

Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications

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- **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 fourth 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



Athens Institute

A World Association of Academics and Researchers

26th Annual International Conference on Communication and Mass Media, 10-15 May 2026, Athens, Greece

The [Mass Media & Communication Unit](#) of Athens Institute organizes its **26th Annual International Conference on Communication and Mass Media, 10-15 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/2027/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.

Important Dates

- Abstract Submission: **13 October 2026**
- Acceptance of Abstract: 4 Weeks after Submission
- Submission of Paper: **12 April 2027**

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Voices of Authority?! Trust in Human and AI-Generated Educational Podcasts

*By Andreas Hebbel-Seeger**

This paper examines the extent to which awareness of an educational podcast's provenance, whether human-produced or AI-generated, shapes perceived credibility, trust, and content evaluation on the part of listeners. Using a quasi-experimental between-subjects design, 60 participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups; both listened to the same AI-generated audio contribution but were given different information about its origin. The findings show that participants who knew the content was AI-generated reported a significantly lower need to fact-check it and also showed a (non-significant) descriptive tendency to rate the synthetic hosts as more trustworthy and knowledgeable than participants who believed they were listening to a human-produced episode. These results partially contradict the AI disclosure literature, though they can be accounted for by the sample's AI-affine, highly educated profile and by an experience-driven "competence heuristic" toward generative AI. Owing to the limited sample size and low variance in AI-related attitudes, potential moderating effects could not be meaningfully explored. The study brings together podcast research, parasocial relationship theory, and AI trust research, offering a first empirical impetus for the educational-media examination of AI-generated instructional content.

Keywords: *Podcast, Trust, AI, Disclosure*

Introduction

Listening to serial audio or audiovisual content via subscription platforms such as Apple Podcasts and Spotify is no longer a niche activity. Current research shows that roughly one third of the German population consumes podcasts on a monthly basis; predominantly as background listening while exercising, commuting, or doing household tasks (Gattringer, 2024). Studies with an international scope report comparable figures despite cross-cultural and national differences (Gohil, 2025). A wide array of motivations drives this use, and the supply is correspondingly diverse in terms of genre and format (McClung & Johnson, 2010; Markman, 2012). Within this landscape, podcasts with an explicitly educational or instructional focus occupy the lower end of the demand spectrum (Edison Research, 2024), embedded in varied usage contexts ranging from informal self-directed learning to blended learning arrangements (Carvalho et al., 2009; Engzell et al., 2025; Meden et al., 2024).

In informal settings especially, trust in the scholarly quality and factual accuracy of what is being communicated is a basic prerequisite, yet one that listeners can typically only infer from formal cues. These include information about a host's credentials (academic qualifications, professional titles, or field of employment), the

*Professor for Media Management, Macromedia University, Campus Hamburg, Germany.

institutional affiliation of the podcast (e.g., with a university or a broadly recognized employer), or the reputation of the platform itself. Trust also develops longitudinally: as listeners accumulate experience with a podcast, they build a parasocial relationship with its host (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Vilceanu, 2025).

Research suggests that it is precisely the “human” dimension of a podcast, verbal slips, hesitations, mistakes, that contributes to the formation of these parasocial bonds and, by extension, to trust in the content (Maloney Yorganci & McMurtry, 2024; Nadora, 2019). Machine-generated podcasts, produced, for instance, using generative AI tools such as Google’s NotebookLM, lack this quality, even as synthetic voices grow increasingly adept at mimicking natural human speech patterns.

The propensity of AI-generated content to contain errors is well documented, including the phenomenon of “hallucination”, the generation of content that sounds plausible but does not hold up under scrutiny (Huang et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2025). Studies show that awareness of this risk produces strikingly divergent responses among listeners: from broad uncertainty and deliberate avoidance of generative AI at one extreme, to a largely uncritical acceptance driven in no small part by convenience at the other (Shao, 2025; Gnambs et al., 2025; Schäfer et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, the present exploratory study investigates whether and how knowledge of an audio contribution’s provenance, as a product of human authorship or as a machine-generated artefact, affects trust in its content. Methodologically, the investigation draws on a quasi-experimental between-subjects design based on a random sample.

We first discuss podcasting as a subject of inquiry by tracing its technological development and terminological origins before describing the current podcast ecosystem. We then narrow the focus to educational podcast use and examine, on the one hand, how generative AI tools are transforming podcast production, up to and including quasi-automated content generation, and, on the other hand, how listeners’ prior attitudes and experiences with AI come into play during reception, drawing on the concept of parasocial relationships. This theoretical groundwork sets the stage for the presentation and discussion of our own study, including its design, conduct, and findings.

Podcasting

Technology and Origins

Podcasting refers to the production and distribution of serial audio or audiovisual content delivered online and available via RSS feed subscription (Kluckhohn, 2009). Several defining characteristics set podcasts apart from other audio formats. Their serial structure creates continuity and fosters ongoing audience engagement. Online distribution enables global reach without recourse to traditional broadcast infrastructure. And the RSS subscription model means that new episodes are delivered automatically to subscribers, encouraging regular listening habits (Linares et al., 2018).

Podcasts can be consumed across virtually any device (desktop computers, laptops, tablets, and smartphones), with mobile devices offering the greatest flexibility.

Smartphones in particular enable on-the-go, incidental listening unconstrained by time or place: while exercising, doing housework, traveling, or commuting through the city (Hebbel-Seeger, 2009).

Although podcast-like concepts can be traced back to audio tutorials distributed on portable cassette players such as the Sony Walkman (Palenque, 2016), the modern term derives from Apple's "iPod," a portable digital audio player launched in 2001. This etymology reflects the medium's roots in the convergence of portable digital audio technology with internet distribution at the turn of the millennium. "Pod" functions (among other readings) as an acronym for "play on demand," while "cast" comes from the second syllable of "broadcasting" (Berry, 2006, 2016a).

The technological developments that have progressively lowered the barriers to podcast production, a process now further accelerated by AI tools, have, in conjunction with the global reach of online distribution, fuelled both steady growth in supply and continued expansion of the audience (McKenzie, 2019; Rime et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2025). McKenzie's (2019) analysis of global science podcast output between 2004 and 2018 documents exponential growth in both the number of shows and the total number of episodes; a trend that has continued across genres ever since.

The podcasting ecosystem today is dominated by a relatively small number of major platforms. Spotify and Apple Podcasts together command roughly two thirds of the global market, each holding approximately one third of listeners (Gohil, 2025), effectively constituting a duopoly. Figures for the German market confirm Spotify's leading position, with Apple Podcasts, the media libraries of Germany's public broadcasters, and Audible trailing at some distance (Gattringer, 2024). Data from our own podcast production studies broadly mirror this distribution, with Spotify and Apple Podcasts running neck by neck (Hebbel-Seeger, 2021; Hebbel-Seeger & Strauß, 2022; Hebbel-Seeger & Horky, 2026).

For producers, podcasts offer a wide range of value-creation and impact possibilities, from brand communication and marketing to educational media. Beyond content distribution, they also serve as platforms for self-presentation and, much like social media, for interaction with audiences and even co-creation:

"Podcasting is not simply a new way to distribute audio recordings; it's a form of expression, interaction, and community building" (Geoghegan & Klass, 2007, p. 167).

For listeners, podcasts accordingly address needs for entertainment and learning, and provide a platform for identification. Contemporary podcasting is thus far more than a distribution channel; it creates spaces for identity formation, community building, and sustained engagement between producers and audiences alike.

Podcasts as an Educational Medium

The relative ease of podcast production and distribution, combined with the flexibility of how and when they can be consumed, makes the medium attractive for informal learning as much as for organized educational settings. This flexibility extends beyond time and place: listeners can consume content whole or in segments, replay episodes as often as needed, and adjust playback speed; an affordance that

matters because learners vary considerably in the time and repetition they require to acquire and consolidate material (Hebbel-Seeger, 2021).

By allowing learners to set their own pace, podcasts support self-regulation and self-efficacy (Erabo et al., 2024). According to Enríquez et al. (2023), podcast-based learning enables students to take ownership of their learning process (p. 898); a shift that the authors associate not only with greater autonomy but also with motivational benefits.

Evans (2008) finds that students particularly value the time savings when reviewing material and the situational flexibility that podcasts afford. A study by Meden et al. (2024) suggests these potential benefits do translate into practice: analyzing survey data from over 600 podcast listeners, the authors conclude that more than half of respondents learn in a self-directed and deliberate way, while around a third learn incidentally. Yet podcasts do not realize their educational potential automatically. Engzell et al. (2025) show that successful integration into higher education depends substantially on how well educators embed podcasts within their pedagogical frameworks. Drawing on their findings, the authors also offer practical guidance on podcast design: effective educational podcasts are entertaining, run roughly 20–30 minutes, and combine analytical commentary with concrete, application-oriented examples; observations that align with Blumers's (2025) expert-interview-based study.

These advantages notwithstanding, podcasts in educational contexts come with real limitations. Unlike written texts, they do not incorporate inline references or citations; sources are typically relegated to show notes or supplementary materials, making it difficult for listeners to evaluate the quality of evidence in real time. Moreover, podcasts generally lack the quality assurance mechanisms of established educational media (peer review, editorial oversight and so on) owing to their informal character (Shaw et al., 2025). This places a particular responsibility on educators who use third-party podcasts in their teaching to vet the material carefully.

Accessibility presents a further challenge. The frequent absence of transcripts or audio descriptions effectively excludes listeners with hearing impairments or those who prefer or need text-based formats (Chelsey, 2021; Mohale, 2024); though this limitation is gradually being eroded by the improving quality and accessibility of external speech-to-text tools in the generative AI era. Additionally, research points to the risk that podcasting may reinforce digital inequalities, as access and use vary with technological literacy, internet connectivity, and device availability (Kakhki et al., 2025; Galily et al., 2024).

Beyond reception, there is growing interest in podcast production by students as a pedagogical activity in its own right. Research shows that such settings productively develop communication skills, teamwork, research competencies, and media literacy, while simultaneously encouraging more active engagement with the subject matter at hand (Hernandez-Lopez & Mendoza-Jimenez, 2025). This dimension is, however, beyond the scope of the present study, which is exclusively concerned with reception effects.

Emotional Proximity and Trust

Because the spoken word in a podcast lacks the source references and citations that anchor credibility in academic written texts, the affective dimension of trust

takes on particular weight in how listeners evaluate what they hear. Alongside institutional signals, such as a podcast's affiliation with a university, listeners may be guided by recommendations from people they know or from influencers (Ao et al., 2023; Sardar & Vijay, 2025), by ratings and reviews (Sung et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022), or by algorithmically curated suggestions (Li et al., 2024). But above all, trust in a podcast is anchored in its host (Mayer et al., 2024).

Repeated exposure, perceived similarity, and personal self-disclosure on the part of the host generate an emotionally meaningful bond with listeners, who come to attribute friendship, trustworthiness, and credibility to that person (Brinson & Lemon, 2022). When hosts share personal thoughts and emotional reactions, or directly address their audience, they activate a relational schema that fosters intimacy and trust. The perceived authenticity and communicative immediacy of the podcast medium encourages listeners to identify with the host and reduces the sense of social distance, even in the absence of any real feedback channel. Hosts' emotional states and dispositions are experienced vicariously by listeners, who gradually begin to perceive them not as distant media personalities but as people they personally know.

Repeated listening, particularly to high-frequency podcasts, integrates the podcast into everyday life, turning the host into an omnipresent social reference point, and deepening what listeners experience as an emotional bond, accompanied by growing trust (Dibble et al., 2016).

Vilceanu (2025) provides systematic evidence for the central role of the podcast host in building and sustaining parasocial familiarity and trust, and for the relationship between listening time and bond strength, through an analysis of over 12,000 listener reviews. Despite the inherently one-sided, mediated communication structure, listeners consistently develop feelings of closeness, trust, and connection toward hosts.

Strikingly, it is not flawless articulation that makes a host seem credible or trustworthy, but rather the authenticity conveyed by uncertainty, verbal slips, and mistakes. Maloney Yorganci & McMurtry (2024) identify seven authenticity markers that promote parasocial relationships, one of which is explicitly "Imperfection": hosts who stumble, digress, or err come across as more human and approachable. Spontaneity and personal admissions create the sense of really knowing the host, while ordinariness and perceived similarity foster feelings of friendship.

Nadora (2019) grounds this in the podcast's character as a "de-professionalized" medium (*ibid.*, p. 4) in which hosts function as "ordinary experts" (*ibid.*, p. 17; Tolson, 2010) whose imperfections are precisely what make them relatable. Moments of ambiguity, self-correction, and reflexivity are not merely tolerated by listeners; they actively strengthen the parasocial bond.

The choice of listening device also plays a role. Consuming podcasts through headphones heightens the sense of immersion and presence compared with loudspeaker listening (Liebermann et al., 2022), which in turn affects perceived proximity to the host. And the content of a podcast rarely feels entirely foreign to listeners: it tends to connect with their personal experience; whether through intrinsic interest or through an extrinsic framing in a school or university context:

“Podcasts are listened to in an intimate setting (headphones), utilising an intimate form of communication (human speech). Furthermore, in many cases podcasts are presented by people from within a listener’s own community of interest or by people s/he may already have a relationship with via social media, and are frequently recorded in a podcaster’s own personal or domestic space” (Berry, 2016b, p. 666).

Podcast Production and AI

Conventional podcast production typically involves four phases: (1) concept development and scripting, (2) audio recording, either in-person or online, (3) post-production, which may involve editing the raw recording as well as integrating external material, and (4) distribution, including publishing on relevant platforms and promoting via social media.

Since 2022, the rapid advancement of generative AI has substantially expanded what is possible in podcast production (Desmedt et al., 2025). The range of available tools runs from AI-assisted aids that support human creators at specific points in the workflow all the way to fully autonomous systems capable of generating audio content from text prompts alone.

Post-production, phase 3, typically accounts for a disproportionate share of the overall effort: beyond content-level editing, it encompasses noise reduction, level adjustment, and speech optimization (Hebbel-Seeger & Strauß, 2022). AI-powered tools have made these steps considerably faster and more accessible in recent years (Bruns, 2008; Zou et al., 2026).

Tools such as Adobe’s Podcast Enhanced Speech¹ and Descript² employ deep neural networks, based in particular on transformer architectures and diffusion models, to eliminate background noise in real time and bring speech recordings close to studio quality. Descript additionally enables transcript-based editing: audio is automatically transcribed, and changes made at the text level are applied directly to the audio file. Further powerful features include automatic loudness normalization, AI-assisted removal of filler pauses, and voice-cloning functionality that allows corrections to be made without re-recording (the so-called “Overdub” feature).

Beyond recording and post-processing, large language models such as ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini can support the substantive and editorial work surrounding an episode, conducting research on topics or guests, drafting interview questions, generating show notes and episode descriptions, and producing visuals for promotional use.

Text-to-speech tools such as ElevenLabs³ can then be used to give a voice to LLM-generated scripts (Hasanabadi, 2023), making it possible to render a dialogue between multiple AI-generated conversational voices as a finished audio file.⁴ The quality of synthetic voices has now reached a level at which lay listeners can barely distinguish them from human recordings; a phenomenon discussed in the literature through

¹<https://podcast.adobe.com/>

²<https://web.descript.com/>

³<https://elevenlabs.io/>

⁴Episode 101 of the German-language podcast “LectureCast” illustrates this approach: text outputs generated via prompts from the LLMs ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini were each assigned synthetic voices, and the resulting audio files were combined into a multi-voiced discussion in a single audio file (<https://open.spotify.com/episode/5kFIqI0ICWKdBcZNCsh8W3?si=qDRzhb-CT6SjUiIOCgpMaw>).

constructs such as “naturalness,” “human-likeness,” and “eeriness” (Abdulrahman & Richards, 2022).

The integration of LLMs into editorial workflows is not without controversy, however. It sits in tension with journalistic quality standards: while generative AI tools promise efficiency gains and scalability, they also increase the risk of homogenized content and factual hallucinations (Bender et al., 2021), demanding at minimum a critically curated approach from producers.

The current high-water mark of AI integration in podcast production is represented by systems that generate complete, dialogic podcast episodes from prompts or linked documents. The most prominent example is Google’s “NotebookLM,”⁵ first released in mid-2024 and continuously updated since. NotebookLM analyzes user-supplied documents, local or linked, combines them with information from its trained knowledge base, and produces a two-person dialogue between a synthetic female and a corresponding male voice in podcast format, simulating natural conversational dynamics including follow-up questions and moderating transitions.

This kind of content generation draws on several interlocking technologies: an LLM to produce a script from the source documents (Sigurgeirsson & King, 2023), a text-to-speech system to synthesize natural-sounding voices (Hasanabadi, 2023), and prosodic models to simulate conversational features such as emphasis, pauses, and affective tone (Wang & Székely, 2024).

The output of such a process need not stand alone; it can also be combined with recordings of real speakers in a mash-up format.⁶

Trust in Artificial Intelligence

“The rise of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) marks a turning point in the development of human cognition. Machines are no longer limited to retrieving information; they simulate thinking, produce fluent responses, and generate seemingly original content—tasks that were once considered uniquely human” (Gerlich, 2025, p. 932; Translation from German).

As the surface differences between human and AI-produced podcasts continue to blur, the question of trust takes on new dimensions. It confronts podcast producers who draw on generative AI to varying degrees, and it confronts listeners for whom the reception of partially or fully AI-generated content brings an additional variable into play: their own prior experiences with and attitudes toward artificial intelligence. What was once a matter of trust rooted in human authenticity now competes with a closeness technically constructed by generative AI, and with a broader stance toward the technology itself.

This is a particularly interesting tension because, as noted above, trust in human communicators does not appear to hinge on the absence of error, quite the contrary.

⁵<https://notebooklm.google/>

⁶Episode 114 of the German-language podcast “LectureCast” provides an example: a conversation recorded between two human participants was supplemented by dialogue passages generated with NotebookLM (<https://open.spotify.com/episode/61TyUZRYq5f4EHvPPN4o5w?si=XOYa5K2jRxKxevnbI26qTw>).

With AI-generated content, the dynamics are different. LLMs are prone to hallucination: they produce output that sounds coherent and plausible but cannot be factually verified (Huang et al., 2025). This appears to be a structural feature rather than an incidental flaw. Xu et al. (2025) demonstrate that LLMs cannot learn all computable functions and will therefore inevitably hallucinate when used as general-purpose problem-solvers. Shao (2025) puts the hallucination rate in benchmark tests at between 5% for general queries and up to 29% for specialized technical questions.

Whether this represents a high or low error rate relative to human performance is a question we set aside here. What seems safe to assume is that all users of generative AI have encountered incorrect outputs at some point, from which, in principle, a healthy skepticism ought to follow. In practice, however, generative AI tools are comparatively easy to access and use, and the fluency and apparent authority of their responses make the output convincing enough for many users to encourage surface-level processing at the expense of epistemic vigilance.

“What intensifies this development further is the growing trust in GenAI systems. This trust, which is often characterized by speed, coherence, and convenience, is rarely based on a thorough understanding of how these systems function. The more users trust the results of GenAI, the less inclined they are to question them. In this way, they relinquish the burden of verification and assessment, replacing analysis with acceptance. Under these conditions, trust is not the result of careful deliberation, but a shortcut around it” (Gerlich, 2025, p. 933; translation from German).

People tend to use AI systems even when they harbour diffuse anxieties or general unease about them. Chen et al. (2025) describe this as “intermittent neutralization”, a process in which acceptance, rejection (driven, for example, by data protection concerns), and information illusions blend into a cognitive dissonance that progressively dampens initial skepticism.

Survey data bear this out. A survey of over 30,000 consumers and employees across eleven European countries finds that non-users are markedly more skeptical than users: 74% of non-users express concerns about data misuse, compared with 62% of users; and while 57% of generative AI users trust it to deliver reliable results, only 33% of non-users share that confidence (Corduneanu et al., 2024).

A similar disconnect between self-assessed knowledge and actual attitudes emerges in Scantamburlo et al. (2023). Drawing on survey data from 4,006 people across eight European countries (Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain, and Sweden), they find that half of respondents hold a positive attitude toward AI despite consistently low self-rated AI competence. This aligns with Gnambs et al. (2025), whose analysis of 1,098 German adults finds broad acceptance of AI use even among people with little hands-on experience.

A more differentiated picture emerges when AI use is examined by context. Schäfer et al. (2024), drawing on telephone interviews with 1,037 young adults in Germany, find, in contrast to the studies cited above, considerable skepticism toward generative AI in scientific contexts, even as general trust in science stands at a comparatively high 56%. Lack of accuracy, bias, and the potential for abuse in pseudoscientific applications are identified as the main risks associated with using generative AI in scientific communication.

How Knowledge of AI Provenance Shapes Podcast Reception

Credibility and trust in podcasts rest, beyond external markers, primarily on the perceived authenticity of the host: imperfections, spontaneity, and personal self-disclosure that listeners read as signs of approachability and humanity. These authenticity signals stabilize parasocial relationships and constitute the foundation of trust in the content conveyed. Generative AI can now simulate these signals convincingly enough that listeners often cannot distinguish synthetic voices from human recordings.

Fully or partially machine-generated podcasts are no longer a future scenario, they are a present media reality. The question of how listeners respond when they know (or do not know) that a podcast was machine-generated is therefore less a technological matter than one belonging to educational media studies and communication psychology.

Human expertise as expressed in educational podcasts now competes directly with AI. Tolmeijer et al. (2022) find that participants rated AI as more capable than humans on the tasks studied, and that with experience participants grew more willing to follow an AI's advice or accept its decisions over a human expert's:

“Our results indicate that people perceive AI to be more capable than humans for the given tasks, but place somewhat higher moral trust in humans. The capable trust in AI is apparent in participant reliance behavior: as they do more missions, they are more likely to take an AI's advice or accept an AI's decision than a human expert's” (Tolmeijer et al., 2022, p. 2).

At the same time, studies point to context-specific skepticism toward generative AI outputs that appears particularly pronounced in scientific and educational settings (Schäfer et al., 2024). Prior experience with AI moderates attitudes toward it, suggesting that reactions to AI-generated educational podcasts are shaped less by the technology per se than by listeners' prior knowledge and expectations.

Two further theoretical considerations sharpen the framing of our research questions. First, trust in AI-generated content is unlikely to be uniform across genres: whether a podcast primarily conveys analytical commentary or relies on strict factual accuracy may itself shape how much verification listeners feel is warranted, and how readily they extend trust to a synthetic host (cf. Li et al., 2025, on the moderating role of content type). The present study is deliberately scoped to a single genre, an informational, lower-stakes higher-education topic, and the findings should be read as bounded by that choice rather than as evidence about AI-generated podcasts in general. Second, the very fact that listeners form impressions of synthetic hosts' trustworthiness and expertise at all points to what Balkin (2017) calls the “homunculus fallacy”: the tendency to attribute human-like intention, competence, and character to non-human agents. That listeners in our sample evaluated AI-generated voices in much the same relational terms they would apply to human hosts, see Section 4.3, suggests that this fallacy operates even under conditions of full AI disclosure, and that it may be a more productive lens for future hypothesis development than a simple human-versus-AI binary.

Against this background, the present study addresses two research questions:

- (1) Does it matter to podcast listeners whether they know the episode was produced by a human or by AI; and if so, does this knowledge alter perceived credibility, trust, and evaluations of content quality?
- (2) To what extent do individual AI attitudes and usage experience moderate these effects?

Drawing on the theoretical considerations and empirical findings reviewed above, we derive two research hypotheses:

- (H1) Knowledge of a podcast's provenance as human-made or AI-generated affects credibility and trust in content quality: listeners who know the content is AI-generated will attribute higher credibility to it and trust it more than listeners who believe they are consuming a human-produced episode.
- (H2) The extent of participants' own AI use and their personal attitude toward generative AI tools modulates the strength of the effect posited in H1: the greater the prior experience and the more positive the baseline attitude toward AI, the greater the trust in content identified as AI-generated.

Methods

To test these hypotheses we opted for a quasi-experiment (Behi & Nolan, 1996) structured as a between-subjects design (Charness et al., 2012). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups, both of which received the same audio contribution as the treatment stimulus but differed in what they were told about its origin. One group was explicitly informed that the episode was AI-generated; the other received no such information and was left to assume they were listening to a conventionally produced, human-authored audio contribution. Group assignment was carried out using the randomization function of the survey platform, which allocated each participant to one of the two conditions with equal probability at the point of survey entry.⁷

The audio contribution was generated using Google's NotebookLM on the basis of a text by Hebbel-Seeger & Vohle (2026). It was subsequently manually trimmed to 5 minutes and 28 seconds to minimize participant burden and reduce dropout risk. The resulting episode features a "human-sounding" synthetic female speaker and a comparably natural-sounding synthetic male speaker discussing the content of the source publication; a format modeled on the expert-dialogue podcast structure common in educational podcasting.

Following the stimulus, participants completed a questionnaire capturing four outcome constructs: perceived host trustworthiness, perceived host expertise, confidence in the accuracy of the content, and the perceived need to fact-check it. Each construct was rated on a 5-point Likert scale; demographic items (gender, age band, highest educational qualification) and self-reports of AI familiarity, AI usage

⁷Data collection and preparation were carried out with the assistance of *Aylin Smokovic* and *Benita Off*.

frequency, and personal interest in AI were collected alongside the outcome measures.

The random sample was drawn from the personal networks of student assistants. The topic selected for the audio contribution, AI-generated videos in higher education, was chosen because it is directly relevant to the participants' lived experience and can reasonably be assumed to hold some intrinsic interest for them. This convenience-sampling approach was chosen for reasons of feasibility within the time frame available for this exploratory pilot study; it was considered acceptable given the study's hypothesis-generating rather than hypothesis-confirming purpose, though, as discussed below, it limits the representativeness of the sample.

The quasi-experiment was conducted online over 23 days at the end of 2025. Participants accessed it individually, at a time and place of their choosing, and were asked to listen to the audio contribution and then complete a questionnaire about it.

Results

A total of 60 valid responses were collected: 38 from women and 22 from men, the majority of whom were under 30 years of age. Fifty participants held at least a general university entrance qualification. This educational profile likely accounts for the high level of familiarity with generative AI that participants reported: 52 rated their familiarity as "high" or "very high," while only 7 expressed uncertainty or said they were "not very familiar," and just 1 indicated no familiarity at all. Interest in AI was widespread: 42 participants described themselves as personally interested to varying degrees, 13 were undecided, 4 reported little interest, and only 1 reported none (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Sample Characteristics (N = 60)*

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Women	38	63.3
	Men	22	36.7
Age	Majority < 30 years	38	63.3
Education	General university entrance qualification or higher	50	83.3
	Other / lower qualification	10	16.7
AI familiarity	High / very high	52	86.7
	Uncertain / not very familiar	7	11.7
	None	1	1.7
Interest in AI	Interested (varying degrees)	42	70.0
	Undecided	13	21.7
	Little interest	4	6.7
	None	1	1.7

The two experimental groups were comparable on age, gender, educational level, AI familiarity, and personal interest in AI. Differences in response patterns can therefore be attributed primarily to whether participants knew (Group 1) or did not know (Group 2) that the audio they had listened to was AI-generated or not.

Differences first emerged on the question of host trustworthiness. Participants who believed they had listened to a human-produced episode rated the hosts as less

trustworthy than those in Group 1 who knew the voices were synthetic. A similar pattern appeared in assessments of expertise: participants aware of the AI provenance rated the hosts' expertise higher than those who assumed human speakers. Across both groups, women were more skeptical than men, consistently rating hosts as less trustworthy and less knowledgeable.

Participants who assumed real human protagonists also expressed lower confidence in the accuracy of the content and a greater perceived need to verify it compared with Group 1. The gender difference recurred here as well: women attributed less trust to the content and saw a greater need for fact-checking.

Table 2. *Mann–Whitney U Tests Comparing Group 1 (AI-Disclosed) and Group 2 (No Disclosure)*

Measure	G1 M (SD)	G2 M (SD)	U	z	p	r
Host trustworthiness	3.11 (0.99)	2.68 (1.09)	480.5	1.508	.134	.202
Host expertise	3.43 (0.96)	3.14 (0.85)	459.5	1.173	.244	.157
Confidence in content accuracy	3.00 (1.05)	2.57 (0.84)	492.5	1.734	.084	.232
Need to fact-check	2.00 (1.00)	2.57 (1.07)	262.0	−2.079	.038*	.280

scale 1 = fully agree, 5 = fully disagree. Missing values were excluded listwise. (Trustworthiness: n = 56; Expertise: n = 56; Accuracy: n = 56; Necessity: n = 55). U is the U-value for Group 1 vs. Group 2. $r = |z| / \sqrt{N}$ as Effect size (Cohen: .10 = small, .30 = medium, .50 = large). * $p < .05$.

Because the data were not normally distributed, group differences were tested using the non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test (see Table 2). Only one of the four comparisons reached significance: participants who had been told the content was AI-generated indicated a significantly lower need to verify it ($U = 262.0$, $z = -2.079$, $p = .038$, $r = .280$). Given that this is the only significant result among four tested comparisons, it should be read as tentative, exploratory evidence for H1, the hypothesis that listeners attribute greater credibility to audio identified as AI-generated, rather than as a confirmed effect; the possibility that this single finding reflects chance (a Type I error) cannot be ruled out and underscores the need for replication with a larger sample. Exploration of H2 was not possible given the near-absence of within-group variance on AI attitudes and experience.

Discussion

The finding that knowing a podcast is AI-generated reduces rather than increases the perceived need to verify its content appears, at first glance, to cut against the AI disclosure literature. Based on a meta-analysis of 13 studies spanning multiple domains, Schilke & Reimann (2025) conclude that disclosing AI use consistently reduces trust, even if the effect is attenuated for people with positive attitudes toward AI or a basic trust in generative technology, it does not disappear. Wang & Huang's (2024) meta-analysis of experimental studies in news research similarly finds that articles labeled as AI-generated are perceived as less credible than human-authored ones. Koning & Voorveld (2025) add evidence from advertising research showing that AI disclosure significantly reduces trust and brand attitudes.

Our result diverges from this first cluster of findings but connects with a second, more nuanced one. Huschens et al. (2023) show that LLM-generated and human-authored texts are rated as equivalent in terms of competence and trustworthiness, with AI-generated texts even perceived as clearer and more appealing; a finding that converges with ours, despite the difference in media format. Li et al. (2025) further demonstrate that AI labels have no significant effect on perceived credibility in their experiment, and that the effect is strongly moderated by prior experience and content type. Particularly relevant for educational contexts is their finding that participants with more prior AI experience rate non-commercial, informational, and educational content as highly credible even when it carries an AI label; consistent with the education level and AI affinity of our sample.

Gallegos et al. (2026) add that AI labels change perceptions of authorship without reducing the persuasive impact of content, supporting the view that AI disclosure does not automatically trigger a trust deficit but operates in a context-dependent way. In educational settings in particular, an AI label may actually activate a kind of “competence heuristic”, as generative AI tools are widely perceived by younger, more highly educated users as capable and factually reliable (Corduneanu et al., 2024). Gerlich (2025) puts this dynamic succinctly:

“Trust in GenAI ... reflects a profound shift in epistemic preferences. Users are increasingly willing to trust AI, not merely because it performs well, but because it appears less prone to error than human alternatives” (p. 935; translation from German).

Taken together, our findings point to an experience-driven evaluation of AI outputs that aligns with Tolmeijer et al. (2022), whose work informed our hypothesis formulation, and resonates with Alieto et al. (2025), who similarly find that people tend to regard generative AI output as a less error-prone knowledge source and engage with it accordingly uncritically. Beyond general AI-affinity, two more specific features of the sample plausibly underpin this competence heuristic. First, the high proportion of participants with hands-on generative-AI experience (52 of 60 rating their familiarity “high” or “very high”) means that, for most respondents, exposure to fluent, competent-sounding AI output already preceded the study; repeated positive encounters of this kind are precisely the mechanism through which Tolmeijer et al. (2022) and Gerlich (2025) locate the growth of capability-based trust. Second, the topic of the stimulus, AI tools in higher education, sits squarely within participants’ own field of competence as students, which may have lowered the perceived stakes of being wrong and correspondingly the perceived need to verify; this would be consistent with the genre-dependency argument introduced in Section 4. We note, however, that the present design cannot separate these two accounts from one another or from the homunculus fallacy discussed above, since AI experience, topic familiarity, and anthropomorphic trust attribution were not manipulated independently. Disentangling them is a natural next step for the replication study proposed below.

The cross-group pattern of greater skepticism among women, lower trust in hosts, higher perceived need for fact-checking, mirrors findings in the literature on gender differences in AI perception. Borwein et al. (2026), drawing on a large North American sample, show that women consistently rate AI risks higher than men, a

pattern attributed to general risk aversion and lower exposure to the purported benefits of AI. Aldasoro et al. (2024) similarly report, on the basis of the Survey of Consumer Expectations, that the “Gen-AI gender gap” in generative AI use is explained primarily by lower self-assessed knowledge, reinforced by greater data protection concerns and lower baseline trust in AI providers. This structural female skepticism toward generative AI offers a plausible account of the pattern observed here, though the sample size precluded a formal significance test.

Limitations

The present study offers initial empirical evidence of differential reception effects tied to awareness of AI provenance in an educational podcast, but several methodological constraints must be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

The sample size of $n=60$ imposes strict limits on statistical power. Several substantively plausible group differences, on host trustworthiness and perceived expertise, for instance, fail to reach significance, which is most readily explained by the combination of a small sample and modest effect sizes. A larger replication study is needed before robust conclusions can be drawn. The present sample size reflects the time and personnel constraints of a student-supported pilot data collection rather than a deliberate methodological choice; recruiting and retaining a substantially larger, more diverse sample within the available 23-day window was not feasible. We treat this explicitly as a constraint on the present study rather than as a finished design, and accordingly frame our contribution as a first, exploratory step that motivates rather than substitutes for the larger replication called for throughout this section.

The sample is also markedly skewed in terms of age and educational attainment, which is reflected in the high levels of AI familiarity participants reported. This limits the external validity of the findings and leaves open whether the observed patterns would generalize to other populations, older listeners or those less comfortable with AI, for example, especially given that prior research consistently shows AI-related attitudes and trust judgments to be strongly moderated by experience and background knowledge.

The homogeneity of the sample on AI familiarity and attitudes also meant that H2, the hypothesis that AI usage and attitudes moderate trust in AI-generated content, was simply not empirically tractable. Testing it properly would require a sample with substantially greater variance on these dispositions. We want to be explicit on this point: since RQ2 was one of the study’s two central research questions, its untested status is not a peripheral caveat but a central limitation of the present study, and the empirical contribution offered here should be read as addressing RQ1 only.

Finally, because this is a quasi-experiment, complete randomization in group assignment was not achieved. While the groups appear comparable on the key variables, a selection effect cannot be ruled out.

Conclusion and Outlook

Starting from the question of how awareness or ignorance of AI provenance shapes the reception of an educational podcast, the present study brings together three research domains, podcast research, educational media, and generative AI, that have not previously been examined in this combination. As an exploratory study, it delivers an initial empirical foothold, even if most of the measured items produce group differences that fall below the threshold of significance. We take this less as a limitation than as an invitation to pursue the questions it raises. We deliberately frame the contribution this way rather than as a finished test of both hypotheses: given the constraints discussed in Section 4.4, a single small-sample study could not by itself deliver a robust answer to RQ2, and we judged it more useful to report the present, theoretically grounded pilot transparently and to specify concretely what a properly powered follow-up would need to look like, rather than to delay publication until a larger study could be mounted.

The most pressing next step is a replication with substantially larger and more diverse samples, one that would permit reliable significance testing and enable the investigation of moderating effects. Of particular interest is the question of whether and how individual AI attitudes, prior usage experience, and general trust in science shape the reception of AI-generated educational content; a question that the present study could not address due to insufficient variance and sample size.

The quasi-experimental design also invites extension in multiple directions. The degree of AI involvement could be varied systematically, from fully AI-generated audio, to AI-written scripts with human voices, to entirely manually produced podcasts, to test whether trust judgments respond more to the binary “human or AI” distinction or to the degree of AI involvement. In this regard, the model of “calibrated trust” developed by Hebbel-Seeger & Vohle (forthcoming), with reference to Lee & See (2004) and Ayoub et al. (2022) in the context of academic video use, offers a potentially useful methodological orientation. A longitudinal design would also be valuable for examining whether trust judgments shift over time as exposure to AI-generated educational content accumulates, including in light of the “intermittent neutralization” dynamic discussed in Section 3 (Chen et al., 2025).

More broadly, the study suggests that the provenance of an educational medium is not a neutral piece of information. It shapes listeners’ attitudes and expectations in ways that have practical implications for how AI-supported educational offerings are designed and communicated. For higher education didactics, a set of concrete follow-up questions arises: how does transparency about AI involvement affect learning behavior; the depth at which content is processed, the willingness to engage with it critically, the nature and extent of that engagement? These questions are as important as they are underexplored.

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From Monsters to Mascots: Anthropomorphized Germs and Hygienic Subjectivity in Turkish and Global Advertising

*By Hande Bilsel**

Hygiene advertising routinely anthropomorphizes invisible pathogens as characters with voices, faces, and intentions. This paper examines how such germ characters construct myths of cleanliness, disgust, and responsibility in Turkish and global contexts. Drawing on a qualitative multiple-case design and Barthesian semiotic analysis, we analyze 11 advertisements and animations featuring personified germs, including Domestos Turkey campaigns, Turkish children's hygiene content, and UK/US Domestos and Listerine spots. The analysis shows that anthropomorphized germs operate as dual-function devices: they dramatize invisible microbial threats through monster, clown, and spokesperson figures, and they naturalize specific versions of the hygienic subject—from vigilant mothers defending bathrooms, through disciplined children "playing" at defeating germs, to responsible citizens supporting school hygiene and adults managing breath to remain socially acceptable.

Keywords: *anthropomorphism, hygiene advertising, semiotics, glocalisation, Türkiye*

Introduction

Hygiene advertising is crowded with germs that talk, sing, protest, and even take selfies. From bleach and surface cleaners to mouthwash and children's handwashing cartoons, microbes that are normally invisible are routinely rendered as characters: spiky villains, pathetic losers, cute sidekicks, or aggrieved spokespersons. For brand managers and health communicators, these anthropomorphized germs are not just visual devices but strategic creative resources that can differentiate brands, shape category meanings, and influence compliance with recommended hygiene behaviors. They dramatize contamination as an intentional act, stage cleanliness as a moral test, and invite viewers to identify with—or laugh at—figures that stand in for invisible risk, thereby affecting how consumers perceive product efficacy, personal vulnerability, and appropriate hygienic conduct in competitive markets. In doing so, they participate in wider cultural struggles over what it means to be a good parent, citizen, child, or partner in an era of heightened concern about contagion and hygiene.

Research on anthropomorphism and disease communication suggests that humanlike pathogens can increase perceived vulnerability and compliance with preventive recommendations, but that their effects depend on tone: cute or humorous germs may soften fear, while monstrous germs amplify disgust and avoidance (Wang et al., 2022; Galoni et al. 2020; Wu et al., 2023). Semiotic and

*Associate Professor, Department of Advertising, Bahçeşehir University, Türkiye.

cross-cultural advertising studies, meanwhile, show how brands recycle visual templates and character types across markets, adapting them to local cultural codes while preserving core brand narratives (Barthes, 1972/1957; Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022). Building on these strands, this paper examines how anthropomorphized germs in hygiene campaigns construct and circulate myths of cleanliness, disgust, and responsibility in both Turkish and global contexts.

Empirically, I focus on a purposive corpus of 11 advertisements and animations featuring personified germs, including Domestos Turkey television campaigns ("Kötüyüm Ben, Domestos," "Hijyen Ekibi – Sultan Mikrop," "Mikroplar Ağlarmış," "#mikroplariyanda"), Turkish hygiene edutainment content (*Çürük Ali ve Mikrop Necati*; children's handwashing cartoons), and selected UK/global Domestos and Listerine spots with animated germ figures. Using a qualitative multiple-case design and Barthesian semiotic analysis, I ask: (1) How are germs anthropomorphized and narrativized in Turkish hygiene advertising and related animated content? (2) How do these representations compare with germ characters in UK/US campaigns by the same or similar brands? and (3) What myths of cleanliness, citizenship, and selfhood are naturalized through these representations?

I argue that anthropomorphized germs operate as dual-function devices: they dramatize invisible microbial threats through monster, clown, and spokesperson figures, and they naturalize particular versions of the hygienic subject—from the vigilant mother defending the bathroom, through the disciplined child who "plays" at defeating germs, to the responsible citizen who supports clean school toilets, and the adult who manages breath to remain socially acceptable (Barthes, 1972/1957; Douglas, 1966; Stones et al., 2022). By comparing Turkish and UK/US executions, I show how a shared germ universe is glocalised: Turkish campaigns embed germs in national genres of humor and civic activism, whereas UK/US campaigns emphasize horror and romantic self-presentation. The analysis thus contributes to anthropomorphism and disease-communication research, to semiotic studies of advertising, and to broader debates about how contemporary cultures imagine—and govern—the boundaries between bodies, homes, publics, and microbes.

This paper proceeds as follows: I first review the relevant literature on anthropomorphism in health and marketing communication, germs and disgust in consumer behavior, and semiotic approaches to advertising. I then outline our qualitative multiple-case methodology and describe my corpus of 11 Turkish and global advertisements. The analysis section examines three thematic clusters—monsters and invaders, cute clowns and mascots, and moral tests—before comparing Turkish and global patterns. I conclude by discussing strategic implications for brand managers, advertising practitioners, and public health communicators seeking to leverage anthropomorphized characters in health and hygiene campaigns.

Literature Review

Anthropomorphism in Health and Marketing Communication

Anthropomorphism refers to attributing human characteristics—such as thoughts, feelings, intentions, or social roles—to nonhuman entities (Wang et al., 2022; Xiang & Park, 2023). In marketing and branding, this can involve humanlike mascots, talking products, or animated characters that represent otherwise abstract entities (Akhan et al., 2022). Hygiene and health campaigns extend this logic to pathogens: diseases and germs are personified as criminals, invaders, or troublesome guests, sometimes with names, faces, and voices (Wang et al., 2022; Stones, 2022).

Experimental work shows that anthropomorphizing diseases can bring them psychologically "closer," increasing perceived vulnerability and compliance with preventive recommendations (Wang et al., 2022; Xiang & Park, 2023). Describing a virus as a deceptive criminal, or depicting mucus and germs as obnoxious intruders, makes an invisible threat more imaginable and therefore harder to ignore (Wang et al., 2022). At the same time, research on anthropomorphized virus icons suggests that effects depend on tone: anthropomorphized warnings can increase risk perception and protective intentions, but highly cute germs may dilute seriousness if not paired with strong messages (Xiang & Park, 2023).

In consumer research, anthropomorphism has also been linked to chronic disease concerns: people who are more concerned about infection are more likely to anthropomorphize germs and disease-related stimuli in everyday life (Galoni et al., 2020; Xiang & Park, 2023). This points to a two-way relationship: communications anthropomorphize germs to influence consumers, but consumers' pre-existing sensitivities and cultural backgrounds shape how such figures are interpreted (Galoni et al., 2020; Akhan et al., 2022). Cross-cultural work on humorous anthropomorphic TV ads shows that the same type of character—a talking object or animal—can support different cultural scripts, more collectivist or more individualist, depending on how its actions and relationships are framed (Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022).

Beyond health contexts, a broader stream of branding research shows that anthropomorphic mascots can strengthen brand attitudes, identification, and purchase intentions by acting as humanized interfaces between consumers and products (Deligoz & Ünal, 2021). Anthropomorphic mascots enhance brand image and perceived personality and provide narrative hooks that make brands feel more like social actors than mere objects (Deligoz & Ünal, 2021). Although germs represent negative rather than positive brand characters, I argue that germ figures in hygiene advertising operate in a similar way: as quasi-mascots that mediate consumer-brand relations by dramatizing contamination and cleansing and by embodying the enemy that the product promises to defeat. Overall, this literature positions anthropomorphized germs as powerful but ambivalent tools: they can heighten perceived risk and compliance, but comic or cute framing can also soften fear, invite identification, and generate unexpected sympathies (Wang et al., 2022; Xiang & Park, 2023).

Germs, Disgust, and Contagious Disease Cues in Consumer Behavior

Beyond personification, germs enter advertising as contamination cues that trigger disgust and fear (Galoni et al., 2020; Stones et al., 2022). Research on consumer responses to contagious disease cues has traditionally emphasized disgust as an emotion that motivates rejection and avoidance of potential contaminants (Galoni et al., 2020). More recent work shows that disease cues elicit both disgust and fear, and that this combination can systematically shift consumer choices: exposure to reminders of contagious disease leads consumers to prefer more familiar products and options, perceived as safer or less risky. Related work on product contagion further demonstrates how evaluations of clean items can deteriorate when they are placed next to disgusting or contaminated products, even without any actual transfer, underscoring the power of contamination cues in consumer judgment (Galoni et al., 2020).

Anthropomorphized germs in cleaning and hygiene advertising operate within this emotional economy, visualizing otherwise invisible contaminants and dramatizing their ability to invade domestic and public spaces (Stones et al., 2022; Xiang & Park, 2023). Stones (2022) proposes a typology of germ imagery in popular health communication, distinguishing between microscopic, monstrous, and cute character-like germs. Microscopic germs align with scientific authority and clinical distance, monstrous germs emphasize horror and invasion, and cute germs introduce playfulness and pedagogical appeal (Stones et al., 2022).

From a consumer-behavior perspective, these visual strategies interact with broader cultural narratives about cleanliness, morality, and social order (Barthes, 1972/1957; Ocak, 2025). In his classic essay on cleaning products, Barthes (1972/1957) argues that detergents and bleaches are sold not only as technical solutions but as symbolic agents of purification, promising to destroy dirt conceptualized as evil. Strong chlorine products are coded as "absolute fire," annihilating all impurity, while softer detergents are framed as gentle liberators that separate dirt from fabric, washing away stain without overt violence (Barthes, 1972/1957). When germs are anthropomorphized and placed within these older purification narratives, they become moralized figures: not just microbes, but villains, tricksters, or pitiable losers whose destruction or survival is linked to what it means to be a good mother, citizen, child, or partner (Galoni et al., 2020; Stones et al., 2022).

My interest in cleanliness is also informed by classic work on purity and pollution. Douglas (1966) theorized dirt as "matter out of place," arguing that practices of cleaning, classification, and boundary-drawing are central to how societies organize moral and symbolic order. Hygiene communication draws on this logic: germs, stains, and bodily fluids are not only biomedical threats but signs of disorder, while cleaning rituals reassert social and moral boundaries. When anthropomorphized germs invade bathrooms, kitchens, mouths, or school toilets in our corpus, they mark these spaces as out of place and in need of purification; their destruction restores not just physical cleanliness but a sense of normative order.

Semiotics, Myth, and the Glocalization of Germ Characters

To analyze how anthropomorphized germs work in advertising, I draw on Roland Barthes' semiotic framework of denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1972/1957; Mzoughi & Abdelhak, 2012). At the denotative level, advertisements present concrete images and sounds: cartoon germs with eyes and mouths, specific domestic or public spaces, caregivers and children, branded bottles and sprays, slogans and jingles. At the connotative level, these elements are organized so that they suggest broader ideas and values: the bathroom becomes a battlefield, school toilets stand for the nation's civic health, the caregiver is recast as a heroic defender, while germs become invaders, protesters, or mischievous tricksters (Barthes, 1972/1957; Mzoughi & Abdelhak 2012). Myth, in Barthes' sense, is the level at which these connotations solidify into common-sense truths: not just that toilets should be cleaned, but that a good parent or citizen is someone who constantly hunts invisible germs using the right products and techniques (Barthes, 1972/1957; Ocak, 2025).

Semiotic analyses of advertising show that such myths systematically encode gendered, classed, and national expectations—for example, positioning mothers as primary guardians of domestic hygiene, or representing middle-class interiors as naturally bright, white, and germ-free (Ocak, 2025; Mzoughi & Abdelhak, 2019). In hygiene campaigns, germs provide a flexible visual device to police these boundaries: germs tend to appear in wrong spaces—dirty bathrooms, neglected school toilets, the mouths of careless or socially awkward people—and their defeat restores not only physical cleanliness but a moral and social order (Barthes, 1972/1957; Stones et al., 2022). Cross-cultural semiotic work demonstrates that when multinational brands move across markets, they often retain the same basic narrative structures while shifting the visual symbolism and character roles to resonate with local norms and humor (Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022).

I conceptualize germ characters as part of a glocalised brand germ universe. Global brands such as Domestos and Listerine develop recurring visual and narrative templates for germs—spiky blobs, monstrous figures, or cartoon clusters—that travel between countries (Ocak, 2025; Stones et al., 2022). However, as prior research on humorous anthropomorphic TV ads and cross-cultural symbolism shows, these figures are re-voiced, re-costumed, and re-embedded in local storylines (Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022). Thus, the same underlying figure—a talking germ—may appear as a horror-coded monster in a UK context, a self-pitying band member or political spokesperson in Turkey, or a comic dragon in a US mouthwash ad. The denotative template remains comparable, but the connotative associations and resulting myths differ across markets (Barthes, 1972/1957; Stones et al., 2022).

This process can be understood through the lens of glocalisation, where semiotic resources created in global brand worlds are re-encoded within local cultural repertoires, producing locally resonant myths from transnational templates (Budha, 2024; Ocak, 2025). My comparative analysis uses this framework in two ways. First, at the level of individual ads, I systematically identify how germ characters are visually designed, voiced, and situated, and which myths of cleanliness, responsibility, and subjectivity they help naturalize (Barthes, 1972/1957; Mzoughi & Abdelhak 2012). Second, at the cross-national level, I treat Turkish and UK/US executions as

variations within a shared germ universe and examine how local humor, political references, and institutional concerns—for example, school hygiene in Turkey versus romantic self-presentation in Listerine campaigns—inflect the same basic trope (Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022). By doing so, I show how anthropomorphized germs do not simply visualize microbes, but participate in the glocal production of myths of the hygienic subject—the vigilant mother, responsible citizen, disciplined child, or socially acceptable partner differently imagined in Turkish and global advertising (Barthes, 1972/1957; Douglas, 1966; Galoni et al., 2020; Stones et al., 2022).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive, multiple-case design to analyze anthropomorphized germs in hygiene advertising. Each advertisement or animated clip is treated as a bounded case of germ personification in health and hygiene communication. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, the goal is analytic generalization in an exploratory, theory-building sense: by systematically comparing carefully selected Turkish and global cases, we refine theoretical concepts such as monster germ, mascot germ, and germ as spokesperson and explore how a shared global advertising trope is adapted to local cultural, political, and regulatory contexts. As such, the study is designed to elaborate concepts and identify patterned configurations rather than to estimate the prevalence of particular representations.

The design is cross-national and comparative, juxtaposing Turkish campaigns—primarily Domestos Turkey and local hygiene animations—with structurally similar UK and US campaigns by the same or analogous brands (Domestos UK/global, Listerine). This approach follows established practice in cross-cultural semiotic advertising research, which examines how multinational brands encode and adapt visual and narrative elements across markets (Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022).

Corpus and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used, guided by four inclusion criteria: (1) Explicit anthropomorphization—germs must be visually represented as characters with humanlike traits (speaking, singing, plotting, protesting, expressing emotions, or acting in social roles); (2) Product and campaign focus—material had to promote hygiene products or behaviors or form part of public health/hygiene education campaigns centered on germ reduction; (3) Context diversity—the corpus includes domestic (bathroom, kitchen), institutional (school toilets), and interpersonal (mouth, breath) settings to capture different hygiene domains and associated moral frameworks; (4) Temporal and market range—Turkish cases span approximately 2015–2025, while global cases include both classic (1980s–1990s Listerine) and more recent (2000s–2010s Domestos UK/global) executions.

The final corpus comprises 11 cases, organized into two sub-corpora (see Table 1). Turkish sub-corpus (7 cases) includes four Domestos Turkey campaigns featuring

distinct germ characters (*Kötüyüm Ben, Domestos*; *Hijyen Ekibi – Sultan Mikrop*; *Mikroplar Ağlarmış*; #mikroplariyanda), one Turkish hygiene/edutainment animation (*Çürük Ali ve Mikrop Necati – Temizlik*), and two Turkish children's hygiene animations (*Aslan Yavrusu – Ellerinizi sabunla yıkayın*; *Elif ve Gürbüz, el temizliği*). Global sub-corpus (4 cases) includes three Domestos UK/global campaigns (CG "disgusting germs" compilation; *Grot Buster*; germ monster spray ad) and one Listerine mouthwash advertisement (animated "Clifford" dragon/germ commercial, circa 1987).

Cases were identified via systematic keyword searches on video platforms and in advertising archives (e.g., "Domestos mikroplar," "germ character ad," "Listerine animated") and selected to maximize variation in germ roles (villain, clown, spokesperson, victim), affective tone (fear, humor, pity), and moral context (maternal care, citizenship, romantic acceptability). This selection logic is consistent with semiotic and cross-cultural advertising studies that work with theoretically driven, information-rich samples (Ocak, 2025; Akhan et al., 2022).

Semiotic Coding and Analysis

The analysis applies Barthesian semiotics in three main steps, supplemented by a structured cross-case comparison. Step 1: Case sheets and denotative coding—for each case, a detailed case sheet documented what is literally seen and heard: germ character design (number, shape, color, facial features, movement, clothing), human characters and their roles, settings and spatial coding, product presentation, key verbal elements, and music and sound effects. This denotative inventory provides the empirical basis for subsequent interpretation and ensures that connotative claims remain grounded in observable signs (Barthes, 1972/1957; Mzoughi & Abdelhak, 2012).

Step 2: Connotative interpretation—I interpreted the cultural meanings and associations activated by these signs: the dominant emotional tone, the narrative roles ascribed to germs, and the broader scenarios in which they operate. Particular attention was given to cultural references and codes—for example, Ottoman "sultan" imagery and protest rhetoric in Turkish Domestos spots, or horror-film and monster conventions in UK campaigns—as well as to gendered, classed, and national coding of cleanliness and responsibility (Ocak, 2025; Mzoughi & Abdelhak 2012).

Table 1. *Case Corpus Overview*

Code	Title/Campaign	Brand/Platform	Country	Year(s)
T1	<i>Kötüyüm Ben, Domestos</i>	Domestos Turkey	Turkey	~2018
T2	<i>Hijyen Ekibi – Sultan Mikrop</i>	Domestos Turkey	Turkey	~2019
T3	<i>Mikroplar Ağlarmış</i>	Domestos Turkey	Turkey	~2020
T4	<i>#mikroplariyanda</i>	Domestos Turkey	Turkey	~2021
T5	<i>Çürük Ali ve Mikrop Necati</i>	Edutainment	Turkey	~2015–2020

T6	<i>Aslan Yavrusu</i> handwashing	Children's hygiene	Turkey	~2020
T7	<i>Elif ve Gürbüz</i> hand hygiene	Educational content	Turkey	~2020
G1	<i>Disgusting Germs</i> compilation	Domestos UK/global	UK	~2010s
G2	<i>Grot Buster</i>	Domestos UK/global	UK	~2010s
G3	Germ monster spray ad	Domestos UK	UK	~2010s
G4	<i>Clifford</i> dragon/germ ad	Listerine	USA	~1987

Source: Authors' compilation.

Step 3: Myth analysis—building on this, I synthesized denotation and connotation into what Barthes terms myth: the seemingly natural stories about cleanliness, responsibility, and subjectivity that each ad constructs (Barthes, 1972/1957). Examples include myths such as "a good mother must relentlessly hunt invisible germs in the bathroom to protect her family," "a good citizen supports school hygiene infrastructure to fulfill collective responsibility," or "a modern individual must manage bad breath to remain socially and romantically acceptable." This level of analysis reveals how germ characters function not only as persuasive devices but as symbolic figures that produce and police hygienic subjectivity (Douglas, 1966; Stones et al., 2022).

Step 4: Cross-case and cross-national comparison—after coding all cases individually, I conducted structured within-corpus and across-corpus comparisons along four predefined axes, adapted from cross-cultural semiotic advertising work (Ocak, 2025; Akhan & Altintas et al., 2022): (1) Characterization—how are germs designed and voiced? (2) Affect—what is the dominant emotional register? (3) Moral economy—what is being tested, and who carries responsibility? (4) Cultural coding and glocalization—what local references, humor, and regulatory boundaries shape germ representation?

Within each of the three analysis subsections—"Monsters and invaders," "Cute clowns and reluctant mascots," and "Moral tests and hygienic subjectivity"—I first compare Turkish cases with one another, then global cases with one another, and finally conduct an explicit cross-national comparison along these axes. This strategy allows us to identify both global continuities in germ anthropomorphism and local inflections that reveal how hygiene myths are adapted to Turkish versus UK/US cultural and institutional settings.

Results

Monsters and Invaders: Domestic Battlefields

Across both Turkish and global campaigns, one prominent configuration is the monster germ as domestic invader. In these ads, germs are anthropomorphized as hostile agents that threaten the integrity of bathrooms, toilets, and other intimate spaces. Their narrative function is to dramatize invisible contamination as an active invasion and to position cleaning products as weapons or defensive shields.

In *Kötüyüm Ben, Domestos* (T1), a single germ character introduces itself in the first person as explicitly evil, boasting about making people sick and reveling in dirt before Domestos arrives. Denotatively, the germ is small, spiky, and brightly colored, with a face, limbs, and exaggerated expressions; it moves through a grimy bathroom environment and addresses the viewer directly. Connotatively, this design fuses children's-cartoon aesthetics with villain tropes: the germ is comic, but its song about causing illness frames it as a morally charged enemy. The myth that emerges is that of the vigilant household defender: a good caregiver must treat germs as declared enemies and use powerful bleach to protect the family, or risk being complicit in their spread.

Domestos Hijyen Ekibi – Sultan Mikrop (T2) extends this logic from the individual villain to an invading army. Here, multiple germs, led by a "Sultan Mikrop," occupy various parts of the house; they speak to one another in a hierarchical, quasi-military register about having taken over surfaces. The domestic interior is reframed as contested territory, and Ottoman-style sultan imagery invokes Turkish historical dramas and political satire: germs become cartoon despots ruling over a dirty empire that must be overthrown. At the mythic level, cleanliness is equated with liberation from tyrannical rule; using Domestos is not just a matter of hygiene but an act of reclaiming rightful order in the home.

The Domestos UK/global *Disgusting Germs* and *Grot Buster* spots (G1, G2) deploy similar monster tropes but with different tonal inflections. In these ads, CG germs are shown living inside grime on tiles, in plugholes, or on toilet surfaces; they speak in exaggerated voices, often with British comedic timing, and react in terror when the product appears. Denotatively, the germs are rendered as grotesque blobs with eyes, teeth, and slimy textures, inhabiting dark, gross micro-worlds that are revealed by an imaginary camera. Connotatively, they combine horror and humor: their world is disgusting enough to trigger aversion, but their banter and over-the-top reactions prompt amusement. The myth here aligns with a forensic warrior narrative: Domestos is a microscopic soldier that can enter hidden grot and annihilate life forms ordinary cleaning cannot reach, justifying high-strength chemicals as necessary for true safety.

The reported UK germ monster spray advertisement (G3) intensifies the horror dimension. A grey, human-sized germ creature narrates how humans now hunt and exterminate germs with sprays, depicted in a way that some viewers and regulators considered frightening for children. This execution shifts the affective balance towards fear, with less compensatory humor than in the Turkish sultan parody or the more comic UK CG germs. The resulting myth edges toward a total war framing: germs are not just bothersome but existential threats that must be relentlessly pursued, even at the risk of disturbing sensibilities.

Comparing these Turkish and UK/global cases highlights both continuity and inflection. All rely on denotative features such as spiky or slimy bodies, grimy settings, and dramatic annihilation effects to frame germs as invading monsters, and all cast bleach as a violent but necessary purifying force. However, the Turkish spots fold this invasion into local genres of humor and politics: the *Kötüym Ben* germ sings and jokes, and *Sultan Mikrop* explicitly references Ottoman-style authority and contemporary satire, softening horror through parody and connecting domestic hygiene to narratives of resisting corrupt rulers. The UK/global ads, by contrast, lean more heavily on horror and disgust, with the germ monster approaching the threshold of regulatory acceptability, and the *Grot Buster* germs visually embedded in extreme filth. In Barthesian terms, both sets construct myths of domestic battlefields where good subjects must fight invisible invaders, but Turkish ads tie this battle to playful, nationally specific codes, whereas UK/global ads emphasize visceral disgust and cinematic monstrosity as their primary persuasive resources (Barthes, 1972/1957; Stones et al., 2022).

Cute Clowns and Reluctant Mascots

A second configuration in the corpus reworks germs from pure monsters into comic clowns or reluctant mascots. Here, germs still represent contamination, but their anthropomorphism invites amusement, pity, or even mild identification, creating a more ambivalent affective field around hygiene.

In *Domestos Mikroplar Ağlarmış* (T3), germs form a music band and sing about how Domestos has made their lives miserable. Denotatively, the germs have band instruments, expressive faces, and perform on a makeshift stage, while lyrics and visuals foreground their sadness and self-pity. Connotatively, they oscillate between villains and victims: they are still bad in principle, but the ad invites viewers to laugh at their complaints and perhaps momentarily sympathize with them. The myth that emerges is one of inevitable progress: powerful cleaning products have changed the world so thoroughly that even germs now feel oppressed, and their protests are ultimately ridiculous. Cleanliness becomes both non-negotiable and slightly comic, as if the only ones who truly suffer are germs themselves.

The Turkish edutainment animation *Çirük Ali ve Mikrop Necati – Temizlik* (T5) pushes further towards cuteness. Mikrop Necati is a named germ character with a distinct voice and personality who jokes, complains, and interacts with human protagonists inside teeth or the body. Denotatively, he is rendered as a small, stylized figure, closer to a cartoon sidekick than a horror monster. Connotatively, this casting aligns germs with children's sitcom humor: Necati is annoying but entertaining, an excuse for didactic dialogue about brushing, washing, and doing the right thing. The myth here centers on moral education through play: children learn that germs are naughty companions they must eventually banish, but the learning process itself is framed as fun, story-driven, and emotionally engaging rather than purely fear-based.

A similar strategy appears in Turkish children's handwashing cartoons such as *Aslan Yavrusu – Ellerinizi sabunla yıkayın* and *Elif ve Gürbüz, el temizliği* (T6, T7). In these clips, germs are depicted as colorful, squealing creatures that chase or bite the protagonists and then scream or pop when attacked by soap and water. Denotatively, they often have big eyes, exaggerated mouths, and bouncy

movements, supported by upbeat music and sound effects. Connotatively, germs become playful antagonists: they are clearly undesirable, but their antics are comic and their defeat is staged as a satisfying game. The resulting myth suggests that being a good child involves mastering a playful battle with germs—following hygiene rules not out of terror but as part of a fun, quasi-heroic routine.

Global Domestos campaigns in the disgusting germs or germ-world family (G1) and related executions also flirt with cuteness despite their gross label. CG germs are shown lounging, partying, or taking selfies in filth before being wiped out, often with humorous dialogue and exaggerated reactions. Denotatively, their designs mix grotesque textures with expressive, sometimes goofy faces. Connotatively, they straddle disgust and amusement: they inhabit revolting spaces, yet their social interactions make them oddly relatable. The myth here is one of carefree germs disrupted by necessary violence: cleaning products abruptly end their fun, reinforcing the legitimacy of harsh interventions while briefly acknowledging the germs' quasi-social world.

Taken together, these cases illustrate how germ characters slide from monsters to mascots. Turkish examples foreground named characters, bands, and children's companions, embedding germs in local comic traditions and educational formats, while Domestos' global germ-world turns pathogens into semi-likable losers whose destruction is framed as both necessary and entertaining. In Barthesian terms, the connotative codes of humor, music, and cuteness inflect the basic germ-as-enemy signifier with new associations, producing myths in which the hygienic subject is encouraged to be vigilant but also to enjoy the battle against germs. This ambivalence complicates the emotional economy established in the monsters and invaders cluster: fear and disgust remain present, but are cushioned by laughter and affection, potentially making intensive hygiene feel more natural, less anxiety-laden, and more compatible with everyday pleasure.

Moral Tests and Hygienic Subjectivity

A third configuration stages germs as agents in moral tests, where cleanliness becomes a marker of good parenting, responsible citizenship, disciplined childhood, or acceptable self-presentation. Here, anthropomorphized germs function less as simple enemies and more as narrative tools to evaluate human characters.

In the Turkish school-toilet campaign *Domestos şimdi de okul tuvaletlerinde! #mikroplarıyanda* (T4), a germ character speaks on behalf of all germs about the threat posed by clean school toilets. Denotatively, the germ is personified as a spokesperson, addressing the audience and commenting on Domestos' presence in schools. Connotatively, this framing turns germs into quasi-political actors: they protest against improved hygiene infrastructure and implicitly position parents, citizens, and brands on the opposite side. The resulting myth casts cleanliness as a civic duty: being a good parent or citizen means supporting campaigns that expel germs from public institutions, particularly schools, thereby protecting children and contributing to the collective good (Douglas, 1966; Stones et al., 2022).

Turkish children's hand-hygiene animations, such as *Elif ve Gürbüz, el temizliği* and *Aslan Yavrusu – Ellerinizi sabunla yıkayın* (T6, T7), frame germs as tests of child behavior. Denotatively, germs appear as small, noisy creatures that enter the

body when hands are dirty and react loudly when washed away. Narratively, children are instructed to wash properly after specific activities; failure to do so allows germs to win. Connotatively, hygiene becomes a matter of obedience and self-discipline: good children follow rules and defeat germs; careless children neglect washing and risk illness. The myth constructed is that of the disciplined hygienic child, whose moral worth is partially evaluated through adherence to cleanliness routines taught by adults and institutions.

In *Çürük Ali ve Mikrop Necati – Temizlik* (T5), Mikrop Necati similarly functions as a moral test for the young viewer. His antics inside teeth or the body dramatize what happens when proper cleaning is neglected: he thrives when brushing and washing are skipped and complains when routines are followed. The connotative lesson is clear: aligning with Necati's interests equals lax hygiene and decay, while opposing him through correct routines equals health and virtue. This reinforces a myth of everyday self-governance, where children are encouraged to monitor their own bodies and habits in line with public-health norms.

The Listerine animated "Clifford" dragon/germ advertisement (G4) shifts the moral test from civic and childhood contexts to the realm of social and romantic acceptability. Denotatively, a dragon-like character embodies germs causing bad breath and plaque; the narrative often ties his presence to social embarrassment, unattractive breath, or failed romantic encounters. Connotatively, germs become stand-ins for social stigma: they threaten not physical survival but one's chances of intimacy and belonging. The myth here is that of the socially acceptable self: the responsible adult manages invisible germs in their mouth to avoid shame and rejection, with Listerine positioned as a tool of self-presentation and affective security.

Taken together, these cases show how germ characters help construct different versions of the hygienic subject. Turkish campaigns foreground civic and collective dimensions—good citizens and parents support clean schools; good children obey hygiene rules—while global mouthwash campaigns emphasize individual self-presentation and interpersonal judgment. In both contexts, anthropomorphized germs serve as narrative devices that test whether characters live up to cultural expectations of care, responsibility, and discipline. Through Barthesian myth, these tests are naturalized: it comes to seem obvious that responsible people must constantly manage germs, whether to protect public institutions, meet parental and educational standards, or maintain romantic and social viability (Barthes, 1972/1957; Douglas, 1966).

Global-Turkish Contrasts in the Germ Universe

Across the three clusters—monsters, clowns, and moral tests—our cases suggest that Domestos and Listerine participate in a broadly shared germ universe, yet this universe is locally re-scripted in Turkish and UK/US contexts. At a denotative level, the building blocks recur: spiky or slimy bodies, expressive faces, group formations (bands, armies, crowds), and dramatic annihilation by branded products. Connotatively, however, these elements are combined with different genres—Ottoman parody, protest rhetoric, children's comedy, or horror cinema—so that the same germs participate in distinct cultural storylines.

In the Turkish sub-corpus, germs are consistently woven into local humor and civic concerns. *Kötüiyim Ben* and *Sultan Mikrop* appropriate villain and sultan figures familiar from Turkish television and satire, while *Mikroplar Ağlarmış* and *#mikroplariyanda* mobilize protest and spokesperson tropes to frame germs as comically frustrated political actors. Children's animations and Mikrop Necati extend germ narratives into pedagogical settings, constructing cleanliness as both playful and morally obligatory for young viewers. The myths that emerge foreground collective and relational obligations: being a good mother, citizen, or child is tightly linked to supporting school hygiene, following public-health routines, and participating in national humor about germs as unruly but ultimately controllable figures.

In the UK/global sub-corpus, germs are framed more strongly through horror, disgust, and interpersonal self-presentation. The *Disgusting Germs*, *Grot Buster*, and germ monster ads lean into grotesque textures and frightening scenarios, at times testing regulatory boundaries regarding what is appropriate for children. Listerine's dragon/germ shifts the focus from civic and domestic spaces to the intimate sphere of breath and romance, making germs symbols of social risk and embarrassment rather than of collective hygiene infrastructure. The dominant myths here stress individual risk management and self-presentation: responsible subjects protect their families and relationships by policing their own bodies and homes against invisible threats.

Seen through a Barthesian and glocalization lens, these differences suggest that anthropomorphized germs act as semiotic pivot points where global brand templates meet local concerns (Barthes, 1972/1957; Budha, 2024). Domestos' core promise—total germ destruction—remains intact, but Turkish campaigns re-encode it through motifs of political satire, school activism, and children's comedy, while UK/US campaigns emphasize horror spectacle and romantic self-management. This supports my broader argument that germ characters do not merely visualize microbes; they help construct locally specific versions of the hygienic subject, in which vigilance, care, and responsibility are differently anchored in domestic, civic, and interpersonal imaginaries (Douglas, 1966; Stones et al., 2022).

Discussion

Across the corpus, anthropomorphized germs emerge as dual-function devices that both dramatize invisible microbial threats and naturalize particular visions of the hygienic subject. Monsters and invaders make germs visible as hostile agents that infiltrate domestic and bodily spaces, justifying strong cleaning products as necessary weapons. Cute clowns and reluctant mascots soften this horror through humor and characterization, turning germs into entertaining losers or sidekicks whose inevitable defeat is pleasurable to watch. Moral-test narratives, finally, mobilize germs to evaluate whether caregivers, citizens, children, and adults meet culturally specific expectations of care, discipline, and self-presentation. Together, these patterns extend existing work on disease anthropomorphism by showing how visual and narrative design calibrate the balance between fear, disgust, amusement, and sympathy in everyday commercial media (Wang et al., 2022; Xiang & Park, 2023; Stones et al., 2022).

My findings contribute to debates on anthropomorphism and disease communication in three ways. First, they confirm that anthropomorphized germs increase the psychological salience of contamination by giving invisible pathogens voices, faces, and intentions, thus reinforcing perceived vulnerability and the perceived need for preventive action. Second, they show that cuteness and humor—especially in children's content and protest-style Domestos campaigns—do not simply undermine risk messages; instead, they create ambivalent affective packages in which fear and disgust are modulated rather than removed. This nuance complements experimental work on anthropomorphized virus icons and cuteness, suggesting that comic germs can support compliance when they are ultimately defeated and clearly positioned as undesirable. Third, by situating germ characters alongside brand mascots and product contagion research, I highlight their role as quasi-mascots that anchor brand meaning and mediate consumer-product relations, even though they represent the enemy rather than the brand itself.

From a semiotic and glocalization perspective, the comparison between Turkish and UK/US campaigns shows how a shared germ universe is locally re-encoded. At the denotative level, both contexts deploy similar visual templates—spiky or slimy bodies, swarms and armies, reaction shots to bleach or mouthwash—but at the connotative and mythic levels they diverge. Turkish Domestos spots fold germs into genres of Ottoman parody, music video, and political satire, casting them as sultans, protest bands, or spokespersons who mirror national debates about authority, activism, and public institutions. Children's animations and Mikrop Necati extend this into edutainment, where germs are comic companions that help inculcate hygienic discipline and citizenship in young viewers. UK/global Domestos and Listerine campaigns lean more heavily on horror iconography, grotesque disgusting germs, and romantic embarrassment, emphasizing individual risk management and social self-presentation. These differences illustrate how global brand templates are glocalised, producing locally resonant myths from transnational semiotic resources.

Finally, my analysis has implications for how cleanliness, morality, and social order are communicated in everyday advertising. Following Douglas's (1966) notion of dirt as matter out of place, anthropomorphized germs mark bathrooms, kitchens, mouths, and school toilets as potentially disorderly zones that must be constantly monitored and purified. Turkish school-toilet campaigns explicitly link germ destruction to civic responsibility and institutional care, suggesting that good citizenship includes supporting the hygienic maintenance of public infrastructures. Children's narratives and Listerine spots, in turn, encourage viewers to internalize cleanliness norms as part of being a good child or an acceptable partner, reinforcing the idea that managing germs is a continuous personal obligation.

For brand managers and marketing practitioners, these findings offer several strategic implications. First, germ anthropomorphism is a double-edged sword: while it increases threat salience and product differentiation, positioning hygiene as a constant moral test may unintentionally alienate consumers who lack access to adequate infrastructure or who cannot meet intensive cleanliness standards, potentially narrowing brand appeal or inviting criticism. Second, balancing monster imagery with playful mascots requires careful calibration to avoid either excessive anxiety (which may trigger avoidance or regulatory pushback) or trivialization of health risks in children's content

(which may undermine credibility). Third, germ narratives that focus on individual failings—bad breath, domestic negligence—can shift attention away from structural determinants of hygiene (e.g., school facilities, housing quality) and onto individual consumers, a framing that may be commercially effective but ethically and politically contested. Fourth, glocalised germ characters offer powerful opportunities for cultural resonance and market adaptation, but drawing on national humor and political tropes carries reputational risk if such references are perceived as reductive or exclusionary.

From a strategic brand-building perspective, germ characters function as quasi-mascots that mediate consumer-product relationships and anchor brand narratives across markets. However, unlike positive mascots that embody brand values, germ figures embody the threat that products promise to eliminate, requiring brands to manage a more complex emotional economy of fear, disgust, humor, and relief. Successful campaigns in our corpus leverage this complexity: Turkish Domestos spots embed germs in locally resonant satire and civic activism to build brand relevance and goodwill, while UK/global executions deploy horror and social embarrassment to justify premium products and intensive routines. These contrasting strategies suggest that germ anthropomorphism is not a one-size-fits-all tactic but a flexible brand tool whose effectiveness depends on aligning character design, narrative framing, and emotional tone with target audiences' cultural codes and consumption contexts.

In sum, germ characters do more than help sell cleaning products and hygiene routines; they participate in the broader, glocal production of hygienic subjectivity, where everyday practices of washing, scrubbing, and rinsing become visible markers of moral character, social belonging, and civic virtue (Douglas, 1966; Stones et al., 2022). For health communication practitioners and brand strategists alike, understanding how these characters work—and how their meanings shift across markets—is essential for designing campaigns that are both commercially effective and culturally responsible.

Conclusions

This paper examined how anthropomorphized germs in Turkish and global hygiene advertising construct meanings around cleanliness, disgust, responsibility, and citizenship, using a qualitative multiple-case, semiotic design. By analyzing 11 advertisements and animations across three thematic clusters—monsters and invaders, cute clowns and reluctant mascots, and moral tests—I showed that germ characters operate as dual-function devices: they dramatize invisible microbial threats and naturalize specific myths of the hygienic subject (Barthes, 1972/1957; Stones et al., 2022). Turkish campaigns tend to embed these figures in local genres of humor, political rhetoric, and school activism, foregrounding collective obligations and citizenship, while UK/US executions emphasize horror and romantic self-presentation, stressing individual risk management and social acceptability (Ocak, 2025).

The study has several limitations. My corpus is purposive and relatively small, focusing on a handful of high-profile campaigns and animations; it therefore cannot claim statistical representativeness of all hygiene advertising. I also analyzed texts only,

without examining how different audiences actually interpret or resist these germ characters in everyday viewing situations. In addition, the temporal scope is selective, combining recent Turkish Domestos and children's content with earlier Listerine and Domestos UK executions rather than providing a systematic longitudinal history.

Future research could extend this approach in several directions. First, a broader cross-national comparison—including additional European, Asian, or Latin American markets—would allow more systematic mapping of how germ universes travel and mutate across cultures. Second, reception studies could explore how different groups (children, parents, health professionals) interpret and emotionally respond to anthropomorphized germs, testing and refining the affective patterns suggested here. Third, post-pandemic hygiene campaigns—especially those produced during COVID-19—may have altered the balance between fear, humor, and civic duty in germ imagery, offering a rich site for longitudinal semiotic and anthropological analysis.

By connecting commercial germ characters to broader literatures on anthropomorphism, disgust, purity, and glocalisation, this study highlights the importance of seemingly playful hygiene animations and adverts as key sites where contemporary cultures imagine—and govern—the boundaries between bodies, homes, publics, and microbes.

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Media Ethics in the Context of Covering Religious Issues. According to the Guidelines and Ethical Coverage Manuals of Western and Georgian Media Organizations

*By Mariam Adamashvili**

The coverage of religious issues represents one of the most sensitive areas of contemporary journalism, requiring a high degree of professional responsibility, ethical awareness, and respect for democratic values. Religion influences social identities, cultural traditions, and public discourse, making ethical standards particularly important in media reporting. This study examines the ethical principles governing the coverage of religious issues in Western and Georgian media organizations and assesses their relevance within the contemporary Georgian media environment. The research employs a qualitative comparative design based on a multi-method approach combining qualitative content analysis, comparative analysis, and elements of discourse analysis. The study analyzes ethical codes, editorial guidelines, and professional standards of leading Western media organizations, including the BBC, The Guardian, Associated Press, National Public Radio, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the European Broadcasting Union, as well as key Georgian media ethical frameworks, including the Code of Conduct of the Georgian Public Broadcaster, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, the internal guidelines of Channel One, and the editorial standards of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Georgian Service. The findings reveal a substantial degree of convergence between Western and Georgian media ethical frameworks. Core principles such as accuracy and verification, impartiality and balance, editorial independence, accountability, protection of human dignity, prevention of hate speech, and respect for religious diversity are consistently emphasized across the analyzed documents. At the same time, the study identifies differences in the level of institutional development and practical elaboration of these standards, with Western media organizations generally providing more detailed guidance concerning religious sensitivity, minority representation, and conflict-sensitive reporting. The research demonstrates that the principal challenge within the Georgian media environment is not the absence of ethical regulations but the consistent implementation of existing standards in everyday journalistic practice. The study highlights the importance of professional education, ethical self-regulation, and institutional support in strengthening responsible religious reporting. It concludes that media ethics should be understood not merely as a set of professional rules but as a democratic framework that protects public trust, promotes pluralism, safeguards human rights, and contributes to informed public discourse.

Keywords: *media ethics, religious reporting, journalism ethics, Western media, Georgian media, editorial guidelines, human rights, religious diversity, democratic communication.*

*Assistant Professor, Georgian National University (SEU), Georgia

Introduction

The discussion on the spiritual and moral values of mass media activity began long ago. The establishment of ethical norms in professional practice has become an essential requirement. In his essay *The Best Job in the World*, Gabriel García Márquez wrote that all journalistic training should be based on three fundamental principles. The foremost requirement is talent and skill; secondly, the understanding that journalistic investigation is not a distinct genre, since all forms of journalism are based on investigation. It is also essential to recognize that ethics is not merely an insignificant condition of professional mastery but an inseparable part of it.

Ethics is no more separate from the profession than the buzzing is from the fly. In the modern world, media is a key defining feature that determines the level of democracy in states and the openness of society. On the one hand, media independence, and on the other hand, accountability toward citizens and society as a whole, represent a crucial challenge faced by civilized states, societies, and individuals. The fulfillment of this task largely depends on media activity. Therefore, contemporary journalism has developed and adopted professional standards and ethical norms as operational rules, which are codified in relevant codes, editorial guidelines, and self-regulatory mechanisms.

The coverage of religious issues is one of the most sensitive and challenging areas of contemporary journalism. Religion is not only a matter of personal belief but also a social, cultural, and political phenomenon that influences collective identities, value systems, and public discourse. Consequently, media coverage of religion requires particular sensitivity, contextualization, editorial independence, and adherence to professional ethical standards. Inadequate reporting on religious issues may contribute to social polarization, stereotyping, discrimination, and the spread of misinformation, whereas responsible journalism can promote social cohesion, pluralism, and democratic dialogue.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in several normative approaches to media ethics that have significantly influenced contemporary journalism. First, the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press emphasizes that media freedom must be accompanied by responsibility toward society and the public interest. According to this perspective, journalism serves democracy by providing accurate, balanced, and socially relevant information.

Second, the research draws upon deontological approaches to media ethics, which stress the importance of adherence to professional duties and ethical principles regardless of consequences. From this perspective, journalists are obliged to pursue truth, verify information, maintain editorial independence, and protect human dignity.

Third, the study incorporates elements of virtue ethics, which highlights professional integrity, honesty, fairness, and responsibility as essential characteristics of ethical journalism. These philosophical orientations are reflected in the ethical guidelines and editorial policies of leading Western media organizations and constitute the normative foundation of responsible religious reporting.

The ethical principles examined in this article should therefore be understood not merely as organizational regulations but as manifestations of broader philosophical traditions that shape journalism in democratic societies.

Georgian Media Context and Research Gap

The contemporary Georgian media environment represents a particularly important context for examining media ethics in the coverage of religious issues. Georgia is a transitional democracy characterized by an evolving media system, political polarization, and ongoing public debates concerning religion, identity, and democratic values. The Georgian Orthodox Church occupies a significant place within the country's historical and cultural identity, while issues related to religious freedom, minority rights, and freedom of expression frequently become subjects of public discussion.

Media studies conducted in Georgia indicate that religious issues are often covered within broader political and ideological debates, which increases the importance of ethical standards and professional responsibility. In such circumstances, journalists are expected to ensure accuracy, impartiality, pluralism, and contextual analysis while avoiding discriminatory narratives and stereotyping.

Despite the growing significance of religious reporting, relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the comparative examination of Western and Georgian media ethical frameworks in this field. Ethical guidelines and editorial standards of major Western media organizations remain insufficiently studied in Georgian academic literature, particularly regarding their relevance and applicability to the Georgian media environment. This study seeks to address this gap by providing a systematic comparative analysis of ethical standards governing the coverage of religious issues.

The comparative approach is particularly important because it enables the identification of similarities and differences between internationally recognized ethical standards and those operating within the Georgian media environment. Such analysis contributes to a better understanding of the extent to which Georgian media ethics corresponds to international professional standards and offers practical recommendations for further development.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this research is to identify the fundamental principles of media ethics that define responsible coverage of religious issues in leading Western media organizations and to assess the possibilities of their application within the Georgian media environment. The study also seeks to examine the concepts of media freedom and editorial independence in the context of professional responsibility, ethical self-regulation, and democratic communication.

Research Objectives

To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives:

- To examine the ethical guidelines and editorial standards of leading Western media organizations regarding the coverage of religious issues.
- To analyze the ethical frameworks and professional standards governing religious reporting within the Georgian media environment.
- To identify the key ethical principles underlying responsible religious coverage, including accuracy, impartiality, balance, accountability, editorial independence, and respect for human dignity.
- To compare Western and Georgian media ethical frameworks and determine the extent of their convergence and divergence.
- To assess the relevance and applicability of international media ethics standards within the Georgian media context.
- To formulate practical recommendations aimed at improving the ethical coverage of religious issues in Georgian media.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What ethical principles characterize the coverage of religious issues in leading Western media organizations?
- **RQ2:** To what extent do Georgian media ethical frameworks correspond to these principles?
- **RQ3:** What recommendations can be derived from international media experience to improve the ethical coverage of religious issues in Georgia?

Object and Subject of the Study

The object of the study is the ethical codes and editorial guidelines of Western and Georgian media organizations.

The subject of the research is the principles of journalistic ethics governing the coverage of religious issues and their practical relevance for the Georgian media environment.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the research lies in its attempt to analyze both theoretical and practical aspects of media ethics in the context of religious reporting. Responsible coverage of religious topics represents not only a matter of journalistic professionalism but also an important prerequisite for democratic communication, social cohesion, and the protection of human rights.

The study contributes to a better understanding of professional media standards, highlights the importance of ethical self-regulation, and provides practical

recommendations for improving the quality of religious reporting in Georgia. Furthermore, it establishes a theoretical and methodological foundation for future empirical studies examining the discursive and institutional dimensions of religion-related media coverage.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design aimed at identifying, systematizing, and evaluating the ethical principles that regulate the coverage of religious issues in Western and Georgian media organizations. The methodological framework was developed in accordance with the main aim of the article: to examine how responsible religious reporting is conceptualized in leading Western media ethical guidelines and to assess the extent to which these principles correspond to the ethical and professional standards operating within the Georgian media environment.

The research is based on a multi-method qualitative approach combining qualitative content analysis, comparative analysis, and elements of discourse analysis. This methodological combination was selected because the study does not seek to measure the frequency of media representations or analyze particular news stories, but rather to examine the normative, institutional, and professional principles that guide journalistic practice. Therefore, the central empirical material of the study consists of ethical codes, editorial guidelines, professional standards, and self-regulatory documents produced by selected Western and Georgian media organizations.

The study does not analyze news content directly. It does not examine specific broadcasts, articles, or journalistic products as primary empirical units. Instead, it focuses on the ethical and professional documents that define the standards according to which media organizations are expected to operate. This clarification is methodologically important, as the purpose of the article is not to evaluate individual cases of religious coverage, but to identify the normative principles that shape responsible journalistic practice in the field of religious reporting. The findings therefore concern ethical frameworks, institutional standards, and professional guidelines rather than the practical performance of particular media outlets in specific news situations.

A qualitative comparative design was chosen because the article is concerned with the relationship between Western media ethics and the Georgian media context. Comparative analysis allows the study to identify similarities, differences, convergences, and context-specific characteristics in the ethical regulation of religious reporting. Since the article examines whether internationally recognized principles of media ethics can be meaningfully interpreted and applied within the Georgian media environment, the comparative method provides an appropriate framework for evaluating both normative compatibility and contextual limitations.

The comparative approach is particularly relevant in this study because Western media organizations have developed extensive editorial guidelines concerning accuracy, impartiality, editorial independence, diversity, hate speech, human dignity, and religious sensitivity. Georgian media ethics documents, including the Code of Conduct of the Georgian Public Broadcaster and the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, also

contain similar principles, but their formulation, institutional scope, and practical elaboration differ. By comparing these frameworks, the study seeks to determine not only whether similar ethical principles exist, but also how they are articulated, justified, and connected to broader democratic values such as pluralism, public interest, and human rights protection.

The study uses purposive sampling. The selection of media organizations and ethical documents was not random, but theoretically and methodologically justified. The sample was formed according to three principal criteria. First, the selected organizations had to possess international or national significance in the field of journalism and public communication. Second, their editorial guidelines, ethical codes, or professional standards had to be publicly available and accessible for scholarly analysis. Third, the selected documents had to contain principles relevant to the coverage of religion, diversity, minorities, human rights, hate speech, public interest, editorial independence, and journalistic accountability.

On the basis of these criteria, the Western media sample included the BBC, The Guardian, the Associated Press, National Public Radio, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the European Broadcasting Union. These organizations were selected because they represent influential models of professional journalism and have developed detailed editorial standards that address issues of accuracy, impartiality, fairness, accountability, diversity, and religious or cultural sensitivity. Their guidelines are widely recognized within democratic media systems and are often used as reference points in discussions of international journalistic standards.

For the Georgian context, the study examined the Code of Conduct of the Georgian Public Broadcaster, the internal editorial and organizational guidelines of Channel One, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, and the editorial standards relevant to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Georgian Service. These documents were selected because they represent important normative and self-regulatory sources within the Georgian media environment. They define the professional responsibilities of journalists, establish principles of truthfulness, balance, impartiality, human dignity, and non-discrimination, and provide the basis for evaluating how Georgian media ethics corresponds to international standards.

The primary unit of analysis in this study is the ethical document. More specifically, the study examines individual provisions, principles, definitions, and recommendations contained in media codes, editorial manuals, and professional guidelines. These textual units were analyzed in relation to the main conceptual categories of the research. The analysis focused on how the documents define journalistic responsibility, how they regulate sensitive topics, how they approach religious and minority representation, and how they connect media freedom with ethical accountability.

Data collection was conducted through systematic document analysis. The selected ethical codes, editorial manuals, professional guidelines, and self-regulatory documents were collected from official institutional sources. Each document was examined in full in order to identify passages related to religious reporting, diversity, human dignity, hate speech, editorial independence, accuracy, impartiality, verification, and accountability. Particular attention was paid to sections that directly or indirectly regulate the coverage of religious issues, the representation of religious communities, the use of potentially

offensive language, the treatment of minorities, and the distinction between fact, opinion, analysis, and commentary.

The analytical framework was based on thematic coding. The coding categories were developed both deductively and inductively. Deductively, the categories were informed by major principles of media ethics and by the theoretical framework of the article, including social responsibility theory, deontological approaches to journalism, virtue ethics, and the democratic function of media. Inductively, the categories were refined through repeated reading of the selected ethical documents, which made it possible to identify recurring themes and institutionally specific formulations.

The following thematic categories were used in the analysis: accuracy and verification; impartiality and balance; editorial independence; human dignity and human rights protection; religious sensitivity; prevention of hate speech and discrimination; accountability and transparency; public interest; source reliability; distinction between fact and opinion; treatment of minority groups; and avoidance of stereotyping and sensationalism. These categories made it possible to compare the ethical logic of different media organizations while maintaining a clear connection with the research questions.

Qualitative content analysis was used to identify and classify the ethical principles contained in the selected documents. This method was appropriate because it allowed the study to move beyond descriptive summary and systematically examine the content of the documents according to predefined analytical categories. Through content analysis, the study identified which ethical principles were most consistently emphasized, how religious sensitivity was addressed, and how journalistic responsibility was linked to democratic communication and public trust.

Comparative analysis was then used to examine the relationship between Western and Georgian ethical frameworks. The comparison was conducted at two levels. First, the study compared the presence of similar ethical principles in Western and Georgian documents, such as accuracy, verification, impartiality, balance, public interest, and human dignity. Second, it examined the depth and specificity with which these principles were formulated. This made it possible to identify not only formal similarities but also differences in institutional elaboration, practical guidance, and contextual emphasis.

Elements of discourse analysis were also employed in order to examine how ethical responsibility, religion, diversity, and professional journalism are conceptually framed in the selected documents. This was particularly important because ethical codes do not merely list rules; they also construct a certain understanding of journalism's role in society. The analysis therefore considered how media organizations define their responsibility toward the public, how they understand editorial freedom, how they justify restrictions on harmful speech, and how they balance freedom of expression with respect for religious and cultural diversity.

The use of multiple methods contributes to methodological triangulation. In this study, triangulation does not mean the comparison of different types of empirical data such as interviews, surveys, and media content. Rather, it refers to the use of different qualitative analytical procedures for examining the same type of material — ethical and editorial documents. Content analysis identifies and organizes the main principles; comparative analysis evaluates similarities and differences between media systems; and discourse analysis interprets the broader meaning and normative

logic of these principles. Together, these methods provide a more comprehensive understanding of how responsible religious reporting is institutionally defined.

The research questions were directly connected to the methodological procedures.

RQ1 — What ethical principles characterize the coverage of religious issues in leading Western media organizations? — was addressed primarily through qualitative content analysis of Western editorial guidelines and ethical codes.

RQ2 — To what extent do Georgian media ethical frameworks correspond to these principles? — was addressed through comparative analysis of Georgian and Western ethical documents.

RQ3 — What recommendations can be derived from international media experience to improve the ethical coverage of religious issues in Georgia? — was addressed through comparative interpretation and synthesis of the findings.

This alignment between research questions and methods was important for strengthening the internal coherence of the study. The first stage of the analysis identified the key principles in Western media ethics. The second stage examined whether similar principles appear in Georgian ethical documents. The third stage interpreted the practical significance of these similarities and differences for the Georgian media environment. In this way, the structure of the methodology corresponds directly to the structure of the article and to the logic of the findings and recommendations.

The study also acknowledges certain methodological limitations. Since the research analyzes ethical documents rather than actual media content, it cannot determine the extent to which journalists and media organizations fully implement these standards in everyday practice. Ethical codes establish normative expectations, but they do not automatically guarantee ethical reporting. Therefore, the conclusions of this study concern the existence, formulation, and comparative relevance of professional standards, rather than the empirical measurement of journalistic behavior. Future research could complement this study through content analysis of actual media materials, interviews with journalists and editors, and audience research.

Despite this limitation, the selected methodology is appropriate for the aims of the article. The study seeks to establish a conceptual and normative foundation for understanding ethical religious reporting in the Georgian context. By analyzing editorial guidelines and professional standards, the article identifies the principles that should guide journalistic practice and evaluates their relevance for Georgian media. This approach is particularly useful in a transitional democratic context, where the strengthening of ethical self-regulation, professional education, and institutional accountability remains an important condition for the development of responsible journalism.

Overall, the methodological combination of qualitative content analysis, comparative analysis, and elements of discourse analysis enables a comprehensive assessment of ethical standards in the coverage of religious issues. It allows the study to identify the main normative principles of Western media ethics, compare them with Georgian ethical frameworks, and formulate practical recommendations for improving religious reporting in Georgia. The methodology therefore supports the central argument of the article: that media ethics is not merely a set of formal

restrictions, but a professional and democratic framework that protects public trust, human dignity, pluralism, and responsible communication.

Overview of Western Media Organizations' Guidelines

The contemporary media environment, characterized by rapid digital transformation, increasing intensity of information dissemination, and diversity of platforms, significantly strengthens the role of journalistic ethics. The rapid circulation of information increases both the level of public awareness and the risks of disinformation, which further emphasizes the importance of adhering to professional standards.

Journalistic ethics constitutes a normative system that defines media responsibility toward society. The concept of ethical journalism is based on the idea of free and responsible circulation of information, which is a necessary precondition for the functioning of a democratic society. Media organizations are expected to maintain internal rules with a systematic editorial process in order to ensure content accuracy and compliance with editorial guidelines. This may include content verification procedures and editorial oversight mechanisms.

The Journalism Trust Initiative, implemented since 2016 by the Ethical Journalism Network in partnership with UNESCO and with the support of the European Union, is a modern tool that offers media organizations mechanisms for ethical self-regulation, including enhanced transparency and accountability in editorial policy. According to the document, media outlets are required to disclose their editorial mission, which must be consistent with the fundamental ethical principles of credible journalism and include: ethical practice, good governance, self-regulation, and public engagement. Ethical journalism requires not only the dissemination of information but also its critical interpretation, contextualization, and consideration of public interest.

The Declaration of Principles of the International Federation of Journalists, which represents approximately 600,000 journalists, explicitly rejects state authority in editorial matters:

“Within the general laws of each country, the journalist shall recognize only the jurisdiction of colleagues in professional matters, excluding any interference by governments or others.”

The declaration also specifies forms of journalistic conduct that are incompatible with professional ethics. According to the document, respect for facts and for the public's right to truth is the journalist's primary duty. In fulfilling this duty, journalists must adhere to the principles of independence, freedom of publication, and fair comment, and must clearly distinguish factual information from commentary and speculation.

According to *The Washington Post* model, audiences must clearly understand the type of content they are consuming: news, analysis, or opinion. This distinction protects readers from interpreting subjective opinions as factual information.

Media credibility is based on accuracy and objectivity. One of the major challenges in the contemporary media environment remains the dissemination of unverified and manipulative information, which undermines both public trust and democratic processes. Journalistic ethics requires multi-source verification of information, clear separation of facts and opinions, and the prompt correction of errors.

Journalists must report only verified information and must not disseminate disinformation and/or falsified facts or documents. Information must be obtained through fair and lawful methods. Covert information gathering is permitted only when information cannot be obtained otherwise and when the matter is of high public interest.

The Associated Press has overcome significant challenges in order to deliver accurate, balanced, and impartial news in a fair and timely manner. As a result of these efforts, the organization has gained public trust, with more than half of the population following AP news content.

Commitment to accuracy and impartiality is also demonstrated by the British public broadcaster, as well as by *The Guardian*, whose editorial values are based on such essential media functions as trust, truth, and accuracy. Journalists must not publish unverified information that may mislead the audience. Every effort must be made to correct inaccuracies, and corrections must be published in a clear and transparent manner. Journalists must respect confidentiality and protect confidential sources. They must also respect the principle of privacy and must not violate human dignity.

Reporters at *The Washington Post* bear primary responsibility for reporting, writing, and fact-checking their stories. Articles are subject to review by one or more editors. The Post maintains an editorial review structure, which may include fact-checking. The organization strives to ensure that stories are reported accurately and comprehensively. In the publication process, errors are addressed with particular responsibility and are corrected promptly. As stated:

“When we issue a correction and/or clarification, our goal is to communicate as clearly and quickly as possible what was wrong and what is correct. Everyone should be able to understand how and why a correction was made.”

If a correction materially affects an article, caption, headline, graphic, video, or other material, the newsroom publishes an immediate correction explaining the change.

The ethical policy of *The New York Times* places particular emphasis on impartiality, accuracy, and integrity in journalism. The document states that:

“Producing content of the highest quality and integrity is the foundation of our reputation and the means by which we earn public trust and meet the expectations of our readers.”

The European Broadcasting Union (EBU), representing broadcasting organizations from 56 countries, requires impartial and fair reporting. The organization defines six core values shared by all member media organizations: universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability, and innovation.

The European Broadcasting Union operates with editorial freedom, free from political, religious, or commercial influence, enabling it to cover any story or content justified by public interest.

According to *The Guardian*’s editorial code of practice, journalists must ensure that their output serves the public interest. Public interest is the fundamental basis of *The Guardian*’s editorial activity.

Journalists must take responsibility for the accuracy of their work and verify information prior to publication. Where possible, primary and original sources should be used. It is essential to emphasize that neither speed nor format justifies inaccuracy.

The BBC is based on principles of fairness, openness, honesty, and straightforward communication, and it treats both contributors and audiences with respect. Confidentiality is protected within its operations:

“We do not place information, correspondence, or conversations into the public domain unless there is a public interest that outweighs the need to maintain confidentiality.”

BBC producers have editorial freedom to explore religious belief and issues of faith. According to BBC editorial standards, although religion and religious views may be subject to criticism, appropriate context must be provided, and critical views must remain open to challenge. Religious content must not be used for recruitment purposes, such as direct appeals encouraging audiences to join a particular religion. References to positive outcomes associated with a religion are generally acceptable.

In interactive religious programming, an appropriate level of responsibility must be exercised to allow expression of belief and exploration of issues surrounding faith, while ensuring that religious beliefs are not misused or exploited.

According to BBC editorial standards, balance is achieved when media outlets actively cover issues and adopt an appropriate form of moderation in production. The BBC requires that, in cases of religious conflict, not only dominant institutions but also minority perspectives must be represented. The BBC document states:

“We want to reflect the world as it is. This means we show all its parts, both human and natural. But we also balance the right to broadcast innovative and challenging content with our responsibility to protect vulnerable people and avoid causing offence. These are the standards expected of us, as are the expectations of our audience.”

Journalists working in the news sector must always strive to be fair and objective in their professional conduct and must recognize the potential influence of their personal biases.

Diversity and inclusion are central to all objectives of the BBC, from reflecting the whole of the United Kingdom to enabling new generations to rediscover themselves, and to operating as one of the world’s most creative organizations. The BBC respects individuals of all differing views, opinions, and experiences, regardless of age, ability, gender, diversity of thought, physical ability, religion, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or social background.

Reporters and editors at *The Washington Post* also emphasize fairness. Although debates about objectivity are ongoing, fairness is a principle that editors and reporters must consistently consider and uphold. Fairness is derived from several basic practices: no story is fair if it loses its essential meaning. Fairness includes completeness, relevance, honesty, and equality toward the reader. No story is fair if it includes substantially irrelevant information at the expense of important facts, or if it knowingly or unknowingly misleads or deceives readers. Fairness also includes the diligent pursuit of comment and its truthful representation.

The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) Code of Editors' Practice establishes a framework of the highest professional standards, which member organizations commit to uphold. This voluntary self-regulatory system balances individual rights with the public's right to know. In order to achieve this balance, the code must be applied neither so narrowly as to restrict respect for individual rights, nor so broadly as to undermine the fundamental right to freedom of expression—including informing the public, avoiding bias, and enabling public interest journalism.

The provisions set out in the document define editorial integrity. These include a clear distinction between comment, speculation, and fact; avoidance of publishing unverified, misleading, or distorted information; prompt and visible correction of significant inaccuracies; and, where necessary, publication of apologies. Affected parties must be given a fair opportunity to respond to significant inaccuracies when reasonably required.

Media must avoid derogatory references to a person's race, skin color, religion, sex and gender identity, or any other physical or mental condition. Such references should only be included when essential to the story.

Western guidelines place particular emphasis on protecting religious sensitivity. Information disseminated by journalists must not contribute to the formation of hatred, stereotypes, or prejudices. Media content must not encourage discrimination based on social or ethnic origin, race, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other beliefs.

Western media codes strictly define rules of identification. Social concepts of taste and decency change over time; words considered offensive by one generation may become part of common usage in another. However, obscenity must be avoided unless its use is essential to the story and its omission would undermine meaning. If editors determine that potentially offensive material has legitimate news value, appropriate visual and/or textual warnings must be used. News columns are clearly distinguished from editorial pages to serve audiences who have the right to receive facts in news sections and opinions in editorial sections.

These labels are defined as follows:

- Analysis: interpretation of news based on evidence, including data, explaining possible developments based on past events.
- Perspective: discussion of news topics from viewpoints, including individual narratives and personal experiences.
- Opinion: a column or blog in the opinion section.
- Review: a professional critique of a service, product, performance, or artistic or literary work.

Emphasis on a person's religious affiliation is permissible only when it is essential to the story, directly related to its core meaning, and necessary for full understanding. Otherwise, such emphasis is considered unprofessional and may contribute to stigmatization.

Ethical guidelines prohibit discrimination based on religion and forbid derogatory references, insult, incitement to hatred, or the reproduction of hate speech against specific religious groups, as well as stereotypes linking religion to violence or

antisocial behavior. Religious topics require in-depth understanding and contextual representation to avoid reinforcing stereotypes.

Any content relating to religion that may be offensive to believers must be editorially justified and aligned with audience expectations and generally accepted standards. Religious belief is of central importance to many people and is therefore a highly sensitive issue. Such issues may lead to emotionally driven criminal acts; therefore, media organizations are obliged to avoid unnecessary provocation. Blasphemy laws vary widely across the world, and content producers may consult legal departments. The Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006, applicable in England and Wales, prohibits the use of threatening words or behavior intended to incite religious hatred.

According to BBC editorial standards, religious sensitivity must be considered during the observance of holy days and major religious festivals in order to avoid unnecessary offense. Drama, comedy, and other genres have the freedom to address religious issues, but awareness of potential offense is always required. Religious references, including names, imagery, deities, rituals, sacred texts, and language, must be handled responsibly within widely accepted editorial standards.

The right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is enshrined in national and international instruments, including the European Convention on Human Rights and the Human Rights Act 1998. This includes freedom of worship, teaching, practice, and observance. Since religion is an integral part of many people's lives, the BBC assumes appropriate responsibility regarding religious programming and its potential impact.

Producers of religious content are granted editorial freedom to present information about different religions and to explore matters of faith; however, they must ensure that the beliefs of followers of any religion or denomination are not subjected to offensive treatment. When religion is the subject of a program, its identity must be clearly communicated to the audience. Vulnerable audiences must be protected from exploitation, and religious programming must not covertly promote religious beliefs.

In reporting significant events, speculation, stereotypes, and sensationalist language must be avoided. Discrimination and incitement to hatred are prohibited.

Journalists must avoid derogatory or offensive references to a person's race, color, nationality, religion, age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability. Such characteristics should only be mentioned when strictly necessary for the story. It is prohibited to film individuals in public or private spaces without consent where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy. Journalists must not engage in intimidation, threats, harassment, or pursuit. They must not continue contacting or filming individuals after a clear refusal. In situations of personal grief or shock, interactions must be conducted with sensitivity and published material must reflect appropriate compassion.

In the 21st century, news is disseminated more frequently than ever through text, photo and video materials, interactive graphics, and audio formats across online, mobile, print, and broadcast media. Regardless of platform, AP opposes any form of hate propaganda and does not use content that may be obscene, offensive, racist, or otherwise discriminatory. AP also protects the confidentiality of victims and, as a rule, does not identify them in text or visual materials. Journalists must remember that their personal opinions may harm AP's reputation as an impartial

news source and must refrain from expressing personal views on controversial public issues in any public forum, including blogs or social media.

Media must not seek to obtain information through covert means or coercion, including through intermediaries. Such practices are justified only in the public interest and only when information cannot be obtained by other means.

It is prohibited to film individuals without consent in public or private spaces where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy. Journalists must not engage in intimidation, harassment, or persistent pursuit. They must not continue questioning, calling, pursuing, or photographing individuals who have clearly refused contact. Transparency is one of the core values of fair journalism.

A journalist's reputation and the credibility of their organization are directly linked to the absence of conflicts of interest. Western media organizations' editorial policies strictly separate professional activity from personal interests, as ethical guidelines emphasize that journalistic reputation and organizational credibility depend on avoiding conflicts of interest.

For example, journalists are prohibited from raising funds for religious or charitable purposes in order to avoid conflicts of interest or expectations of favorable treatment. Specifically, the *New York Times* ethics code prohibits journalists from fundraising for religious or charitable causes. This regulation ensures that journalists do not create obligations toward any institution that could influence their editorial independence.

Media professionals are also required to refrain from public or political activities that could compromise their impartiality. Although personal religious belief is a protected right, it must not serve as a lens through which professional reporting and interpretation of events are conducted.

New York Times employees are not permitted to serve on governmental boards or commissions, whether paid or unpaid, nor to join advisory committees or similar bodies, except those related to journalistic organizations or media education.

Journalists are not allowed to solicit funds for socio-political, religious, educational, charitable, or other purposes, as this may create expectations of favorable treatment. The editorial team respects and protects copyright and does not engage in plagiarism. Quotations must be accurate and impartial. Any behavior that creates conflicts of interest or negatively affects fair and objective reporting is strictly avoided.

The European Broadcasting Union reports events impartially and offers audiences a broad, balanced range of perspectives and opinions, while its staff remain sensitive to potential conflicts of interest. The use of covert microphones or cameras may be acceptable if it is in the public interest, but only when no other means of obtaining information are available.

BBC documentation states that BBC employees must serve the public, not themselves; accordingly, their activities must be conducted in the public interest rather than for personal gain.

Media Ethics and Professional Standards in Georgia

Coverage of religious topics in the Georgian media space is particularly sensitive, given the country's historical, cultural, and social context. In Georgia, religion—

especially Orthodox Christianity—plays a significant role in shaping national identity and cultural heritage. At the same time, the country is home to various religious groups and denominations, which requires particular sensitivity and responsibility from the media. Therefore, professional and ethical coverage of religious issues constitutes an essential factor in ensuring media credibility and public trust.

The issue of the relationship between media and religion in Georgia has become particularly relevant over the past two decades, as the development of media has been accompanied by an increase in the intensity of religious coverage. The media often serves as a space where issues such as the role of the Church in public life, religious freedom, the rights of religious minorities, and relations between Church and State are discussed.

Media studies in Georgia often note that coverage of religious issues is closely linked to cultural and political contexts. The media frequently becomes a space where different narratives compete (conservative, liberal, and ethno-religious discourses). In this context, the importance of media ethics increases significantly, as journalists are obliged to ensure plurality, accuracy, and contextual analysis.

Respect for ethical standards in the coverage of religious issues is especially important in multi-religious and culturally diverse societies. In Georgia, where the Orthodox Church plays an important cultural role, media coverage of religious topics often becomes part of public debate.

Ethical reporting on religious issues is a necessary precondition for strengthening journalistic professionalism and democratic culture. Analysis of international standards shows that ethical norms are not a barrier but rather the foundation of quality journalism. The implementation of these standards in the Georgian context will contribute to increasing media credibility and fostering a tolerant environment in society. Ethical journalism is the only way for the media to remain an objective narrator rather than an instrument of manipulative narratives.

It can be argued that Western media guidelines are not merely a set of restrictions, but rather an instrument that protects journalists from errors and the public from misinformation and manipulation. The implementation of these standards in the Georgian media space is critically important for establishing a high level of professional ethics.

In the process of establishing democratic values in the country, the existence of an informed society is of crucial importance. Public awareness cannot be achieved without high-quality and professional broadcasting. Freedom of speech and expression is one of the main guarantees of improving the quality of public information. However, ensuring the public's right to receive quality information cannot be achieved solely through legal regulations and protective laws of freedom of speech and expression. To achieve this, it is necessary to establish a strong relationship between journalists and the audience. For this purpose, it is essential that journalists fully understand that they are accountable not to information sources, but to society. Journalists must feel responsibility for the information they provide to the public.

On the other hand, in order for society to be properly and qualitatively informed, it must understand what is required of journalists and what their obligations are. The Code of Conduct of the Public Broadcaster is “one of the instruments of such interdependence—on the one hand, journalists’ responsibility and, on the other hand, society’s ability to monitor this responsibility.”

The Code of Conduct of the Georgian Public Broadcaster represents the first attempt to establish such a document in the Georgian broadcasting space. This code protects the rights of individuals in general, as well as those of broadcasters and journalists. It is neither a rigid set of rules nor a mandatory ethical manual. It is a set of basic professional standards and principles of journalistic ethics, compliance with which is obligatory only for employees of the Georgian Public Broadcaster. As stated in the code, "It would be impossible to include all aspects or details of journalistic activity in the code, as well as to foresee all possible situations in which a journalist may find themselves. The code of conduct does not represent a set of precise mathematical formulas that would apply in any situation and assist journalists in making a single correct decision."

The Public Broadcaster's Code of Conduct serves as a guide that, together with a journalist's internal ethics and intuition, assists in making appropriate decisions in specific circumstances. Naturally, the code is a constantly evolving document, which is periodically revised, developed, and refined in practice. The Public Broadcaster makes every effort to establish the truth and accurately reflect current events. For this purpose, reporting is based on verified facts, precise data, and reliable sources, in order to avoid misleading the audience through unverified or inaccurate information.

If a journalist has not personally witnessed a specific event, they must obtain information from primary sources and eyewitnesses. It is also important to verify the received information with alternative sources, and if necessary, the journalist must seek supporting evidence.

The Public Broadcaster's Code of Conduct states that impartiality of information is the basis of objective public information. Therefore, one of the organization's main functions is to remain impartial, examine events in detail, and fairly present differing opinions on controversial issues. The Georgian Public Broadcaster strives to maintain balance in coverage and does not ignore significant and valuable positions.

The Code defines biased programming as content that does not reflect a wide range of opinions, is intentionally or unintentionally tendentious, or covertly expresses private views of individuals or groups.

News programs must cover all events equally, and in controversial matters, opinions must be presented in a balanced manner. A journalist's duty is to provide the public with comprehensive information and not avoid doing so due to possible offense or dissatisfaction from any group. In media production, preference should not be given to the majority of society; rather, attention should be paid to what society needs and has the right to know.

The Public Broadcaster operates based on public interest and assists audiences in making informed decisions, listens to their feedback and complaints, and promptly corrects mistakes. The broadcaster works for society and together with society. Information in journalism is considered a public good, not a consumer product. This implies that journalistic activity must be conducted within professional ethics, and journalists are accountable to society, their profession, and themselves.

All program content and nature must result from editorial decisions and must not be influenced by political, commercial, or private pressures. The public must be

assured that editorial decisions are made solely on the basis of strong arguments and must trust the integrity of the Public Broadcaster's programs and services. Journalistic activity is public, and broadcasters and journalists must disclose any circumstances that could call their editorial independence into question.

Accurate facts must be presented in clear and well-structured language, using standard everyday speech. Careless use of words and expressions must not exaggerate facts or distort reality. In television reporting, language must be simple and accessible, avoiding unnecessary words. Foreign terms should be avoided where adequate Georgian equivalents exist. Specialized terminology (e.g., medical or technical) should not be used unless necessary, in which case it must be explained in accessible language.

Journalists must not use language inconsistent with established linguistic standards; however, language is constantly evolving, and certain expressions may become socially acceptable or unacceptable over time.

Broadcasters must respect the fundamental right of individuals to practice any religion or confession. When preparing religious programs or reports, journalists must be aware of what may offend audiences. Consideration must be given to the beliefs and characteristics of different religious groups in Georgia. What is acceptable for one religious group may be unacceptable for another.

It is prohibited to manipulate audience emotions through religious programming, to ridicule any religious belief or worldview, or to covertly promote one religion over another. It is also prohibited to identify nations or states based on religion unless relevant to the program topic.

If a guest or respondent attributes an event to ethnic origin or religious belief without justification, journalists must present the real causes of the event and emphasize that ethnicity and religion are not related to the issue. Racist or xenophobic statements must not go unchallenged and must be explicitly criticized.

In covering ethnic and religious minorities:

Discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion, political opinion, ethnicity, cultural or social belonging, economic status, place of residence, health condition, age, or any other factor is strictly prohibited.

The Public Broadcaster's internal guidelines define discrimination as any intentional or unintentional exclusion, distinction, or preferential treatment based on the above characteristics that undermines equal opportunities in professional activity.

Freedom of speech is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democratic society. Modern journalism is built upon this right, and journalistic responsibilities stem from the public interest in being informed. The Journalistic Charter emphasizes that journalism is not merely a profession but a public responsibility.

The Charter is based on two key international documents:

- Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (freedom of expression);
- The Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists.

These establish minimum standards aimed at protecting journalistic autonomy, credibility, and professional dignity.

The first principle - respect for truth and the public's right to know - emphasizes that journalism is based on the pursuit of truth. Information must be fact-based, not speculative; distortion of truth is a serious ethical violation; and journalists are responsible not only for presenting information but also for ensuring its accuracy.

The principle of conscience guarantees that journalists must not be forced to express imposed opinions or positions. Journalists must not be subjected to pressure from editors, owners, political actors, or sponsors. They operate within their own professional conscience, in line with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Journalists must rely only on verified facts. Unverified information must not be broadcast. Information should be confirmed by at least two independent sources to prevent disinformation.

Protection of confidential sources is a fundamental journalistic principle, and journalists must not disclose them.

Journalists must not promote hatred or discrimination. This includes rejecting hate speech, avoiding incitement to violence, eliminating stigmatizing terminology, and ensuring dignified and impartial coverage.

The most serious violations of journalistic ethics include:

- Intentional distortion of facts;
- Acceptance of bribery or benefits;
- Plagiarism.

These actions undermine media integrity and can cause serious public harm.

The Journalistic Charter establishes a comprehensive framework of professional standards that protects public interest, strengthens institutional independence of media, and ensures professional trust. Its principles are not merely normative rules but the foundation of an ethical culture upon which independent journalism in Georgia is built. Compliance with these principles determines not only media quality but also the level of democratic development.

Findings

The analysis of ethical codes, editorial guidelines, and professional standards revealed a substantial degree of convergence between Western and Georgian media organizations regarding the fundamental principles governing the coverage of religious issues.

First, the findings demonstrate that accuracy and verification constitute the cornerstone of ethical journalism in both Western and Georgian frameworks. All examined organizations emphasize the necessity of fact-checking, source verification, and the correction of inaccuracies. Ethical responsibility is consistently associated with the dissemination of reliable and verified information.

Second, impartiality and balance emerged as one of the most frequently emphasized principles. Western media organizations, particularly the BBC, The Guardian, The Washington Post, and the European Broadcasting Union, require

journalists to present diverse viewpoints and avoid one-sided narratives. Similar standards are reflected in the Code of Conduct of the Georgian Public Broadcaster and the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, which stress the importance of pluralism and balanced reporting.

Third, editorial independence was identified as a core value across all analyzed documents. Ethical frameworks consistently emphasize that journalistic decisions should remain free from political, ideological, religious, and commercial influence. The findings indicate that editorial autonomy is regarded as a necessary condition for maintaining public trust and professional credibility.

Fourth, both Western and Georgian ethical frameworks place considerable emphasis on the protection of human dignity and human rights. Religious reporting is expected to avoid discriminatory language, stereotyping, stigmatization, and any form of incitement to hatred. Respect for diversity and equality is presented as a fundamental journalistic responsibility.

The analysis also revealed a strong commitment to preventing hate speech and discriminatory narratives. Ethical guidelines prohibit derogatory references based on religion, ethnicity, race, gender, or other protected characteristics. Journalists are encouraged to provide contextualized reporting and avoid reproducing harmful stereotypes.

Religious sensitivity represents another significant area of convergence. Western media organizations provide detailed guidance regarding the representation of sacred symbols, religious beliefs, rituals, and faith communities. Georgian ethical documents similarly emphasize respect for religious diversity and the importance of avoiding content that may unnecessarily offend religious groups.

Despite these similarities, several contextual differences were identified. Western ethical frameworks tend to provide more detailed and institutionally developed guidelines concerning religious diversity, minority representation, editorial accountability, and conflict-sensitive reporting. Georgian ethical documents generally reflect the same normative principles but often provide less extensive practical guidance regarding their implementation.

The findings further indicate that the primary challenge in the Georgian media environment is not the absence of ethical regulations but the consistency of their implementation in everyday journalistic practice. The existence of professional standards alone cannot ensure ethical reporting without adequate professional training, editorial commitment, and institutional support.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that Georgian media ethics largely corresponds to internationally recognized professional standards. At the same time, the findings suggest the need for stronger professional education, enhanced ethical self-regulation, and more systematic application of existing standards in the coverage of religious issues.

Recommendations for Georgian Media

The coverage of religious topics in the Georgian media represents a particularly sensitive area of professional responsibility, as such issues are closely connected to

societal identity, cultural traditions, and value systems. The way media presents religious issues significantly influences public discourse, intergroup relations, and the development of democratic culture. Therefore, it is essential that journalistic practice be based on clear professional and ethical standards that ensure accuracy, impartiality, and the protection of public interest.

One of the key priorities for Georgian media is the strengthening of professional standards in covering religious topics. Ethical guidelines of international media organizations emphasize that reporting on religion should be grounded in the principles of accuracy, context, and pluralism. Journalists must verify information and present multiple perspectives in order to avoid the spread of one-sided or stereotypical narratives. Such an approach contributes to a better-informed society and helps prevent the deepening of social polarization.

In covering religious issues, it is particularly important to clearly distinguish between fact and opinion. One of the core principles of journalism is the objective and balanced presentation of information, which requires the accurate reporting of facts and a clear separation of commentary or interpretation from factual reporting. Professional journalism should rely on the verification of information through multiple sources and the proper contextualization of events. This practice strengthens public trust in the media and reduces the risk of misinformation.

Another important task for the development of Georgian media is the reduction of sensationalism in the coverage of religious topics. In the contemporary media environment, competition for audience attention often leads to sensationalized reporting, which can negatively affect public discourse. Sensational headlines, emotionally charged narratives, and the amplification of conflict are particularly problematic in religious reporting, as they may contribute to increased social tension. Responsible journalism should prioritize balanced and ethically grounded reporting that serves the public interest rather than merely attracting audience attention.

An important direction of media development is the strengthening of journalists' professional education and training. Modern journalism requires not only technical skills but also a deep understanding of ethical standards and the ability to apply them in practice. Specialized training programs for journalists on media ethics, religious reporting, and cultural diversity significantly enhance professional competence. International experience shows that such educational programs contribute to improving the quality of journalism and increasing media credibility.

In this context, cooperation between universities and journalistic organizations is particularly important, as it enables the integration of academic knowledge with professional practice. Including media ethics and religious reporting in journalism curricula will contribute to the development of future journalists' professional culture and a better understanding of ethical standards.

Another key direction for Georgian media is the institutional strengthening of ethical self-regulation. In modern democratic societies, one of the most effective mechanisms of media governance is self-regulation, based on professional codes of ethics and independent institutional frameworks. Self-regulation allows media organizations to maintain editorial independence while ensuring a high level of professional accountability.

In Georgia, the development of media self-regulation is already underway; however, its effectiveness largely depends on the active involvement of the journalistic community and the practical implementation of ethical standards. Professional charters, ethical codes, and journalistic organizations play an important role in increasing media accountability and ensuring adherence to journalistic standards. Strengthening these institutional mechanisms will contribute to increasing media credibility and public trust.

In conclusion, the development of Georgian media requires strengthening professional standards in the coverage of religious issues, reducing sensationalism, supporting journalists' education and training, and reinforcing institutional mechanisms of ethical self-regulation. These directions will contribute to the development of professional media culture and create conditions for responsible and ethical journalism, which is one of the key foundations of a democratic society.

Discussion

Media continuously changes its form and reflects the social and political structures within which it operates. The degree of media freedom in any system is determined by how power is distributed in society, particularly in relation to political and economic structures. In Western countries, commercial media tend to be more pluralistic, as capitalist societies are characterized by a decentralization of power. However, in many third-world contexts, the "market" model of mass media coexists with authoritarian structures. In Eastern Europe and Asia, media traditions often reflect the significant role of the ruling political power in subsidizing mass communication. One reason for this is that certain television stations cannot achieve financial sustainability independently. An integrated political-economic elite often sets political agendas for media outlets while guaranteeing their economic survival. As a result, media owners and senior managers are often less focused on financial independence and instead serve the interests of their funders. News content is frequently shaped within ideological frameworks that serve both ruling political elites and opposition interests. The content of private television channels is directly influenced by owners' interests, as media output reflects the priorities of its financiers.

Regarding the coverage of religious issues, Georgian media currently faces numerous challenges. As the research has shown, one of the main problems is the low level of professional competence and education among journalists. Instead of providing in-depth analysis of religious phenomena, the primary focus of media coverage is often sensationalism and ratings. Consequently, religious topics are rarely studied in depth. In general, Georgian media does not prioritize the production of religious or cultural educational programming, and religious topics have unfortunately become a source of manipulation and scandal, which is unethical.

Today, media coverage is mostly limited to conflicts arising on religious grounds, while other aspects are either ignored or reported insufficiently, often in a biased or aggressive manner.

Debates concerning the representation of religion and religious institutions remain an important topic within Georgian media studies. Some scholars and public actors have raised concerns regarding the balance and representation of church-related

issues in segments of the Georgian media. The analysis demonstrates that ethical standards in modern journalism are one of the key tools ensuring accuracy, inclusiveness, and the development of democratic discourse. Media ethics is widely recognized in academic literature as being based on principles such as accuracy, impartiality, fairness, and accountability. Research findings indicate that Western media organizations provide a clear normative framework defining professional journalistic standards.

Religious reporting is one of the most sensitive areas of journalism. Religion is not only a belief system but also a social and cultural phenomenon that significantly influences public life. Therefore, religious reporting must be based on professional responsibility and ethical standards. The role of media in shaping religious discourse is especially important, as journalistic narratives often determine public perceptions of religious groups and events.

Research also shows that journalists frequently face ethical dilemmas when covering religious topics, particularly in balancing freedom of expression with respect for different social groups. Professional journalism requires media organizations to avoid hate speech, stereotypical narratives, and discriminatory representations. International media ethics principles emphasize that journalists must be especially cautious when covering topics related to religious, ethnic, or cultural identity.

Responsible religious reporting is particularly important in diverse societies where different religious and cultural groups coexist. Balanced and ethical media coverage of religious topics contributes to social harmony and helps prevent the spread of stereotypes and discrimination. The main goal of journalism in such cases should be informing the public rather than amplifying conflict. Professional journalism is based on the principle that protecting the public interest should be the primary objective of information dissemination.

Another important finding of the research is that the development of media ethics is closely linked to the strengthening of journalism education and professional training. Integrating media ethics and religious reporting into journalism curricula will contribute to the development of professional culture and a better understanding of ethical standards. International practice shows that journalist training and media ethics education play a crucial role in improving the quality of journalism.

In many cases, Georgian media struggles to distinguish between individual persons and entire groups, which increases the risk of ethnic stereotyping. For example, in crime reporting, if the perpetrator is non-Georgian or belongs to a specific religious group, journalists often highlight this detail, using expressions such as “a Syrian woman stabbed two Georgians” or “Muslim terrorists put Christian populations at risk.” In this way, media often emphasizes ethnicity or religion in a manner that implies the crime is more significant because of the perpetrator’s identity. This creates a risk of strengthening stereotypes and negative attitudes toward non-Georgians and various religious groups. Nevertheless, media remains one of the most powerful instruments in shaping public opinion. In such situations, the audience’s main responsibility is to critically assess what purpose a media message serves and what narrative it attempts to construct.

Unfortunately, there is a shortage of highly qualified and professional journalists in today’s Georgian media landscape. At the same time, the number of unqualified personnel is increasing, which poses a serious threat to journalism as a profession and to

the institutional functioning of media in general. When the public receives inaccurate or incomplete information, it contributes to distortion of facts and undermines the formation of objective public opinion. Credibility, objectivity, and accuracy are the foundation of media's core function, and these principles must be upheld. Unfortunately, these standards are frequently violated, resulting in biased, unverified, and often manipulative information, which is unacceptable in ethical journalism.

Media outlets should not contribute to associating specific problems with particular religious groups, nor should they reinforce existing stereotypes. Acts of violence or crime should not be reported in ways that encourage negative generalizations. Furthermore, media should avoid disseminating statements that incite hatred or mock individuals of different religious beliefs.

It is important not to generalize the behavior or actions of one individual to an entire religious group. Journalists should avoid drawing unjustified connections between a person's religious affiliation and negative events. References to religious identity should only be included when they are essential to the story. In cases of criticism of religious groups, the subjects of criticism should be given the opportunity to express their views and respond.

In short, media has a powerful influence on society. It can psychologically affect individuals and shape perceptions, sometimes even without people realizing it. Media can construct public opinion about individuals and events, and it can spread misinformation in a way that audiences may not immediately recognize. It can either promote or hinder the development of societal awareness and worldview. Media is a crucial institution that significantly influences public consciousness and the formation of the civil sector. It remains one of the most powerful institutions in articulating modern values. Therefore, journalists must remain aware of their responsibility, as their influence on society is extremely significant, especially in countries like Georgia.

Even in the most challenging environments for journalism, there are reputable media organizations across Europe that maintain public trust through integrity, professionalism, and fairness. At the same time, considering current challenges, it is necessary to further explore how media can provide even more reliable and objective information while fully preserving editorial independence.

Conclusion

This study examined the ethical principles governing the coverage of religious issues in Western and Georgian media organizations and explored their relevance within the contemporary Georgian media environment. Through a comparative analysis of the editorial guidelines, ethical codes, and professional standards of leading Western media organizations, alongside the ethical frameworks operating in Georgia, the research sought to identify the fundamental principles of responsible religious reporting and assess their applicability within Georgian journalistic practice.

The findings demonstrate that, despite differences in media systems, institutional traditions, and socio-political contexts, Western media organizations share a common normative understanding of ethical journalism. Their editorial policies are based on such principles as accuracy, verification, impartiality, balance, editorial independence,

accountability, transparency, and respect for human dignity. These principles form the foundation of responsible journalism and provide practical guidance for addressing ethical dilemmas in everyday reporting.

Particular attention is devoted to the coverage of religion and religious communities. The analysis revealed that leading Western media organizations emphasize contextualization, the avoidance of stereotypes, the prevention of hate speech, and the careful treatment of sacred symbols and religious beliefs. Ethical guidelines consistently stress that religious identity should be mentioned only when directly relevant to a story and should never be used in a manner that contributes to stigmatization, prejudice, or discrimination. Such standards are especially important in diverse democratic societies, where media narratives significantly influence public attitudes and social relations.

The research also demonstrated that Georgian media ethical frameworks largely correspond to internationally recognized professional standards. The Code of Conduct of the Georgian Public Broadcaster, the Charter of Journalistic Ethics, and other professional documents reflect many of the same principles found in Western ethical frameworks, including commitments to truthfulness, fairness, professional responsibility, freedom of expression, pluralism, and respect for human dignity. This suggests that the Georgian media environment possesses a solid normative basis for ethical journalism. At the same time, the study indicates that the existence of ethical codes alone cannot guarantee ethical reporting. The effectiveness of ethical standards depends on their practical implementation, institutional support, editorial culture, and the professional competence of journalists. Many contemporary media challenges arise not from the absence of ethical regulations but from inconsistencies in their application. This observation is particularly relevant in transitional democracies, where media organizations often operate within politically polarized environments and under various economic and social pressures.

One of the central conclusions of the study is that religious reporting remains one of the most sensitive areas of journalism. Religion intersects with issues of identity, history, culture, politics, and human rights, making ethical responsibility especially important. Inaccurate or unbalanced reporting can contribute to misunderstanding, stereotyping, and social tension, while responsible journalism can facilitate informed public debate, promote tolerance, and strengthen democratic culture. Consequently, journalists covering religious issues must demonstrate a high degree of professional competence, ethical awareness, and editorial responsibility.

The findings further highlight the importance of editorial independence. Ethical journalism requires reporting to be guided by professional judgment rather than political, ideological, commercial, or religious interests. Editorial independence is not only a professional principle but also a prerequisite for public trust. The credibility of media organizations depends on the perception that information is produced fairly, accurately, and free from external influence.

The study also confirms the close relationship between media ethics and democratic communication. Ethical standards should not be viewed merely as professional restrictions but as mechanisms that enable journalism to fulfill its democratic function. By ensuring accuracy, fairness, transparency, and accountability,

media ethics contributes to the development of an informed public sphere and supports democratic participation, pluralism, and the protection of human rights.

Another important finding concerns the role of journalism education and professional training. Contemporary media environments are increasingly complex due to digital transformation, technological innovation, information overload, and social polarization. Under such conditions, professional competence must extend beyond technical reporting skills and include a strong understanding of ethical principles and decision-making processes. Strengthening media ethics education and expanding professional training opportunities would contribute significantly to improving the quality of religious reporting in Georgia.

The practical significance of this study lies in its recommendations for improving the ethical coverage of religious issues in Georgian media. Greater emphasis should be placed on contextual reporting, fact verification, the clear separation of facts from opinions, the reduction of sensationalist practices, and the promotion of pluralism and diversity. Media organizations should actively encourage ethical awareness and professional accountability among journalists.

Future research should focus on empirical analyses of media content and newsroom practices in order to better understand how ethical standards are implemented in everyday journalistic work. Comparative content analyses, interviews with journalists and editors, and audience studies could provide valuable insights into the relationship between ethical principles and media performance.

In conclusion, media ethics remains one of the fundamental pillars of responsible journalism. In the context of religious reporting, ethical standards serve not only as professional guidelines but also as important instruments for protecting human dignity, promoting social cohesion, and strengthening democratic communication. The consistent implementation of these principles within the Georgian media environment can contribute significantly to the development of a more professional, credible, and socially responsible media system.

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Analysis of Corporate Social Responsibility in the Ghanaian Press

By Christopher Kweku Nyame & Mavis Amo-Mensah[±]*

This study explores coverage of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in two Ghanaian newspapers – the Daily Graphic and the Business & Financial Times (B&FT), specifically looking at CSR issues covered, the nature of stakeholders addressed, and the tone of coverage. The study employs content analysis methods and analyses 398 CSR news stories published in the two newspapers over a twenty-four-month period. Through the lens of agenda-setting and stakeholder theories, we find that CSR issues spanned a broad range of themes, with health, economic empowerment, and education topics emerging as strategic priorities in the newspapers. The results also identified two main categories of stakeholder groups: stakeholders as beneficiaries of CSR and stakeholders as sources in CSR coverage. Furthermore, the print media narratives on CSR emphasised strong positive tone, advancing companies' obligations to stakeholders in preference to scrutinising CSR performance. The study deviates from prevailing research emphasis on corporate perspectives and stakeholder responses to CSR to demonstrate the critical role of the press in promoting social responsibility and sustainable development values. The findings enrich existing literature by providing new insights into the representation of CSR activities as reflected in press discourses – an insufficiently studied domain, especially in the context of Ghana.

Keywords: *Corporate Social Responsibility, CSR coverage, Newspapers, Content analysis, Ghana*

Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become the ethos of modern business strategy, shaping how companies interact with their stakeholders and contribute to sustainable development. Prior research indicates that many of today's proactive businesses go beyond financial success to serve the interests of all stakeholders, including employees, consumers, suppliers, and communities, to create positive social change (e.g. O'Connor, 2023). Amo-Mensah and Tench (2018) observe that global environmental crisis and its far-reaching consequences, including climate change, resource depletion, habitat destruction, and air pollution, have further reinforced the idea of CSR. The authors further note that with stakeholders becoming increasingly interested in business activities in society, such environmental impacts may cause social unrest and tensions that affect company performance. Within this sense, the empirical literature strongly suggests that companies that contribute to the well-being of communities and societies they affect are perceived more favourably, leading to improved value in areas such as corporate reputation, customer loyalty, stakeholder

*PhD Candidate, Department of Strategic Communication, University of Education, Ghana.

[±]Associate Professor, Department of Strategic Communication, University of Education, Ghana.

relationships, investor confidence, increased brand position, and revenue (e.g. Bartikowski & Berens, 2021; Huang, 2023). As rightly affirmed by Potter and Kramer (2011) via the concept of Creating Shared Value (CSV), companies can strategically create economic growth while also facilitating social needs to achieve long-term sustainability.

Recent research has shown that companies that strive to be socially responsible also prioritise communication about CSR efforts as output for corporate transparency and trust (e.g. Verk et al. 2021). Thus, businesses that have considered CSR also give preference to CSR reporting, through which they document performance of non-financial metrics to create CSR awareness among stakeholders and to provide accountability on social and environmental impacts (Perez et al. 2020). Such disclosures often incorporate Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) principles, which seek to project company sustainability practices and non-financial risks (Peng & Ying, 2025), or are sometimes conceptualised within the Triple Bottom Line sustainability framework: People, Planet, and Profit (Elkington, 1998). Some scholars have posited that due to the complexities and the paradoxical effects of CSR disclosures, companies must understand what to communicate (content) and how to communicate (delivery) to offset negative stakeholder attributions, including skepticism (e.g. Elving et al. 2015). According to Edogor (2025), the media, both traditional and digital, function as powerful information sources, serving as avenues for targeted CSR information that positively shapes stakeholder perceptions and behaviours (Zhang and Dong, 2021). Despite the shift towards digitalisation, the print media continue to be relevant for disclosing CSR information due to its dependability, trustworthiness and potential to effectively target groups within a specific geographical context (Menicacci & Simoni, 2024). Specifically, in Ghana, newspapers are key information sources that translate corporate actions into newsworthy content; they also serve as potent platforms for monitoring the activities of businesses to expose unethical practices in a way that safeguards public interest (Tella et al., 2018).

Within the CSR literature, scholars have established that while studies on CSR disclosures abound, researchers have been more interested in analysing corporate texts such as CSR/Sustainability reports (e.g. Kishan & Azhar, 2025), annual reports (e.g. Adebaya & Ackers, 2025) and company websites (e.g. Schröder, 2021), with lack of significant research contributions on CSR-related press coverage (Zhang & Dong, 2021), particularly in the context of developing economies (Aram & Nagarajan, 2025; Balqiah et al. 2023). In Ghana, even though recent years have seen a proliferation of studies on CSR/CSR Communication in various industry sectors, the existing research has discussed and emphasised various company dimensions and stakeholder perspectives on CSR (e.g. Ansong, 2017; Ansu-Mensah et al. 2021; Nyamekye et al. 2025), other than media coverage and representation of CSR issues. Notably, a comprehensive review generally shows that, but for the study by Teller et al. (2008), which concentrated on the relationship between press reports and CSR reputation, using two leading telecommunications companies as cases, the literature has been silent on how the Ghanaian news media cover CSR, creating a huge research gap. Building upon these premises and drawing on the stakeholder and agenda-setting theories, we address this empirical gap by analysing how two leading Ghanaian newspapers—the *Daily Graphic* and the *Business and Financial Times (B&FT)*—cover CSR, focusing on the dominant issues covered, stakeholders most

represented, and tone of coverage. The *Daily Graphic*, a government-owned daily newspaper founded in 1950 and published by the Graphic Communications Group Limited, was selected because it is the most widely read newspaper in Ghana, controlling about 60% of the market share. The paper, which also has the highest circulation in the country, has established a niche in the print media landscape for credible and authentic news, serving as information source for various media organisations. On the other hand, the B&FT, also a daily newspaper, dominates the print media landscape in Ghana in terms of business and financial news. It is a privately-owned newspaper that was founded in 1989 and published by the Business and Financial Times Limited. The paper has won many awards both locally and internationally, and also organises top-notch events on business and economic issues in the country. Significantly, the study contributes to the existing literature by providing new empirical data on the representation of CSR activities as reflected in press discourses – a domain that has received limited attention in CSR communication research, especially in the context of Ghana. The findings have useful implications for corporate entities, policymakers, and regulatory bodies responsible for shaping CSR.

Corporate Social Responsibility and Media Coverage

CSR is often viewed as complex, dynamic, and multifaceted, broadly encompassing “the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society” (European Commission, 2011-14). In an effort to clarify what CSR actually entails, Carroll (1991) provided one of the leading and most cited definitions, which he conceptualised as the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations societies have of organisations. According to Carroll (1999), economic responsibility prioritises profitability and economic growth; legal responsibility requires companies to comply with laws and regulations; ethical responsibility involves morally right or justifiable behaviours that go beyond mere compliance with laws; while philanthropic responsibility includes voluntary social contributions such as charitable donations. In a groundbreaking study, Dahlsrud (2008) found five CSR dimensions: environmental, social, economic, stakeholder, and voluntariness. From this range of perspectives, we conceive CSR as businesses acting responsibly and making ethical decisions in the interest of society. CSR communication, on the other hand, reflects how “companies manage information about their socially responsible initiatives and exchange this with their shareholders for the purpose of creating a shared understanding” (Amo-Mensah & Tench, 2015, p. 18). Through such disclosures, especially via news reports, the agenda-setting role of the media becomes evident, particularly in determining relevant CSR issues, how companies and other stakeholders are represented, and whether CSR initiatives are portrayed as genuine commitments or strategic branding efforts (Jauernig & Valentinov, 2019). Research has shown that, in developed country contexts, CSR disclosures have evolved from philanthropy-focused narratives to sustainability and corporate governance issues (e.g. Pérez et al., 2018; Visser, 2008). For instance, Pérez et al. (2018) found that CSR issues that received the most media attention in Spain were shareholder rights, economic development programmes, and product development to cater to the needs of disadvantaged customers. In China, Tang (2012) found that there was an

increasing focus on corporate ethics, environmental policies, and labor rights in CSR news coverage. Similarly, in business press reports in the USA, Cook et al. (2018) asserted that the newspapers disclosed more ethical and legal CSR issues. In Africa, including Ghana, however, corporate philanthropy remains the dominant theme in media coverage, with businesses frequently publicising charitable donations and causes (e.g. Jamali et al., 2015; Tella, et al., 2018).

In the context of this study, we considered the agenda-setting and stakeholder theories relevant to provide insights into the nature of CSR coverage in the two selected newspapers. The Agenda-setting theory explains how the media influence public perceptions by determining which issues receive attention (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). According to Carroll & McCombs (2003), agenda-setting operates on two levels: the prominence of issues in media coverage, which directly impacts public awareness, and how the media frame issues, highlighting particular attributes such as tone, usually classified as positive, neutral/mixed, or negative. With reference to tone, several empirical studies in different contexts have shown strong positive tone for CSR stories in newspaper coverage (e.g. Frig et al. 2018; Furey et al. 2019). For instance, Zhang and Swanson (2006) analysed CSR reporting in U.S. and international newspapers and found that 47% of CSR news articles was covered positively, 36% was neutral, and 15% was negative. Similarly, Pérez et al. (2018) found that CSR news in Spain was predominantly celebratory, reinforcing corporate legitimacy without questioning the actual impact of CSR activities on society. From stakeholder perspectives, the study also relied on the agenda-building process, focusing on how CSR information sources or actors shaped the narratives in the newspapers (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007). Since the foundational definition of the term stakeholder was contextualised to mean: “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p.31), other scholars have broadened the term and its application in areas including stakeholder identification (e.g. Wood et al. 2021), and stakeholder representations (e.g. khedmatgozar et al. 2023). For instance, in the stakeholder management literature, Wood et al.’s (2021) identification matrix prioritises stakeholders with power, legitimacy and urgency. Moon & Hyun (2009) analyzed stakeholder representation in the U.S. newspapers and found that shareholders (33%) and customers (21%) were the most frequently mentioned stakeholders, with community stakeholders (10%) and employees (14%) receiving limited attention. The study further revealed that government and regulatory bodies (18%) played a secondary role in CSR news. On sources of CSR news, some findings indicate that CSR disclosures are often shaped by corporate interests rather than independent stakeholder voices such as community members, labor unions, and regulatory bodies (e.g. Pérez et al., 2018; Tam, 2019; Tang, 2012). Even though there are findings indicating that corporate sources lend authority to CSR messages (e.g. Grümberg & Pallas, 2013), third-party experts like CSR activists are considered more credible and are more likely to have a positive impact on stakeholder perceptions and on policy spheres (Anisimova et al. 2019). Based on the foregoing and drawing on agenda-setting and stakeholder theories, this study examines coverage of CSR in two leading Ghanaian newspapers—the *Daily Graphic* and the *B&FT*. We specifically provide insights into the following research questions:

1. What CSR issues are covered in the Daily Graphic and the B & FT?
2. Which stakeholders are addressed in CSR coverage in the Daily Graphic and the B & FT?
3. What is the nature of tone in CSR coverage in the Daily Graphic and the B & FT?

Methodology

In line with previous studies on media coverage on CSR (e.g. Weder et al. 2019), this study was based on content analysis procedures (incorporating both qualitative and quantitative elements) to examine the CSR issues covered in the *Daily Graphic* and the *B & FT*; stakeholders addressed in the CSR representations; and the tone of coverage of CSR in the two newspapers. To ensure a more representative sample of the corpus of data (sample from each day of the seven days of the week), we relied on a constructed week sampling technique to select 398 CSR articles published in the two newspapers over a period of twenty-four months (from January 1 2020 to December 31, 2021). Constructed week sampling has been widely used in studies on media coverage and newspaper content analysis in Ghana (e.g. Serwornoo, 2019) and in other contexts (e.g. Pérez et al., 2018; Tang, 2012). According to Hester and Dougall (2007), constructed week samples “involve identifying all Mondays, and randomly selecting one Monday, then identifying all Tuesdays, and randomly selecting one Tuesday, and continuing the process for all the days of the week” (p. 812). Before this, a pilot study was conducted using May 2021 publications of both newspapers to ascertain the feasibility of the research to check content-wise whether information about CSR would pass as a source of data for the study. The study was confirmed after the pilot review established the presence of CSR issues in the period covered. The articles on CSR were identified by searching archived newspapers using the following selection criteria: articles explicitly mentioning CSR and related constructs, including corporate philanthropy, sustainability and ethical business practices; news reports, features, and editorials related to CSR initiatives across industries; and stories that reference CSR and other environmental sustainability efforts. The unit of analysis was an entire CSR news story and these were identified, coded and thematically analysed drawing on categorisations in previous research on CSR and CSR news coverage (e.g. Dalsrud, 2008; Pérez et al., 2018). To ensure coding consistency and validity, a detailed coding manual was developed to guide the content analysis process. Two coders were trained using the coding scheme, and they independently coded a subset of the sample representing approximately 15% (n=60) of the 398 newspaper articles. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Cohen’s Kappa, yielding an average coefficient of 0.82, indicating substantial agreement. Following this assessment, the remaining articles were coded using the agreed coding scheme. Based on the research questions, each article on CSR found in the newspapers was analysed for the following: (a) CSR issues (b) stakeholders addressed and (c) tone of coverage. In terms of CSR issues, Amo-Mensah and Tench (2015) observed that the presence of CSR disclosures from a set of texts may be determined based on relevant literature. In line with this, we developed seven CSR themes drawing on ideas and categorisations from scholars such as Carroll (1991), Dalsrud (2008), Elkington (1998) and Pérez et

al. (2018). Again, each article's tone was analysed based on Tang's (2012) classification: positive, negative, or neutral/mixed. From this perspective, news that suggested that a company was recognised for various forms of CSR accomplishments or was connected to CSR efforts that created a favourable image or reputation was considered to have a positive tone. On the other hand, coverage that generally depicted issues of corporate irresponsibility or unethical business activities or that portrayed a company in a bad light, was considered to have a negative tone. A neutral or mixed tone, according to Tang (2012), has a blend of both positive and negative CSR associations or does not have any evaluative orientations of the message.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented in relation to our three focal areas. First, we focused on CSR issues covered in both newspapers. We then looked at the nature of stakeholders addressed in the newspapers and finally, the tone of CSR coverage in the newspapers. Analysis of the coverage of CSR by the *Daily Graphic* and the *B&FT* uncovered a total of 398 CSR news stories published by the two newspapers from January 2020 to December 2021. As would be expected, *B & FT* had the highest number of CSR stories, totaling 230, representing 58%, while the *Daily Graphic* had 168 (42%). Broader coverage of CSR in the *B&FT* is not surprising. The newspaper mainly focuses on business news; therefore, CSR is perhaps of high relevance (the concept has become a critical aspect of the business model), whereas the *Daily Graphic*, a more general newspaper, covers a wide range of fields, including education, agriculture, politics, and business.

CSR Issues covered in the Daily Graphic and the B&FT

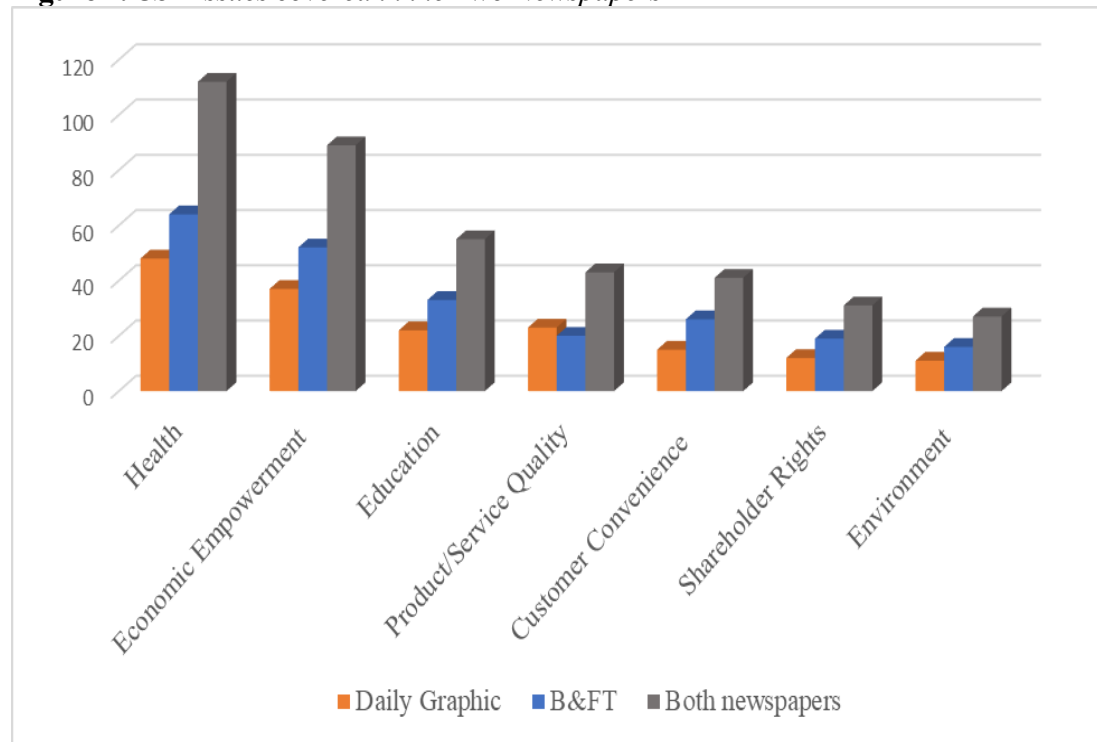
As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1 below, CSR issues covered in the newspapers focused on a broad range of themes. Specifically, evidence from the data revealed seven core areas: health, economic empowerment, education, product/service quality, customer convenience, shareholder rights and environment. Out of the 398 CSR stories in the two newspapers, CSR issues presented predominantly focused on health (n=112, 28.1%), with *B&FT* recording the highest proportion (n=64) as against *Daily Graphic* (n=48). Economic empowerment issues, which placed second, had a cumulated percentage of 22.4% out of the total number of CSR issues identified- n=52 representing 22.6% in the *B&FT* and n=37 accounting for 22.0% in the *Daily Graphic*. Education recorded the third highest in terms of CSR issues (n=55, 13.8%), with more of such issues amounting to 33 (14.3%) in the *B&FT* than in the *Daily Graphic* 22 (13.1%), followed by product/service quality (n=43, 10.8%), customer convenience (covered 41 times at 10.3%) and shareholder rights (reported 31 times at 7.8%). Environment had the lowest; very few CSR issues focused on this category (n=27, 6.8%): 16 (7.0%) in the *B&FT* and 11 (6.5%) in the *Daily Graphic*. Our findings on CSR issues revealed some notable variations in the two newspapers. Much attention was given to health, economic empowerment and education in the *B&FT* than product/service quality, while in the *Daily Graphic*, health had more

representation, followed by economic empowerment, product/service quality and education. Surprisingly, product/service quality had more coverage than education in the *Daily Graphic*.

Table 1. *CSR Issues covered in the Daily Graphic and the B&FT*

CSR Issues	Daily Graphic	B&FT	Both newspapers
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Health	48 (28.6)	64 (27.8)	112 (28.1)
Economic Empowerment	37 (22.0)	52 (22.6)	89 (22.4)
Education	22 (13.1)	33 (14.3)	55 (13.8)
Product/Service Quality	23 (13.7)	20 (8.7)	43 (10.8)
Customer Convenience	15 (8.9)	26 (11.3)	41 (10.3)
Shareholder Rights	12 (7.1)	19 (8.3)	31 (7.8)
Environment	11 (6.5)	16 (7.0)	27 (6.8)
Total	168 (100)	230 (100)	398 (100)

Figure 1. *CSR Issues covered in the Two Newspapers*



Overall, the findings revealed that the two papers paid considerable attention to health, economic empowerment and education issues, predominantly reflecting manifestations of Carroll's (1991) philanthropic responsibility, and consistent with previous research on newspaper coverage of CSR that similarly uncovered such issues (e.g. Furey et al., 2019; Pérez et al., 2018). The findings, however, contradict extant studies in terms of prioritisation of these responsibility issues. For instance, Tang's (2012) study in Chinese newspapers pointed out employment opportunities (20.4%),

product quality (20%), and environmental conservation (17.7%) as the most prominent responsibility issues, and also identified arts and culture as a standalone theme. Likewise, Pérez et al. (2018) found shareholder rights as the dominant CSR issue in Spanish media representation, whereas this was less emphasised in the two Ghanaian newspapers across the 24 months. The findings further suggest that there was more coverage on development-oriented/philanthropic issues in the two papers, consistent with previous studies in Ghana (e.g. Amo-Mensah & Trench, 2015) and several other African countries (e.g. Amaeshi et. al. 2015; Jamali et. al. 2015), but at variance with those in developed country contexts (e.g. Woo & Jin, 2016). For example, health-related CSR issues focused mainly on construction/renovation of health facilities, donations of medical supplies, and other support for health care delivery (e.g. maternal health, child health, and malaria). It came out that the heightened attention to health-related CSR issues was largely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely impacted health care systems across the country, driving corporate involvement in public health donation efforts, including providing personal protective equipment such as face masks and hand sanitizers. Similarly, CSR stories on education covered construction/ renovation of classrooms, library facilities and donations of relevant educational materials such as computers, books, and other necessary school supplies. Economic empowerment CSR initiatives concentrated especially on rural and extremely poor communities. Companies, especially those in the banking and mining sectors, led initiatives to support local businesses, livelihood empowerment programmes, technical training, and agricultural development. Particularly, women were given access to monetary resources to boost their capacities and economic opportunities. Such economic empowerment initiatives also reflect Carroll's (1991) economic responsibility of firms to contribute to sustainable development while maintaining profitability. Emphasis on voluntary corporate contributions further aligns with Dahlsrud's (2008) voluntariness dimension, reinforcing the idea that many of the companies' CSR actions were discretionary. On the other hand, product and service quality CSR issues emphasised product quality, service excellence, compliance with quality/industry standards and ensuring that products and services meet customer needs and expectations. On customer convenience, we followed the conceptualisation by Strenger and Nicholls (2017), which points to companies creating ease for all customer activities and experiences. Based on the data, customer convenience CSR issues were present in the two newspapers in many forms: providing customers with online/digital services, digital payment options, home delivery options, market cash collection and relocation/mergers of bank branches to facilitate seamless transactions. Central to shareholder rights CSR issues, as evidenced from the analysis, is what scholars have suggested as the legal purpose of the corporation (e.g. Friedman, 1970) or shareholder primacy (e.g. Fisch), exemplified by economic self-interest and value creation for companies, for instance, in areas of profitability, market share, and other business prospects (e.g. Ansong, 2017). Environmental issues, which received the least mention (6.8%), aimed at sustainable practices rooted in achieving a healthy environment (these were predominantly in the areas of community clean-ups, waste reduction practices, afforestation, provision of trash bins and engagements with local community members to ensure effective environmental management).

Consistent with the findings observed, there is strong empirical consensus that development-oriented/philanthropic CSR issues in Africa are premised on governance gaps and unique socio-economic needs (e.g. Jamali et al 2015), as opposed to what pertains in developed and resource-rich countries (e.g. UK, USA, those in Europe) that tend to focus more on environmental and human rights CSR issues (e.g. Woo & Jin, 2016). As explicitly documented by Gajadhur and Nicolaides (2022), “numerous governments in developing countries are grappling with severe poverty, and as a result, they depend on the private sector to carry out social and environmental functions that they are unable to provide” (p. 166). Moreover, a recent report by the World Bank reiterates that there are still high rates of poverty in Africa, with over 400 million people living in extreme poverty (World Bank, 2024). These challenges are compounded by crucial infrastructural gaps, which contribute negatively to growth prospects in the continent. According to the African Development Bank (2025), closing Africa’s infrastructural deficits requires about \$100 billion dollars per year to achieve Africa Union’s Agenda 2063. Moreover, specific country case studies in Ghana also reveal that lack of a comprehensive CSR regulatory framework and the resurgence of the activities of Multinational Companies (MNCs) further fuel ad hoc CSR practices (e.g. Amo-Mensah & Trench, 2018). With enormous pressure on MNCs to support communities, most of these businesses exploit the volatile economy and reap from its natural resources in the name of facilitating local economic development. The literature further hints that while CSR policy commitments remain challenging in Africa, some countries, including Denmark, France, Sweden, Russia and the Netherlands, have successfully enabled robust regulatory frameworks to support effective implementation of socially responsible issues (e.g. Young & Marais, 2012). Perhaps one of the most daunting CSR concerns faced by Africa, as established in this study, is the focus on peripheral CSR issues (philanthropy) rather than broad-level focal areas (e.g. environmental, human rights). On the other hand, these findings point to a strong need for macro-level areas of CSR in Africa, but these also highlight the wide variations and heterogeneity of CSR across different contexts. In line with this, Matten and Moon (2008) underscore the relevance of context in CSR in their comparative study in the USA and Europe. The authors accentuate cross-cultural variations, highlighting two main strategies to CSR implementation -implicit CSR (embedded in institutional norms and rules resulting in mandatory CSR practices in Europe) and explicit CSR (voluntary practices in liberal market economies such as the USA and Africa).

Table 2. *Sample Extracts on References to CSR issues in the Two Newspapers*

CSR ISSUES	SAMPLE EXTRACTS
Health	<i>Newmont commits US\$350000 into Asutifi North District Hospital Project. (B &FT, 8/10/2020, p. 9)</i> <i>Providing the hospital with PPEs is TechnipFMC’s contribution to ensure that doctors and nurses work in a safer environment to provide quality health care and save lives (Daily Graphic, 2/7/2021, p.22)</i>
Education	<i>Ecobank hands over new computer laboratory to Christian Methodist Senior High School... education is one of the three critical focus areas for Ecobank’s corporate social responsibility programmes (B&FT, 13/4/2021, p.3)</i>

	<i>Yinson Ghana provides off-grid solar systems for local schools at Prestea (Daily Graphic, 15/3/2021, p.30)</i>
Economic Empowerment	<i>AngloGold Ashanti trains 168 women in enterprise and skills development. (B &FT, 19/11/2020 p. 14)</i> <i>Blue Band kicks off the GHS 100.000.00 'Spreading Smiles' initiative (Daily Graphic, 11/12/2020, p.24)</i>
Product/Service quality	<i>Prudential Bank has over the years, strengthened its information security in line with PCI DSS requirements to provide...highest quality service (B&FT, 12/1/2021, p. 24)</i> <i>Goil introduces new higher-grade fuel at no higher cost. With the release of the petrol stock, all consumers will benefit from a higher-grade petrol that significantly boosts the performance of all engines... (Daily Graphic, 17/2/2020, p.73)</i>
Customer Convenience	<i>Odotobri Rural Bank brings convenient banking to Asawase customers. The relocation is aimed at bringing convenient banking to petty traders...and ultimately take customers who visit the banking hall on a daily basis out of congestion (B &FT, 20/1/2021. p.24)</i> <i>...Mobile Money Interoperability, which would allow our esteemed customers the opportunity to perform enhanced services on their phones and through stand-alone Point of Sale (PoS) devices... (Daily Graphic, 17/2/2021 p.29)</i>
Shareholder rights	<i>The bank recorded an outstanding performance in profitability during the year under review – posting a pretax profit of about GHS11.5million compared to approximately GHS4.4million in the previous year, representing an impressive growth of 165%. (B &FT, 2/6/2021 p.24)</i> <i>...ARB Apex Bank put up an impressive performance, with its profit before tax increasing from GHS1 million in 2019 to GHS5.9 million in 2020, representing a positive variance of 482 percent... (Daily Graphic, 17/2/2021. p.29)</i>
Environment	<i>... Greening and protecting our environment is an everyday affair. At Nestle we have made a commitment to contribute to the environment sustainably through several actions (B&FT, 10/8/2021, p.16)</i> <i>The Ridge Nest Hotel in Adukrom Akuapim in the Eastern Region has embarked on an afforestation project as part of its corporate social responsibility to support efforts to restore the natural vegetation (Daily Graphic, 5/8/2021, p. 27)</i>

Source: Data from the selected newspapers

The Nature of Stakeholders addressed in the Newspapers

The study also sought to uncover the nature of stakeholders inherent in the coverage of CSR in each of the two Ghanaian newspapers. The various stakeholders reported in the newspapers across the 24 months were coded, analysed and categorised.

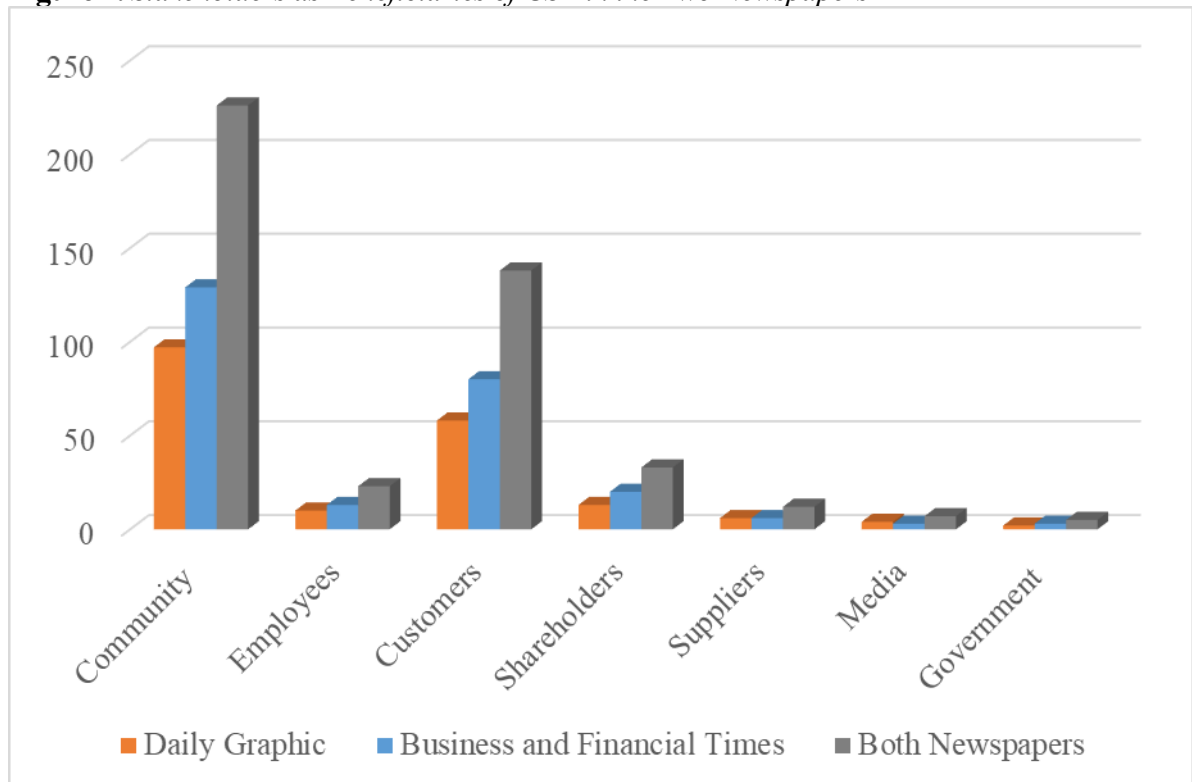
The study identified two categories of stakeholders: *stakeholders as beneficiaries of CSR* and *stakeholders as sources in CSR coverage*.

Stakeholders as Beneficiaries of CSR

From the analysis, stakeholders as beneficiaries of CSR were reported on 444 times (far more than the 398 CSR news stories assessed for the entire study, because some news stories gave multiple reportage on CSR beneficiaries) in the two newspapers: 190 in the *Daily Graphic* and 254 in the *B&FT*. Table 3 below is an aggregate distribution of CSR beneficiaries in the two newspapers. Based on agenda-setting constructs, we identified frequency as a salient cue in the news coverage since this has the potential to influence public agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 2017). In accordance with this and from stakeholder theory perspectives, the data revealed that groups prioritised as beneficiaries of CSR initiatives in both *Daily Graphic* and the *B&FT* included *community, customers, shareholders, employees, suppliers, media and government*. *Community* stakeholders emerged strongly as a strategic priority (226, 50.9%), followed by customers (138, representing 31.1%), shareholders (33, 7.4%), employees (23 times at 5.2%), suppliers (12 times at 2.7%), and the media (7 times at 1.6%). It can be seen from Table 3 that the government as a stakeholder, constituted the least prioritised CSR beneficiary (reported on 5 times at 1.1%).

Table 3. *Stakeholders as Beneficiaries of CSR in the Daily Graphic and the B&FT*

Beneficiaries of CSR	Name of Newspaper		Both Newspapers
	Daily Graphic	B&FT	
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Community	97 (51.1)	129 (50.8)	226 (50.9)
Employees	10 (5.3)	13 (5.1)	23 (5.2)
Customers	58 (30.5)	80 (31.5)	138 (31.1)
Shareholders	13 (6.8)	20 (7.9)	33 (7.4)
Suppliers	6 (3.2)	6 (2.4)	12 (2.7)
Media	4 (2.1)	3 (1.2)	7 (1.6)
Government	2 (1.1)	3 (1.2)	5 (1.1)
Total	190 (100)	254 (100)	444 (100)

Figure 2. Stakeholders as Beneficiaries of CSR in the Two Newspapers

It is noteworthy that with reference to representation, there were no significant differences identified in the two newspapers relative to most salient beneficiaries of CSR initiatives, as Table 3 and Figure 2 above depict. However, whereas the *Daily Graphic* did not focus much attention on government (least mentioned CSR beneficiary, 2 times at 1.1%), *government* and *media* stakeholders had equal representation in the *B&FT* (3 times for each category at 1.2%). It is also important to emphasise that with the exception of the *media*, which was taken more into account in the *Daily Graphic* (4 times representing 2.1%) when compared with the *B & FT*, enough coverage was given to almost all CSR beneficiaries in the *B & FT* than in the *Daily Graphic*, but for suppliers, where prominence was equal in both newspapers.

In the CSR management literature, the agenda-setting power of stakeholders in news media has been emphasised. Scholars like Pérez et al. (2018) reiterate that the amount of news media coverage of stakeholders in CSR serves as a strong catalyst for positive public attention. Consistent with the studies by Tang (2012) in China and Pérez et al. (2018) in Spain, this study also established that the main concern for companies when it comes to CSR is the community, where critical social initiatives are emphasised, particularly in underserved areas to enact positive change. As expected, the prominence placed on ‘community’ CSR beneficiaries in the stories shared affirms findings that such responsibility, particularly in the African context and especially in Ghana, is predominantly community-oriented, where company initiatives seek to improve the well-being of local communities (e.g. Amo-Mensah & Tench, 2015; Freeman & Dmytriiev, 2017). In this respect, the observation by Furey et al. (2019) in the U.SA that, there is media concentration on coverage of

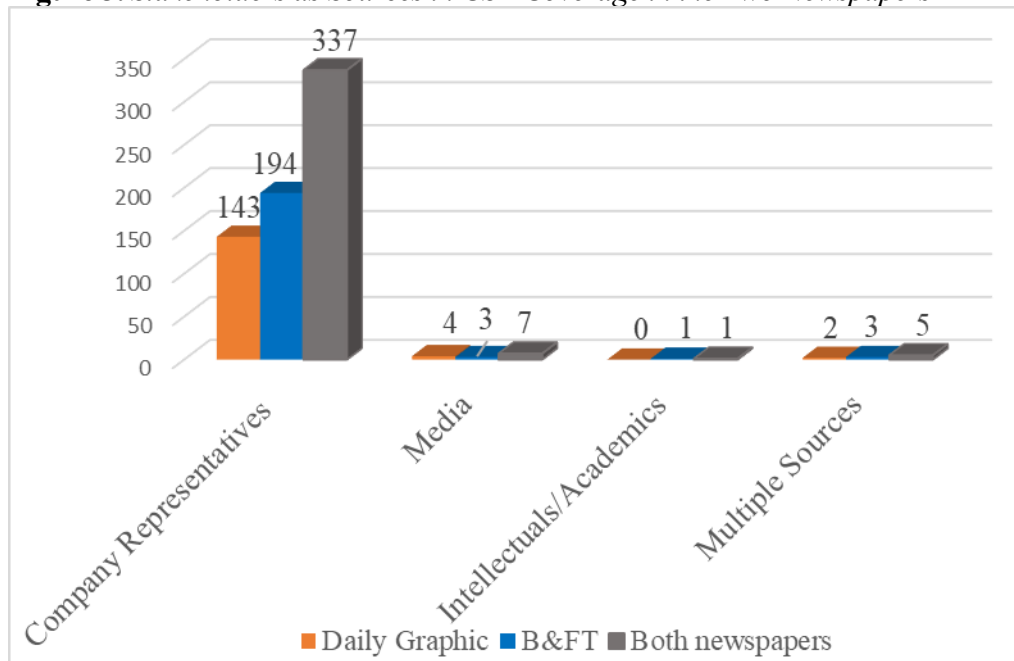
community-dominated issues or issues that affect local people, holds true. From the analysed newspapers, *customers* were the second most visible beneficiaries of CSR while *employees* ranked fourth, receiving considerably less media attention as compared with the *community, customers, and shareholders*, similar to the Spanish study by Pérez et al. (2018), but contrary to the findings by Furey et al. (2019) and Tang (2012) which both found employee stakeholders as the second most prioritised CSR beneficiary in newspaper coverage in the USA and China respectively. Notably, suppliers, government and media stakeholders did not receive much attention, compared with community and customer stakeholders, as also established by Moon & Hyun (2009).

Stakeholders as Sources in CSR Coverage

The data from the archived newspapers also uncovered stakeholders that served as CSR sources. These were discussed 350 times: 201 in *B & FT* and 149 in the *Daily Graphic* (the total number is less than the number of analysed CSR articles because some articles did not have stakeholders as sources, but rather, company reports). Three key sources of CSR information emerged from the data: company representatives, the media, and academics. In some cases, the sources were multiple, that is, a combination of two or more of the sources identified in the CSR coverage. The data revealed that most CSR sources come from company representatives (as shown in Table 4 and Figure 3 below), recording a cumulative frequency of 337 and representing 96.3%. Of the remaining 13 (3.7%), the media as CSR source recorded 7 at 2.0%, followed by those from ‘multiple sources’ with a frequency of 5 at 1.4%. Academics represented the least used source in CSR coverage (with a frequency of 1 at 0.3%).

Table 4. *Stakeholders as Sources in CSR coverage in the Two Newspapers*

Stakeholders as Sources in CSR Coverage	Name of Newspaper		
	Daily Graphic	B&FT	Both newspapers
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Company Representatives	143 (96.0)	194 (96.5)	337 (96.3)
Media	4 (2.7)	3 (1.5)	7 (2.0)
Intellectuals/Academics	0 (0.0)	1 (0.5)	1 (0.3)
Multiple Sources	2 (1.3)	3 (1.5)	5 (1.4)
Total	149 (100)	201 (100)	350 (100)

Figure 3. Stakeholders as Sources in CSR Coverage in the Two Newspapers

From the data, the newspapers were mostly saturated with company representatives such as public relations officers, CSR managers, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), and communication officers from different industry sectors (primarily telecommunications, mining and banking) serving as sources in CSR coverage. Most of these groups are usually directly or indirectly in charge of planning and managing social responsibility activities in addition to activating communication efforts via various forms of media, including newspapers (e.g. Menicacci & Simoni 2024). Extant literature indicates that such representatives do not only act as voices that communicate CSR information on behalf of companies (e.g. Amo-Mensah & Tench, 2015), they also serve as reflections of the ideologies of their sources (e.g. McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007). This strong news-media-business relationship is consistent with prior studies (e.g. Grafström & Windell, 2011; Grümberg & Pallas, 2013) that have found that corporate sources are the most common primary contributors of CSR news. Conversely, in Furey et al.'s (2019) study, activists were mostly relied on as sources in CSR coverage. Then again, in instances where the media were used as sources by the newspapers in the coverage of CSR, journalists, media managers, and other coordinators of media houses were reported to have engaged in various forms of responsible actions. From the data, the role played by academics in CSR news was minimal (appeared in just one CSR story in the dataset). Surprisingly, NGOs, which are often key voices in CSR discussions worldwide (Pérez, 2018; Tam, 2019), were entirely absent from the Ghanaian media coverage. Meanwhile, according to Anisimova et al. (2019), third-party experts like CSR activists or academics or NGOs are considered more credible than corporate sources. From the evidence gathered, consistent reference to CSR beneficiaries and sources illustrates Dahlsrud's (2008) stakeholder dimension, showing that CSR is framed in relation to identifiable social groups impacted by corporate activity.

Nature of Tone in CSR Coverage

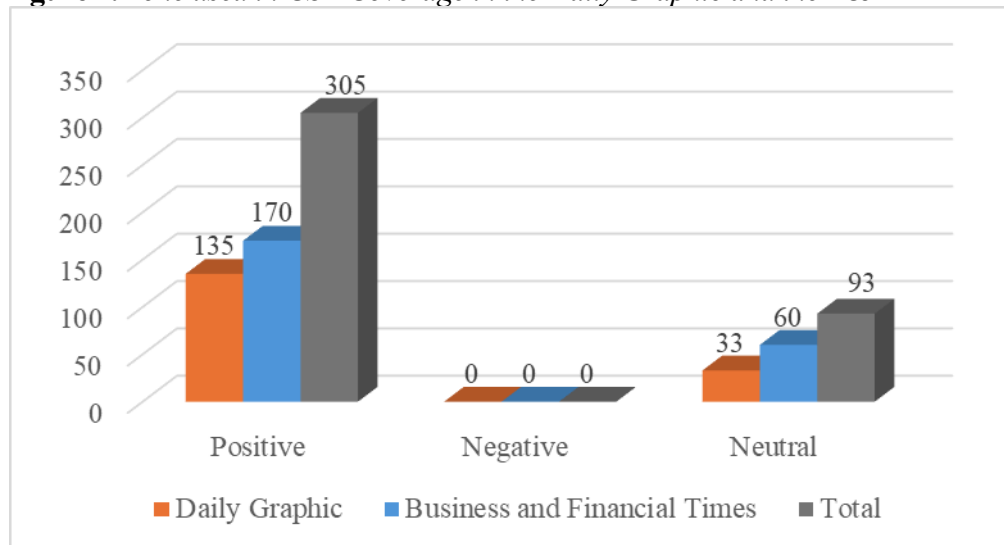
We also examined the nature of tone in CSR coverage in the newspapers, drawing on the well-established three-point mode of tone assessment: positive, negative, and neutral (e.g. Tang, 2012). As already highlighted, a story with a positive tone in CSR assessments include those that commend companies for operating in an ethical manner or for implementing various forms of responsible activities that contribute positively to society and the environment (e.g. Zhang & Swanson, 2006). In the context of this study, such commendations reflected frames based on cues such as societal interest, beyond profits, stakeholder well-being, kind gestures, outstanding commitment, impressive performance, and positive variance, among others. On the other hand, negative CSR tone reflects actions of corporate irresponsibility, while much of neutral or mixed tone derives from coverage that includes both positive and negative CSR actions, without evaluative modifiers such as effective, good, impressive or bad (e.g. Valenzuela, 2019).

Our findings show that both *B & FT* and *Daily Graphic* had strong positive tone for CSR stories across all the industry sectors (with a cumulative percentage of 76.6 of the 398 CSR stories analysed), followed by neutral tone (23.4%). Further analysis of the findings revealed there was no negative tone in CSR coverage in the two newspapers. Additionally, positive and neutral tone were prominent in the *B & FT* than in the *Daily Graphic*. Table 5 and Figure 4 below present a summary of the tone of CSR, as deduced from the analysis during the period of study.

Table 5. *Nature of Tone in CSR coverage in the newspapers*

Tone of story	Daily Graphic	B&FT	Both newspapers
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Positive	135 (80.4)	170 (73.9)	305 (76.6)
Negative	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Neutral	33 (19.6)	60 (26.1)	93 (23.4)
Total	168(100)	230(100)	398(100)

Source: Authors own creation

Figure 4. Tone used in CSR Coverage in the Daily Graphic and the B&FT

Based on the observations above, we contend that the newspapers' coverage of CSR was mostly celebratory, advancing companies' obligations to stakeholders as opposed to scrutinising their CSR performance. The results are in agreement with the Ghanaian study by Tella et al. (2018) and studies from other parts of the world (e.g., Pérez et al., 2018; Zhang & Swanson, 2006). The literature suggests that diverse voices (including activists, environmentalists, government representatives, and celebrities) in CSR discourses lead to more critical coverage (e.g. Tam, 2019). In this study, however, representatives of large and multinational companies in Ghana, who mostly invest in media advertising, dominated as CSR sources. Perhaps the overwhelmingly positive tone may be attributed to the financial relationship between these large corporations and the media houses. The substantial advertising revenue provided by the companies may limit open critical evaluation of responsibility performance and perceived authenticity in CSR reporting practices. Akpabio (2005) even estimates that up to 50% of media content originates from corporate information subsidies, especially those that serve commercial interests, making media coverage susceptible to corporate influence. The favorable nature of CSR coverage in the Ghanaian newspapers, however indicates that company representatives have very positive relationships with the media, contradicting claims that the media typically display unfavorable attitudes towards these representatives (Zhang & Swanson, 2006).

Conclusion

This study sought to examine print media coverage of CSR using archived data from two Ghanaian newspapers, the *Daily Graphic* and the *Business & Financial Times (B&FT)*, to understand CSR issues reported, stakeholder representations, and tone of coverage. Drawing on agenda-setting and stakeholder theories, a total of 398 CSR news items published between January 1 2020 and December 31, 2021 were qualitatively content-analysed. The results show that CSR issues covered in the

newspapers focused on seven broad range of themes: health, economic empowerment, education, product/ service quality, customer convenience, shareholder rights and environment. Specifically, while health, economic empowerment and education frames received significant media attention, product/service quality, customer convenience, shareholder rights and environment topics were not so much prioritised. In addition, the findings identified two main categories of stakeholder groups: stakeholders as beneficiaries of CSR and stakeholders as sources used in CSR coverage. Beyond ‘community’ as the most ranked of the spectrum of stakeholders featured as beneficiaries of CSR, other groups including customers, shareholders and employees were also accentuated. Three key sources of CSR news stories were uncovered: company representatives, the media and academics. However, the newspapers were mostly saturated with company representatives such as public relations/communication officers, CSR managers and chief executive officers serving as CSR sources. Moreover, tone of CSR stories was overwhelmingly positive, with more than 90% of the analysed articles celebrating corporate contributions, thus limiting critical assessments of CSR performance. The study deviates from prevailing research emphasis on corporate perspectives and stakeholder responses to CSR and demonstrates the critical role of the press in promoting social responsibility and sustainable development values. The findings enrich existing literature by providing new insights into the representation of CSR activities as reflected in newspaper discourses – an insufficiently studied domain, especially in the context of Ghana. Furthermore, the results have important implications for media practitioners, corporate entities, policymakers and regulatory bodies responsible for shaping CSR. It is important to note that our coverage of CSR issues in this current study concentrated on only the two selected major newspapers in Ghana. Future research can therefore extend the study to other newspapers and media platforms.

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