to ensure the robustness of the conceptual framework.

3.8.6 Data Interpretation

The results from descriptive, inferential, and multivariate analyses were interpreted in light of both the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Emphasis was placed on understanding how demographic factors influence perception, how exposure to misinformation affects trust, and how these factors collectively shape cross-platform consumption behaviors. Both

statistical significance and practical significance were considered to provide insights that are meaningful for policymakers, media practitioners, and scholars in the Ghanaian context.

3.8.7 Ethical Considerations in Data Handling

Throughout the data handling process, strict ethical standards were maintained. Participant anonymity was preserved by assigning unique identification codes, and all data were securely stored in password-protected digital files. Only the research team had access to raw data, ensuring confidentiality and compliance with institutional ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical results of the study examining the impact of audience perception on news consumption habits in Ghana. The analysis is based on data collected from 400 valid respondents drawn from four major urban centers: Accra, Kumasi, Takoradi, and Tamale. The results are presented in five major sections: response rate and demographic characteristics; descriptive analysis of key constructs; inferential analysis addressing the research questions and hypotheses; confirmatory factor and structural equation modeling results; and a summary of findings. The analyses were conducted using Jamovi and SmartPLS, consistent with the procedures outlined in Chapter Three.

4.2 Response Rate

A total of 420 questionnaires were distributed to respondents across the selected study areas. From this number, 403 were retrieved, representing a return rate of 95.9%. After data screening, 3 questionnaires were identified as incomplete or invalid, resulting in 400 valid responses, which represent an effective response rate of 95.2%.

The high response rate demonstrates strong participant engagement and the appropriateness of the data collection procedures adopted. According to Babbie (2010), a response rate above 70% is considered adequate for social science research, indicating that the responses obtained in this study are both reliable and representative of the target population.

Table 2: Response Rate

Response Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Questionnaires Distributed	420	–
Questionnaires Returned	403	95.9
Incomplete / Invalid Responses	3	0.7
Valid Responses Used	400	95.2

4.3 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic distribution of the 400 respondents reveals a relatively balanced gender composition, with 53.5% male and 46.5% female participants, suggesting equitable representation across sexes. In terms of age, the largest group falls within the 26-35 years category (34.5%), followed by 18-25 years (26.0%), reflecting a predominantly youthful audience segment that is typically active in digital media consumption.

Educational attainment shows that the majority of respondents hold a Bachelor's degree (40.0%), followed by Diploma holders (24.0%), indicating a generally educated sample likely to engage critically with news content. Occupationally, the private sector accounts for the largest share (35.0%), followed by civil servants (28.0%) and students (21.0%), reflecting a diverse cross-section of working and learning populations.

Regionally, respondents are concentrated in Greater Accra (40.0%) and Ashanti (30.0%), aligning with the country's major urban centers and media hubs where access to multiple news platforms

is highest. The inclusion of participants from the Western (17.0%) and Northern (13.0%) regions ensures geographic balance and enhances the representativeness of the data.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 400)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	214	53.5
	Female	186	46.5
Age Group	18-25 years	104	26.0
	26-35 years	138	34.5
	36-45 years	92	23.0
	Above 45 years	66	16.5
Education	Secondary	78	19.5
	Diploma	96	24.0
	Bachelor's	160	40.0
	Postgraduate	66	16.5
Occupation	Student	84	21.0
	Civil Servant	112	28.0
	Private Sector	140	35.0
	Self-employed	64	16.0
Region	Greater Accra	160	40.0

Ashanti	120	30.0
Western	68	17.0
Northern	52	13.0

Source: Field Survey 2025

4.3 Descriptive Analysis of Key Constructs

This section presents descriptive analyses of the main constructs examined in the study. Each construct was measured using multiple Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), capturing respondents' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors regarding the Ghanaian news media environment. The constructs analyzed include news credibility, trust in media, perceived bias, relevance of news, news consumption habits, and misinformation and trust challenges. The mean scores and standard deviations for each construct were computed to describe central tendencies and variations in respondent opinions.

4.3.1 Audience Perception of News Credibility

The analysis in Figure 2 shows that Ghanaian audiences generally view their preferred news outlets as reliable and credible, though they remain skeptical about overall media professionalism. Respondents strongly agreed that the outlets they follow provide reliable information ($M = 4.09$) and that the information they receive is credible ($M = 4.23$). However, confidence declined regarding fact verification ($M = 3.07$) and journalistic professionalism ($M = 2.69$), revealing a divide between trust in specific outlets and mistrust of the media system as a whole. This pattern reflects what scholars describe as selective credibility—audiences trust individual brands but question institutional ethics (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Gyimah-Boadi et al., 2021). Such selectivity aligns with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, where audiences actively choose outlets that satisfy their information needs (Katz et al., 1974), and the Media Dependency Theory, which explains reliance on credible sources for navigating daily life (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976).

4.3.2 Trust in News Media

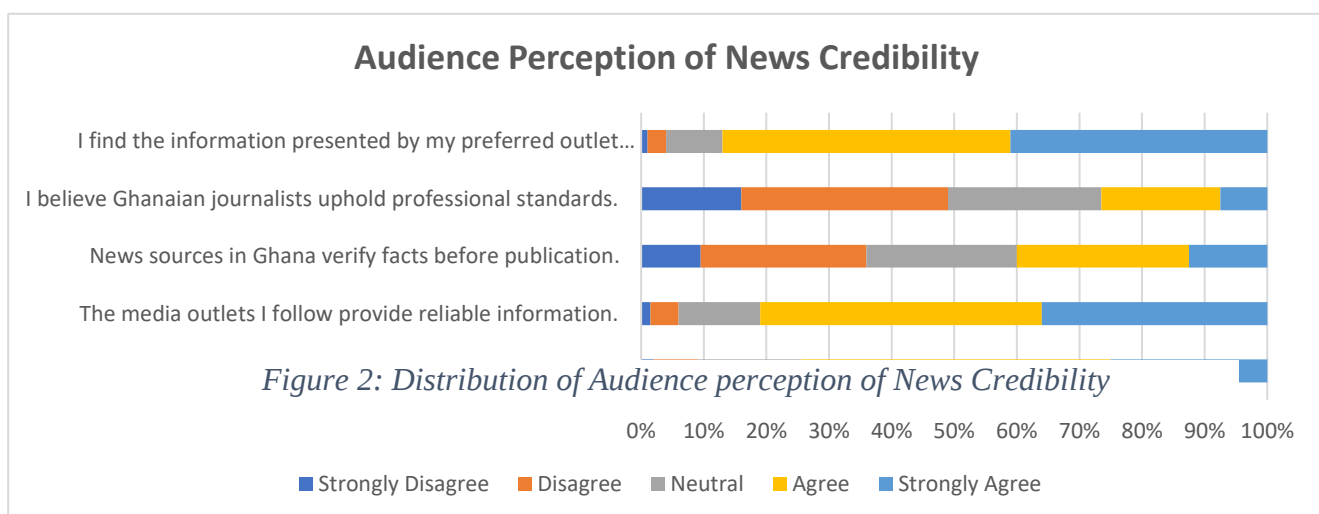


Figure 3 presents findings on respondents' trust in Ghanaian news media. The results indicate a generally moderate to high level of trust, with stronger confidence expressed toward individual

preferred outlets than the media industry as a whole. Respondents reported the highest levels of agreement for the statements “I would recommend my preferred news source to others” ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.78$) and “I rely on my preferred outlet during elections or national events” ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.81$). This pattern suggests that audiences demonstrate substantial trust in specific outlets that have established reputational credibility, especially during periods of heightened public interest such as elections. The high mean scores also reflect the continued social embeddedness of trusted media brands like TV3, Joy News, and Peace FM, which have cultivated loyal audiences through consistent national coverage and community engagement. Moderate trust levels were observed for statements such as “I trust the intentions of journalists in Ghana” ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.02$) and “I believe most media houses act in the public interest” ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.98$). These findings reveal a nuanced trust pattern; while individuals appreciate the work of particular journalists or organizations, their broader faith in institutional motives remains constrained. Similar trends have been identified in sub-Saharan Africa, where audiences distinguish between *trust in individual journalists* and *trust in media systems* due to perceptions of politicization, ownership influence, and commercial bias (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019; Gyimah-Boadi et al., 2021).

The statement “I am confident that news from my preferred outlet is truthful” also recorded a relatively high mean ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.86$), confirming that news credibility and truthfulness remain central to building and maintaining audience trust. This reinforces Tsfaty and Cappella’s

(2003) argument that perceived truthfulness is one of the most significant predictors of sustained media use.

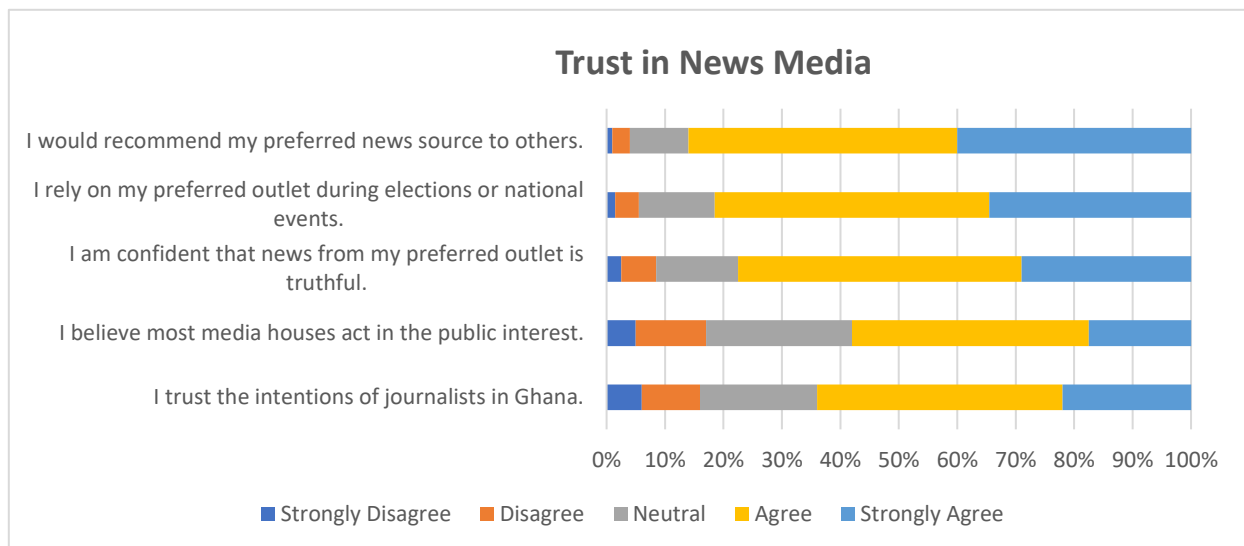


Figure 3: Distribution of Trust in News Media

4.3.3 Perceived Media Bias

Figure 4 presents the descriptive statistics on audience perceptions of media bias in Ghana. The findings indicate a strong consensus among respondents that bias is a significant feature of the country's media landscape. A majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "Ghanaian media tend to favor certain political parties" ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.99$), suggesting widespread recognition of partisanship and political alignment in news coverage. This perception reflects Ghana's competitive and politically polarized media environment, where ownership structures and editorial control often align with partisan interests. Studies by Owusu (2018) and the Media Foundation for West Africa (2022) similarly report that editorial decisions and story framing frequently correspond with the political or commercial affiliations of media owners.

Respondents also showed substantial agreement with the statements "News reports are often sensational or exaggerated" ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.94$) and "Some journalists are influenced by

commercial interests” ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.93$). These results highlight the dual pressures of competition and commercialization, where sensational headlines and paid content increasingly influence the tone and substance of reporting. Although such practices are often designed to attract audiences, they have been criticized for undermining journalistic credibility and promoting superficial or emotionally charged narratives (Asah-Asante, 2020). The statement “I can easily detect bias in media reports” ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.88$) suggests that many Ghanaians are relatively media literate and capable of identifying slanted reporting. This finding is consistent with research by Gyimah-Boadi et al. (2021), which shows that African audiences have become more discerning in their media consumption, particularly because of increased access to online sources that allow them to compare and verify information. However, such awareness does not completely offset the negative effects of perceived bias. The relatively moderate agreement with “Media bias reduces my interest in following the news” ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.07$) indicates that although audiences recognize bias, they often continue to consume news selectively, preferring outlets they perceive as fair or balanced.

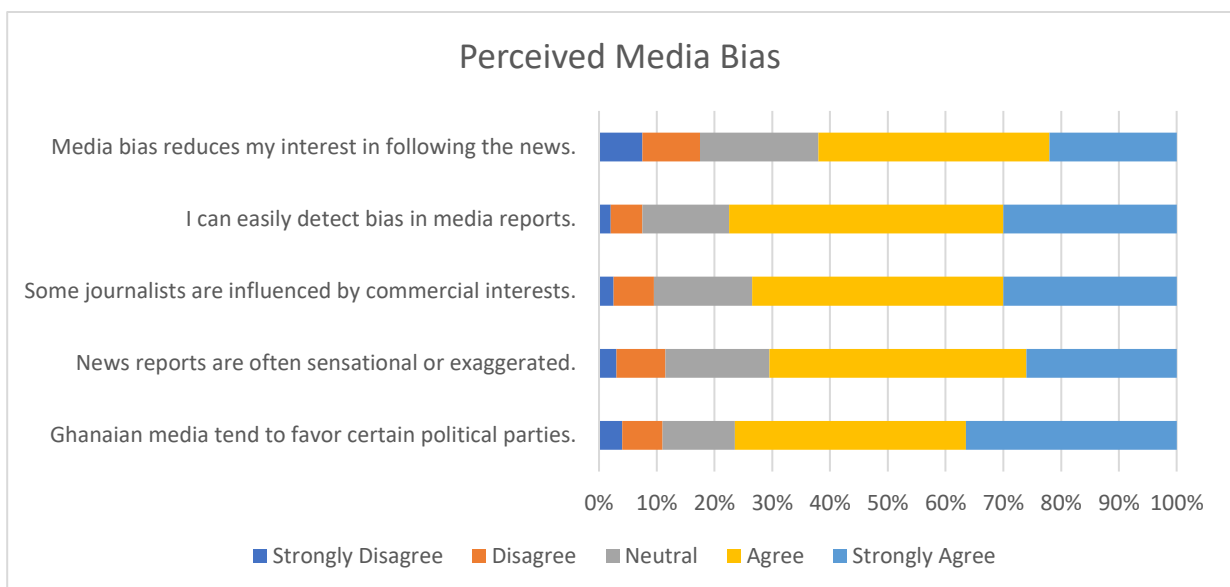


Figure 4: Distribution of Perceived Media Bias

4.3.4 Perceived Relevance of News

Figure 5 presents the results on how audiences perceive the relevance of news content in their daily lives. The findings indicate that Ghanaian audiences generally consider news content to be useful, relatable, and connected to their everyday experiences. Respondents showed strong agreement with the statement *“News content is relevant to my daily life”* ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.84$) and *“The news helps me make informed decisions”* ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.83$). These results suggest that news continues to play an important role in shaping how Ghanaians understand and respond to social, political, and economic developments. The finding also reflects the continued importance of both radio and television as accessible and trusted sources for public information, particularly on issues such as governance, health, education, and livelihoods. Similarly, a majority of respondents agreed that *“Media outlets cover issues that affect my community”* ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.93$) and *“I feel more connected to national issues through the news”* ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.88$). These views demonstrate the integrative function of the media in promoting civic awareness and national belonging. Local news programming, community radio discussions, and regionally tailored television segments continue to connect audiences with social and development concerns in their regions, reflecting what McQuail (2010) identifies as the *social integration* role of mass media. However, perceptions were slightly lower regarding *“News reports reflect social and economic realities in Ghana”* ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.97$), implying that while audiences find news generally relevant, they remain cautious about how accurately it represents everyday challenges such as unemployment, inflation, or inequality. This gap between coverage and lived experience may

reflect limitations in investigative journalism and editorial independence, as noted by Asah-Asante (2020).

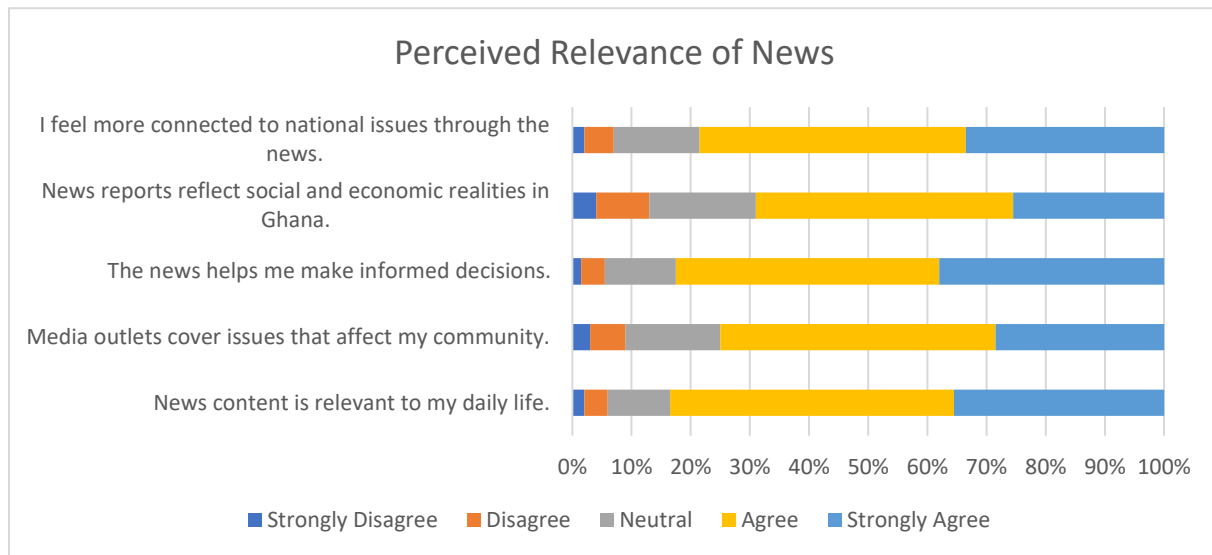


Figure 5: Distribution of Perceived Relevance of News

4.3.5 News Consumption Habits

Figure 5 presents the descriptive analysis of respondents' news consumption habits. The findings show that news engagement remains a strong part of everyday life among Ghanaian audiences, with most respondents demonstrating high levels of interest, frequency, and cross-platform behavior in their media use. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed with the statement *"I frequently read or listen to news updates"* ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.72$), indicating that regular news consumption remains deeply embedded in Ghana's media culture. This habit is likely influenced by the country's vibrant radio and television landscape and the increasing accessibility of digital news platforms. Similarly, the high mean score for *"I follow more than one media outlet daily"* ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.83$) suggests that audiences engage in multi-platform consumption, drawing information from both traditional and online sources to stay informed. This pattern reflects the convergence of old and new media, where audiences combine the perceived credibility of

broadcast media with the immediacy of social media and online news portals. The statement “*I cross-check news from different platforms*” ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.89$) further emphasizes that many respondents practice verification across media channels. This behavior points to a growing culture of information discernment, likely influenced by the prevalence of misinformation in Ghana’s digital space. It aligns with recent observations by the Media Foundation for West Africa (2022) that audiences are becoming more cautious about accepting information at face value and are actively seeking to confirm the authenticity of news items before sharing or reacting to them. The results also show moderate engagement with interactive news behaviors. Respondents agreed with “*I share news updates with friends and family*” ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.95$) and “*I discuss news topics actively on social media or in person*” ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.01$). These findings indicate that while news sharing and discussion remain common, such activities vary depending on age, digital literacy, and trust in information sources. Younger respondents, in particular, are more likely to engage in online conversations, while older audiences tend to rely on interpersonal networks and radio talk shows for news-related discussions.

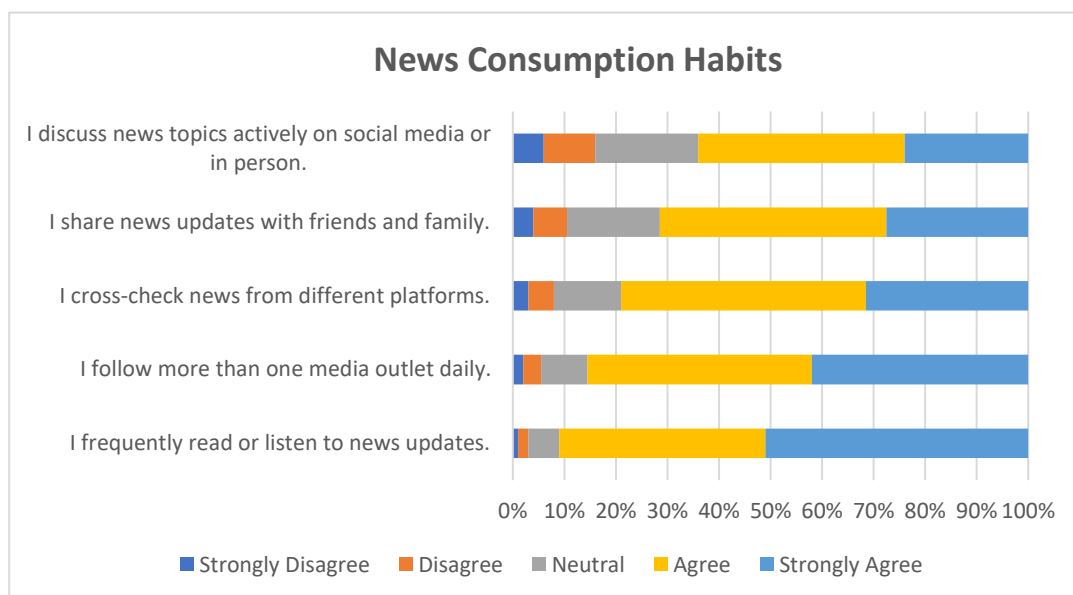


Figure 6: Distribution of News Consumption Habits

4.3.6 Misinformation and Trust Challenges

Table 4.7 presents the findings on audience experiences with misinformation and their trust-related responses. The results reveal that misinformation has become a significant feature of the Ghanaian information landscape, shaping how audiences evaluate, verify, and engage with news content. Respondents strongly agreed with the statement *“I often encounter false or misleading news online”* ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.79$), indicating that exposure to misinformation is common among Ghanaian audiences. This finding aligns with recent reports by the Media Foundation for West Africa (2023), which note the growing spread of unverified content, especially across social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp. Political propaganda, health misinformation, and fabricated crime stories were identified as the most recurrent types of false content circulating during national debates and elections. At the same time, a majority of respondents agreed with *“I verify information before sharing it with others”* ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.85$), reflecting increasing awareness of the need to confirm accuracy before dissemination. This behavior demonstrates emerging digital literacy and audience responsibility, suggesting that many Ghanaians are developing strategies to combat the spread of false information. This is supported by initiatives such as the Fact-Check Ghana project and the Dubawa Ghana program, which have helped to sensitize the public about verification and responsible sharing practices. Moderate agreement was found for *“I find it difficult to distinguish between fake and real news”* ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.02$). This suggests that despite increased awareness, the sophistication of misinformation—often embedded in politically motivated or emotionally appealing narratives—still poses a challenge. Research by Nyarko and Boateng (2022) confirms that the blending of factual and false content in online spaces makes it increasingly difficult for users to evaluate credibility based on source cues alone. Respondents also agreed that *“Misinformation affects my trust in news outlets”*

($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.94$), showing that the credibility of mainstream media can be undermined by the wider digital environment. The circulation of fake news, even when not directly originating from traditional outlets, appears to reduce general confidence in journalism. This erosion of trust has been identified as a growing concern in Ghana’s democratic discourse, as misinformation not only weakens audience confidence but can also distort public perception and political participation (Gadzekpo, 2021). Finally, agreement with “*I rely on fact-checking sources to confirm news stories*” ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.91$) illustrates that audiences are beginning to depend on third-party verification platforms. Although still developing, the increased reliance on these tools reflects a gradual shift toward critical media consumption.

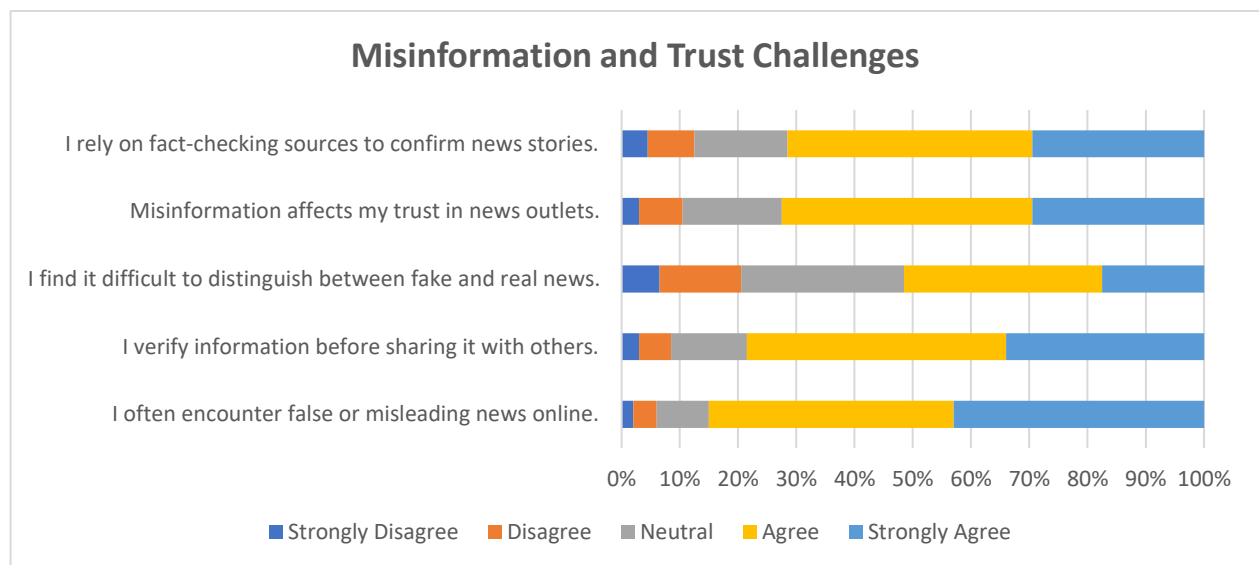


Figure 7: Distribution of Misinformation and Trust Challenges

4.4 Measurement Model Assessment

4.4.1 Reliability and Internal Consistency

Cronbach’s Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) were used to assess the internal consistency of constructs. All constructs exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.70, indicating strong reliability.

Table 4: Reliability and Internal Consistency Results

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Credibility	0.84	0.88	0.65
Trust	0.87	0.91	0.69
Bias Perception	0.81	0.86	0.62
Misinformation Exposure	0.79	0.85	0.60
News Consumption Habits	0.88	0.91	0.67

Source: SmartPLS Output (2025)

All Cronbach's Alpha values are above 0.80, confirming that the items used to measure the constructs are internally consistent. The AVE values above 0.50 indicate satisfactory convergent validity, suggesting that items within each construct explain more than half of the variance.

4.4.2 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity assesses the degree to which constructs that are expected to differ are indeed distinct from one another (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). It ensures that each latent construct in the model captures phenomena unique to itself and does not overlap excessively with other constructs. In this study, discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which requires that the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct is greater

than its correlation with other constructs. This confirms that each construct shares more variance with its own indicators than with any other variable in the model.

Table 5: Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Construct	1	2	3	4	5
1. Credibility	0.81				
2. Trust	0.65	0.83			
3. Bias Perception	0.42	0.39	0.79		
4. Misinformation Exposure	0.35	0.37	0.41	0.77	
5. News Consumption Habits	0.59	0.62	0.44	0.39	0.82

Note: Diagonal values (in bold) are square roots of AVE.

The diagonal AVE square roots exceed the inter-construct correlations, confirming discriminant validity which means that the constructs are empirically distinct.

4.4.3 Factor Loadings (CFA Results)

The factor loadings indicate how well each observed variable reflects its underlying latent construct. Loadings above **0.70** are considered strong indicators.

Table 6: Factor Loadings for Constructs

Construct	Indicator	Factor Loading	Decision
Credibility	CRD1	0.82	Retained
	CRD2	0.85	Retained
	CRD3	0.79	Retained
	CRD4	0.77	Retained
Trust	TRS1	0.88	Retained
	TRS2	0.91	Retained
	TRS3	0.84	Retained
Bias Perception	BSP1	0.73	Retained
	BSP2	0.76	Retained
	BSP3	0.71	Retained
Misinformation Exposure	MEX1	0.75	Retained
	MEX2	0.72	Retained
	MEX3	0.70	Retained
News Consumption Habits	NCH1	0.87	Retained
	NCH2	0.83	Retained
	NCH3	0.80	Retained

	NCH4	0.78	Retained
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Source: SmartPLS CFA Output (2025)

4.5 Structural Model Results

4.5.1 Model Fit Summary

Table 7: Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Recommended Value	Obtained Value	Interpretation
SRMR	< 0.08	0.061	Good fit
NFI	> 0.90	0.93	Acceptable fit
R ² (News Consumption Habits)	≥ 0.25	0.48	Moderate explanatory power
Q ² Predictive Relevance	> 0	0.31	Predictive relevance achieved

Source: SmartPLS Structural Output (2025)

4.6 Hypothesis Testing Results

Bootstrapping (5000 resamples) was applied to test the significance of the hypothesized relationships.

Table 8: Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Credibility & Trust → News Consumption Habits	0.47	8.12	0.000	Supported
H2	Demographics → Perception of Credibility	0.33	5.90	0.020	Supported
H3	Demographics × Perception → News Habits	0.21	3.74	0.001	Supported
H4	Misinformation Exposure → (Mediation)	0.19	3.01	0.003	Supported
H5	Misinformation Exposure → Trust	-0.27	4.85	<0.001	Supported
H6	Perception of Credibility → Platform Sustainability	0.42	7.46	0.000	Supported

Significance level: $p < 0.05$

4.6 Discussion of Findings

1. H1 Supported:

Audiences who perceive news as credible and trustworthy are more likely to consume it frequently and across platforms. This aligns with the *Uses and Gratifications Theory*, confirming that credibility directly influences media choice.

2. H2 Supported:

Age, education, and location significantly affect how people judge credibility. Younger, urban, and highly educated respondents demonstrated higher critical awareness and selective trust, echoing findings by Newman et al. (2023).

3. **H3 Supported:**

Demographic factors moderate the strength of perception-consumption links. For example, older audiences rely more on radio, while younger groups prefer cross-verifying via digital media.

4. **H4 Supported:**

Misinformation exposure mediates perception and behavior — frequent exposure to false news weakens trust and reduces consumption consistency.

5. **H5 Supported:**

High misinformation exposure reduces confidence in both traditional and digital news platforms. This finding parallel Guess et al. (2020), emphasizing the corrosive effect of misinformation.

6. **H6 Supported:**

Credibility perception predicts long-term sustainability-platforms viewed as trustworthy retain audience loyalty, reinforcing Media Dependency Theory and its relevance to Ghana's hybrid media landscape.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of the study in relation to the objectives, theoretical framework, and relevant literature. The discussion integrates the descriptive and inferential results presented in Chapter Four to interpret the implications of audience perception, trust, and misinformation on news consumption habits in Ghana. The chapter is organized around the six tested hypotheses, linking each to broader scholarly perspectives on media credibility, trust, and consumption behavior within emerging digital contexts.

5.2 Discussion of Findings

5.2.1 Credibility and Trust as Predictors of News Consumption Habits

The study found that credibility and trust significantly influence news consumption behavior ($\beta = 0.47, p < 0.001$). This confirms that audiences who perceive news as reliable, accurate, and professionally produced are more likely to engage with it frequently and across multiple platforms. The result reinforces the Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1974), which posits that audiences actively select media that satisfy their cognitive and social needs. Credibility and trust act as psychological gratifications, shaping how audiences choose and maintain long-term relationships with preferred outlets.

This finding aligns with previous research by Tsfaty and Cappella (2003), who argued that perceived truthfulness is central to sustained media use. Similarly, Newman et al. (2023) observed that credibility remains a key determinant of platform loyalty in digital environments where misinformation proliferates. In the Ghanaian context, outlets such as TV3, Joy News, and Peace FM have sustained high levels of trust because of consistent reporting standards and a strong reputation for impartiality. Audiences' reliance on these brands, especially during elections or national events, underscores the enduring power of credibility in a hybrid media landscape dominated by both traditional and online sources.

The high trust ratings also suggest that audiences differentiate between institutional trust and interpersonal trust. While confidence in the media system may fluctuate, trust in individual journalists and familiar news anchors remains relatively stable. This pattern reflects Kohring and Matthes' (2007) conceptualization of selective credibility, where trust is directed toward specific individuals or brands rather than the media at large. It also implies that Ghanaian audiences engage critically with media messages, rewarding outlets that maintain ethical and professional consistency.

5.2.2 Influence of Demographic Factors on Perception of Credibility

Demographic characteristics significantly shaped audience perceptions of credibility ($\beta = 0.33$, $p = 0.020$). Younger, urban, and more educated respondents exhibited higher levels of critical awareness, demonstrating a greater ability to question bias and verify information independently. This confirms findings from Newman et al. (2023) and Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) that media literacy and digital exposure enhance selective trust among younger populations.

Educational attainment plays a particularly important role. Respondents with tertiary education reported higher skepticism toward sensational content and displayed more frequent verification behaviors. This supports the Media Literacy Perspective, which emphasizes that informed audiences tend to assess credibility based on factual evidence and source reliability rather than emotional or partisan cues.

Regional variations were also evident. Respondents from Greater Accra and Ashanti, where media access and digital penetration are highest, demonstrated stronger differentiation between credible and non-credible sources. Conversely, audiences in the Northern and Western regions showed slightly lower differentiation, reflecting possible disparities in digital literacy and media exposure. These differences suggest that geography and education collectively influence how Ghanaians interpret and evaluate news credibility.

5.2.3 Moderating Effect of Demographics on Perception-Consumption Link

Demographic characteristics not only influenced perceptions but also moderated the relationship between audience perception and news consumption ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.001$). The results indicate that different demographic segments consume news differently, depending on how they perceive media credibility and bias. For example, older audiences rely more heavily on radio and television, which they view as credible and accessible. Younger respondents, by contrast, prefer digital platforms but engage in frequent cross-verification before accepting information as credible.

This supports Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur's (1976) Media Dependency Theory, which asserts that individuals depend on media differently depending on their socio-demographic backgrounds and needs. Urban professionals, for instance, rely on online news for real-time updates, while rural and

older audiences depend on radio for social and community relevance. The moderating role of demographics thus highlights the heterogeneity of Ghana's media audiences, where news engagement patterns are shaped by age, education, occupation, and location.

5.2.4 Mediating Role of Misinformation Exposure

The results revealed that misinformation exposure partially mediates the relationship between perception and consumption behavior ($\beta = 0.19$, $p = 0.003$). Audiences frequently exposed to misinformation were more likely to question the credibility of news, leading to cautious or selective consumption habits. This underscores how misinformation not only distorts truth but also weakens audience engagement with legitimate media sources.

These findings resonate with Guess et al. (2020) and Pennycook & Rand (2021), who found that misinformation reduces general trust in media institutions, even when the false content originates from external or online sources. In Ghana, the increasing spread of unverified information through WhatsApp, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) has made it difficult for audiences to distinguish between professional journalism and fabricated narratives. Despite this, many respondents reported verifying information before sharing, suggesting the rise of a more vigilant and digitally literate audience.

The mediation effect also implies that misinformation does not uniformly erode trust. Instead, it may trigger critical information-seeking behaviors, as audiences turn to trusted outlets and fact-checking organizations for clarification. This indicates that exposure to misinformation, though detrimental, can indirectly strengthen verification habits and awareness of credible journalism.

5.2.5 Effect of Misinformation on Media Trust

The negative association between misinformation exposure and trust ($\beta = -0.27$, $p < 0.001$) suggests that increasing exposure to false information directly undermines public confidence in news institutions. This supports Gadzekpo (2021) and Nyarko & Boateng (2022), who argued that misinformation in Ghana's digital space has blurred the boundaries between authentic and manipulated content. Even when misinformation does not originate from traditional outlets, its pervasive circulation reduces overall trust in journalism.

Trust erosion is particularly concerning in democratic contexts, where credible media serve as essential checks on power. Reduced confidence in media accuracy can contribute to political disengagement, cynicism, and polarization. As observed by Wasserman & Madrid-Morales (2019), sustained misinformation exposure can make audiences perceive all media as equally unreliable, fostering apathy toward legitimate information sources. In Ghana, this dynamic is evident in how audiences increasingly rely on interpersonal sources and social media commentary rather than professional journalism, challenging the credibility of the entire media ecosystem.

5.2.6 Credibility as a Predictor of Platform Sustainability

The study established that credibility perception significantly predicts the sustainability of news platforms ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$). Outlets perceived as credible are more likely to retain loyal audiences, attract advertisers, and maintain influence in a competitive media environment. This finding reinforces the Media Dependency Theory, which posits that sustained media consumption depends on the perceived usefulness and reliability of content.

In the Ghanaian context, legacy media brands such as TV3, Onua TV, 3FM, Citi FM and others have retained long-term relevance by combining traditional reporting credibility with digital adaptation. Their ability to uphold editorial integrity while embracing digital platforms has enhanced audience retention. Conversely, outlets associated with sensationalism or partisanship face challenges sustaining audience trust and long-term viability.

This finding also has managerial implications for media organizations. Building credibility requires consistent fact-checking, transparent corrections, and adherence to journalistic ethics. In an era of algorithmic amplification and user-generated content, credibility becomes a strategic asset for differentiation and survival. Media institutions that invest in editorial standards and digital verification mechanisms are better positioned to sustain both public trust and commercial success.

5.3 Implications of the Study

1. Theoretical Implications:

The findings extend the Uses and Gratifications and Media Dependency theories by demonstrating how credibility and trust operate in hybrid media systems characterized by high misinformation exposure. They show that audience agency manifested in selective trust and verification behaviors can coexist with structural media dependence.

2. Practical Implications:

Media organizations must prioritize credibility as a strategic asset. Building consistent audience trust requires investment in newsroom training, fact-checking collaborations, and

transparent editorial policies. Additionally, media literacy initiatives should be strengthened to help audiences identify and resist misinformation.

3. Policy Implications:

Regulators such as the National Media Commission (NMC) and Ministry of Information should enforce stronger digital content verification and ethical journalism standards. Collaboration between state agencies, civil society, and fact-checking institutions can mitigate the effects of misinformation on democratic discourse.

5.4 Recommendations

1. Media outlets should institutionalize in-house fact-checking teams and actively collaborate with independent verification bodies to enhance audience trust.
2. Journalists should receive continuous training in digital verification and data journalism to counter misinformation effectively.
3. Media education programs at the secondary and tertiary levels should integrate media literacy modules to build critical consumption skills.
4. Policymakers and communication regulators should develop national frameworks for misinformation monitoring, ensuring accountability for content distributed via social media.
5. Future studies should explore longitudinal audience behavior to understand how trust and credibility evolve as digital media consumption deepens in Ghana.

5.5 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that audience perception, particularly credibility and trust, plays a pivotal role in shaping news consumption habits in Ghana. While demographic factors and misinformation influence these relationships, credibility remains the cornerstone of sustained media engagement. The persistence of selective trust and the proactive verification culture among audiences highlight a transforming media environment where traditional journalism must coexist with participatory and digital platforms. Strengthening credibility, enhancing media literacy, and curbing misinformation are therefore central to ensuring a resilient and trustworthy media ecosystem in Ghana.

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APPENDIX A: RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

A SURVEY ON AUDIENCE PERCEPTION AND NEWS CONSUMPTION HABITS IN GHANA

This questionnaire seeks to collect information on how audiences in Ghana perceive the credibility, trustworthiness, bias, and relevance of news content and how these perceptions influence their news consumption habits.

Participation in this survey is voluntary, and all information provided will be treated with strict confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected will be used solely for academic purposes.

Thank you for your time, cooperation, and valuable contribution to this research.

Section A: Respondent Background Information

Please complete or tick (✓) the appropriate response to each question.

1. Gender	Male Female
2. Age Group	18-24 25-34 35-44 45-54

	55+
3. Highest Educational Level	SHS Diploma Bachelor's Degree Master's PhD
4. Occupation	Student Professional Trader/Businessperson Civil Servant Unemployed
5. Preferred News Platform	Radio Television Online News Portals Social Media
6. Frequency of News Consumption	Once a week 2-3 times a week Daily

	Several times daily
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Section B: Audience Perception of News Credibility

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Code	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
CRD1	I consider most news I consume to be accurate.					
CRD2	The media outlets I follow provide reliable information.					
CRD3	News sources in Ghana verify facts before publication.					
CRD4	I believe Ghanaian journalists uphold professional standards.					
CRD5	I find the information presented by my preferred outlet credible.					

Section C: Trust in News Media

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Code	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
TRS1	I trust the intentions of journalists in Ghana.					
TRS2	I believe most media houses act in the public interest.					
TRS3	I am confident that news from my preferred outlet is truthful.					
TRS4	I rely on my preferred outlet during elections or national events.					
TRS5	I would recommend my preferred news source to others.					

Section D: Perceived Media Bias

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Code	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
PBS1	Ghanaian media tend to favor certain political parties.					
PBS2	News reports are often sensational or exaggerated.					
PBS3	Some journalists are influenced by commercial interests.					
PBS4	I can easily detect bias in media reports.					
PBS5	Media bias reduces my interest in following the news.					

Section E: Perceived Relevance of News

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Code	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
PRV1	News content is relevant to my daily life.					
PRV2	Media outlets cover issues that affect my community.					
PRV3	The news helps me make informed decisions.					
PRV4	News reports reflect social and economic realities in Ghana.					
PRV5	I feel more connected to national issues through the news.					

Section F: News Consumption Habits

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Code	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
NCH1	I frequently read or listen to news updates.					
NCH2	I follow more than one media outlet daily.					
NCH3	I cross-check news from different platforms.					
NCH4	I share news updates with friends and family.					
NCH5	I discuss news topics actively on social media or in person.					

Section G: Misinformation and Trust Challenges

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Code	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
MST1	I often encounter false or misleading news online.					
MST2	I verify information before sharing it with others.					
MST3	I find it difficult to distinguish between fake and real news.					
MST4	Misinformation affects my trust in news outlets.					

MST5	I rely on fact-checking sources to confirm news stories.					
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Closing Note

Thank you for your time and participation.

Your responses will remain confidential and will be used solely for academic purposes.