

# Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications

Quarterly Academic Periodical, Volume 12, Issue 2

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# Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications

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- **Dr. John Pavlik**, Head, [Mass Media and Communication Unit](#), Athens Institute & Professor, Journalism and Media Studies, School of Communication and Information, Rutgers University, USA.
- **Dr. Adam Pitluk**, Deputy Head, [Mass Media and Communication Unit](#), Athens Institute & Assistant Professor, Coastal Carolina University, USA.
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The ***Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications (AJMMC)*** is an Open Access quarterly double-blind peer reviewed journal and considers papers from all areas from mass media and communication. The Journal encourages the submission of works that engages issues of international scope and that explore matters of theoretical importance across a diverse range of topics from journalism, to strategic communication, to economics, public policy, politics and technological change as they relate to media and society. Many of the papers published in this journal have been presented at the various conferences sponsored by the [Mass Media & Communication Unit](#) of the Athens Institute. All papers are subject to Athens Institute's [Publication Ethical Policy and Statement](#).

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The current issue is the second of the twelfth volume of the *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications (AJMMC)*, published by the [Mass Media & Communication Unit](#) of Athens Institute.

Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute



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### **25<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference on Communication and Mass Media, 11-15 May 2026, Athens, Greece**

The [Mass Media & Communication Unit](#) of Athens Institute organizes its **25<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference on Communication and Mass Media, 11-15 May 2026, Athens, Greece** sponsored by the [Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications](#). The aim of the conference is to bring together academics and researchers of Communications, Mass Media and other related disciplines. Please submit a proposal using the form available (<https://www.atiner.gr/2026/FORM-MED.doc>).

### **Academic Members Responsible for the Conference**

- **Dr. John Pavlik**, Head, [Mass Media and Communication Research Unit](#), Athens Institute & Professor, Rutgers University, USA.

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- Delphi Visit

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## **Stages of Being Foreign as Portrayed in *Daughter of Keltoum and Lost Birds***

*By Fran Hassencahl\**

In this paper, I use the intercultural communication model, The Stages of Being Foreign, developed by anthropologist Oberg (1960) and modified by Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963), Lewis & Jungman (1986), and Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) to explain the experience of culture shock. This model describes the stages that individuals experience when they leave, either voluntarily or involuntarily, their home country/culture and must adapt to a new culture. These stages as described by Oberg are a preliminary stage (a spectator stage), an increasing participation stage, the pit of the culture shock stage, the adaptation stage, and for some migrants a reentry stage if they return to their home country. This model is still widely used by study abroad administrators and managers in corporations who assign students and workers abroad. I apply this model to the experiences of three refugee children depicted in two films: *Lost Birds* (2015) directed by Aren Perdeci and Ela Alyamac (Türkiye) and *Daughter of Keltoum* (2001) directed by Mehdi Charef (Algeria/France). Findings are that all three children experience the Stages of Being Foreign and make difficult adjustments to new lives.

*Keywords:* Oberg, Stages of Being Foreign, Perdeci & Alyamac, and Charef

*“The different experiences surrounding individual migration, and the wider political or cultural contexts in which it takes place, can have enormous practical and psychic repercussions reflected in the various words we use for those who leave one country for another. There are refugees, emigres, emigrants, and expatriates, designations that point to distinct kinds of social, but also internal experience. It matters enormously, for starters whether you choose to leave or are forced to.”*

*Eva Hoffman, 1999*

*“Films, in this sense, like works of literature, offer fictional micro -accounts of coming to terms with the past, which engage audiences’ emotions and invite them to identify with the subject position of the victims. And, in doing so, they facilitate the process of belated remembrance and mourning.”*

*Suner, 2009.*

The UN Refugee Agency (UNCHR) reported in May 2024 that the world broke old records by recording the largest ever number of displaced individuals. More than 120 million people have been forced to leave their homes. Refugees number 43.4 million and over one- half of these individuals are under the age of eighteen. Asylum seekers, waiting and hopeful, are 6.9 million. Media images of their plight show these

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individuals in crowded refugee camps either waiting to return home, emigrate or find temporary asylum in other countries or regions to escape war, famine, persecution, and economic deprivation. Families separate without hope of reunification or with limited ability to navigate the process for families to reunite. Brain drain occurs when those able to leave and by virtue of their economic situation, political and family connections can secure an airline ticket; others move by foot or by local transportation. Issues of acceptance, resettlement, and regulation of this human flow are discussed in major political debates and become the focus of voters' concern in elections in Asia, Europe, and the United States. Walls are built and the paperwork seems endless. Due to climate change these numbers are likely to increase. Individuals who are familiar with the research on the adjustment of those who move either permanently or temporarily to another culture would see those refugees experience "The Stages of Being Foreign" a model developed by anthropologist Kalervo Oberg. This model is primarily used in the communication field and in international education to help individuals, work, study and resettle in another culture.

### Research Question

Tom J. Lewis and Robert E. Jungman (1986) assume that literature reflects life and compiled a book of short stories that reflect each of the Stages of Being Foreign. Their goal was to help people understand how millions of travelers manage their experiences when moving to a new culture. In this paper I investigate two film stories, *La Fille de Keltoum* (*Daughter of Keltoum*, 2001) by Mehdi Charef a French/Algerian film makers and *Yitik Kuslar* (*Lost Birds*, 1915) made by two Turkish independent filmmakers, Aren Perdeci and Ela Alyamac. Charef portrays a young woman, adopted as an infant and taken from Algeria to Switzerland. Rallia returns to connect with her birth mother presumed to be living in the dry rugged terrain of the Amazigh areas of Algeria and finds an unfamiliar system of values particularly in their treatment of women. *Lost Birds reaches* back into history to investigate through the eyes of siblings the situation of Armenians displaced by at first voluntary and then forced into internal and external population exchanges by Türkiye in the pre- and post-World War I period. I apply the model "Stages of Being Foreign" to these two films/stories.

I chose the medium of film because film because the universality of its language impacts a wide range of audiences across geographic and cultural borders. In a world connected to the Web and mobile phones, "communication shifts more and more toward visual language, moving images carry the potential to inform, evoke, cause distain or relief, and, ultimately, force viewers to react." (Kazecki, Ritzenhoff, and Miller, 2013, p. xv.). Films based upon stories of individuals who cross borders and live in conditions of diaspora show situations that are timely and universal. Potentially, viewers may reflect on the experiences and values of others or recall stories from their family's past when they crossed borders to seek a better life. Budd (2002, p. 257) argues that intercultural films can serve as "an intercultural barometer" to provide the viewer "an essentially accurate reading of the state of inter-relations... biases and attractions, hopes and fears, warts and all-- a careful look at the Screen can reveal them."

### Development of a Model for Analysis

The model, Stages of Being Foreign, evolved as scholars attempted to describe the processes of intercultural interactions experienced by those who work or study in a different culture. This led to a spinoff of practical manuals, training courses and college courses, and advice to help individuals understand their experiences and emotions that arise from these interchanges. Immigrants and refugees face the potential experience of culture shock. Sojourners can measure their increased facility and comfort in a new culture by how successfully they navigate those issues of 'belonging' and 'identity' that sociologist Zigmunt Bauman, after losing his university position in Poland and moving to the United Kingdom, discusses in *Identity* (2004, p.9) "But there, in Britain, I was an immigrant, a newcomer- not so long ago a refugee from a foreign country, an alien. I have since become a naturalized British citizen, but once a newcomer can you ever stop being a newcomer?" These experiences of immigration may lead to depression, interpersonal stress, conflict, and inability to successfully work or adjust to live in the new culture, which are behaviors now grouped under the term of "culture shock." Bauman, while experiencing shock and displacement, was able to adjust and find work in the familiar culture of the University of Leeds. Not all immigrants are so fortunate and find adjustment to be a long and complicated process.

The term culture shock formally originated in the field of anthropology and was first used by Cora DuBois, an American anthropologist who completed her Ph.D. in 1932 at the University of California Berkeley. She entered a job market that was not encouraging to women. DuBois began field work with American Indian tribes in the Northwest and later worked in Indonesia. She used the term in a 1951 speech to the Institute of International Education when she discussed the cross-cultural experiences of anthropologists engaged in field work (Jackson, 2018).

In 1960, anthropologist Kalervo Oberg published an article, "Culture Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environments", in *Practical Anthropology*. He based the article on a speech he gave to the Women's Club of Rio de Janeiro in 1954. Oberg supervised anthropologists and technicians who came from the United States to work on development projects. He observed that they often were less successful because they had problems of adjustment to a new culture. Such adjustment issues, often reflected in the American Peace Corps by the participant's statement, "I wanna go home", also wastes the training time and resources used to place the participant, who is expected to teach, develop new methods of sanitation, or help implement new agricultural practices. For many volunteers this would be their first experience working outside the US. Although Oberg applied the term broadly to all individuals who travel and work in another culture.

Born to Finnish immigrant parents in British Columbia, educated in Canada, England, and the United States (Ph. D. from the University of Chicago, in 1933), Oberg was a first-generation scholar who taught at various United States' universities. In 1942, he began 25 years of service with a variety of US government agencies in Ecuador, Brazil, Peru, and Surinam. His career concluded in 1973 by his death after being hired in 1968 at the University of Oregon at Corvallis, where he was recognized on campus by his trademark, a Stetson hat. His final overseas assignment was working

on a project (1959-1963) with the US Mission in Surinam researching rural communities and laying the groundwork for planning projects in agriculture and fisheries. He was particularly interested in development issues and how groups coped with technological change (McComb & Foster, 1974).

Oberg drew upon his field work experiences and postulated that there are four stages in the process of adjusting to a new culture. These are the Preliminary or Honeymoon Stage, Culture Shock Stage, Increasing Participation Stage and Adjustment Stage. This paper examines those stages and the subsequent refinements made by other scholars and applies these stages to the experience of immigration as depicted in two films. Most of the research has focused upon the experiences of those who work or study abroad, members of the military or their dependents. These individuals usually stay in the host culture for a determined amount of time. Other than narratives written by individual immigrants about their experiences in coming to live in another country, few studies discuss Oberg's stages of culture shock to the immigrant and refugee experience (Zeng, 1991; Silonim & Regev, 2016)

### **The Model: Stages of Being Foreign**

Oberg (1960) characterized culture shock by using the metaphor of "an occupational disease" experienced by those who have been "transplanted abroad". He characterized those individuals as "like a fish out of water" who experience anxiety by losing the familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. Everyday experiences such as saying, "hello" and "goodbye," tipping behavior, dress, the customs, and practices around eating unfamiliar foods, and bathroom usages become major difficulties to be overcome. These concerns often manifest themselves in individuals who see themselves as open-minded and culturally aware. They become anxious, even fearful, withdrawn, or complain and compare their experiences with their host country and their home country. They often reject the cultural practices of their new home and "everything American becomes irrationally glorified. All the difficulties are forgotten and only the good things back home are remembered." Oberg wryly concludes "It usually takes a trip back home to bring one back to reality." (Oberg, 1960).

Fellow scholars made modifications, and the model has become the basis for cross-cultural training in education and the military, and to prepare individuals to study or work abroad either for a salary or in a volunteer capacity. Researchers and practitioners come primarily from the fields of anthropology, education, cross-cultural psychology, and intercultural communication. Much of the work in education focuses upon examining and dealing with issues arising from the student study abroad experience and the American Peace Corps assignments where some 30 to 40 percent of the volunteers return to the United States before completing their required two years. Shein (2015) reports that Peace Corps trainers make considerable effort to get the volunteers to understand that culture shock will be a normal part of their experience. Gary R. Weaver (2000), editor of *Culture, Communication and Conflict*, and former faculty member at the School of International Service at American University, indicates that experiencing culture shock and not being able to overcome it, in addition to other factors such as health issues and disagreements with the

managers of projects, are major factors in these drop-out rates. In the same volume, articles by Joann S. Lubin (2000) and Mitchell R. Hammer (2000) discuss the need for cross-cultural training in business. Hammer cites the cost in 1970 dollars of \$55,000.00 for each family that had to be returned prematurely from an overseas assignment. While these overseas experiences are not a focus of this paper, these concerns are still researched and discussed in scholarly literature. For example, the 2018 article by Cupsa, "Culture Shock and Identity" and "Risk Factors Associated with Culture Shock among Asylum Seekers from Darfur by Slonim-Nevo and Shirley Regev (2016) show that culture shock continues to be a major factor in the adjustment of migrants and those who work overseas. Textbooks in intercultural communication continue to address issues of culture shock. The former Intercultural Press (now Nicholas Brealey Publishing) carries books intended to dispel fears and help those working and traveling in a new culture to understand and communicate with Arabs, Germans, Iranians, Mexicans, Indians, and the Japanese.

### **Stages of Being Foreign Model**

Oberg (1960) labels the first stage, the spectator stage, as the "honeymoon stage" which may last a few days or for perhaps six months. Individuals may be on a Cook's tour, fascinated by the new" and often stay in hotels and associate with nationals who speak their language. Oberg adds the proviso, "If one is a very important person, he or she will be shown the show places, will be pampered and petted." With such a favorable experience, these individuals will speak favorably about their hosts to the press and to colleagues when they return home.

The second stage of culture shock begins when individuals find that they must cope "with real conditions of life." Adjustment issues arise and individuals begin to feel angry and critical of the host country and "take refuge in the colony of your countrymen and its cocktail circuit which often becomes the fountainhead of emotionally charged labels known as stereotypes" (Oberg, 1960).

There is maid trouble, school trouble, house trouble, transportation trouble, shopping trouble, and the fact that people in the host country are largely indifferent to all these troubles. They help but they just don't understand your great concern over these difficulties. Therefore, they must be insensible and unsympathetic to you and your worries. The result, "I just don't like them." (p.143).

Rather than owning these problems and seeking solutions, some individuals blame the host country for their problems. If it is not possible to leave the country, they may resort to stereotyping and aggressive behavior toward their hosts. They recall "only the good things back home." This brings consequences, because citizens of the host country "will sense this hostility and, in many cases, respond in either a hostile manner or try to avoid you." Colleagues who have made a satisfactory adjustment may try to help or they may avoid you and view you "a bit queer" (p.144). At this point, the individual begins to experience the symptoms of what Oberg (1960) labels culture shock.

Some of the symptoms of culture shock are: excessive washing of the hands; excessive concern over drinking water, food, dishes, and bedding; fear of physical contact with attendants or servants; the absent-minded, far-away stare (sometimes called the tropical stare); a feeling of helplessness and a desire for dependence on long-term residents of one's own nationality; fits of anger over delays and other minor frustrations; delay and outright refusal to learn the language of the host country; excessive fear of being cheated, robbed or injured; great concern over minor pains and eruptions of the skin; and finally that terrible longing to be back home. (p. 142-143)

Options to resolve culture shock include starting to learn the language, finding the humor in situations, and beginning to adjust the new culture. "You adapt yourself to water and power shortages and to traffic problems." He reminds his audience that the environment does not change, but your attitude to the environment changes. In short, you get along under a new set of living conditions. Individuals gain an awareness that their previous lack of understanding and lack of ability to communicate are factors that can be overcome. At this point, the newcomers enter Oberg's Increasing Participation stage which is a process leading to the fourth stage of Adjustment (Oberg, 1960).

In that fourth stage of Adjustment, the individual begins to accept the customs of the country without passing judgement and begin to "enjoy" the foods, habits, and customs of the country. Oberg cautions that the problems of adjustment are real. There will be misunderstandings and frustrations and "intestinal disturbances." Nevertheless, when you return home you miss the country and the people to whom you have become accustomed (Oberg, 1960).

Additional scholars modified and expanded upon Oberg's model, and culture shock discussions are included in intercultural communication textbooks and in materials provided for individuals who work or study overseas. Kohls (1984), a director of training for the United States Information Agency, trained thousands of Peace Corps volunteers and US. Embassy personnel. He discusses in his book, *Survival kit for overseas living: For Americans planning to work and live abroad*, the stages of adjustment for those going overseas. He lists these stages as 1.) initial euphoria, 2.) irritability and hostility, 3.) gradual adjustment and 4.) adaptation or biculturalism. These stages parallel Oberg's stages. Kohls (1984) notes that in the second stage, "Gradually, your focus turns from the similarities to the *differences*. And those differences, which suddenly seem to be everywhere troubling." This is 'culture shock' and he warns that there may be multiple waves of culture shock (pp. 67-68).

Educators Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) characterize the overseas experience as a U curve with the highest levels of satisfaction at the beginning, after a period of adjustment and after the return home. They base their curve upon surveys of 400 American students in France and 5,300 American Fulbright and Smith-Mundt scholars abroad. They raise the question of what happens to the returnee and their interactions with colleagues back home. This is later articulated by the Gullahorns as the fifth stage or reentry stage. Adler (1975) finds that intercultural adaptation is a transitional experience which results in greater self-awareness and cultural awareness in the unfamiliar environment. He characterizes the stages as contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, and independence.

Lewis and Jungman (1986) add a new first stage which they call the Preliminary Phase where the sojourner decides to leave home, prepares for life overseas and forms

stereotypes about what it will be like in the host culture. Their second stage, the Spectator Phase, parallels Oberg's Honeymoon Stage. Lewis and Jungman observe that the newcomer is caught up in the new sights and experiences and "is not likely to consider how he appears to others during this period, primarily because he is so deeply involved as a spectator of all that is going on around him that he has difficulty imagining that he himself is the spectacle" (Lewis and Jungman, 1986). Usually, the sojourner has a buffer from the difficulties of everyday life. A member of the host country or a colleague, who has been in the country for a while, will take the "Visitor" to see interesting landmarks, recommend restaurants and share cultural events. This visitor is assisted with the everyday tasks of living and may be in a hotel waiting for more permanent housing. The "visitor" in the spirit of optimism and newness may ignore any unpleasanties or social cues that might arise from their hosts.

Their third stage, Increasing Participation or Oberg's Adjustment Stage or Recovery Phase requires "a temporary letting go of established concepts of selfhood and of emotional investment in oneself that has built up over the years" (Lewis & Jungman, 1986). The sojourner begins to size up the situation and determines that it is possible to function in this culture. "Over time, the sojourner starts to realize that difficulties are not deliberate attacks by the hosts and begins to experience a perceptual shift from "culture shock" to "culture aware" (Pitts, 2010). If this stage is not successfully navigated, then the individual falls into "Culture Shock", where the person feels depressed, and begins to withdraw and isolate themselves from others and experiences "somatic disorders that are difficult to locate and identify precisely, irritability, uncharacteristically eccentric and compulsive behavior, and unpredictable outbursts of aggression" (Lewis & Jungman, 1986). The individual begins to intensely dislike the new situation and feeling unable to remedy it, retreats into spending time with others from their home country. Here they find company and begin to enact stereotypic in group behaviour (e.g., amplifying home culture identity) applying negative stereotypes to the outgroup, their hosts.

The Adaptation Stage, Oberg's fourth stage, occurs when individuals begin to feel more at "home" or can experience what Edward Hall calls "congruence" with the host culture. The visitors become bi-cultural or in some cases may even overidentify with the new culture. At this point they feel more confident, have learned effective and appropriate communication skills, and are able to build social relationships. Occasional frustrations occur, but they are not debilitating. Others begin to see this person as a participating member of the culture as the newcomer acquires new tools and begins to integrate into the host culture. The newcomer also functions more effectively on the job and places less strain on family relationships.

Oberg recognizes The Re-entry Phase as a potential problem, but he does not label it as a stage. Sojourners return to their home base country, but they do not step in the "river" in the same place as their departure. Time brought changes to their old environment. This return may not be satisfactory because, because they remember and like the old, and find their previous compatriots show little interest in hearing in any detail about their new insights and experiences. "For people in the home culture, those experiences are remote in both space and time and are of little relevance to life here and now" (Lewis & Jungman, 1986). The travelers again feel like "fish out of water"

and may reject their native culture or feel an intense longing to return where they feel better accepted and understood.

Some researchers find that the greatest adjustment problem occurs at the beginning of the entry into a new culture. Ward and Kennedy's 1996 study of New Zealand overseas volunteers found that depression occurred early in the workers' assignments. Zheng and Berry (1991) in their longitudinal study of Chinese scholars in Canada, found that the scholars experienced depression and anxiety within the first four months of their visit. Although there is disagreement as to the order of the stages of being foreign, there is no dispute that these stages occur for those who come to a new culture for a work assignment or study abroad. These stages also occur for those who leave their home country as an immigrant or as a refugee.

The order of the Stages of being Foreign is based primarily upon observational data and interviews. There is no systematic study of adjustment to a new culture because of difficulties in identifying participants for a study and following them for a year. Participants often drop out before the study is completed. (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Variables such as coping skills, prior experiences and social support networks influence satisfaction outcomes. Whether the sample is composed of those on short term assignments or refugees, and immigrants who are settling permanently in a new place will color the results of such a study (Ward and Kennedy, 2001).

Relocation continues to be fraught with problems for the receiving country and those received. Questions of assimilation are raised by the host country's citizens, who wonder about immigrant loyalties and whether these individuals threaten their jobs. One immigrant family is a novelty, but dozens of them are perceived as a threat. Natives often assume that the immigrant can change identities and cultural practices as easily as acquiring a new wardrobe. Granted it might take a bit longer to become fluent in the language. The stages of being foreign are not well understood by the traveler. Rarely can one step back with objectivity during this experience and say, "I am a spectator, or my anxiety is a symptom of culture shock." Edward Said (2000) reflects upon his immigration experiences and writes, "Exiles look at non-exiles with resentment. They belong in their surroundings, you feel, whereas an exile is always out of place. What is it like to be born in a place, to live and stay there, to know that you are of it, more or less forever?" Belonging or fitting into a new culture is a complex process and requires careful intercultural negotiations by both parties.

Stage studies have declined and some of the longitudinal studies are critical of the U-curve model, but no comparable model has emerged to take its place, albeit Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) offer their ABC model. They report that Oberg's model is intuitively appealing and resonates with individual experiences and that some research supports Oberg and the U Curve model. Both models explain the psychological adjustment experiences of those cast into a new and unfamiliar culture. When individuals leave their home country either by choice or necessity and reflect on their experiences, these newcomers are more likely to be able to fit into these four stages rather than factor out their psychological factors such as locus of control, prior feelings of depression or attachment to social groups.

This paper is not the place to investigate all the journal articles and textbooks that investigate and expand upon Culture Shock. These stages have passed into training manuals and appear on web pages of organizations such as that of Investopedia and

health care blogs such as AMN Healthcare. For the sake of consistency this paper will use Oberg's four stages to analyze two films about individuals' experiences as refugees. These films are *Daughter of Keltoum* and *Lost Birds*.

### Three Directors Reflect their Experiences with Diaspora

Mehdi Charef, the director of *Daughter of Keltoum* (2001) was born in Algeria in 1952 and at the age of ten moved to live in Nanterre, one of the *bidonvilles*, the shantytowns, outside Paris. He received little education and worked as a mechanic in a factory for ten years before his first novel, *Le thé au harem d' Archi Ahmed* (1983) became a movie. Charef received a lucky break when celebrated director Constantin Costa-Gavras was impressed by Charef's interview on the literary talk show *Apostrophes*. Gavras and his wife Michele Ray-Gavras formed a production company to help finance turning Charef's novel into a film. A prize in 1985 at the Cannes Film Festival and an award for Best First Work from the Césars in 1986 established a new career for Charef. Eleven additional films have followed, and he has made films for French television (Armes, 2005; Xavier, 2010). *Keltoum* joins four other films: *Miss Mona* (1986), *Camomille* (1987), *Au pays des Juliets* (1982) and *Marie-Line* (2000) that explore the problems of women in a strict and patriarchal country where women band together to support each other and cope with the situation (Balkaran, 2016).

Aren Perdeci and Ela Alyamac, two Turkish filmmakers, made the movie *Lost Birds* (2015) after they discovered their family connections to the Armenian community. Aren Perdeci, a director of short films, commercials and music videos in Istanbul, discovered that he was a direct descendant of two Armenian families based in Konya and Bursa. His co-director Ela Alyamac had a similar experience after finding family secrets about close family friendships with an Armenian family who left to escape the genocide. She studied filmmaking at Chapman University in Southern California. Together they did extensive research to achieve their goal of introducing the topic of the Armenian genocide on the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the genocide with a more personalized story that Turkish people could relate to (Pambukyan, n. p.). To some extent this film is a continuing example of what Suner (2010) discusses as "the unprecedented questioning of the idea of Turkishness" which is primarily reflected by young independent directors who focus on the representation of non-Muslim minorities such as the Kurds, Greeks, and Armenians in Türkiye.

Classifications are more important to scholars than to the viewing public. Charef and Perdeci and Alyamac create films that could be considered accented cinema. Naficy's designation of "accented cinema" describes a diverse group of filmmakers united by their experiences of exile and diaspora. "Accented films are in dialogue with the home and host societies and their respective national cinemas, as well as with audiences, many of whom are similarly transnational, whose desires, aspirations, and fears they express" (Naficy, 2001). These films are both global and local and their makers either by their experience of diaspora (Charef) or that of family members and neighbors (Perdeci and Alyamac) can be considered accented cinema.

A more useful categorization, if one is needed, is to think about films made by diasporic filmmakers and writers as a way of imagining "home." Moorti (2003)

argues that we can consider diasporic films, particularly those made by women filmmakers, as a “gendered mode”. Moorti designates two ways of visually creating identifications with the homeland. The films could reflect “a particular brand of hypermasculine nationalism” where elements of a mythical past are combined with a super patriotism. In contrast, a feminine mode of film making focuses upon and explores relationships and deals with issues of identity and multiple cultural affiliations. The feminine mode permits the filmmakers to explore “the interstice, the ways in which gendered subjects locate themselves and negotiate between multiple cultural affiliations and articulate how the processes of dislocation, affiliation and displacement are thoroughly radicalized and gendered” (Moorti, 2003). In a statement about *Lost Birds* that could also apply to *Daughter of Keltoum*, film director Aren notes, “This film cannot change the fact that this tragedy took place, but it can help us to better understand each other and to look at the future with hope” (Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa).

### **Application of Oberg’s Model to Two Films**

Nineteen-year-old Rallia in *Bent Keltoum* possesses no memories of Algeria, her birthplace. The motivation for her return is anger and issues of identity. She plans to find her birth mother, confront her as to why she was given up for adoption and then to kill her mother for this act of abandonment. We get no information about Rallia’s life in Switzerland or whether she is employed or a student. She has the means and independence to travel and can choose to return to Europe. The Algeria she returns to has been wracked by a civil war (1991-2002). Despite President Bouleflika’s offers of amnesty, militant terrorist groups continue to fight in rural areas and exacerbate the poverty and isolation of those who have little political sympathies for the terrorists or the government in Algiers. We see this Berber/ Kabyle settlement as a poverty stricken rural mountainous area untouched except for the occasional rebel Islamist soldier who continues to fight in a civil war known as the Black Decade (1991-2002) against the central government in Algiers. After gaining independence from France, Algeria made Arabic mandatory in the schools and began to forbid the use of Amazigh languages. The Berber-Arab divide encouraged by the French colonists remains a thorny issue to resolve. Economic neglect, and the Imazighen desire for regional autonomy brought guerrilla war to the region. Although the film is about relationships rather than politics, it is set in this political context. Rallia is not a *Pied Noir*, although she seeks healing, she has no memories or persistent nostalgia for her birthplace (Hubbell, 2012; Rahal, 2011).

*Bent Keltoum* does not address a preparation or planning stage, and we see Rallia a young bare headed nineteen-year-old woman stepping off a dusty bus in a dry rural area of Algeria. Upon leaving the bus, she makes her way to a cluster of stone houses and meets her aging grandfather, who accepts her as family, but cannot recall whether she was born in the kitchen or outside. Nedjma, her aunt, takes care of her father and is in sporadic contact with her sister Keltoum, whom Rallia assumes to be her mother. Keltoum works as a housekeeper at a distant beach resort hotel in El Kantara located in northeastern Algeria.

Rallia does not know that she was sold to a European couple so her family could purchase a water pump to operate a well that soon was dry. Basically, she was seen as a “commodity” and as Briggs (2012) points out “losing children is an index of political and social vulnerability” By not knowing the culture she also would not understand the shame brought to her family, because she is the product of a rape by a passing soldier. Rallia settles in for a brief period, adjusts her wardrobe for protection from the ever-present rays of the sun and struggles to help her aunt carry jerry cans of water from a distant slow trickling spring. She cannot stay because her goal is to find her mother who infrequently visits her family. The story continues as Rallia and Nedjma make that journey to connect with the mother via travel in the back of pickup trucks, buses, a flatbed truck carrying bags of grain, and by foot. Rallia is driven by her desire to confront and kill her birth mother for abandoning her.

In the Increasing Participation Stage individuals experience good and bad days. Individuals begin to have problems with money and experience concerns about health and sanitation. Culture clashes continue and the individual either copes and forges on or falls into culture shock. Rallia reluctantly allows her aunt, Nedjma, to travel with her and resents her admonishments to cover her shoulders and hair. The aunt’s naivete and wonder at the world outside her home village which a fellow traveler describes as “a living hell” provides comedic relief to their difficult journey, which for Rallia becomes one big Culture Shock.

Rallia exclaims, “I am Lost,” when she meets another European/Amazigh woman from Belgium at a local communal bath for women. This woman has a similar experience and searches for her father who left her and her mother in Europe and returned to Algeria. Rallia has not experienced patriarchal control and the relegation of women being child bearers and housekeepers. She quickly discovers at a stop at a roadside cafe that water is available only for men and she hastily leaves the makeshift café under the threat of being beaten by the proprietor. Outside this cafe, Rallia sees a middle-aged woman standing with a rope around her wrist. The other end of the rope is attached to a donkey’s saddle. Nedjma explains that the woman is being “repudiated.” In this scene, her husband puts a few coins in his wife’s hand and drives her away with a stick. She will be replaced by a younger woman, the new wife, who will raise the repudiated’s children. Rallia is also shocked when she sees a little girl who is not in school but sits selling cigarettes one at a time to passersby. After a grain truck’s driver’s attempt to rape Rallia and her aunt, Rallia abandons her urban middle-class ways, becomes a thief, steals the trucker’s flatbed truck, and drives it to an eventual reunion with her birth mother.

At the resort hotel Rallia reunites with her birth mother, who turns out to be Nedjma, her presumed aunt. Rallia experienced culture shock, particularly as she finds women in these rural mountains have little value except for the labor and children they provide. With the passage of time, summoning one’s inner strengths and support and conversations with old and new friends, most sojourners begin to adjust to their situation. Rallia could develop greater facility with the language and gain a better understanding of the host culture. She has an option to stay in the increasing participation and adjustment stages and become more task oriented and energetic. However, we see her boarding the same dusty bus that brought her into contact with her lost family. Now bare headed and free from male commands to cover she will

return to Switzerland, which she considers her home. Her stage of adjustment is coming to terms with her circumstances of birth and subsequent adoption.

Perdeci and Alyamac while researching for their script found many Turkish Armenian descendants of orphans like the main characters in their film, Bedo and Maryam, who were willing to share their stories. Both Bedo and Maryam were caught up in the Turkification process and spent time in an orphanage. The guiding assumption by the newly founded state was that the children could be reprogrammed either by adoption by Muslim families or living in a state-run orphanage where they would be given new names, punished for speaking Armenian and forced to convert to Islam (Gzoyan, 2023). These goals reflected that Ottoman Empire composed of many ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities should be forgotten. The new Turkish republic was to be primarily composed of Turkish speaking Muslims. Atatürk's modernization of Türkiye occurred overnight with citizens waking up to a state mandated Western style alphabet, calendar, and dress.

The events in *Lost Birds* show a nascent nationalism, which grew after Türkiye recovered from the first World War. The nation, suffered under heavy debt, being on the losing side, and divided by the Treaty of Sèvres into realms to be controlled by England, Greece, Italy, and France. With these divisions, Seker (2023), and G. Emen-Gokatalay and S. Gokatalay (2023), explain that some Turks feared that the Armenians and Greeks would break away and establish their own states. The treaty was never ratified. The boundaries of the present Turkish state were established after the Turkish war of Independence (1919-23) with the military efforts of Atatürk who served as president of the new Republic from 1923 to 1938. In addition to Atatürk's modernization processes such as changing the alphabet and mandating free and compulsory elementary school education, Türkiye emerged from a multiethnic Ottoman Empire to a secular state accompanied by an enduring and strong state nationalism. Koksall (2016) notes that power was in the hands of the Sunni Turks. Alevi, Kurds, and Christian minorities needed to either suppress their identity or come to terms with being seen as "outsiders." As Orhan Pamuk (1997), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, states in his novel, *The New Life* "The west has swallowed us up, trampled on us in passing, They have invaded us down to our soup, our candy, our underpants; they have finished us off. But someday, someday perhaps a thousand years from now we will avenge ourselves; we will bring an end to this conspiracy by taking them out of our soup, our chewing gum and our souls" (Pamuk, 1997).

With an all-Armenian cast and filmed in a reconstructed village in Central Anatolia, Perdeci and Alyamac used Armenian music and thousands of candles that reflect the passage of time and the rituals of the Armenian church to recreate the story of Bedo, his sister Maryam, and their pet bird 'Bachig.' (which means "kiss" in Armenian). The Turkish Culture Ministry General Directorate approved the film and provided a small grant, even though the policy of Türkiye is to deny the genocide of Greeks and Armenians (Witmer, 2015). Donations of props and carpets from that era and stories gathered from Armenian survivors still living in Türkiye, helped to make the set and script authentic.

*Lost Birds* opens with an introduction to an extended Armenian family living in a small Anatolian village. The father is absent due to conscription into the Ottoman army. The two main characters, Bedo and Maryam, live in a comfortable home with

their mother and maternal grandparents. Early events in the film show an Easter celebration with family and neighbors complete with music, dancing, and a picnic of holiday foods. Trouble is brewing. In an Easter church service, the priest announces that the police are collecting residency permits. Prophetically, one of the men in the audience predicts that they will “exile all of us.” When the police arrest grandfather and all the other men in the village, the mother forbids the children to leave the house. The bored children sneak out with their caged bird and revel in the sunshine that illuminates the tall grasses and leaves of surrounding trees. When they return home carrying a bouquet of wildflowers, they find the house empty and ransacked. Thus begins their journey into Culture Shock. They become strangers and arrive at the Spectator stage while remaining in their homeland.

Not knowing that their mother escaped to Aleppo, the children set out amid long shots of the sunlit wheat fields and pastures to find her. At this point they move into the stage of Increasing Participation with the Turkish-Muslim culture. Bedo while gathering berries for their bird is captured by two Turkish soldiers who decide to take him to work in the fields at a local aga’s farm. Bedo not only gets a job, but he receives a new name and undergoes circumcision to change his religious identity. Thus, bringing him into the “Culture Shock Stage.” Later, he confides in Maryam after she asks whether he was baptized with his new name, he whispers to her about his surgery. She asks if it hurt a lot and Bedo answers “Yes” and adds that he did not cry.

Staff members from an orphanage run by a Christian missionary group from Switzerland find Maryam, who is exhausted and hungry from her search for her brother. Sharing their religious practices facilitates her adjustment to a familiar culture with a Christmas tree and gifts, but not so much that she wants to stay. After Bedo joins her at the orphanage, they run away and return to their old home expecting that their parents would be there for the Christmas holiday only to discover that another family now lives there. There would be no ability to regain access or payment for lost properties for Christian Ottomans under the newly established government in Ankara (Kurt, 2023). At this point, the children experience major Culture Shock and would have starved or frozen to death, were they not saved by intervening events and the fatherly kindness of “Uncle Mahmut”, one of the teachers at the rural orphanage. He braves the snow and wind to find them and arranges for their immigration into Syria. Their mother searched for her children in orphanages established by the state and religious organizations to take care of and in the case of state-run orphanages to convert children to Islam. From exile in Aleppo, she sent money to the officers of the Christian orphanage to arrange for them to be smuggled into Syria. Potentially Bedo and Maryam will revisit the Stages of Being Foreign.

The closing shots of *Lost Birds* show the children reuniting with their mother who waits with a group of mothers and black habit wearing church sisters, standing in front of a stone church on a hill outside Aleppo city. Maryam and Bedo can re-assimilate into that Armenian community and reach a new Adjustment Stage. Symbolically, Maryam releases their caged iridescent blue bird, who flies off to freedom, analogous to the children leaving Türkiye by horse cart to find their freedom. They will participate in a new country without their beloved grandparents and father, but they can escape the Culture Shock brought about by Türkiye’s rising nationalism and desire to create a homogeneous society. Yilmazok (2019) reiterates, “Nation

building is based on the exclusion of differences”...and “the creation of a *constitutive outsider*”. Orhan Pamuk (1997) in his novel, *The New Life*, has his main character Osman, a one-time university student, observe a cuckoo clock used for calling people to prayer that announces the time by saying “Happiness is being a Turk, a Turk, a Turk”. Osman experiences an identity crisis and observes that the clock “automatically settled the Westernization-versus- Islamization question through a modern device.” Sofos (2024) reiterates in his book, *Turkish Politics and ‘The People’: Mass Mobilization and Populism*, “Those who did not conform to the idea of Turkishness had no place in the Republic.” It may be a modified adjustment stage, but Bedo and Maryam by joining the Armenian community in Syria will join a more pluralistic society, which at that time was less likely to view them as “Other.”

### Conclusion

Feury and Feury in *Visual Cultures and Critical Theory* (2003) write, “The image is a component in a complex configuration of political, cultural and social discourses and ideologies formulating visual culture”. By looking, “we are incorporating ourselves into a chain of events.” Are questions of history and political decisions romanticized or are stories intertwined with questions of history and politics? As the story unfolds the viewer can see the power relationships embedded in the narrative. The images and themes of cultural and geographic borders and crossing borders, may be an overworked perspective, but immigrants and their stories continue. The United States has joined other countries to restrict the movement of that 122 million mentioned in the opening paragraph of this paper. While sympathy may be fleeting, the image of the three-year-old Syrian boy wearing a red tee-shirt and washed up on a Turkish beach on the beach after attempting a perilous border crossing still resonates in the media. *Daughter of Keltoum* and *Lost Birds* deal with issues of immigration and Oberg’s Stages of Being Foreign in a more personal way by returning to family histories or what is termed “history from below.” Not dismissing the big macro-level stories of economic and political history, Suner (2009) argues that micro-level studies also should focus on the stories of individuals. These stories use film as does literature come “to terms with the past, which engage audiences’ emotions and invite them to identify with the subject position of the victims.” In this respect, *Daughter of Keltoum* and *Lost Birds*. explore family memories that present more nuanced perspectives and address the experiences of ordinary individuals in relation to the journey through the Stages of Being Foreign as they encounter new political, cultural, and social discourses and ideologies that surround the process of immigration.

Optimistically, Weaver (2000) compares culture shock to the common cold, which should be managed. He points out that no prevention or magic cure exists, but understanding the process gives us a sense of control and predictability. Thus, border crossers like Rallia, Bedo, and Maryam can travel through the Stages of Beng Foreign to cope, gain new intercultural skills and understanding and settle in the Adjustment Stage. Viewers of these two films could gain an understanding about the characters’ refugee experiences and consider how they in such situations would navigate the Stages of Being Foreign.

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## **From Knowledge Exchange to Brand Engagement: The Strategic Use of Podcasts in Sports Management – A Case Study of the FISU World University Games Rhine- Ruhr 2025**

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This article examines the strategic deployment of podcasting as a communication and marketing tool in the context of major sporting events. Using a single-case study design grounded in participatory observation and secondary data analysis of Spotify analytics, we investigate the "On the Road to Rhine-Ruhr 2025 – Sports Podcast," created in preparation for the FISU World University Games Rhine-Ruhr 2025. Our central research question asks: how can podcasting serve simultaneously as an educational platform and a marketing channel for a major international sporting event? Drawing on parasocial interaction theory, uses and gratifications theory, and content marketing frameworks, we analyze production processes, content strategy, and audience reception metrics. Our findings confirm that a funnel-based content strategy achieves measurable international audience reach across diverse demographics while delivering genuine educational value. We conclude by examining how emerging AI technologies may transform podcasting's role in sports communication.

*Keywords:* podcasting, sports communication, event marketing, content marketing, sports management, parasocial interaction, uses and gratifications

### **Introduction**

The landscape of sports communication has undergone profound transformation in the digital age, with new media formats continuously reshaping how organizations engage with stakeholders, fans, and the broader public. Among these emerging formats, podcasting has established itself as a particularly versatile and influential medium, combining the intimacy of radio with the convenience of on-demand digital content. As of 2024, podcasting has achieved remarkable global penetration, with the United States alone accounting for 129.9 million monthly listeners, representing 37.4% of the population. In Germany, where major sporting events continue to play a significant cultural and economic role, 22.1 million monthly users (26.3% of the population) engage with podcast content regularly (Gohil, 2025).

This article examines the strategic deployment of podcasting as a communication tool for major sporting events through the case of the podcast series "On the Road to Rhine-Ruhr 2025 – Sports Podcast," realized in cooperation with the organizers of the FISU World University Games Rhine-Ruhr 2025. The FISU World University Games, the world's second largest multi-sport event after the Olympic Games, presented unique communication challenges and opportunities. Rather than creating

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conventional promotional content focused directly on the event, the podcast employed a "funnel strategy," using academic expert discussions on broader sports management themes to attract and engage an interested audience while gradually directing attention toward the Rhine-Ruhr Games.

This study is guided by the following central research question: How can podcasting be strategically employed as both an educational tool and a marketing channel in the context of a major international sporting event? From this research question, we derive the following hypothesis: A podcast series applying a funnel-based content strategy can achieve measurable international audience reach and engagement while simultaneously fulfilling educational and marketing objectives for a major sporting event.

The analysis is grounded theoretically in parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Dibble et al., 2016; Mayer et al., 2024), uses and gratifications theory (Tobin & Guadagno, 2022), and content marketing frameworks (Rowles & Rogers, 2019). These frameworks together explain why audiences develop sustained engagement with podcast content and how organizations can leverage this engagement for dual educational and promotional purposes.

This case study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital sports communication by providing empirical insights into podcast production, content strategy, and audience reception in the specific context of event management. It further addresses practical considerations of resource allocation, technical implementation, and international collaboration. Finally, it considers future trajectories for sports podcasting, particularly the implications of artificial intelligence technologies that are rapidly transforming content creation and distribution.

## **Podcasting**

### **Definition**

Podcasting refers to audio or audio-visual content with a serial character that is distributed online and can be subscribed to via RSS feeds (Linares et al., 2018; Rime et al., 2022). This definition encompasses several key characteristics distinguishing podcasts from other audio formats. First, the serial nature creates continuity and encourages ongoing audience engagement. Second, online distribution enables global reach without traditional broadcasting infrastructure. Third, RSS subscription functionality allows listeners to automatically receive new episodes, fostering regular consumption patterns.

Reception is possible across all device classes, from desktop computers to tablets, but podcasting has proven particularly successful on mobile devices, enabling consumption during commuting, exercise, domestic tasks, and other activities. This flexibility represents one of podcasting's primary advantages: listeners can engage with content without time or space restrictions (Hebbel-Seeger, 2010).

## Genesis and Terminology

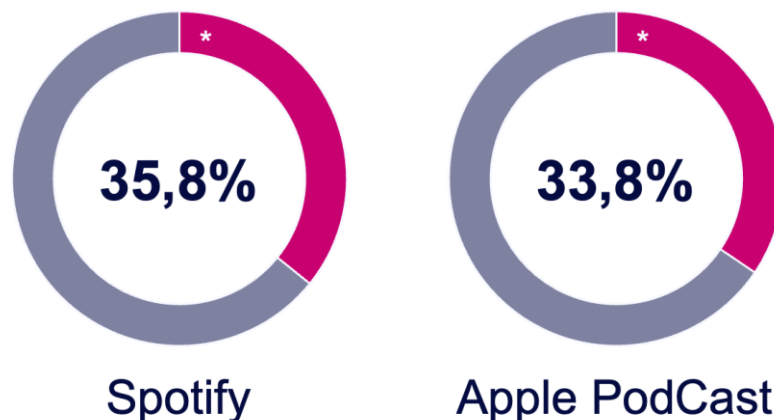
While podcast-like concepts have existed since the audio tutorial movement and the era of portable cassette players like the Sony Walkman (Palenque, 2016), the contemporary term derives from Apple's "iPod," a mobile audio device launched in 2001. This etymology reflects the medium's roots in the early 2000s convergence of portable digital audio technology and broadband internet distribution.

The technological developments that have increasingly trivialized the recording and processing of podcasts - accelerated further by artificial intelligence tools - combined with their potentially global reach in online communication, have fostered both an ever-expanding and increasingly diversified supply of content and corresponding growth in demand (McKenzie, 2019; Rime et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2025). McKenzie's (2019) analysis of global science podcast production from 2004 to 2018 documented exponential growth in both the number of podcasts and total episode output, a trend that has only intensified in subsequent years.

## The Contemporary Podcasting Ecosystem

The current podcasting landscape is characterized by several dominant platforms, with Spotify commanding 35.8% of the global market share and Apple Podcasts accounting for 33.8% (Gohil, 2025). This near duopoly has significant implications for content creators, who must optimize their distribution strategies to ensure visibility on these primary platforms while also maintaining presence on alternative services such as Amazon Music and various specialized platforms (Figure 1).

*Figure 1.* Podcast Platforms preferred by listeners Globally in 2024 (illustration based on Gohil, 2025)

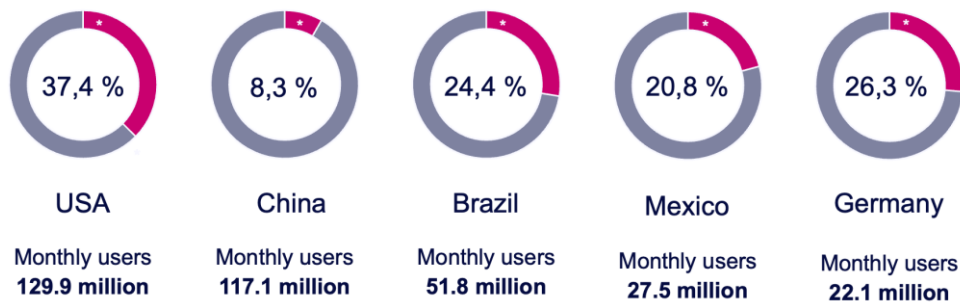


\* Percentage share of the total of all platforms used for podcast consumption worldwide

Geographic distribution of podcast consumption reveals interesting patterns. While the United States leads in absolute numbers, markets like Brazil (51.8 million monthly users, 24.4% of population) and Mexico (27.5 million monthly users, 20.8% of population) show impressive penetration rates. In China, despite lower percentage

penetration (8.3%), the absolute number of 117.1 million monthly users represents the second-largest national audience globally (Gohil, 2025). These patterns suggest that podcasting has achieved genuinely global reach while maintaining strong regional variations in adoption rates and consumption patterns (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Podcast listeners by Country in 2024 (illustration based on Gohil, 2025)



\* Percentages refer to the respective ratio to the total population

## Reception and Communication Goals

### The Multifunctionality of Podcasting

Podcasting serves diverse purposes for both creators and audiences, a multiplicity that contributes to its growing adoption across sectors. From the reception perspective, podcasts fulfill needs ranging from pure entertainment to educational learning, with many successful shows occupying hybrid spaces of edutainment and infotainment. From the communication perspective, organizations employ podcasts for education, information dissemination, marketing, brand building, and increasingly for cross-selling and audience conversion: "Podcasts have become the most used digital marketing tool that has emerged in recent years, and brings the brand and the public together" (Samur, 2021).

Geoghegan and Klass (2007) captured this multifunctionality eloquently: "Podcasting is not simply a new way to distribute audio recordings; it's a form of expression, interaction, and community building" (p. 167). This observation, made relatively early in podcasting's mainstream adoption, has proven prescient. Contemporary podcasting indeed functions as more than a distribution channel; it creates spaces for identity formation, community connection, and sustained engagement between creators and audiences.

Contemporary podcasting indeed functions as more than a distribution channel; it creates spaces for identity formation, community connection, and sustained engagement between creators and audiences. This multifunctionality is central to understanding why podcasting represents an attractive tool for sports event organizations seeking to achieve simultaneous educational and marketing objectives.

Newman & Cherubini (2025) also highlight the rapidly growing importance of podcasting in the field of journalism. They observe that the "shift to audio and video consumption" is accelerating and that there is an increasing "focus on audience-facing

format transformations". Their survey of media professionals in 51 countries shows that "more media companies plan to integrate audio (read articles, audio summaries, and podcasts) into their websites and apps". One reason for this is that "podcasts tend to drive loyalty". This underscores the importance of podcast journalism in the field of marketing as well (Dowling, 2024).

In the marketing domain, podcasts have emerged as what Samur (2021) describes as "the most used digital marketing tool that has emerged in recent years, and brings the brand and the public together" (p. 550). This assertion reflects podcasting's unique positioning in the digital marketing mix: unlike interruptive advertising, podcasts offer invited content that audiences actively choose to consume, often during extended time periods that allow for deep message processing.

### **Podcasting as an Educational Tool**

The educational applications of podcasting have received substantial scholarly attention, with research identifying several mechanisms through which podcasts enhance learning outcomes (Drew, 2017). Crucially, podcasts allow listeners to proceed at their own pace and to receive content repeatedly, a key prerequisite for strengthening self-regulation and self-efficacy (Erabo et al., 2024). This temporal flexibility addresses a fundamental challenge in education: learners vary considerably in the time and repetition they require to master new concepts (Hebbel-Seeger, 2021).

Research by Biber and Heidorn (2021) suggests that podcast consumption in combination with light exercise promotes retention, pointing to the medium's compatibility with active lifestyles. This finding has particular relevance for sports-related content, where audiences may naturally integrate listening with physical activity. Enríquez et al. (2023) emphasize that podcast-based learning "empowers students to take ownership of their own learning" (p. 898), highlighting the medium's potential for fostering learner autonomy and motivation.

Two examples of integrating podcasts into a sports management class (Rockhill et al., 2019) and a sports communication class (Slater & White, 2024) demonstrate the importance of this communication tool in what is called educational learning. In both cases, with connecting theory to practice students showed significant learning successes, better practical skills in sports media and increased motivation through the integration of podcasting into their lessons and projects.

### **Limitations and Challenges in Educational Podcasting**

Despite these advantages, scholarly literature also identifies important limitations. Unlike written texts, podcasts typically lack visible citations and references in the spoken word, potentially making it more difficult for learners to evaluate source quality and evidence strength. Furthermore, podcasts often lack the rigorous quality assurance mechanisms associated with traditional educational materials, such as peer review processes or editorial oversight (Shaw et al., 2025).

Accessibility concerns represent another significant challenge. Research by Chelsey (2021) and Mohale (2024) documents how podcasts frequently fail to provide transcripts, audio descriptions, or other accessibility features, potentially excluding

audiences with hearing impairments or those who prefer text-based formats. Studies also suggest that podcasting may contribute to digital divide phenomena, with differential access and engagement patterns related to technological literacy, internet access, and device availability (Kakhki et al., 2025; Galily et al., 2024).

### **Podcasting for Marketing and Brand Building**

In the marketing sphere, podcasts function as ideal-typical content marketing tools. They enable direct connection to target audiences without intermediaries, promote brand awareness, convey brand values and credibility, and support customer loyalty (Beck et al., 2022; Mayer et al., 2024; Whipple et al., 2022; Lögdberg & Wahlqvist, 2020). These characteristics position podcasting as an integral component of the contemporary digital communication mix (Rowles & Rogers, 2019).

The parasocial relationships that develop between podcast hosts and regular listeners represent a particularly valuable marketing asset (Sun & Li, 2026). Rooted in parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956), this phenomenon describes how listeners develop feelings of intimacy, trust, and connection with hosts despite the mediated, one-directional nature of the communication. Research by Vilceanu (2025) and Mayer et al. (2024) confirms that listeners perceive podcast recommendations and endorsements as coming from trusted sources rather than commercial interests, even when they rationally understand the commercial nature of the content. This dynamic creates opportunities for influence and persuasion that differ qualitatively from traditional advertising relationships.

Target group loyalty in podcasting tends to be remarkably strong (Rohden et al., 2023), with regular listeners often consuming entire episode catalogs and maintaining engagement over extended periods. From a uses and gratifications perspective (Tobin & Guadagno, 2022; for an overview see Ruggiero, 2000), audiences actively seek out podcast content to satisfy needs including learning, entertainment, companionship, and identity reinforcement; motivations that align well with the dual educational-marketing objectives of sports event communication.

Bob & Swart (2010) characterize the FISU World University Games Rhine-Ruhr 2025 as a “special event” that will be broadcast on international and national television, reaching an international as well as national and regional audience. This distinguishes the student games from the significantly larger mega events. “There are a range of legacies associated with sport events that include economic, social, political, tourism, infrastructural and sport impacts. There is a tendency to focus on the economic and infrastructural impacts and social legacies are often neglected” (Bob & Swart, 2010). They identify and describe five different forms of legacies: sporting, urban, infrastructural, economic, and social. Similarly, Thomson et al. (2013) attribute a “local and global nature of legacy” to sport event legacies. They state that there is “a range of legacies ... for the host city, region, country, and event owners through the hosting of a sport event.” This highlights the importance of podcasting as a tool for the legacy of mid-sized sporting events.

## **Theoretical Framework Summary**

Taken together, three theoretical frameworks provide the analytical lens for this study. Parasocial interaction theory explains how sustained audience engagement and trust develop through podcast host–listener relationships, creating conditions for effective marketing influence. Uses and gratifications theory accounts for the diverse motivational orientations of podcast audiences, explaining why listeners engage with content combining educational and promotional purposes. Content marketing theory, specifically the funnel approach (Rowles & Rogers, 2019), provides the strategic rationale for providing genuine value on broad themes rather than narrow promotional messaging, gradually directing audience attention toward a specific organizational goal. These frameworks collectively generate the hypothesis tested in this case: that a podcast series grounded in the funnel content strategy can simultaneously achieve educational impact and marketing reach.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative single-case study design (Yin, 2018) to investigate the strategic deployment of podcasting in the context of the FISU World University Games Rhine-Ruhr 2025. The case study approach is appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research question and the unique contextual features of the Rhine-Ruhr podcast project, which do not lend themselves to experimental or survey-based designs.

The central research question guiding this analysis is: How can podcasting be strategically employed as both an educational tool and a marketing channel in the context of a major international sporting event? The corresponding hypothesis posits that a podcast series applying a funnel-based content strategy achieves measurable international reach and engagement while simultaneously fulfilling educational and marketing objectives.

Data were drawn from two primary sources. First, audience analytics generated by the Spotify for Podcasters platform were collected across the full publication period, spanning February to July 2025. These analytics provided quantitative measures of listener numbers, geographic distribution, demographic characteristics (age, gender), device usage, and platform preferences. While Spotify data represent only one distribution platform, Spotify's position as the dominant global podcast platform (35.8% market share; Gohil, 2025) makes it the most representative single-source indicator of audience behavior. A limitation of this approach is that listener data from Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music, and other platforms were not systematically captured, meaning total audience figures are likely conservative estimates.

Second, production documentation maintained by the authors throughout the podcast series provided detailed insight into workflow, resource requirements, guest selection, and strategic decision-making. Given that the authors served as both the podcast producers and the researchers conducting this analysis, this constitutes a form of participatory observation; a recognized approach in media and communication studies for obtaining insider knowledge of production processes (Schlütz & Hedder,

2022). A reflexive awareness of the potential for observer bias is maintained throughout the analysis.

The descriptive-analytical method employed follows established practice in case study research: descriptive statistics characterize the audience reception data, while qualitative interpretation connects observed patterns to the theoretical frameworks introduced in Section 3. Secondary data analysis of existing podcast industry statistics (Gohil, 2025) contextualizes the case within broader market trends. The study makes no claim to statistical generalizability; instead, it aims for analytical generalization using the Rhine-Ruhr case to develop and refine theoretical propositions about podcasting as a strategic communication tool in sports event management.

## Content Creation

### Balancing Technical and Accessible Content

Creating effective podcast content requires careful attention to multiple dimensions of quality and audience engagement. Research by Rehmann et al. (2024) emphasizes that "to attract a wider audience, content must be presented to balance technical aspects with real-life examples to which listeners can relate" (p. 1). This balance proves particularly important when addressing topics involving specialized knowledge, as is common in academic and professional sports management contexts.

Authenticity, concrete contextual integration, and personal connection through storytelling represent core success variables in podcast creation. These elements work synergistically: authenticity establishes credibility and trust, contextual integration ensures relevance and applicability, and storytelling creates emotional engagement and memorability. Expert discussions represent an ideal format for achieving this balance, particularly when experts can articulate specialized knowledge in accessible language while connecting abstract concepts to concrete experiences.

### Targeting and Positioning Strategy

Effective podcast strategy requires clear decisions about target audiences and positioning. The funnel approach employed in the Rhine-Ruhr 2025 podcast project represents one such strategic option: rather than creating content exclusively for those already interested in the specific event, the podcast addressed broader topics relevant to sports management, event organization, sustainability, and communication. This approach aimed to attract audiences with general interests in these domains and gradually direct their attention toward the specific target event.

This strategy reflects a foundational principle of content marketing theory (Rowles & Rogers, 2019): provide genuine value that serves listeners' interests independent of any single event, thereby building goodwill, establishing authority, and creating familiarity with the organizing institution and its values. The expectation, grounded in uses and gratifications theory, is that audiences actively seeking educational content on sports management will develop positive associations with the organizing institution — associations that then translate into awareness of and interest in the event itself.

## **On the Road to Rhine-Ruhr 2025 – Sports Podcast**

### **Project Genesis and Strategic Objectives**

The "On the Road to Rhine-Ruhr 2025 – Sports Podcast" emerged as an extension of an international lecture series conducted during the winter term 2024/2025 as a joined project of Macromedia University of Applied Sciences in Germany and the organizers of the 2025 FISU Summer Games, which brought together students and colleagues from around the world for discussions on various aspects of sports management and major sporting events. The lecture series format involved expert presentations followed by question-and-answer sessions, creating rich discussions that revealed both academic insights and practical considerations.

Selected speakers from these lectures were subsequently invited to participate in podcast episodes on the same topics, allowing for deeper exploration of themes introduced in the academic context. This connection between formal educational programming and public-facing podcast content created synergies: the lecture series provided a natural recruiting pipeline for expert guests with proven ability to engage audiences, while the podcast extended the reach and lifespan of ideas beyond the original student audience.

The podcast title, "On the Road to Rhine-Ruhr 2025," carried literal and metaphorical significance. Literally, it positioned the series as providing guidance on the final stretch of the journey toward the Games' opening. Metaphorically, it suggested forward movement, preparation, and anticipation. The content was deliberately designed to address both sports management professionals and the general sports-interested public, examining various aspects of organization, communication, and implementation of major sporting events.

Critically, the podcast did not focus directly on the FISU World University Games in general or the Rhine-Ruhr Games specifically. Instead, it addressed broader themes and questions relevant to anyone interested in major sporting events: sustainability practices, communication strategies, regional impacts, event legacy, and future trends. This indirect approach reflected a sophisticated understanding of content marketing principles: provide genuine value rather than promotional messaging, and audiences will develop positive associations with the organizing institution.

### **Dual Functionality: Learning Tool and Marketing Channel**

The podcast was conceived from the outset as serving dual purposes simultaneously: functioning as a flexible, contemporary learning tool and as an effective marketing channel. This duality shaped content decisions, production approaches, and distribution strategies, aligning with the theoretical framework presented in Section 3.

As a learning tool, the podcast aimed to provide accessible insights into sports management challenges and innovations, making academic expertise available to practitioners and interested publics. As a marketing channel, it sought to build awareness of and anticipation for the FISU World University Games 2025, develop a community of interested stakeholders, and establish positive associations with the organizing institutions. The funnel strategy meant that marketing objectives were

pursued indirectly through value provision rather than through explicit promotional messaging; a distinction that, from a parasocial interaction perspective, is critical for maintaining audience trust and engagement.

### **Production Details and Publication Schedule**

The podcast series comprised ten episodes released over approximately four months. A trailer was released on February 6, 2025, serving to introduce the series concept and encourage subscriptions. The first full episode went online on March 10, 2025, establishing a publication rhythm of approximately fourteen days between episodes. The final episode was published on July 14, 2025, two days before the Games' opening, providing maximum recency and building immediate anticipatory engagement.

Distribution was implemented across multiple major platforms, including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Amazon Music. This multi-platform approach ensured accessibility regardless of listeners' preferred podcast consumption method and aligned with best practices for maximizing reach (Rowles & Rogers, 2019).

### **Technical Implementation and Workflow**

The production process employed contemporary tools designed to facilitate international collaboration and high-quality output. Recording occurred in a decentralized manner, with participants joining from various global locations. PodCastle.ai, an online podcast and VoIP tool that captures separate audio tracks for each speaker, was used for recording. This technical approach proved essential for subsequent editing, as it allowed individual audio optimization, noise reduction, and level balancing that would be impossible with a mixed recording.

Local editing employed Adobe Audition, professional audio software providing comprehensive capabilities for refining recorded material. Post-production processes included removing verbal stumbles, balancing audio levels, adding introductory and concluding segments, and implementing sonic branding elements that created consistent identity across episodes.

### **Resource Requirements and Time Investment**

Detailed tracking of time investment provided insights into the resource requirements for podcast production at this level of quality. On average, each episode required approximately 90 minutes of preparation time (guest acquisition, briefing, and questionnaire development), 60 minutes of recording, and 150 minutes of post-production editing, the most time-intensive phase. In total, each episode represented approximately five hours of work for the core production team, amounting to roughly 50 hours of direct production time across ten episodes, not including strategic planning, platform management, promotion, and assessment activities. These figures provide valuable benchmarking information for organizations considering similar initiatives.

## **Content Strategy: Expert Guests and Topic Selection**

The podcast featured experts from around the world discussing various topics related to major sporting events. Guest selection prioritized individuals who combined academic expertise with practical experience and demonstrated communication skills. The international composition of guests served multiple purposes: it reflected the global nature of major sporting events, it provided diverse perspectives on common challenges, and it created networks of engagement across geographic boundaries.

Topics addressed throughout the series included sustainability practices in event management, communication strategies for complex stakeholder environments, regional economic and social impacts, event legacy planning, and emerging trends in sports organization. This breadth allowed the podcast to appeal to varied audience interests while maintaining coherent focus on major sporting events as a unifying theme.

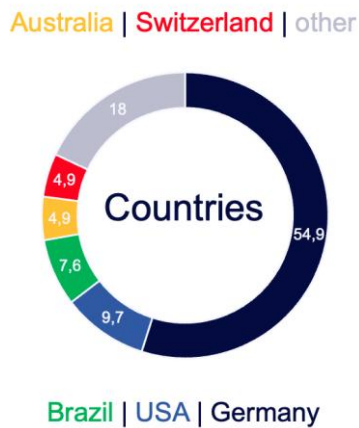
The conversational interview format enabled exploration of nuance and complexity that would be difficult to achieve in written formats constrained by length or in presentation formats constrained by time. Guests could develop extended arguments, provide detailed examples, and respond to probing questions that elicited deeper insights.

## **Audience Reception and Engagement**

### **Geographic Distribution**

Reception data collected primarily from Spotify analytics revealed interesting patterns of audience distribution and engagement. Geographically, the podcast attracted listeners from multiple countries, with the top three being Germany, the United States, and Brazil. Additional listeners came from Australia, Switzerland, and various other nations, reflecting genuinely international reach despite the German context of the Rhine-Ruhr Games (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Listeners of the Rhine-Ruhr Podcast by Country (in percent)



The strong Brazilian presence in listenership was particularly noteworthy, potentially reflecting Brazil's status as a major podcast market (24.4% of the population as monthly podcast users; Gohil, 2025) as well as connections through academic networks and international sports communities. The German audience represented the most obvious primary target demographic given the domestic location of the Games, while the American audience likely reflected both general interest in sports management topics and specific connections through the academic lecture series.

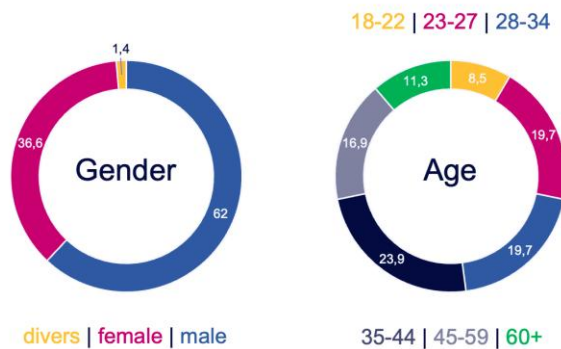
This geographic diversity validates both the internationalization strategy embedded in the podcast design and the funnel content approach. By addressing universal themes in major sporting event management rather than focusing narrowly on local specificities, the content achieved relevance across national boundaries — a finding consistent with content marketing theory's prediction that value-driven content outperforms promotional content in attracting broad, engaged audiences (Rowles & Rogers, 2019).

### Demographic Characteristics

Demographic analysis revealed interesting patterns in listener composition. By gender, the audience skewed male, though female listeners and those identified as diverse were also present (Fig. 4). This gender distribution reflects broader patterns in sports media consumption while also suggesting opportunities for more intentional outreach to underrepresented groups in future iterations.

The age distribution showed concentration in the middle-age cohorts, though the presence of younger listeners (groups 18–22 and 23–27) is encouraging from an educational perspective, indicating that the podcast successfully reached students who might benefit from academic expertise in sports management. The three subsequent cohorts (28–34, 35–44, and 45–59) likely included sports management professionals and engaged sports fans with sophisticated interests. From a uses and gratifications perspective (Tobin & Guadagno, 2022), this distribution suggests the podcast satisfied both informational-educational needs (younger cohorts) and professional development needs (mid-career cohorts), confirming the dual functionality central to our hypothesis.

Figure 4. Listeners of the Rhine-Ruhr Podcast by Gender and Age (in percent)

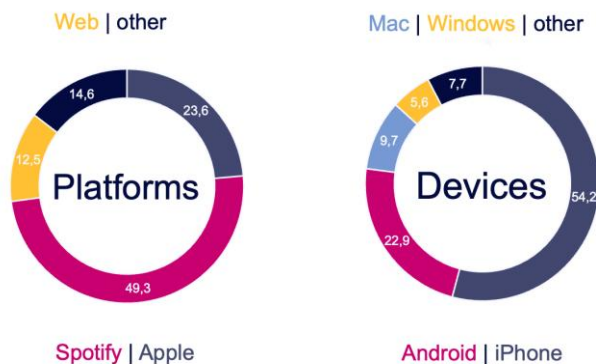


### Device and Platform Usage

Analysis of listening devices revealed that mobile devices dominated consumption patterns: iPhones and Android devices together accounted for the majority of listening, with Mac and Windows computers representing desktop consumption. Some listeners accessed the podcast through smart speakers, reflecting the growing integration of podcast content into home audio ecosystems (Figure 5). This device distribution confirmed the importance of mobile optimization and validated podcasting's positioning as content for consumption during commuting, exercise, and other activities outside traditional desk-bound media contexts, consistent with Hebbel-Seeger's (2010) early observation about the medium's flexibility.

Platform distribution showed Spotify as the dominant access point, with Apple Podcasts second, followed by web-based listening via browser. Amazon Music and other audio platforms together accounted for less than 15% of listening. This pattern aligned with broader industry trends (Gohil, 2025) and validated the multi-platform distribution strategy, while also highlighting Spotify's position as the critical platform for maximizing reach. The strong correlation between global platform market share data and the distribution observed in this case further contextualizes the podcast's audience within established patterns of podcast consumption.

Figure 5. Listeners of the Rhine-Ruhr podcast by platforms and devices (in percent)



## **Discussion**

### **Hypothesis Assessment**

The findings support the central hypothesis of this study: the Rhine-Ruhr podcast, designed around a funnel content strategy, achieved measurable international audience reach across three continents while simultaneously fulfilling educational and marketing objectives. Audience data from Spotify confirm international reach spanning Germany, the Americas, and the broader global podcast-listening public. The demographic distribution - spanning student-age to professional cohorts - confirms dual-functional uptake consistent with uses and gratifications theory. The absence of direct promotional content did not prevent audience building; on the contrary, the provision of substantive expert discussions appears to have sustained the engagement necessary for the parasocial relationships that make podcast marketing effective.

### **Podcasting as Strategic Communication Infrastructure**

The Rhine-Ruhr 2025 case demonstrates that podcasting can function as effective strategic communication infrastructure for major sporting events when content strategy, production quality, and distribution are carefully considered. The funnel approach of providing valuable content on broader themes rather than narrow promotional messaging proved effective for building awareness and interest. Audiences increasingly resist overt marketing but respond positively to content providing genuine insights, education, or entertainment value (Rohden et al., 2023). By positioning the organizing institution as a knowledge hub and thought leader rather than simply a promoter, the podcast created opportunities for positive association and trust-building, mechanisms central to parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Mayer et al., 2024).

The international reach achievable through podcast distribution creates opportunities for engaging global audiences at relatively low cost. For events with international participation and interest, such as university sports competitions bringing together students from around the world, this efficiency has particular value. The Rhine-Ruhr case demonstrates that even a modest, decentralized production operation can achieve an international listener base when content is strategically designed for broad relevance.

### **Educational Value and Knowledge Mobilization**

The dual functionality of the Rhine-Ruhr podcast, as both marketing channel and educational tool, suggests that sports organizations might benefit from reconceiving communication initiatives as knowledge mobilization efforts like classes in educational learning benefit from podcasting (Rockhill et al., 2019; Slater & White, 2024). Rather than treating communication as merely transmitting promotional messages, organizations can position themselves as facilitators of learning about sports management, sustainability, community impact, and related themes. This approach is

consistent with uses and gratifications theory, which identifies learning and information acquisition as primary motivations for podcast consumption (Tobin & Guadagno, 2022): by meeting these audience motivations, the podcast generated sustained engagement that made parasocial relationships - and thus indirect marketing influence - possible.

For university sporting events in particular, this educational positioning aligns naturally with institutional missions. Universities are fundamentally educational institutions, and major sporting events they host provide opportunities to demonstrate this identity to public audiences. Podcasts that bring academic expertise to general audiences embody the knowledge mobilization aspirations increasingly emphasized in higher education, suggesting that this communication format may be especially well-suited to the FISU context.

### **Resource Considerations and Sustainability**

The resource requirements documented in the Rhine-Ruhr case - approximately five hours of core production time per episode - suggest that high-quality podcasting is achievable for organizations with modest dedicated capacity. Compared to video production, traditional media advertising, or large-scale promotional campaigns, podcasting represents relatively efficient use of resources. However, the sustained effort required across a multi-episode series should not be underestimated: producing ten episodes over four months required not only direct production time but also ongoing strategic planning, guest coordination across international time zones, platform management, and promotional activity.

The decentralized production approach enabled by tools such as PodCastle.ai makes international collaboration feasible without requiring travel or co-location; an important advantage for events committed to environmental sustainability, such as the FISU World University Games. Podcasting's relatively low resource intensity compared to many other communication formats thus represents a meaningful alignment with sustainability commitments.

### **Community Building and Event Legacy**

Beyond immediate marketing and educational objectives, the Rhine-Ruhr podcast aimed to contribute to community building and event legacy (Bob & Swart, 2010). The community dimension reflects podcasting's potential to connect dispersed individuals around shared interests, creating networks of engagement that persist beyond individual episodes or even entire series.

Regular podcast listeners often develop affinity not only with hosts but also with fellow audience members, particularly when podcasts create opportunities for listener interaction through social media, live events, or other engagement mechanisms (Schlütz & Hedder, 2022; Tobin & Guadagno, 2022). While the Rhine-Ruhr podcast did not extensively pursue these interactive dimensions (Wendland, 2025), future iterations might explore more systematic community cultivation.

The importance of podcasting as a legacy element has become particularly clear for a "special event" like the Rhine-Ruhr Games. This confirms the assessments found

in the literature (Bob & Swart, 2010; Thomson et al., 2013). The legacy dimension, the lasting impacts of an event beyond its immediate occurrence, represents an increasingly important consideration in major sporting event planning. Podcasting creates enduring digital content that continues to be discoverable and consumable long after the event concludes. Unlike traditional media coverage that is ephemeral or event-focused promotional materials that lose relevance post-event, podcast episodes on substantive themes maintain value indefinitely. This enduring presence contributes to sustained awareness and ongoing association between the organizing institution and thoughtful sports management practice.

## **The Impact of AI on Future Podcast Production**

### **Emerging Technologies and Production Transformation**

The podcasting landscape is currently undergoing rapid transformation driven by artificial intelligence technologies. Text-to-speech tools, AI-assisted recording and editing software, and comprehensive generative AI platforms like Google's NotebookLM are massively expanding the possible uses of podcasts while simultaneously reducing production barriers and resource requirements. In the Rhine-Ruhr production workflow itself, AI already played a role through PodCastle.ai's AI-assisted audio processing, foreshadowing deeper integration in future projects.

These technologies introduce both opportunities and challenges for sports communication professionals. On the opportunity side, AI tools could enable more frequent content creation, automated translation and localization for international audiences, personalized content variations for different listener segments, and rapid response to developing stories or emerging topics. Production time requirements that currently represent barriers to entry, the approximately five hours per episode documented in this case, could be substantially reduced, potentially democratizing access to podcasting as a communication tool. Initial research suggests that traditionally disadvantaged groups, including those marginalized by gender, age, or religion, might particularly benefit from AI-enabled podcasting tools (Galily et al., 2024).

### **Authenticity, Trust, and the Limits of AI-Mediated Production**

However, these technological developments raise important questions about authenticity, quality, and the specific value propositions of podcasting, concerns that connect directly to the theoretical framework underpinning this study. Much of podcasting's marketing effectiveness, as explained by parasocial interaction theory, derives from its perceived authenticity: listeners develop feelings of intimacy and trust with hosts as real individuals. If AI-generated or heavily AI-mediated content becomes prevalent, audiences may perceive artificiality and lose the very trust that makes parasocial influence possible (Mayer et al., 2024; Vilceanu, 2025).

Quality considerations also merit attention. While AI tools reduce production time, they do not automatically ensure substantive content, insightful analysis, or compelling narrative. The danger exists that lowered barriers to podcast creation could

lead to a proliferation of low-quality content that undermines the medium's credibility. Sports organizations committed to thought leadership and meaningful stakeholder engagement should therefore approach AI tools strategically: using them to enhance efficiency in tasks such as audio editing, transcription, translation, and distribution, while preserving the human expert conversations that constitute the medium's distinctive appeal and educational value.

### Strategic Recommendations for Sports Organizations

Based on the Rhine-Ruhr podcast project experience and the theoretical frameworks applied in this study, the following strategic recommendations emerge for sports organizations considering podcast initiatives:

- **Commit to a clear research or communication objective.** Whether educational, marketing-oriented, or both, a clearly defined purpose guides all subsequent decisions about content, format, and audience targeting.
- **Adopt the funnel content strategy.** Provide substantive expert content on themes broader than the specific event. This builds audience trust and parasocial relationships that make indirect marketing influence possible and more durable.
- **Ground content in theoretical frameworks.** Applying uses and gratifications and parasocial interaction principles to content planning helps ensure that episodes meet genuine audience motivations, sustaining engagement across a series.
- **Commit to consistent quality and schedule.** Podcasting success depends on building regular audience relationships through reliable, high-quality content delivered on a consistent schedule.
- **Leverage expert networks strategically.** Identify and engage experts who combine specialized knowledge with communication skills and authentic passion for their topics. International expert networks provide diverse perspectives while building global connections.
- **Implement multi-platform distribution.** Ensure content is accessible across major podcast platforms, particularly Spotify and Apple Podcasts.
- **Measure and assess systematically.** Track audience metrics, engagement patterns, and qualitative feedback. Use these data to refine content strategy and demonstrate value to organizational leadership.
- **Explore AI tools judiciously.** Use AI to enhance efficiency in production and distribution while preserving the human authenticity that makes podcasting effective for building trust.
- **Consider accessibility proactively.** Provide transcripts, show notes, and other accessibility features to ensure inclusive access to content.

## Conclusion

This study sets out to examine how podcasting can be strategically employed as both an educational tool and a marketing channel in the context of a major international sporting event. The central hypothesis, that a funnel-based content strategy achieves measurable international reach while simultaneously fulfilling educational and marketing objectives, is supported by the evidence from the "On the Road to Rhine-Ruhr 2025 – Sports Podcast" case.

Four key empirical findings emerge. First, high-quality podcast production requires substantial but manageable resource commitments; approximately five hours per episode for planning, recording, and post-production. Second, international collaboration is feasible using contemporary online recording tools, enabling global expert participation without travel requirements. Third, audience reception data confirm genuine international reach, with listeners spanning multiple continents and demographic segments. Fourth, dual educational and marketing functionality created value for multiple stakeholder groups simultaneously, as evidenced by the demographic spread consistent with both learning-oriented and professionally engaged audiences.

Theoretically, the case validates the explanatory power of parasocial interaction theory, uses and gratifications theory, and content marketing frameworks as applied to sports event communication. The Rhine-Ruhr podcast demonstrates that audiences build trust and engagement with content that provides genuine value and that this trust can be channeled, indirectly, into awareness of and positive association with a specific event. The funnel strategy operationalizes this theoretical insight in a practically viable production format.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The single-case design limits generalizability, and the authors' dual role as producers and researchers introduces observer bias that reflexive practice only partially mitigates. The reliance on Spotify analytics means that listener data from other platforms were not fully captured, leading to conservative audience estimates. Future research should apply comparable case study designs to other major sporting events and explore audience reception through mixed methods that include direct listener surveys or interviews.

Looking forward, artificial intelligence technologies promise to transform podcasting production and distribution while raising important questions about authenticity and trust; the very foundations of parasocial influence. Sports organizations should approach these technologies strategically, using AI to enhance efficiency in production tasks while preserving the human expert conversations that constitute podcasting's distinctive educational and relational value.

As major sporting events face increasing expectations for transparency, sustainability, and stakeholder engagement, sophisticated communication strategies become ever more essential. Podcasting represents a valuable, resource-efficient tool in the contemporary sports communication toolkit; particularly when deployed with clear strategic objectives, theoretical grounding, and genuine orientation toward providing audience value. The Rhine-Ruhr 2025 experience demonstrates that thoughtful podcast initiatives can contribute meaningfully to event success, institutional reputation, and the broader project of responsible sports management.

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## **Safety and Security Concerns of Journalists during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh**

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused increased safety and security challenges for journalists around the globe. However, in many developing nations, like *Bangladesh*, there is a dearth of knowledge regarding these adverse consequences of the journalism profession. This study intends to explore the safety and security issues faced by journalists in covering the COVID-19 pandemic for major newspapers, radio stations, television channels, and news portals. A total of sixty In-depth interviews (IDIs) using a semi-structured interview questionnaire and two Focus group discussions were conducted among journalists in person interview questionnaire and two Focus group discussions were conducted among journalists in-person in sixteen districts under two divisions of Bangladesh. The data were audio taped, transcribed, and later analysed utilizing the hierarchy of influence model. The study revealed four major dimensions of journalists such as physical, psychological, digital, and financial safety concerns. The data showed that most journalists faced financial hardship and mental distress due to a lack of regular salary, health insurance, and fear of infection and prosecution under the *Digital Security Act for news reporting*. They also suffered from obtaining safety equipment such as personal safety equipment (PPE), hand sanitizer and facemasks. The data indicate that, several safety and security challenges impacted news coverage and the overall state of journalism in Bangladesh during COVID-19 pandemic.

*Keywords:* COVID-19 pandemic, safety and security, journalists, Bangladesh

### **Safety and Security of Journalists amid the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh**

Safety and security issues have long been a topic of discussion among researchers and practitioners of journalism. The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened the issue of how journalists can serve their important role of providing the public with reliable information in times of crisis, with a significant risk to their own lives and health. The information that the reporters were reporting could save people's lives by telling them where infections were happening, which hospitals and clinics were coping, and which were overwhelmed by cases. State lockdowns especially hampered print publications, which interrupted or stopped their production and distribution for long periods. This brought even more people to the internet, which was often now their only source of information.

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Journalists did not rely solely on digital platforms to fulfil their professional responsibilities. Even as much of the world remained under lockdown, they continued to work in the field to gather news and provide timely information to the public. In this context, at least 400 journalists died from COVID-19 from the beginning of 2020 to September 2020 in 50 different nations around the world including Bangladesh (Press Emblem Campaign, 2020). In Bangladesh, 25 journalists died from COVID-19 and around 750 journalists and media professionals from 162 national and local media outlets became infected with the coronavirus while working as front-line reporters (Swapan, 2020). A total of 76 per cent of Bangladeshi journalists worked through the COVID-19 pandemic without health insurance (South Asia Center for Media in Development, 2020) and 33 per cent of them were forced to work without personal protective equipment (PPE) (Bangla Tribune, 2020). As a result of inadequate security, 21 journalists died from suspected COVID-19 infection (Uddin and Rigby, 2020). Ahmed (2020) notes challenges to press freedom during the pandemic for covering corruption and criticizing powerful politicians. Reporters Without Borders called for the dismissal of charges against at least 12 bloggers and journalists who were detained under the Digital Security Act of 2018 after covering COVID-19 related issues (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

Print media declined as a source of news throughout the world for a generation (Jain, 2022). Yet, in Bangladesh, especially among the millions of poor and rural people who do not have internet access, print media was still a vibrant source of news in 2019. However, in 2020-2021, the print media were hit hardest by the state's response to COVID-19. Lockdowns, curfews, and restrictions on movement made it almost impossible to print and distribute newspapers and magazines. In addition, misconceptions about the causes of the spread of this virus, in social media (Ahmed, 2020), made some newspaper readers afraid to go around in the street looking for – some even to touch - a newspaper. According to Khan (2020), there was a 50–70 per cent decline in Dhaka-based newspapers' circulation and a significant decline in revenue due to loss of advertising (their main source of income). Businesses that were locked down most of the time had no reason and no money to advertise their products. These economic shocks forced numerous print media news companies to close their doors.

Some 68 out of a total of 340 newspapers being published in 2019, in eight Divisional cities and other Districts of the country, have ceased publication (Sharifuzzaman, 2020). Additionally, the economic crisis in print media in Bangladesh cost the country 1,600 journalist's jobs, and over 4,000 journalists suffered financial losses in various ways throughout the pandemic crisis (Antara, 2020). Antara (2020) described getting correct information while maintaining safety and security for journalists during the pandemic as a "huge difficulty": she thought it was possible that many print media journalists would leave the industry.

Usually, there is no unemployment benefit scheme in Bangladesh. However, the Government of Bangladesh, recognizing the crisis in the industry and the need for professional journalism during the pandemic, granted 10,000 BDT (approximately \$100 US) to each journalist who had been out of work for at least six months during the pandemic (Jahangir, 2020).

These economic issues for journalists have largely been neglected in the

published literature. Yet, very basic changes occurred in Bangladesh's news industry and in the concept of a career in journalism in 2021. This article seeks to help fill this gap in the literature.

Rangpur and Rajshahi Divisions, in the poorest northern part of Bangladesh, were selected as the site for data collection. This largely rural area probably typifies most of Bangladesh's land area in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on journalism. Big cities, like Dhaka and Chittagong, were a different story.

### **The Gap in the Literature on COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Journalism and Journalists in Bangladesh outside Dhaka**

Although researchers have begun gathering information on the various challenges confronting the media industry in the modern world, the majority of research on journalists' safety focuses on reporting on conflict and war (Ashry, 2019; Kim, 2010; Tumber, 2006) with relatively few academics writing about it. The issue there was mostly physical danger to journalists operating in combat zones.

Journalists' occupational safety comprises personal (physical, psychological) and infrastructural (digital, financial) dimensions for performing professional duties (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). They conceptualize journalists' safety as the extent to which journalists can perform their work-related tasks without facing threats to their physical, psychological, digital, and financial stability and well-being. In addition, Brambila and Hughes (2019) characterize journalist safety as the set of behaviors and circumstances that lessen the possibility of harm to them as individuals and as institutional actors—that is, physical, psychological, digital, and financial. Physical threats also include beatings, torture, sexual harassment, arrests, imprisonment, disappearances, and murder.

Digital threats include hacking and surveillance attacks and limiting or blocking access to information, sources, and audiences. Unstable work conditions put journalists' wages uncertain and make it harder for them to fulfil their obligations (Hayes and Silke, 2019). This condition challenges the operational basis of journalism as an institution. On the individual level, uncertainty manifests in unemployment, the loss of income or position, professional standing, and reputation- or in a less well-equipped journalistic culture, it characterizes work conditions that had never been financially stable (Matthews and Onyemaobi, 2020). Moreover, digital, physical, and financial safety are clearly interlinked with psychological consequences which can be treated as key indicators towards this profession. Concern over the financial instability of the journalists' profession has grown because of dysfunctional media markets, political entanglements, and advertisement cuts. Journalists' safety affects not just only the profession and individual journalists, but also democracy, societies overall, and freedom of expression (Hoiby and Ottosen, 2019).

International Federation of Journalists (2020) identified several significant global issues for journalists, including financial, psychological, and physical challenges. Meanwhile, Jamil & Appiah-Adjei (2020) also demonstrated that during the COVID-19 outbreak, the media mostly spread misinformation and deception since Pakistani journalists lacked strong gatekeeping and verification mechanisms. These

challenges included physical assault, arrest, confinement, censorship, and harassment. Likewise, besides health safety concerns, unstable financial conditions and threats by the ruling party and the government during the pandemic were considered in different articles about the journalists working in the capital city of Bangladesh.

Yet even on this general issue of journalists' safety in hostile environments, there has been little attention to the plight of journalists in Bangladesh. Khatun et al. (2017) are one of the few exceptions to this dearth of study of Bangladesh on journalists' physical safety, addressing the reasons for self-censorship by Bangladeshi journalists. Kaioum and Panday (2012) and others were also exceptions, identifying a number of types of discrimination against journalists working outside of Dhaka (of the kind sampled for this research), including low pay, a lack of training and motivation and negligence on the part of media managers. So the journalists interviewed for this research come from a long history of marginalisation and discrimination, to which the COVID-19 pandemic merely added more burden. Islam and Mahadi (2025) identify political, digital, and socio-cultural threats that Bangladeshi journalists regularly encounter.

Much of this work pre-dates COVID-19 and, while important, with those issues likely to remain with us long after the pandemic, they are not directly relevant to the impact of the pandemic. There were some concerns and challenges of journalists covering natural disasters, which are more relevant to the COVID-19 experience. Ananthan (2017) discovered that journalists in Sri Lanka suffered bodily and psychological harm as a result of losing their jobs during the tsunami there. During the Ebola pandemic in Africa, from 2013 to 2016, journalists suffered greatly from a lack of safety equipment and financial stability in Liberia (Thomas & Senkpeni, 2020; Edimo, 2016), but not in Ghana and Sierra Leone (Antwi-Boasiako, 2017). The importance of press freedom was emphasised during the avian influenza and other earlier pandemics in Australia (Hooker, et al., 2011). Earliest, Raj et al. (2010) researched safety concerns for reporters covering natural disasters in Bangladesh.

Academic research into the COVID-19 pandemic's impact in Bangladesh seems mostly limited to a few Bangladeshi sources. South Asia Center for Media and Development (2020)<sup>1</sup> and Islam et al. (2020)<sup>2</sup> raised the issue of safety concerns for Dhaka journalists covering the COVID-19 pandemic. They did not explore the impact of the pandemic in rural areas as is done here.

### Theoretical Framework

Since journalism is so important to society, journalists work in an ecosystem where their work both influences and is influenced by surrounding circumstances (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). McQuail (2000) and Preston (2009) developed a

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<sup>1</sup>South Asia Center for Media in Development (SACMID) explored the huge gaps between expectations and reality among mostly-Dhaka-based journalists during the COVID-19 lockdown.

<sup>2</sup>Islam addressed safety issues for Dhaka-based newsroom editors and sub-editors and reported that media outlets were taking action to protect their physical and economical safety, such as providing masks, PPE, hand sanitizers and transport support during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

theoretical and conceptual framework that serves as a basis for researching the factors that influence and mould news content and journalism practice. Nonetheless, Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) hierarchy of influences model is among the most well-liked theoretical models. It provides enhanced explanatory power along with a framework for examining the combined effects of multiple components at various levels on journalistic activities.

It outlines the factors that influence media production and arranges them along a spectrum that spans from small-scale societal systems to the levels of individual microbes.

The model illustrates how several levels of influence may interact with one another. The stages in the continuum are individual, media routines, organisational, social institutional, and social system levels (Reese, 2019). The backgrounds, attitudes, personalities, and professional orientations of journalists are believed to impact the individual level of influence, which is the most micro level on the continuum. This, in turn, impacts the media content that journalists produce (Hanitzsch et al., 2010).

The social institutional level focuses on how the environment, sources, social institutions, etc., shape journalists' work, while the social system level, which is the most macro-level, discusses how ideologies and the complex system in which journalists operate can influence journalists' work (Reese, 2019).

The hierarchy of influences model is different from previous models in that it takes into account micro, meso, and macro levels. The model highlights institutional environment (i.e., political, socio-cultural, and regulatory contexts), social system, and individual impacts on journalistic practice at the macro level, as well as organisational influences at the meso level.

The model has been applied in journalism studies to examine several communication concepts across the five levels of analysis suggested by Vos and Heinderycks (2015), including professionalism and gatekeeping. However, studies have not addressed how the model explains the concept of journalists' safety and the variables that affect it at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Because it enables the researchers to investigate the factors influencing safety issues journalists face while performing their journalistic tasks in the proper micro, meso, and macro levels in the Bangladesh context, the hierarchy of influences model, thus, serves as the foundation for this study.

## **Methodology**

The study was qualitative supplemented by quantitative data. A total of 60 journalists from newspapers, online news portals, television channels, mainstream radio stations, and community radio stations, from 16 Districts in Northern Bangladesh (Rajshahi and Rangpur Divisions), who covered COVID-19-related news in various media, were interviewed<sup>3</sup>. A minimum of five years of experience with a mainstream media outlet was used as the primary respondent selection criterion. A semi-structured questionnaire was developed in Bengali, and data from journalists in person were collected in 2022. Due to time constraints and to

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<sup>3</sup>There are a total of 64 districts in Bangladesh.

reduce the possibility of COVID-19 infections among respondents and data collectors, the study was conducted in the immediate post-COVID-19 period. The research team identified 70 journalists from 16 Districts, contacted them, and 65 responded. Five questionnaires were excluded from 65 due to a lack of qualitative data.

In addition, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were held in two divisional cities separately with sixteen journalists. Two criteria were applied when selecting respondents for FGDs: one journalist was selected from each district of the division, and participants were selected from diverse media outlets such as Dhaka-based newspapers, local newspapers, news agencies, television channels, and radio stations.

Before the interview began, the respondents were made aware of the research objectives, potential risks and benefits of their voluntary participation and their informed consents were obtained. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and later translated into English. The full identities of the participants in data collection were kept confidential to protect them from retaliation by any person or organization for data they disclosed or opinions they expressed. The project was exempted from review by the Ethics Review Committee of the researchers' university as it was not related to critical issues such as medicine, health, or children. However, the researchers voluntarily chose to maintain the highest ethical standards in this research, for example, by keeping respondents' identities confidential despite their consent to disclosure of their identities and by getting full, voluntary informed consent from each participant to participate. Each participant was informed of the right to terminate participation at any time without cause.

Moreover, to ensure authenticity and quality of the data, the interview documents and FGD transcripts were sent to the interviewees, via email, to reconfirm their statements. The researchers finalised the study's findings only after receiving approval from the journalists participating.

The acquired data were examined thematically by the researchers, who also coded the data and transcripts numerically to protect research participants' anonymity by de-identifying them.

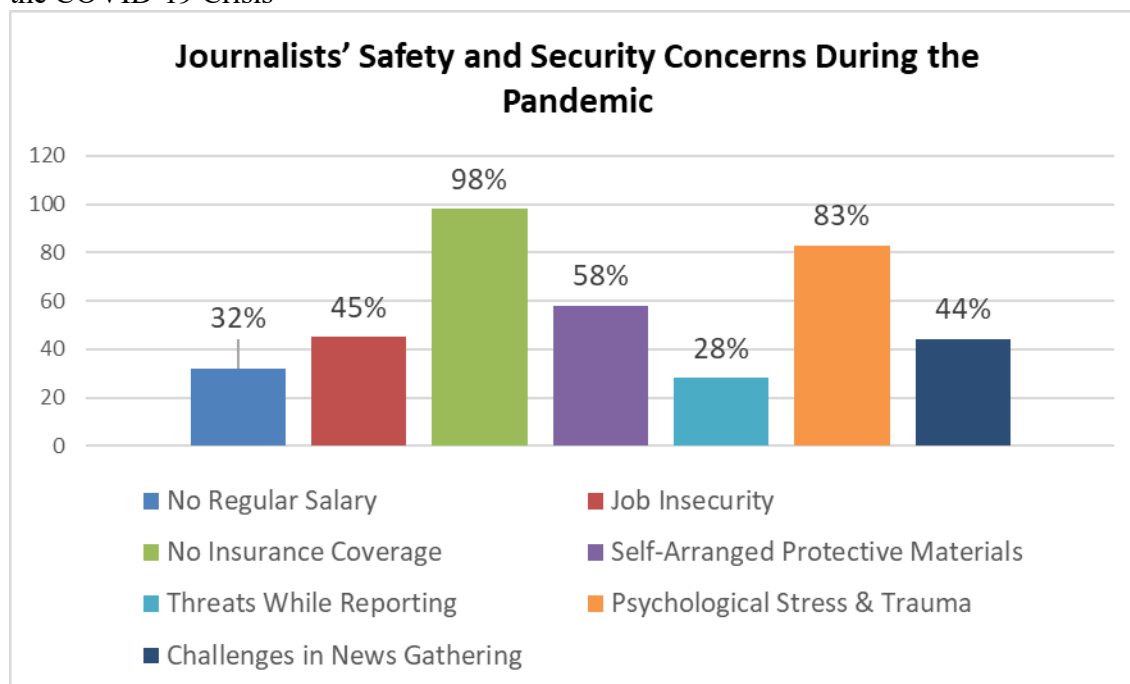
## **Findings and Discussion**

The findings from the interview and FGDs are presented in two clusters. The first step focuses on the sufficiency of the journalist's safety and security, while the second step focuses on challenges to their safety and security, to understand what needs to be done to improve their safety and security

### **Identifying the Safety and Security of Journalists in covering the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The data show that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists faced various types of insecurity, including a lack of job security, health issues, the unavailability of personal protective equipment, personal threats, and mental health issues.

Figure 1. Percentage of Journalists Experiencing Safety and Security Issues Amid the COVID-19 Crisis



Note: Author's interview data, 2022

Most journalists were worried about the lack of insurance coverage (99%) and the need to collect their own protective materials (77%) during the COVID-19 pandemic. A smaller portion reported not receiving regular salaries (32%) or expressed fear of losing their jobs (30%).

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings on Journalists' Safety and Security Concerns during COVID-19

Safety and Security Concern	Frequency (%)	Description/Theme
No Regular Salary	32%	A significant portion of journalists experienced unstable or inconsistent income during the pandemic.
Job Insecurity	45%	Nearly half faced uncertainty about employment status due to industry instability.
No Insurance Coverage	98%	An overwhelming majority lacked health or risk insurance, highlighting extreme institutional vulnerability.
Self-Arranged Protective Materials	58%	More than half had to procure their own safety gear (e.g., masks, PPE), indicating inadequate organizational support.
Threats While Reporting	28%	Journalists continued to face direct threats in the field despite mobility and safety restrictions.
Psychological Stress &	83%	High levels of emotional and

Safety and Security Concern	Frequency (%)	Description/Theme
Trauma		psychological distress were reported, reflecting the mental health toll of pandemic journalism.
Challenges in News Gathering	44%	Difficulties obtaining information, accessing sources, and verifying facts were common barriers during the pandemic.

Note: Author's interview data, 2022

Table 1 summarizes the prevalence of the primary themes identified in the study. The discussion that follows provides a detailed examination of each theme and its significance within the broader context of journalists' safety and security.

### Lack of Job Security and Unreliable Remuneration

Most journalists, 58 per cent of the interview respondents, were on salary, meaning that they received regular payment (whether or not it was fixed and whether or not they called it an "honorarium"). However, 32 per cent of the workforce said that they received payment irregularly. Another 10 per cent of journalists did not answer the question about their payment. One of the journalists said:

We, the journalists outside of Dhaka, got a lump sum honorarium instead of salary. I am always scared: not only of not being paid but also of losing this job altogether. During the pandemic, the most frightening situation for some of us was the anxiety that we could, any day, be told that we did not need to come back again (Interviewee number 13).

The data reveal that 55 per cent of the journalists were not afraid of losing their jobs during the pandemic crisis. That the majority felt job secure is certainly good. But that 45 per cent of the journalists felt that they might lose their jobs at any time is not good enough.

Two reasons may explain the slightly higher employment security and a little more remuneration insecurity for journalists, especially outside Dhaka, during the pandemic crisis. Usually, the mainstream print and online media employ only one reporter in a District, while television companies employ one reporter and one cameraperson for a District. The reporter is solely responsible for covering all newsworthy issues for his/her employer(s) in a given district. Thus, the employers tend a little more toward job security because dismissing the single reporter for a District means no news to report from that District, no matter how important the story. They can lose out to competitors in covering news there and that can also translate into less readers, viewers, and advertisers paying them revenue in that District.

Reporters outside Dhaka have historically been poorly paid and are usually employed informally, without the appointment letter and contract required by the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 and its attendant rights for the worker (Panday & Rahman, 2011), such as the right not to be dismissed without cause, the right to

minimum wages and the right to fixed compensation paid regularly. If the company dismisses an informal employee, does not pay the employee or reduces the employee's payment, the informal employee has no recourse, as there is no proof of employment and no signed contract. This is one reason that the payment is often called "honorarium" rather than "salary", which implies an employment relation with legal obligations on the employer and legal rights for the worker. Worse, on top of this background of underpayment and no security of employment or payment, the lockdown suddenly deprived advertisers of much of their own revenue, as they were not allowed to carry on their business, so they could not pay for media advertising, a major source of revenue for the media. Then the lockdown also suddenly deprived many readers/viewers of their jobs or at least part of their income: they might choose food or other necessities rather than to buy access to news. So many media companies employing journalists suddenly lost large chunks of their revenue due to the lockdown and were literally paying all their creditors, including employees, only whatever they could with whatever they had. Journalists in rural areas kept their jobs but their income became irregular, delayed and was often short compared to past agreements and practice.

A distortion in the data set must be acknowledged. The criterion for selecting participants "five years of experience and employment by at least one mainstream media outlet" means that the best-paid and most-secure journalists, working with media outlets that dominate the industry and also have other complementary lines of business revenue, were most likely to have been selected to supply data. Many journalists, new to the industry, freelancing or working for newer and smaller media employers in the small towns and rural areas, with smaller revenue bases, were excluded from the sample set. According to the Department of Films and Publications (DFP), in 2019, there were 340 daily newspapers in Bangladesh (Sharifuzzaman, 2020). Due to the coronavirus pandemic, only 86 were in business in 2020. Almost 1,000 journalists became unemployed when these newspapers shut down (Asia News, 2020). The reputed German media company, *Deutsche Welle* (DW), published a report on the salaries and jobs of Bangladeshi journalists during the pandemic, finding that at least 4,000 journalists and media workers in Bangladesh were adversely financially affected by the pandemic. Of these, at least 600 journalists were dismissed or stood down (Swapan, 2020). All of this suggests that the data reported in this study might have come from a group who were more job secure and remuneration secure than most reporters in the industry. This would have tended to skew the data toward a far rosier picture than existed throughout the industry and throughout the country. Caution must therefore be taken in drawing conclusions from this data about "all journalists in Bangladesh during the coronavirus pandemic."

Despite the irregular honoraria and lower pay, reporters in the sample set still wanted to stay in their jobs. This was due to the uncertainty of finding other jobs and their understanding that the number and profits of potential employers, in journalism and all industry, was sharply declining during the COVID-19 pandemic. A journalist, from the part of the news industry worst affected by the pandemic (the print media), stated:

I cannot blame the media for paying their employees irregular honoraria during the pandemic. The entire media industry suffered from a lack of advertisements, circulation, and proper government support during the crisis (Interviewee number 09).

This journalist's statement exemplifies the feelings of most journalists outside Dhaka who contributed data for this research. Even normally well-paid and employment-secure journalists in Dhaka often did not receive regular payment for their work during the crisis. Some journalists employed by media houses in Dhaka were forced to diversify, reporting in local newspapers, national newspapers, online, radio and television channels, etc. to patch together enough money to support their families. Some journalists outside Dhaka had to supplement their professional income with other forms of livelihood from business or employment in other industries in order to survive. Furthermore, the data collected for this research shows that the majority of respondents did experience financial insecurity due to a lack of proper support from the Government, media outlets, and journalists' organizations, much like Liberian journalists in dealing with the Ebola pandemic earlier (Thomas and Senkpeni, 2020; Edimo, 2016). However, the majority of Bangladeshi respondents in this research did not experience unemployment to the extent that Sri Lankan journalists did during natural disasters such as the great tsunami of 2004 (Ananthan, 2017).

### **Lack of Health Protection**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the IFJ issued a safety advisory to media professionals and advised media employers to treat the corona outbreak as a health and safety crisis, so that employees could perform their duties with due care and protection from infection (International Federation of Journalists, 2020). The COVID-19 News Organizations Safety Protocols provide practical guidance on how to cover the pandemic professionally while minimising risks. These Protocols addressed assignment safety, hygiene, and mental health concerns, such as managing freelancer accreditation, PPE, health insurance, and expenses for mental health safety (International Media Support, 2020).

A total of 98 per cent of respondents to this research project said that they had been denied health insurance, preventing them from claiming expenses for medical treatment and their families from claiming compensation for death. One reporter, from a leading TV channel in Chapai Nawabganj, described the personal meaning of this statistic:

One of my close friends, who worked in the Daily Kaler Kantha (a newspaper) in my District, died in a road accident while on duty. He did not receive adequate medical care or compensation. His family has also received no benefit or compensation from the media, journalist organizations, or from the newspaper owners (Interviewee number 18).

Rural journalists often cannot access good medical care even during normal times and, due to the sudden overload of coronavirus cases, medical care in many rural Districts virtually collapsed. For example, the news editor of a leading Rajshahi-based local newspaper died of COVID-19.

Of the respondents, only 2 per cent of the journalists in the sample for this research reported that they had signed a health insurance policy and submitted it as requested by media employers. Health insurance is far from comprehensive in Bangladesh. There is no State scheme: the state hospitals are supposedly “free” but there are charges for seeing a doctor’s visit as an outpatient, day-fees for inpatients, and fees for medicine and tests that can add 31 up to be substantial.

The “free” State hospitals become expensive because they often run out of medicines or lack needed testing equipment. In this case, patients are told “go get this medicine” or “go bring these test results”. What that means is that the patient has to pay market prices to buy medicines at pharmacies or undergo tests in private clinics at their own expense.

During the pandemic, many patients rushed to suddenly overcrowded state facilities, full of COVID-19 patients, and were simply turned away. There were sad stories in the media about patients in Joypurhat District being turned away, trying for Naogaon District hospital, being turned away there and dying on the trip to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital, which became a treatment centre of last resort for the whole Division. This was not a matter of money, it was a matter of capacity: but those with health insurance could have availed of the private sector hospitals, which had great capacity (some of it nationalised by the Government during the pandemic).

Private health insurance through employers is relatively new in Bangladesh. Some universities and some private companies, especially in Dhaka, have offered cover to their employees through private schemes (The Daily Star, 2021). A journalists’ cooperative, Dhaka Reporters’ Unity (DRU), provides its members in Dhaka health insurance cover and, during the pandemic, provided a COVID-19 testing booth in Dhaka, for Dhaka-based journalists. The Broadcast Journalist Centre (BJC) offered health insurance but only to Dhaka-based television journalists, as well as ambulance services to COVID-19 positive journalists (Broadcast Journalist Centre, 2020).

Yet, capital-based journalist organizations namely Dhaka Reporters Unity and Broadcast Journalist Center membership and services are confined among Dhaka city journalists while the present study was conducted among outside Dhaka journalists. No organization or institution provides such benefits to journalists working outside of Dhaka (Dhaka Reporters Unity, n.d.). In general, access to emergency coronavirus treatment was better, although certainly not good, in Dhaka.

Personal health insurance, except for rich people and foreigners, is virtually unheard of in Bangladesh. A major source of health care during normal times in Bangladesh, for those who can afford it, is to travel to the neighbouring country, India, or sometimes even as far as Thailand, and pay cash. But the Indians sealed the border in 2020, as did Bangladesh in reply and as did most countries in the world. Few journalists have the money to get treatment in India or Thailand anyway, even during normal times.

The results here confirm the findings of the media-related organization SACMID, which discovered that 76 per cent of journalists lacked health insurance during the pandemic (SACMID, 2020). SACMID (2020) sampled journalists in Dhaka, where access to health insurance (e.g., by the Dhaka Reporters’ Unity or other Broadcast

Journalist Centre, described above) is marginally better than for journalists in rural areas, from which the sample for this research was taken. Thus, the SACMID (2020) result is marginally better than the finding of this study.

A great worry for many journalists interviewed for this research, in particular, was that they would carry coronavirus home to their family members. A District-level reporter for a major television channel stated:

We are forced to live in a small, rented house, with other family members, due to my small honorarium. As a result of my frequent visits to gather news, I go to many places and meet many people. That means I am highly-likely to get infected with coronavirus. We can also pick up the virus from colleagues. So I am highly-likely to get infected with coronavirus and then to get everyone in my house infected quickly (Interviewee number 21).

According to the IFJ (2020) and SACMID (2020) studies, there were many cases of journalists infecting their families with coronavirus as this respondent feared.

### **Managing PPEs as part of Health Security**

PPE refers to protective clothing, helmets, goggles, masks, or other garments or equipment that protect the wearer's body from viral intrusion. However, the data here shows that 98 per cent of journalists used only the face mask to protect themselves from COVID-19. The journalists reported that 95 per cent of them used only hand sanitizer. Only a very small number of journalists (11 per cent of respondents) isolated themselves.

PPE is regarded as the most important precaution for emergency service personnel during a pandemic. The face masks were also important for stopping COVID-19 transmission. The "K" series, worn by the rich, the police, and civil servants in Bangladesh, is a little better; however, it is likely that the majority of journalists in the sample were using the free cloth masks distributed by the Government and non-government organizations. The cloth face masks were usually used in Bangladesh and have since been found to be of very limited value in stopping COVID-19 transmission (Johansson, 2021). Hand sanitiser is more effective in stopping coronavirus transmission, but the virus is airborne, can be propelled by sneezes and coughs, and can linger in the air.

True isolation is most effective in preventing coronavirus transmission, but a journalist cannot work that way, beyond online or telephone interviews. A journalist has to see people and places that no one shows him/her. Thus, PPE is the best option for journalists: it blocks most coronavirus transmission but leaves the journalist free to travel, see what is happening, inspect locations, go where he/she would never be taken, etc.

Yet the data show that only 45 percent of journalists received PPE. Among the 45 percent who received PPE, 78 percent had to get it themselves: 8 percent received it from private organizations, 3 percent from employers, and 5 percent from the state. Six percent of respondents did not answer this question.

Employers mostly abrogated their moral, if not legal, obligation to protect the people gathering the news that made their revenue possible. Almost all of the employers (97 per cent) put their journalists, unprotected or minimally so, into a potentially deadly milieu and, in effect, threw them under the bus.

Yet a television reporter from Natore District raised a contrary view:

I have no confidence in PPEs because of their poor quality. Despite using PPEs and other safety measures, a surprising number of government officials have become infected in my District. If the Government or any other organization wishes to provide PPE, they must maintain its quality. At the same time, the Government provided vaccinations to police and doctors from the beginning of the pandemic, but what about the journalists who worked alongside them?" (Interviewee number 27)

The Government only provided free mass vaccinations later, in 2021, due to lack of supply of vaccine in 2020, after an abortive attempt to produce them in Bangladesh. Around 95 per cent of the 45 per cent of journalists who had PPE received no training on how to put on and take off PPE. Only 5 per cent of the total respondents received training in use of PPE. Incorrectly used, PPE is not effective in stopping coronavirus transmission. Perhaps this explains the Natore journalist's, above, report that many civil servants who had used PPE still got infected with COVID-19. The PPE which a minority of Bangladesh rural journalists acquired, by whatever means, without the needed training, was therefore probably of minimal effect in protecting them from coronavirus.

### **Physical and Legal Threats in covering the News**

A total of 28 per cent of respondents received threats while reporting on COVID-19. Among them, 30 per cent stated that they had been threatened by local administration and 53 per cent by "others". Meanwhile, 17 per cent were threatened by persons in the private sector. A Kurigram District journalist reported:

Because it is a hazardous profession, we face a number of pressures if we want to cover and publish irregularities, nepotism, and corruption-related issues. I received threats from a variety of sources for publishing information about irregularities in relief activities during COVID-19 period. Even after the respective authority provided evidence to support the complaints, the concerned influential Chairmen and their coteries verbally threatened me several times (Interviewee number 07).

Most professional journalists working in the community consider verbal and physical assault to be a part of the job and there is some evidence in the literature to support their conclusion in Bangladesh. In 2020, the human rights organization, Article 19, recorded a total of 265 attacks on journalists, with approximately 80 per cent of attacks coming from the grassroots level (ARTICLE 19, 2021).

Overuse of the Digital Security Act, 2018, also intimidated journalists during the pandemic. A reporter from Thakurgaon District elaborated:

Due to a lack of protection for the freedom of the press, we have faced several challenges in gathering corruption-related news during the coronavirus emergency. Some Dhaka colleagues were charged and detained under the DSA for publishing corruption of powerful people in the media, which affects our willingness to cover such issues in our Districts. Local government officials, influential politicians and local journalist cliques use the threat of complaints under the DSA to intimidate us when we try to report corruption- and nepotism-related news (Interviewee number 47).

The international NGO, Article 19 (2020), documented a total of 60 cases of using the DSA to prosecute 100 people, including 22 journalists, for criticising Government and non-government initiatives in Bangladesh against coronavirus, in traditional and social media, in Bangladesh during the first five months of 2020.

Earlier literature suggested (Raj et al., 2010) that journalists in Bangladesh have encountered safety and security challenges, which include personal safety and protection from physical attack etc. (“individual” influence in the hierarchy of influences model), low pay, a lack of training and motivation (“organizational” influence in the hierarchy of influences model), difficulty in obtaining information (“routine” influence in the hierarchy of influences model) and psychological stress (“ideological” influence’ in the hierarchy of influences model). For these reasons, the hierarchy of influences model appears to be applicable to the study of journalists’ context in Bangladesh.

### **Psychological Stress**

Overall, 83 per cent of respondents reported psychological stress and trauma as a result of COVID-19 infection, personally or of family members, scarcity of PPEs, lack of proper treatment, less and irregular payment and financial uncertainty. A journalist from the Rangpur District said:

I am always mentally troubled due to a lack of financial security. It is extremely difficult to support my family when payments from media outlets are irregular. I typically receive adequate financial assistance from a per centage of advertisement revenue, but this all dried up during the pandemic, leaving a big hole in my income (Interviewee number 56).

In total, 23 per cent of respondents reported that they were frequently in mental distress and 12 per cent said they were distressed all the time during the COVID-19 emergency. Some journalists felt guilty when they visited high-risk places, came home and their family members got infected. An online journalist from Naogaon stated:

We always felt emotional trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the high risk of infection. We had to go to high-risk places like hospitals, clinics, testing centers, etc. I sometimes thought I might be infected too. I share the same room with my family, even when I come back from travelling to high-risk areas, as we have no other rooms to sleep in. So I was always worried and felt guilty that I might infect them with a fatal disease (Interviewee number 46).

Most respondents found that managing their physical and mental health during the pandemic was more difficult and important than “traditional” risks of journalism in the global south, which includes sudden and forced termination, mobile phone surveillance, online communication hacking, etc. (Adhikari & Gellner, 2016; Jamil, 2019).

### **Challenges of Journalists in gathering Information on COVID-19**

Journalists must work regularly and gather information from various sources to cover news. They must be in public places and they have to talk to people. They must touch documents that others have touched. COVID-19 made all of these potentially-fatal behaviours. The disease made the normal and necessary behaviour of journalism dangerous, yet the journalists had to engage in it or risk losing their jobs. Not only their lives but their families’ lives depended on taking this risk of infection in order to meet basic needs. Respondents reported that they were unable to maintain social distance while gathering information in high-risk infection areas. COVID-19 also made informants less willing to meet and share information, so there was a lack of that free flow of information on which journalism relies.

Yet, 55 per cent of respondents did not consider it a challenge to gather information during the panic. Perhaps they adjusted to the challenges with experience until they were no longer challenges. Most probably; they learned how to adapt journalism to the disease-ridden environment: they learned how to gather information online, to use the telephone and online meeting apps in place of personal meetings and to receive documentary information by e-mail instead of in person.

While 44 per cent of respondents said that they faced challenges in gathering information, further investigation indicated that 90 per cent of these respondents were talking about a lack of health safety equipment as the “challenge”.

A correspondent from the Natore District said:

Because journalism is a challenging profession, it is extremely difficult to survive without being challenged. Meanwhile, we are engaged in a competitive process of broadcasting the same news in a limited period. Due to the pandemic and the Government’s regulations, we are having difficulty in getting interviews from high-level government officials in time to get them into our reporting (Interviewee number 06).

Despite the worldwide campaign to “stay at home and stay safe” during the COVID-19 pandemic, journalists could not do journalism this way. Only a few journalists from the Rajshahi and Rangpur Divisions were given the opportunity to work solely from home. The majority of journalists (83 per cent of respondents) said they worked from both home and office. Only 2 per cent of journalists in the sample said that they worked only from the office. Only 15 per cent of respondents were able to work solely from home. More than two-third of journalists (85 per cent of respondents) went outside to perform their professional duties.

More than half of journalists (58 per cent of respondents) thought COVID-19 infection was an important risk in their workplace and 42 per cent thought it was

risky to go to work. The perceptions differed depending on the area. The bureau chief of a well-known TV channel in Sirajganj said:

We were facing difficulties obtaining on-the-spot coverage due to the ongoing floods and *Qurbani* (sacrifices of animals during *Eid-Ul-Azha*, a national and religious holiday) in my locality. We are compelled to go to crowded places and sometimes forget safety tips due to the pressure of continuous reporting. Most people in our rural area are not aware of the importance of wearing masks and maintaining social distance (Interviewee number 07).

To prevent the spread of the COVID-19 infection, the Government of Bangladesh declared a general holiday beginning March 26, 2020, later extended until May 30, 2020. Following that, on a limited scale, all offices, shopping malls, business shops, and public buses reopened on May 31 provided they adhered to 13 health directives. Journalists worked as frontline fighters during the general holiday. They had to visit various locations, particularly hospitals, lockdown zones, and vulnerable areas, to gather information. Less than half of the respondent journalists (40 per cent) stated that they visited people and places to gather news where there was real social distancing being practiced. More than one third of journalists (36 per cent of respondents) frequently visited such locations.

Most journalists said that they had made a conscious choice to risk their own lives in order to save their jobs: by surrendering to Fate on the matter of COVID-19. Such a choice might have been avoided if the media organizations had hired extra journalists to support their pre-pandemic staff: but most did not even have enough money to pay their pre-existing staff regularly or well, let alone to take on extra staff.

It is evident that people, organizations, and Governments were all profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in unforeseen ways (Josephson and Michler, 2021). As a result, the dynamics of the safety and security concerns faced by journalists changed as a result of the necessity to deliver accurate information about COVID-19. According to the "hierarchy of influences model," Bangladeshi journalists and media had to navigate a variety of individual, institutional, and environmental challenges when covering the COVID-19 pandemic on an individual, societal, and institutional level.

### **Integrated Discussion: Hierarchy-of-Influences Model Analysis**

The Hierarchy of Influences (HOI) model was originally developed by Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese, and then was modified by Stephen Reese in 2019. This analytical framework illustrates how a multiple, layered forces influence journalistic practices. This model emphasizes that influences function concurrently across interconnected levels rather than attributing news production to a single factor, such as individual choices or institutional pressures.

### **Mapping Findings through the Hierarchy-of-Influences Framework**

The hierarchy-of-influences model (Reese, 2019) reveals dropping vulnerabilities from individual experiences through organisational structures to larger societal

systems, offering a methodical lens for comprehending how journalists' safety concerns during COVID-19 operated across interconnected micro, meso, and macro levels.

### **Micro Level: Individual Vulnerabilities and Agency**

The approach focuses on the professional values, work experiences, role perceptions, personal safety concerns, emotional stress, and ethical orientations of journalists. Even while journalists' autonomy is recognized, larger structural factors limit their options (Hanitzsch et al., 2010). Our results show significant effects at the individual level: 83 per cent reported psychological and emotional stress due to worries about family safety, financial anxiety, and personal safety concerns regarding infection fears (see more on psychological stress). Even though 58 per cent of respondents acknowledged serious workplace dangers (see more on job security), 85 per cent persisted in field reporting (see more on the difficulties faced by journalists in obtaining information). This micro-level discomfort had a direct impact on decision-making.

This concern was expressed by a journalist: "I was always worried and felt guilty that I might infect them with a fatal disease" (Interviewee 46). Journalists actively sacrificed their lives to keep their jobs, demonstrating individual agency in the form of difficult decisions between personal survival and professional obligation. As an example of how micro-level factors influence external pressures, the 28 per cent of journalists who received threats showed varying individual responses based on personal risk tolerance (see more on physical and legal threats in covering news).

### **Meso Level: Organizational Failures and Economic Collapse**

The internal newsroom dynamics, editorial policies, managerial decisions, resource availability, job security, institutional procedures and culture, newsroom routines, and media conventions that shape journalists' work are all included in the organisational level (Reese, 2019). During crises, newsroom routines and organizational risk-management strategies become salient. According to this research, ninety-seven per cent of companies did not provide personal protective equipment (PPE), ninety-eight percent of journalists did not have health insurance, and 95 per cent did not receive any safety training (see more on Managing PPEs as part of health security). These failures were exacerbated by economic devastation: 68 out of 340 newspapers closed, 1,600 journalists lost their jobs, circulation fell by 50–70 per cent (see more on the safety and security of journalists in Bangladesh discussion), and only 58 per cent of journalists received regular pay (see more on job security and inconsistent remuneration). According to one journalist, "a lack of advertisements, circulation, and proper government support suffered from the entire media industry" (Interviewee 09).

Media organizations failed to adapt media routines to pandemic conditions, with 85 per cent of journalists working without adequate safety protocols in gathering information (see more on challenges of journalists in gathering information). The model illuminates how meso-level organizational instability resulted from macro-level economic forces (advertising market collapse, lockdown policies) while cascading down to create micro-level individual precarity (irregular pay, job insecurity, psychological trauma).

### **Macro Level: Institutional Suppression and Systemic Inequality**

Wider socio-political environments, legal frameworks, public health issues, governmental policies, economic constraints, market conditions, ownership structures, and global crises like COVID-19 pandemic are all included in this. Journalism is shaped by influences beyond the control of individuals and organizations, and government regulations and legal frameworks limited journalistic practice at the social institutional level. A chilling effect was caused by the Digital Security Act, which resulted in 60 cases punishing 100 people for covering COVID-19, including 22 journalists (Article 19, 2020). One journalist clarified "Some Dhaka colleagues were charged...which affects our willingness to cover such issues," (Interviewee 47). Threats came from local administration (30 per cent), influential figures (53 per cent), and private sector (17 per cent). Government failures included no unemployment benefits, exclusion from priority vaccination list, working journalists' medical facilities.

Fundamental vulnerabilities were revealed by structural factors at the most macro level—the social system. In the absence of alternative mechanisms, the advertising-dependent business model failed. Geographic disparity was glaring: "no organisation provides such benefits to journalists working outside of Dhaka," reflecting system-level ideology discounting rural journalism, whereas Dhaka-based organisations only offered health insurance and testing to capital journalists. Article 19 revealed a culture of impunity by documenting 265 attacks on journalists, of which 80 per cent were grassroots. Inadequate public health infrastructure, such as overburdened rural hospitals and a lack of national insurance, put journalists in immediate danger.

### **Cross-Level Interactions: The Power of Cascading Analysis**

The model's analytical strength lies in revealing multi-level interactions. Macro-level economic collapse triggered meso-level organizational revenue loss, producing micro-level individual distress: "I am always mentally troubled...advertisement revenue dried up during the pandemic" (Interviewee 56). Journalists faced simultaneous multi-level pressure: DSA threats and pandemic risks (macro), no PPE and irregular payment (meso), infection fears and guilt (micro). One journalist reporting during floods exemplified this convergence: "compelled to go to crowded places and sometimes forget safety tips due to continuous reporting pressure" (Interviewee 07).

From the above discussion, it should be noted that this approach highlights the dynamic interplay of different layers, demonstrating that nested, cumulative influences rather than isolated factors are what lead to journalistic outcomes.

### **Theoretical Contribution and Intervention Framework**

By applying the hierarchy-of-influences paradigm to journalist safety, this study demonstrates how pandemic dangers functioned concurrently at the individual (health vulnerabilities), organisational (inadequate safety practices), and governmental (weak policies) levels. Participants described this multi-level failure as creating a "dystopian context" that resulted in "wrong decisions in reporting." Coordinated action at all three

levels—individual psychological support and training, organisational safety procedures and insurance, and governmental press freedom protections with financial assistance—is necessary for effective protection. Protecting journalism during international emergencies necessitates transnational, multi-level frameworks since global crises transcend national boundaries.

The contribution of this study lies on the specific intersections such as the first study conducted on hierarchy of influence model analysis on comprehensive safety dimensions during pandemic crisis among district level journalists.

Factors at the individual, social, institutional, and organizational levels define and shape the increasing safety and security risks found in this study, which in turn influences and defines journalists' individual decisions regarding media content and journalistic practice. The journalists' context was dystopian, causing them to make wrong decisions in reporting to the public. Thus, the damage to the reporting of accurate news and the insecurity and suffering caused to journalists is found to have been, fundamentally, the result of media organizations' failure to give journalists the resources that they required.

### **Conclusion**

Despite their potentially vulnerable role in combating the coronavirus pandemic, too many journalists did not receive regular remuneration, and many news providers ceased to exist, creating unemployment and fears of unemployment. Outside Dhaka, journalists faced a variety of challenges, including a lack of motivation, financial loss and insecurity, denial of their legal rights, threats, lack of health insurance and protective equipment, intimidation under the Digital Security Act, 2018 and a constant sense of stress and insecurity, contribute to national cooperation to fight the pandemic and even to tell true news from false. Most of the time, they were just struggling to survive, barely able to support their families and keep themselves and their families safe from COVID-19 infection.

The findings substantially support the published literature on related topics and fill in large gaps in the literature about journalism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. However, further study with a larger sample is necessary for a comprehensive report of the problems.

More in-depth research can offer precise policy recommendations at the national and international levels to safeguard the press, its freedoms, and our freedoms as news consumers in future. Indeed, in the case of an internationalised health disaster like COVID-19, requiring an internationalised response, perhaps the press freedoms and freedom of information require international, and not just national, protection. As all journalists in the world faced the economic shock of lockdown and collapse of many news organizations, there is a growing need for international subsidies of journalism both in the developed world and in the global south, so that the Fourth Estate could play its worldwide role in informing the world's people in all countries about what was really happening and what people could do to help in the fight against the common viral enemy.

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## **Memeing the Masses: Internet Memes as Educational Tools and Expressions of Public Opinion on Social Media**

*By Dina Younis\* & Mariam Amer<sup>‡</sup>*

*The proliferation of digital technology and social media has paved the way for teenagers and young adults to socialize on a new level. The online platform of social media became a place for civic engagement and public opinion expression, where being humorous and having visual content contributed greatly to the spread of the easiness of the online interaction (Kertcher and Turin, 2020). Accordingly, internet memes appeared as a part of the user-generated content that became not only viral, but also influential at both social and political levels. Internet Memes function as commenting tool on events in our society from a humorous perceptiveness, which may now always be politically correct. However, this results in a mirroring of the social reality on the internet specifically social network websites (Ortiz et al., 2020). Consequently, memes enable internet users, who are somehow socially sensitive or restrictive, to freely express themselves in manners that were not considered possible in a direct dialogue. Nevertheless, the effect of memes on audiences is not sufficiently scrutinized, especially among online media literate and semi-literate users, as most studies tackled memes impact from an entertaining perspective and ignored its educational and persuasive power especially in the political and social aspects. Therefore, a gap in the literature is clearly identified in role of memes as a digital humor tool that has cultural profound meanings. Egyptian users rely heavily on memes usage as a mean of expression, negotiation, voicing opinions, social and political participation as well as identity reflection. Therefore, examining how memes are used as well as perceived is crucial. Additionally, from an educational perspective, such measurement is essential in tackling issues regarding new media literacy, since memes are viewed as a communication method for expressing opinions and shaping perception among young users, then it is essential to study as well as assess how audiences understand and engage with this type of digital media. Therefore, the aim of the current research is to examine how memes act as a tool for learning, public opinion formation as well as participation within social and political contexts. Moreover, the study aims to measure the educational aspect behind memes usage by exploring how the exposure to political and social memes affects the learning and understanding of the social and the political online content.*

### **Social Media, Memes and Public Opinion**

In the recent digital age, the communication concept is commonly understood as an interactive aspect, where many scholars argued that social media platforms changed the online space from the idea of an anonymous atmosphere into a complicated environment for networking, public opinion, civic engagement and identity formation

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(Latif et al., 2024; Li, 2024). While earlier studies acknowledged the need for empowering the online space to be a tool for democratizing the online opinion, recent studies embraced a more nuanced perspective, where they equally emphasized the empowerment of the audiences and the constraints resulted from the algorithms and the governing laws practiced in most of the online platforms. Therefore, social media acted as a diverse space enabling the different opinions, and at the same time, promoting selective exposure, opinion supremacy and distinction (Alit Suryawati et al., 2024).

Many studies that examined social media, showed that the public opinion generated on online platforms like Twitter and Facebook does not reach the degree of full unanimity, nevertheless, it encouraged more a leading orientation that resulted from the interaction dynamics fostered only through digital media (Li, 2024). This finding is congruent with most recent studies claiming that online audience incline to defy any change in their opinions on the one hand. On the other hand, they encourage predominant attitudes that resulted through recurrent online media exposure and peer pressure (Gass and Seiter, 2022). Additionally, most studies tackle the opinion formation from a high level, as they frequently ignore social and political dimensions of the online digital space, for instance, humour, ridicule, storytelling, etc.

Recent studies tackled the existing gap regarding the online cultural content, internet memes in this case, and its impact on public opinion formation. In other words, internet memes act as a hybrid form of online communication that mix entertainment, criticism, and emotions. As a result, audiences are empowered to engage indirectly with all social and political topics (Latif et al., 2024). Compared to the normal online texting, memes communication overcomes participation obstacles as well as facilitate diffusion and diversity, resulting a significantly persuasive tool among online audiences, especially young ones. Nevertheless, some researchers claim that the influential effect of memes still acknowledged as uneven as it depends on the degree of media literacy and degree of exposure of the online young audiences (Amer, 2024).

Accordingly, a view shift had occurred in the role and impact of social media, where it is not seen as a neutral space for opinions reflection, rather it is seen as an empowering space that formulates the public opinion through interactive content and interactive users. Meanwhile, the need for more further investigation is required in understating the relationship between public opinion, media literacy and memes especially in Egypt, as digital media and online interaction are substantial and influential.

### **Mememes as an Empowering Tool in the Digital Age**

Internet memes are recognized as a type of user-generated content, where it empowered online audiences to proactively participate in any form of an online discussion. Usually user-generated content is defined as “User-generated content (UGC) is defined as any media content that is produced or created by the end user consumer and public rather than by paid professionals and is primarily shared online,” (Younis, 2026). Most recent studies focus on the fact the memes are created and disseminated through normal online users rather than an organised institution, therefore, its role in expressing diverse opinions as well as social and political issues is respectfully trusted. As a result of its fast diffusion, memes play a vital role in the

empowering users' engagement, affecting their identity formation, as well as reflecting their opinions and perceptions (Dyner, 2021; Tassadit, 2025).

Some studies emphasised the potential impact of memes as a persuasive tool, where its nature in merging humour with symbolism in a visual content aid in its participatory nature. Subsequently, convoluted ideas can be easily communicated in a persuasive, yet emotional form lowers the defiance usually found online regarding social and political issues (Milner and Phillips, 2020; Shifman, 2022). In other words, memes allow the online youth to be consumers and producers at the same time, encouraging as well as poking their online media literacy skills.

Researchers recently started to view memes as a "form of public discourse and visual rhetoric within networked publics," (Ross and Rivers, 2023; Highfield, 2020). Most scholars define memes as a tool for discussing public matters, enabling peer validation, and exemplifying some persuasive characteristics, in addition to their sentiment qualities; thus, allowing memes to act as trusted communicative tools for social and political matters (Dyner, 2021; Shifman, 2022).

### **Social Media Activity and Memes: Emotional Power**

Memes played a vital role in the communication interactive process initiated in the digital space. In other words, memes are considered the cultural units that creates communication between online users, where they are perceived as a form of online expression. Furthermore, the degree of effectiveness of memes usage is quite debatable according to some studies, where some show positive association between memes and online users' expressions and others proved that it is conditioned on the type of humored memes shared. Having said that, as study conducted by Brody & Cullen (2023) examined the impact of memes usage on human relationships, where it found that sharing humor memes as an enjoyment function is positively correlated with the satisfaction level of any relationship, however, using it as an apologetic expression is negatively correlated with the level of satisfaction. Moreover, most of the research participants confirmed the notion of using memes as a social expression in their closest relationships and as a mean of social communication generally, nevertheless, the results showed that memes only served the humor function and not as a more thoughtful form of communication.

Another study conducted by Zhang & Gearhart (2022) examined the difference between memes used political entertainment and memes for political observation. The study found that the most frequent shared and viewed of political memes are mainly to satisfy their political entertainment need and not for political observation need. Nevertheless, the most frequent memes created satisfy the political observation need rather than the entertainment. In other words, individuals who share and view and does contribute to engagement use the memes for political entertainment, and individuals who create and contribute to engagement use the memes for observing the politics currently in action. Another study found congruent results, where it examined the psychological reasons behind memes usage, and it provide that some individuals use the memes to moderate the stressful situation faced in the daily social life. In other words, memes are used as a tool for reinterpretation of social situation when

individuals' area faced with cultural problems (Flecha, et al., 2021).

The abovementioned literature did show the effective impact of the memes regarding interaction and emotional expression, nevertheless their communicative influence is conditioned and limited. Also, most of the studies identified memes as humorous online content, however their use for complex political and social matters was not distinctive. Since most of the studies found that mems are used mainly for entertainment and not for political and social observation, therefore memes effectively contribute to the engagement more than it affects public opinion formation.

### **Memes and Public Opinion: Educational and Motivational Power**

Memes are now managing as well as forming the political dialogue on social media platforms, thus affecting the public opinion, political participation, as well as the dynamics of the political ideology. The fast spread of the memes over social media, like Twitter, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram, contributed to its need as a tool for political participation, where it is used as a method of political terminologies. A study conducted by Al Afnan (2025) found that the memes are not considered a neutral form of communication, but rather a significant instrument that affects the political and partisan discourse. The study found that different types of memes receive different degree of engagement withing political sub-groups, for instance, conservative groups share memes reflecting capitalism, free market, and patriotism. While more liberal lenient groups share memes reflecting social justice and environmental issues. Additionally, the study added the sentiment aspect, where it found that justice and environmental memes encourage positive sentiments, while critical political memes encourage negative ones. Nevertheless, such negative sentiments can carry some ethical misunderstandings as it manipulates “emotional responses rather than promoting for informed discussion”.

The memes and public opinions concepts are interrelated, yet some argument about their ethical concerns are existent, where another study conducted by Misra (2025) shared similar finding with the previous study mentioned above. The results showed that memes do have a significant impact on the shaping of public opinion represented on social media platforms, yet the impact varies according to the type of social media platform on the one hand. On the other hand, the type of the memes with its accompanied sentiment, either positive or negative. The study found that political memes allowed political actors to have higher levels of engagement with younger generations, also, some memes acted as a reinforcement tool for existing political beliefs, while others acted ignited the debates and discussions. The study concluded that memes is considered a powerful communication tool discussing politics, mobilization and persuasion. In other words, memes are proven to have the ability to simplify complex political terms, thus allowing diverse people to contribute to the public opinion resulting more inclusive and participatory political attitude.

Memes generally are perceived to be an “emotional contagion”, where it acts as an intermediary in spreading diverse feelings and emotions, especially emotional behaviors in social media platforms. They not only encourage the feeling, but encourage the interaction as well, where it considered a strategic communication tool

for steering the collective action, sentiment and by extension the public opinion acting as an “emotional mobilization” (Tabatabaei and Ivanova, 2021). A study conducted by Akram, et al. (2021) examining the impact of memes of individual anxiety levels during covid pandemic, showed some congruent regarding emotional in general and anxiety feeling in specific results, where it found that usually anxious individuals selective choose social media to acclimate to the social uncertainties they faced during the pandemic. Additionally, they share humorous memes as a copying mechanism to elevate their general mood and decrease their anxiety. In other word, individuals resort the online space to share as well as interact with memes to reduce some of their psychiatric symptoms, like anxiety and depression, as they form social and emotional online bonds that might act as a digital supportive group.

Additionally, another study conducted by Arkam & Drabble (2022) shared the similar findings, where it showed the social media pages dedicated to humor medical memes have a positive impact on the users, as it creates some social and emotional bonds resulting the simplification of difficult expressions, thus creating a socially supportive group. Also, memes have a positive impact on specific psychiatric issues, like depression and anxiety, where they are perceived as a humous mean of social connection that decrease such insecurities. In other words, individuals use memes to alleviate their mood by laughing out their problems and forming some social connection at the same time. Finally, it could be concluded that memes are used on two different yet parallel paths, where it is used as a mean of online expression that decreases anxiety due to its humorous nature from a psychiatric viewpoint on the one hand. On the other hand, it has an irrefutable role in the digital political life, where it constitutes a major part in public opinion due its ability to simplify complex political expressions. Subsequently, the current research paper will examine how memes could act as an educational tool for public opinion expression in a positive and enjoyable manner to overcome their anxious nature that is usually accompanied with the political participation and behavior, especially in the digital space.

## Theoretical Framework

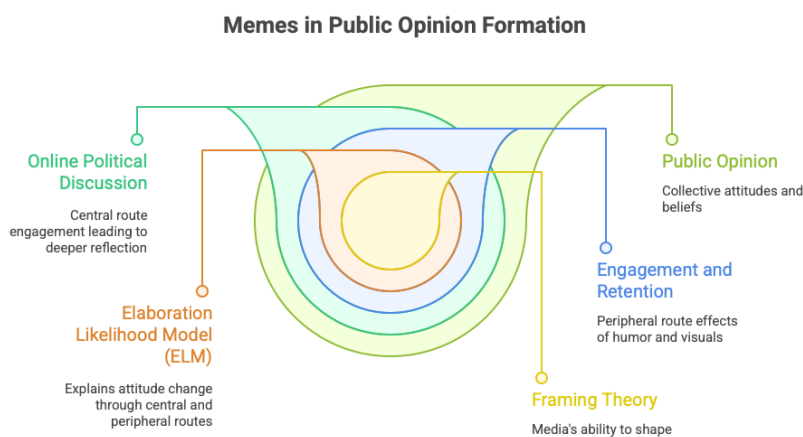
### Framing Theory and Elaboration Likelihood Model

Generally *framing theory* refers to the ability of media to create frames for several reasons, for instance, gaining public affection, normalizing viewpoints and persuasion (Guenther et al., 2020). In the current research paper memes utilize framing theory to rapidly simplify implications and sense-makings in a digital media platform. Since farming in general is referred to as the mean to select as well as interpret situations, then memes are a *sub-category frame* as they simplify complex political terms into audio or visual humor narratives that evoke social support and understanding. In other words, it could be claimed that memes changed the decoding process of political messages, using humor, allowing it to be easily digestible by diverse audience, thus increasing the contribution to the public opinion.

ELM on the other hand, complements the notion of framing theory in the current research, where it provides a thorough explanation on how memes affect attitudes

through both central and peripheral routes of persuasion (Widyaningsih et al., 2025). The use of humor as well as emotional appeals in memes usually affect the both the attention and the acceptance of the audience (peripheral route). The visuals found in memes encourages sharing, engagement as well retention attitudes. Meanwhile, accordingly, when audience are deeply involved, they will reflect profounder and deeper attitude (central route) that leads to online political discussion, thus contributing to the public opinion. Together framing theory and ELM constitutes a deep explanation as well as comprehension on how memes act as an educational tool in public opinion, as it shows how meanings as well as emotions are framed through humorous memes, developing high levels of engagements as well as motivation that would eventually either enlighten or redesign collective support and understanding.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework



In this paper, we analyze how memes serve as a vehicle to express an individual or collective voice, and how individuals use these memes as a main source of communication.

The researchers wanted to examine if: first, social media activity and meme engagement, the viewing of memes will result in perceiving memes as a new method of communication.

- Second, usage of memes as an emotional coping mechanisms.

Third, the relationship between memes, public opinion and social anxiety. if the viewing of memes will result in perceiving memes as a new source of information and knowledge

Thus, the following research hypothesis were developed to measure the above variables:

- **H1:** There is a positive relationship between the level of social media activity and the likelihood of viewing or sharing memes

- **H2:** Users who find memes emotionally relieving are more likely to perceive them as useful for understanding or responding to public opinion during crises.
- **H3:** Exposure to memes that address public opinion issues contributes to users' learning and understanding of social and political topics.
- **H4:** Individuals who agree that memes help them “cope with public opinion anxiety” are more likely to believe memes influence or reflect public opinion.
- **H5:** Engagement with memes (viewing/sharing frequency) affects lower self-reported anxiety toward current public issues information online.

## **Methodology**

Using a quantitative descriptive research design, the researchers conducted an online survey to explore how internet memes influenced participants' engagement, emotional regulation, and public opinion on current issues. The survey intended to measure participants' social media engagement, meme utilization, and psychological response to internet memes as part of their online communication behaviors.

A quantitative descriptive research design is used and an online survey is the chosen method. The current research employed a descriptive study to document the use of internet memes and measure the effect that they had on participants' social media interactions, emotional regulation, and opinions about social issues. A descriptive study was appropriate due to the goal of the study to measure attitudes/behaviors rather than manipulate them. An online survey was distributed among the sample to help understand and analyze the use of memes in expressing an individual's opinion and how they use it as its main source of communication on online social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (N=166).

## **Sampling**

The study employed a purposive sample, where the sample must meet the researcher's aim in being active online participants on social media platform and being teenagers and young adult, since they are the main users of these online social media platforms. All participants were active users of popular social media networks, i.e. X, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat. Non-probability sampling was adopted as it helps researchers to collect respondents that were knowledgeable about the phenomenon that was being researched, in this case, the consumption and sharing of memes on current issues that affect the public opinion.

Participants were targeted as per their relevance to the research topic. The criteria established for inclusion in the study were using social media frequently, being in the teenage and young adult age groups, as teenagers and young adults are considered the main consumers and producers of internet memes.

The final sample was made up of 166 participants (N = 166) who used at least one of the following social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter), WhatsApp, and Snapchat.

Age range: Teenagers and young adults (age 16 to 30)  
Gender: Male and female participants  
Education level: Secondary education and university level  
Sampling technique: Purposive (non-probability) sampling.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Data were gathered using online survey that was distributed through popular social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. People shared the survey link over a period of 2 weeks and respondents participated voluntarily and anonymously. respondents were informed about the purpose of the survey and that their responses would be kept confidential and used for academic research only.

This structured questionnaire consisted solely of closed-ended questions only, that are:

- Social media activity and meme exposure (e.g., viewing, sharing, or creating memes)
- Emotional perceptions (e.g., coping with anxiety, forming social bonds, and interpreting public opinion through memes)
- Demographic information (gender, age, education)

Attitudinal items were rated on a 3-point Likert scale:

- 1 = Disagree
- 2 = Neutral
- 3 = Agree

The scale selected intended to reduce the number of response alternatives and encourage completion.

### **Instrument Development and Validation**

The questionnaire was self-developed based on relevant literature on digital communication, meme culture, and public opinion formation. No standardized scale was adopted. The instrument was reviewed for clarity and relevance prior to distribution. A pilot test (n=20) was conducted as well as reliability analysis to ensure validity and reliability.

### Delimitations of the Study

Geographic delimitation: It only includes respondents based in Egypt.

Age delimitation: Only teenagers and young adults were included. Older age groups were excluded.

Platform delimitation: focuses on the four most common social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp and Snapchat.

Time delimitation: Because this data was collected over two weeks, it only provides a snapshot of their perceptions.

Methodological delimitation: Using self-reported survey data, this study conducts a quantitative descriptive analysis of correlates for peripheral nerve injuries without qualitative exploration.

### Results

For the survey purpose a filtering question was added in the beginning asking whether or not respondents were active social media users. A total of **166 respondents** completed the survey, all of whom confirmed being active social media users

*Table 1.* Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 166)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Female	133	80.1
	Male	33	19.9
<b>Age Group</b>	16–20 years	31	18.7
	21–25 years	90	54.2
	26–30 years	25	15.1
	31 years or older	18	10.8
<b>Education Level</b>	Undergraduate student	101	60.8
	Bachelor's degree	38	22.9
	Master's degree	23	13.9
	PhD / Other postgraduate	4	2.4

### Social Media Usage and Meme Exposure

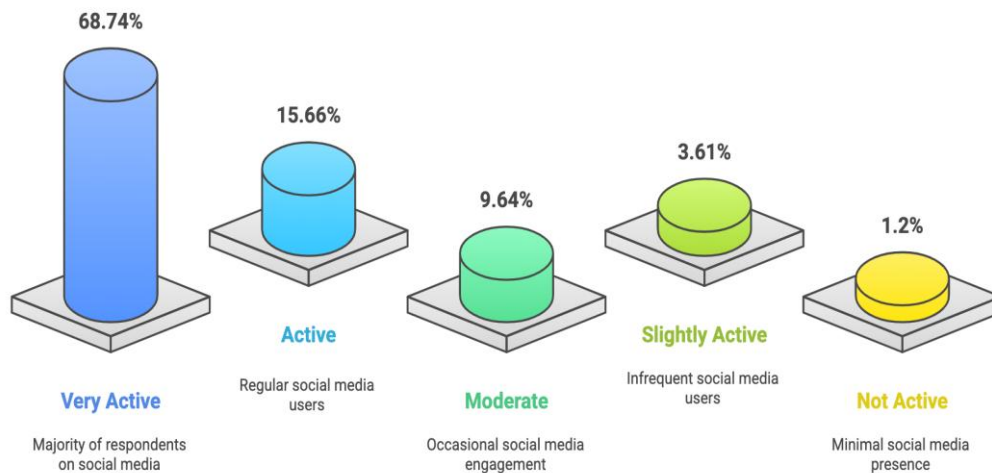
The most common used social media platform was found to be Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp with 77% of the respondents answering that they use it the most.

Table 2. Level of Social Media Activity

Activity Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Very active	114	68.7
Active	26	15.7
Moderate	16	9.6
Slightly active	6	3.6
Not active	2	1.2

Regarding overall activity level, the majority identified themselves as **very active users (68.7%)**. When the respondents were asked how active you are on social media? The majority with 68.74% answered very active (n=114), while 15.66% answered active (n=26), 9.64% answered with Moderate (n=16), 3.61% answered with slightly active (n=6) and only 1.2% answered with not active (n=2). Results are shown in more details in figure 1.

Figure 2. Level of Social Media Active users



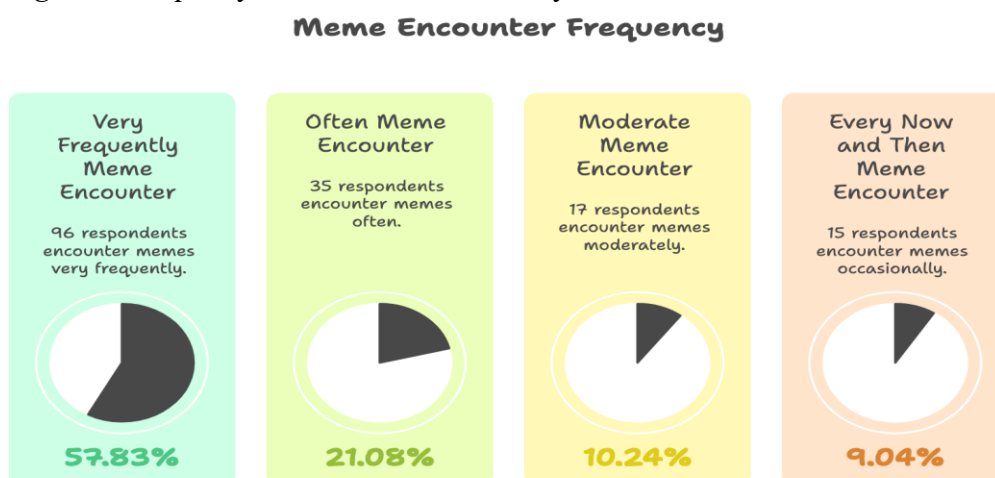
### Meme Awareness, Consumption, and Sharing Behavior

Nearly all respondents reported familiarity with memes (**n = 163**). Meme exposure and enjoyment were exceptionally high. the most common response was yes, I know what a meme is (n=163). The majority of the respondents answered that they view memes regularly with 94.58% (n=158) and only 4.82% answered no (n=8). When asked whether or not the respondents enjoy reading memes, the majority answered yes they enjoy with 96% (n=160) and only 4% did not enjoy reading memes (n=6). These results demonstrate that while meme creation is less common, meme circulation and recommendation are widespread, supporting memes' role as participatory communication tools.

### Frequency of Meme Exposure

In analyzing the frequency of participants encountering memes throughout their day, the results indicate a significant level of exposure and engagement with meme content. The majority of respondents 57.83% (n=96) reported that they come across memes very frequently, suggesting that memes have become a part of daily online interactions. 21.08% stated that they encounter memes often (n=35), further emphasizing the consistent visibility of memes across social media platforms. A smaller proportion 10.24% described their exposure as moderate (n=17), while (9.04%) noted that they come across memes only every now and then (n=15). Results are shown in Figure2.

Figure 3. Frequency of Memes encountered by users



Moving on, respondents were asked whether they repost or shared memes before the majority answered Yes with 82.53% (n=137) and only 17.47% answered that they don't share memes (n=29). On the contrast, when asked if they ever created their own memes, the majority answered no with 66.27% (n=110) and only 33.73% answered yes (n=56). Respondents were then asked if they would recommend or send a meme to their friends, the majority said that yes, they would with 92.77% (n=154), while they minority said they don't with 7.23% (n=12).

Concerning memes covering social issues respondents were unaware, the majority answered Yes with 90.36% showing a strong response to the role of memes as a source of education to current public opinion issues (n=150). This shows that memes moved to become an influential tool for social awareness and public discourse. Only 9.46% answered no to the question (n=16).

### Mememes as Tools for Opinion Expression and Public Discourse

When asked the respondents about the usage of memes as a method of self-expression in online communication and texting, the majority 76.51% answered that they do use memes to express their thoughts, feelings, and opinions in digital

interaction. A small part of the respondents 22.89% answered that they do not use memes as a form of self-expression (n=38).

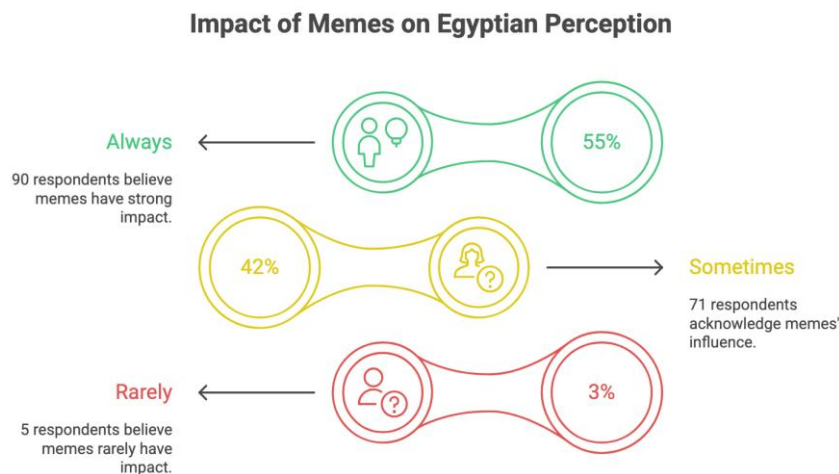
Regarding if respondents use memes to contribute to public conversations regarding current public opinion issues, the results showed a tendency toward using memes as a form of participation and social commentary. 57.36% answered “yes” that they actively engaged in public discourse through meme sharing or creation (n=96). These findings indicate that memes are widely used for expression and awareness, though skepticism toward credibility remains. On the other hand 41.57% stated “No,” implying that a significant minority still view memes primarily as entertainment (n=69).

When asked if the respondents believe that a meme related to current public opinion issues, the majority with 59% answered No, this shows a level of skepticism among social media users regarding the credibility of meme-based information (n=98). In the meantime, 41% admitted to believing a meme at some point (n=68).

### Perceived Impact of Memes on Public Opinion

Concerning the issue if respondents believe that memes have a strong impact on how Egyptian perceive current issues, the majority 55% answered “Always” (n=90). While 42% answered with “Sometimes” showing that they acknowledged the influence of the memes (n=71). And a small percentage 3% answered with “Rarely” (n=5). Results are shown more in Figure 3.

Figure 4. Impact of Memes on Egyptian users’ Perception



### Attitudinal Dimensions Toward Memes (3-Point Likert Scale)

Regarding the variable of communication and the usage of memes, results showed how respondents perceive memes as a tool for persuasion, interaction, and education related to current public opinion issues. When asked where they thought memes are persuasive, 50% of the respondents remained neutral, while 35.54% of the responded

agreed and 12.65% disagreed. Likewise, then evaluating whether memes were convincing 47% remained neutral, 34% agreed and 17% disagreed. Respondents were asked whether they believe memes help them communicate better with others regarding current public opinion issues, 36% agreed, 37% remained neutral and 26% disagreed. Likewise, when asked whether memes help them find common ground with others, (42.17%) were *Neutral*, 58 (34.94%) agreed, and 36 (21.69%) disagreed. When examining the entertainment dimension, a majority of participants (55.42%) agreed that memes are considered online entertainment, (28.92%) remained neutral, and (14.46%) disagreed, reinforcing that memes are primarily viewed as enjoyable digital content even when they address serious topics. Finally, when analyzing whether memes are a good source of communication regarding public opinion issues, (36.14%) remained *Neutral*, 57 (34.34%) agreed, and 45 (27.11%) disagreed.

Regarding the variable of freedom and the usage of memes, results showed how respondents perceive memes as a source of awareness, knowledge and affirmation in relation to current public opinion issues. When asked whether memes make them more aware of current public opinion issues, responses were evenly distributed: 35.54% chose *Neutral*, 32.53% disagreed, and 31.93% agreed. Likewise, concerning if memes make the respondents feel more knowledgeable, the majority disagreed with 37.35%, followed by 33.13% remaining neutral and 28.92% agreed. In a related question regarding awareness of current public opinion issues, 37.95% remained neutral, while 33.73% disagreed and 28.31% agreed. Finally, when asked whether memes strengthen their views regarding current public opinion issues, 42.77% were *Neutral*, 33.73% disagreed, and 22.89% agreed.

Results related to the variable of the viewing of memes and personal opinions, it showed an emotional and social dimensions of meme engagement among participants, revealing how memes serve not only as tools for opinion expression. When asked whether memes help them express their opinions regarding current public opinion issues, 36.75% remained neutral, 35.54% agreed and 27.71% disagreed. In regards to the emotional relief, the majority with 47% agreed that memes reduce the anxiety they feel regarding current public opinion issues, 36.14% remained neutral and 16.27% disagreed. Likewise, respondents were asked if memes help them better cope with current public opinion issues, 39.16% remained neutral, 31.33% agreed and 28.92% disagreed. Finally, respondents were asked if memes allow them to form bonds with others who share similar views, 45.18% agreed, 36.75% were neutral and 18.07% disagreed. Mean scores above the neutral midpoint (2.0) indicate a moderate-to-positive perception of memes, particularly as entertainment, emotional relief tools, and social bonding mechanisms.

Table 3. Mean Scores for Meme-Related Attitudinal Dimensions

Dimension	Mean	SD
Persuasion & convincing power	2.23	0.61
Communication effectiveness	2.18	0.65
Entertainment value	2.41	0.58
Awareness & knowledge	2.01	0.67
Emotional relief & coping	2.31	0.63
Social bonding	2.27	0.60

### Discussion

The first hypothesis argues that there is a positive relationship between the level of social media activity and the likelihood of viewing or sharing memes. Which means that it was expected that the more active users are on social media, the more they would engage with memes, whether by viewing them, sharing them, and/or reposting them. Basically, individuals who use social media for more than four hours per day should be more involved with meme culture than in active individuals. A chi-square test was employed to analyze the relationship between social media users' activity level and meme engagement. The results showed to be not statistically significant ( $p=.554$ ), this shows that the level of social media users' activity does not have an impact on meme engagement. Results did not support H1.

Table 4. A Chi-square test conducted to Test the Statistical difference between Social Media users' Activity Level and Meme Engagement

#### Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.021 <sup>a</sup>	4	.554
Likelihood Ratio	3.359	4	.500
Linear-by-Linear Association	.015	1	.903
N of Valid Cases	166		

a. 5 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .52.

The second hypothesis claimed that users who find memes emotionally relieving are more likely to perceive them as useful for understanding or responding to public opinion during crises. Meaning that when individuals feel that memes help them reduce stress, fear or anxiety, they start to view the memes as being valuable tools for learning and making sense of what is happening in society. This is especially seen during times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic or wars. A chi-square test was employed to analyze the relationship between emotional relief from memes and their perceived usefulness during crises. Results were found to be statistically significant ( $p<.001$ ) showing that individuals who find memes emotionally relieving are more

likely to perceive them as informative, educational and useful too. Results indicate that the more memes make users feel emotionally better, the more users will believe that memes will help them with understanding what is happening in society.

*Table 5.* A Chi-square Test conducted to Test the Statistical difference between Emotional Relief from Memes and their perceived usefulness during Crises

#### Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	189.983 <sup>a</sup>	64	.000
Likelihood Ratio	175.575	64	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	69.260	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	164		

a. 75 cells (92.6%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .44.

The third hypothesis argues that exposure to memes that address public opinion issues contributes to users' learning and understanding of social and political topics. Mainly H3 suggests that individuals see memes about current public opinion events, they don't just laugh, they actually educate themselves and learn something from it. Memes that include social issues, simplify political ideas or use humor in certain situations, may lead to the increase of individuals' awareness and understanding of public discussions. A Pearson correlation test was done to examine the relationship between memes exposure and the learning outcome about public opinion issues. Results showed a statistically significant positive correlation ( $r(158), p = .036$ ). This suggests that users are more frequently exposed to memes and are slightly more likely to report learning or gaining information of current public opinion topics. Results support H3 that meme exposure contributes to informal learning and social awareness among users.

*Table 6.* A Pearson Correlation Test conducted to Test the Statistical difference between Memes Exposure and the learning Outcome about Public Opinion Issues

#### Correlations

		memelearn	How2doyouencountermemesduringyourday
memelearn	Pearson Correlation	1	.167*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.036
	N	160	158
How2doyouencountermemesduringyourday	Pearson Correlation	.167*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.036	
	N	158	164

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The fourth hypothesis argues that individuals who agree that memes help them cope with public opinion anxiety are more likely to believe memes influence or reflect public opinion. This means that individuals who use memes as an emotional coping

mechanism with stress and tension also tend to see memes as powerful communicative tools. Moreover, if memes help people feel better about current public opinion issues that are more likely to think that these memes matter more, or that they shape public attitudes. A Pearson correlation was done to measure the relationship between individuals' perceptions of memes as a coping mechanism for public opinion anxiety and their belief in memes' influence of the public's attitudes. Results showed statistically significant and a strong positive correlation ( $r(164), p < .001$ ) meaning that individuals find memes emotionally comforting are more likely believe that memes influence or may reflect the public opinion. Results supports H4 where emotional engagement with memes influence individual's perception of their social and communicative impact.

Table 7. A Pearson Correlation Test conducted to Test the Statistical Difference between Individuals' Perceptions of Memes as a coping Mechanism for Public Opinion Anxiety and their Belief in Memes' Influence of the Public's Attitudes

**Correlations**

		memeviews	memefreedom
memeviews	Pearson Correlation	1	.652**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	165	164
memefreedom	Pearson Correlation	.652**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	164	165

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

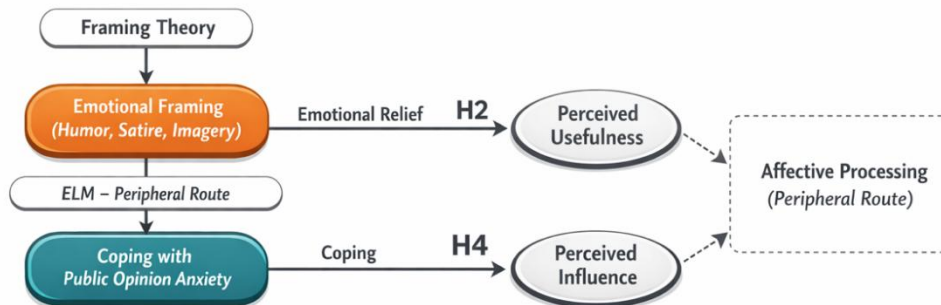
The fifth hypothesis states that eengagement with memes (viewing/sharing frequency) affect lower self-reported anxiety toward current public issues information online. Meaning that users who have higher level of engagements with memes, by viewing them, liking them, or sharing them are more likely to experience less anxiety or stress when getting information about current public opinion issues. Moreover, the more individuals relate to memes, the calmer and less anxious individuals feel about serious or social topics. A Pearson correlation test was done to examine the relationship between meme engagement levels and individuals' anxiety level toward current public opinion issues. Results showed a weak and a non-statistically significant correlation ( $r(164), p = .38$ .) showing that higher level of engagement with memes does not necessarily mean lower anxiety levels. Therefore, results did not support H5. The result implies that while memes may provide entertainment, they do not substantially influence emotional responses such as anxiety toward social or political issues.

Table 8. A Pearson Correlation Test conducted to Test the Statistical Difference to Examine the Relationship between Meme Engagement Levels and Individuals' Anxiety Level toward current Public Opinion Issues

		ViewsandMe meslAniexty	memeengag ment
ViewsandMemeslAniexty	Pearson Correlation	1	-.069
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.379
	N	165	164
memeengagment	Pearson Correlation	-.069	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.379	
	N	164	165

The results related to H2 and H4 were explained based on Framing Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). According to the former, memes can be understood as forms of framing that condense and encapsulate public opinion issues in highly emotional and easily understandable formats. The support for H2 indicates that users who consider emotionally relieving memes more helpful in a crisis situation are more receptive to memes that humorously represent or emotionally frame the interpretations of social situations. The support for H4 indicates that the extent to which memes help users cope with anxiety regarding public opinion is predictive of their perception of memes as persuasive, as well as their perception of memes as representative of public opinion, both supporting the persuasive power of emotionally framed memes. In terms of the ELM model, the studies suggest that users process meme discourse using mainly the peripheral route, drawing on characteristics such as emotional release, humor, and relatability, and not on the processing of factual correctness. This may explain why emotional involvement correlates with perceived usefulness/influence but not with factual correctness. Furthermore, Framing Theory and the ELM explain why, as H2 and H4 hypothesized, memes are affectively framed. Memes are affectively and peripherally used to convey how someone should think about or perceive public opinion, not how citizens understand public opinion. Figure 5 shows a model that demonstrate the importance of emotional framing, such as humor, satire, and imagery in Internet memes, utilizing Framing Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (peripheral route) to provide emotional relief and coping from public opinion.

Figure 5. Theoretical Model Linking Internet Meme Framing, Emotional Processing, and Public Opinion Perceptions



### Educational and Practical Implications

The findings of this study also highlight the importance of internet memes as popular communicative artifacts and suggest their meaningful role in shaping learning, emotional responses, and public sentiments on social media. Several implications for educators, media practitioners, and policymakers are also discussed.

#### Educational Implications: Memes as Learning and Engagement Tools

Findings show memes are highly exposable, shareable, and considered to have educational content and provide support for informal learning. Teens and young adults could use memes as informal learning tools as they can capture complex social and political realities without requiring meaningful effort and in formats that are often considered appropriate and relatable. In educational settings memes can be used to complement lectures, as discussion or debate material, or to get students thinking critically about current affairs. For example, memes can be used to: Introduce or summarize social, political or cultural issues, encourage students to create or assess memes related to the course to reinforce concepts, and bridge formal education with students' everyday digital experiences.

However, educators must help students to discern, within that data, the difference between satire, fallacy, misinformation, and fact. These findings show the potential, but also the challenges of learning from memes. While many participants reported having previously learned about social issues from memes, many also expressed reluctance to trust them as a credible learning source. It also highlights the need for media literacy education related to visual and participatory digital culture.

### **Media Literacy Implications**

Teach students about how memes frame issues, spread emotions, and influence public opinion. Experience and develop critical skills for understanding the source, context, and intent. Algorithmic amplification and virality influence what content appears on users' screens and what they learn. Teaching about memes should be a part of teaching media literacy to help learners become critical and responsible consumers of digital media.

### **Practical Implications for Content Creators and Media Practitioners**

In light of these findings, content creators, journalists, and digital communicators can use memes to engage, persuade, and appeal to younger audiences. Memes can be used to: Improve the visibility of social awareness campaigns, encourage discussion and debate of social issues, and use humor and relatability to address subtle or sensitive topics. As such, creators must remain ethically responsible for not oversimplifying, distorting, or misinforming audiences in their use of the meme.

### **Policy and Public Communication Implications**

From a public policy perspective, the adoption of memes as an instrument for understanding public sentiment highlights that memes are a relevant form of public communication, which can be utilized by policy makers and public institutions to reach and engage the younger population.

Policy-makers can better understand the sentiment and engagement in memes and leverage the use of memes as a form of communication.

## **Conclusion, Limitation and Recommendation**

### **Conclusion**

The current study examined the relationship between social media memes as an educational tool for public opinion, where survey was implemented to quantitatively measure the online participants' online engagement, meme usage, as well as their psychological response. The questionnaire was distributed among the desired sample on Facebook and Instagram, using purposive sampling technique, to scrutinize the role of memes as a part of their online communication tools and expressions. The study examined several hypotheses, and the results goes as follows: first the relationship between the level of social media users' activity does not have an impact on meme engagement behavior. Second, individuals who find memes emotionally relieving are more likely to perceive them as informative, educational and useful, thus H2 was supported. Third, meme exposure contributes to informal learning and social awareness among users. Fourth, emotional engagement with memes influences individual's perception of their social and communicative impact. Last, the results imply that while

memes may provide entertainment, they do not substantially influence emotional responses such as anxiety toward social or political issues.

Additionally, the current study defined memes as a framing device, where it simplifies complicated political and social implication through funny visual content making the messages more appealing to the online youth. Also, it combined framing theory with ELM (Elaboration Likelihood Model) to explain how memes can impact attitudes through both central and peripheral routes, where humor and emotions are explained through the peripheral routes and the profound discussion and conversations of public opinion can be instituted through the central route.

### **Limitation**

The current study offered an insightful perspective regarding memes as acting as an impactful educational tool, nevertheless, it did face several limitations. First, reliance on purposive sampling hinders the idea of generalizability of the study findings as well as the number of the respondents contributed. Second, the data was affected by the self-reported measures that might affect the participants objectivity and contributing to the research bias and subjective analyses, especially since it examined an emotional variable. Third, using cross-sectional survey design limits the idea of claiming some causality between meme engagement and emotional responses.

### **Recommendations**

For the future research, the following is recommended to be explored, first, the educational and emotional perspectives of online memes in different cultural, social contexts, as well as demographics. Second, a comparative study between different social media platforms could be done instead of examining them together, for instance, TikTok versus Instagram could be more insightful since the nature of the platform differs as well as the format and engagement levels. Third, applying mixed methods, qualitative method, in this case would be beneficial is establishing some insights and deep analysis about the users' memes usage regarding civic issues. Lastly, adding the variable of algorithmic exposure would be very insightful and richer as memes not only used as means of entertainment, but they are also now perceived as more meaningful tools of casual learning and public discussions.

Additionally, it is recommended to measure the media education and media literacy impact on the youth understanding of memes and its usage. Also, a comparative study based on age could be beneficial and more insightful to examine the different levels of engagement as well as recognizing the efficient stages for media literacy education introduction. Another comparative study could be explored regarding the role of the educational systems in introducing as well as expediting the impact of memes in diverse matters and how education in general influence transmedia literacy, especially in Egypt compared to other countries.

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