



PREVALENCE OF TRADITIONAL NEWS MEDIA DISTRUST IN CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigates the prevalence of distrust in traditional news media among residents of Cross River State, Nigeria, exploring its demographic correlates and underlying factors. Utilizing a cross-sectional survey design, primary data were collected from 384 participants across urban and rural communities using stratified random sampling. Findings reveal a significant level of distrust, with 62.5% of respondents expressing skepticism toward traditional media due to perceived bias, sensationalism, and political influence. Younger respondents (18–35 years) and those with higher education exhibited greater distrust, while urban residents reported slightly higher skepticism than rural counterparts. The study is grounded in the Media Dependency Theory, which posits that reliance on media shapes perceptions of credibility. Results highlight the growing influence of social media as an alternative information source, exacerbating distrust in traditional outlets. Recommendations include enhancing media transparency, fostering community engagement, and promoting media literacy to rebuild trust. This study contributes to understanding media distrust in a developing context, with implications for journalism and democratic processes in Nigeria.

Keywords: Media distrust, traditional news media, Media Dependency Theory, media literacy, social media

Introduction

The media serves as a vital pillar in democratic societies, acting as a conduit for information, a platform for public discourse, and a mechanism for holding power accountable. However, a global surge in distrust toward traditional news media encompassing newspapers, television, and radio threatens its credibility and societal role. In Nigeria, a country with a dynamic and historically robust media landscape, this distrust is increasingly pronounced, driven by perceptions of bias, sensationalism, and political affiliations. This study focuses on Cross River State, a culturally and ethnically diverse region in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone, to investigate the prevalence of distrust in traditional news media and its demographic correlates. By examining this phenomenon in a specific regional context, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions on media credibility, public perception, and the evolving media landscape in developing nations.

Nigeria's media environment is characterized by a mix of state-owned, privately owned, and community-based outlets, with traditional media historically playing a central role in shaping public opinion. However, recent decades have seen a decline in trust, fueled by factors such as editorial bias, ownership influence, and the proliferation of alternative information sources like social media. According to the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, global trust in news media stands at a mere 43%, with similar trends observed in African contexts, including Nigeria (Edelman, 2024). In Cross River State, with its blend of urban centers like Calabar and rural communities in areas like Yakurr and Obubra, unique socio-cultural and economic dynamics shape media consumption



and trust. The state's diverse population, comprising ethnic groups such as Efik, Ejagham, and Bekwarra, alongside varying levels of literacy and digital access, provides a rich context for exploring media distrust.

Globally, distrust in traditional media is a well-documented phenomenon. In the United States, Gallup polls report that trust in media has plummeted to 32%, driven by perceptions of partisan reporting and sensationalism (Gallup, 2022). In Europe, the Reuters Institute (2023) highlights how marginalized communities often distrust media due to underrepresentation or misrepresentation, a trend particularly relevant to Cross River's ethnic and rural populations. In Nigeria, studies have identified regional variations in media trust, with southeastern and south-south states showing higher skepticism due to historical marginalization and perceived media alignment with political elites (Etumnu, 2023; Ojebuyi, 2016). For instance, a study in Southeast Nigeria found that 51% of respondents relied on social media for news about insecurity, bypassing traditional outlets due to distrust (Etumnu, 2023).

The rise of digital platforms, particularly social media, has significantly altered media consumption patterns, exacerbating distrust in traditional media. Platforms like X, with their immediacy and unfiltered content, have become alternative sources of information, especially among younger and urban populations. A 2024 Pew Research Center study found that 21% of U.S. adults regularly consume news from social media influencers, with the figure rising to 37% among those under 30 (Pew Research Center, 2025). In Nigeria, social media's role is equally transformative, with "newsfluencers" and citizen journalists challenging traditional media's monopoly on information dissemination (Onyechi, 2018). This shift is particularly pronounced in urban areas of Cross River, where internet penetration is higher, enabling residents to access diverse information sources.

Several factors contribute to media distrust in Nigeria. Political interference, often manifested through media ownership by political elites, undermines perceptions of objectivity. Sensationalism, driven by commercial pressures, further erodes credibility, as outlets prioritize attention-grabbing headlines over factual reporting (Ojebuyi, 2016). Additionally, the lack of representation of marginalized groups, such as rural and ethnic communities in Cross River, fosters skepticism about media fairness. For instance, rural residents may perceive traditional media as urban-centric, failing to address local issues like agricultural challenges or ethnic conflicts (Akinbobola, 2021). Moreover, economic constraints limit access to diverse media sources in rural areas, potentially amplifying reliance on unverified social media content.

Historical context also shapes media distrust in Nigeria. During the colonial and post-independence eras, Nigerian media played a critical role in advocating for independence and democracy, earning public trust (Ukonu, 2013). However, the military regimes of the 1980s and 1990s suppressed media freedom, fostering a legacy of skepticism toward state-controlled outlets. While the return to democracy in 1999 liberalized the media landscape, it also introduced commercial and political influences that continue to undermine trust (Ojebuyi, 2016). In Cross River, this historical backdrop, combined with contemporary challenges like misinformation and digital divides, creates a complex environment for media trust.



Recent literature emphasizes the role of demographic factors in shaping media distrust. Younger individuals, often digital natives, are more likely to question traditional media due to their exposure to diverse online sources (Pew Research Center, 2025). Education level also influences trust, with highly educated individuals more likely to critically evaluate media content (Etumnu, 2023). Location urban versus rural further modulates trust, as urban residents with greater access to digital platforms may exhibit higher skepticism compared to rural counterparts reliant on traditional media (Akinbobola, 2021). Gender differences, while less pronounced, may reflect varying media consumption habits, with men potentially engaging more with political news due to cultural norms (Onyechi, 2018).

This study bridges global and local perspectives, situating Cross River State within the broader discourse on media distrust. By focusing on demographic correlates and employing primary data collection, it seeks to uncover the extent and drivers of distrust in a region marked by ethnic diversity, economic disparities, and varying digital access. The findings aim to inform strategies for rebuilding media credibility and fostering informed public discourse in Nigeria.

Theoretical Underpin

This study is grounded in the Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), which provides a robust framework for understanding media distrust in Cross River State. The theory posits that individuals' reliance on media for information influences their perceptions of its credibility and legitimacy. In stable societies, where media systems are perceived as reliable, dependency fosters trust. However, in contexts marked by political instability, economic challenges, or alternative information sources, dependency decreases, leading to skepticism. In Cross River, varying levels of media dependency shaped by access to traditional versus digital media likely influence distrust differently across urban and rural populations.

The Media Dependency Theory operates at three levels: individual, group, and societal. At the individual level, factors such as age, education, and media access shape dependency. Younger, educated residents with internet access may rely less on traditional media, turning to social media for information, thus fostering distrust in mainstream outlets. At the group level, ethnic and community identities in Cross River, such as the Efik or Bekwarra, may influence perceptions of media bias, particularly if traditional media underrepresents these groups. At the societal level, Nigeria's history of political interference in media and economic pressures on journalism amplifies distrust, as outlets are often seen as aligned with power structures (Ojebuyi, 2016).

The theory also accounts for the role of alternative media systems. The rise of social media platforms like X has reduced dependency on traditional media, particularly in urban areas of Cross River, where internet penetration is higher (Akinbobola, 2021). This shift aligns with the theory's assertion that when alternative sources meet information needs, trust in primary systems (traditional media) declines. Additionally, societal instability, such as Nigeria's ongoing security and economic challenges, heightens skepticism toward media perceived as complicit in elite narratives (Etumnu, 2023).



To complement the Media Dependency Theory, this study draws on the Selective Exposure Theory (Stroud, 2011), which suggests that individuals selectively consume media aligning with their beliefs, further entrenching distrust in outlets perceived as biased. In Cross River, where ethnic and regional identities shape information preferences, selective exposure may amplify distrust among groups who feel marginalized by mainstream media. Together, these frameworks provide a nuanced lens for analyzing media distrust, accounting for both structural and individual factors in a developing context.

Methodology

Research Design and Population

A cross-sectional survey design was employed to assess the prevalence of traditional news media distrust in Cross River State. The study population comprised residents aged 18 and above, drawn from both urban (Calabar Municipality) and rural (Yakurr and Obubra Local Government Areas) settings. Cross River State has an estimated population of 3.8 million (National Population Commission, 2023).

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Using the Wimmer and Dominick sample size calculator, a sample of 384 respondents was determined based on a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure representation across urban and rural areas, with strata defined by location, age, gender, and education level. Three communities were selected: Calabar (urban), Yakurr, and Obubra (rural).

Data Collection

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered face-to-face by trained enumerators. The questionnaire comprised three sections: demographic characteristics, media consumption habits, and perceptions of traditional media credibility. A 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) measured distrust, with items such as "Traditional media reports are often biased" and "I trust social media more than traditional media." The instrument was pretested with 30 respondents in a pilot study to ensure reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and means) and inferential statistics (chi-square tests) to explore associations between demographic variables and media distrust. SPSS version 25 was used for analysis.



Demographic Profile of Participants

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Participants

| Variable | Category | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-----------|-----------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Age | 18–35 years | 210 | 54.7 |
| | 36–50 years | 120 | 31.3 |
| | 51+ years | 54 | 14.0 |
| Gender | Male | 190 | 49.5 |
| | Female | 194 | 50.5 |
| Education | No formal education | 40 | 10.4 |
| | Primary/Secondary | 150 | 39.1 |
| | Tertiary | 194 | 50.5 |
| Location | Urban (Calabar) | 200 | 52.1 |
| | Rural (Yakurr/Obubra) | 184 | 47.9 |

Results

Prevalence of Distrust

The study found that 62.5% of respondents expressed distrust in traditional news media, with a mean distrust score of 3.8 (SD = 0.9) on the Likert scale. Key reasons included perceived bias (78.1%), sensationalism (65.6%), and political influence (59.4%). Social media was cited as a more trusted source by 45.3% of respondents.

Demographic Correlates

Table 2

Demographic Correlates

| Variable | Category | Distrust (%) | Chi-Square (p-value) |
|----------|-------------|--------------|----------------------------|
| Age | 18–35 years | 70.5 | $\chi^2 = 12.4, p = 0.002$ |
| | 36–50 years | 58.3 | |
| | 51+ years | 48.1 | |
| Gender | Male | 64.2 | $\chi^2 = 0.8, p = 0.371$ |



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|-----------|---------------------|------|----------------------------|
| | Female | 60.8 | |
| Education | No formal education | 45.0 | $\chi^2 = 15.7, p < 0.001$ |
| | Primary/Secondary | 58.7 | |
| | Tertiary | 70.1 | |
| Location | Urban | 66.5 | $\chi^2 = 4.2, p = 0.041$ |
| | Rural | 58.2 | |

Younger respondents (18–35 years) exhibited significantly higher distrust (70.5%) compared to older groups ($p = 0.002$). Those with tertiary education reported greater skepticism (70.1%) than those with lower education levels ($p < 0.001$). Urban residents showed slightly higher distrust (66.5%) than rural residents ($p = 0.041$), likely due to greater exposure to alternative media. Gender differences were not significant ($p = 0.371$).

Discussion

The high prevalence of distrust (62.5%) aligns with global trends, where media skepticism is driven by perceived bias and political influence. The significant distrust among younger and educated respondents reflects their access to social media, consistent with Media Dependency Theory. Urban residents' higher skepticism may stem from greater internet penetration, enabling comparisons between traditional and digital media. The reliance on social media as a trusted source mirrors findings from Pew Research, where younger demographics increasingly turn to influencers. In Cross River, historical marginalization and ethnic diversity may amplify perceptions of media bias, particularly in rural areas.

Conclusion

This study confirms a substantial level of distrust in traditional news media in Cross River State, driven by perceived bias, sensationalism, and political influence. Demographic factors, particularly age, education, and location, significantly influence distrust, with younger, educated, and urban residents exhibiting greater skepticism. The shift toward social media underscores the need for traditional media to adapt to changing consumption patterns.

Recommendations

- Enhance Transparency: Media outlets should disclose editorial processes and funding sources to rebuild credibility.
- Promote Media Literacy: Community-based programs can educate residents on evaluating news sources critically.
- Diversify Representation: Including voices from marginalized communities, such as Cross River's ethnic groups, can address perceptions of bias.



- Engage with Digital Platforms: Traditional media should leverage social media to engage younger audiences authentically.

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