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 current issue is the fourth of the eleventh volume of the *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications (AJMMC), published by the Mass Media & Communication Unit of* Athens Institute.

Gregory T. Papanikos
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- **Dr. John Pavlik**, Head, Mass Media and Communication Research Unit, Athens Institute & Professor, Rutgers University, USA.

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- Acceptance of Abstract: 4 Weeks after Submission
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Newspaper Framing of Climate Change in Tamil Nadu, India

By I. Arul Aram[*] & Vivek Nagarajan[±]

As one of the most pressing global challenges of our times, climate change has thrust the media into a crucial position, wielding influence over public understanding and shaping policy debates. This study investigates how climate change is framed in Tamil Nadu by analysing articles from The Hindu published in 2023. This study combines the frame analysis model developed by Semetko and Valkenburg with the Climate Action frame from Sustainable Development Goal 13 (SDG 13) added on. This study analysed 600 articles through the lens of six distinct frames: responsibility, conflict, economic, human interest, morality, and climate action. These framing categories form the basis of the analytical framework. The Responsibility frame emphasises governmental accountability in addressing climate issues, the Conflict frame elucidates disagreements concerning resource allocation, the Economic frame examines the financial implications of risks associated with extreme weather events, the Human Interest frame incorporates a human perspective into climate narratives, the Morality frame integrates ethical perspectives, and the Climate Action frame focuses on climate adaptation and climate mitigation strategies. This study provides valuable insights into how regional climate change narratives are constructed in the state of Tamil Nadu, south India, and offers insights into how a global crisis is contextualised in print media through strategic framing.

Keywords: Climate change, media framing, Tamil Nadu, The Hindu, Semetko and Valkenburg, Climate Action frame, SDG13

Introduction

Climate change poses substantial threats to various sectors, including health, agriculture, biodiversity, and food security. The health sector contributes significantly to greenhouse gas emissions in developed countries, with an increasing climate impact in low-income nations (Holmner et al., 2012). Climate change affects all aspects of biodiversity, potentially resulting in irreversible ecosystem shifts and the loss of essential services for human survival (Rinawati et al., 2013). The Green Revolution enhanced agricultural production, but incurred environmental costs, contributing to climate change through the intensive use of fossil fuels and agrochemicals. Traditional agriculture is gaining recognition as a climate-smart strategy for sustainable food production (Singh and Singh, 2017). Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a tool for climate change mitigation, with applications in weather prediction, energy management, and industrial pollution analysis (Kumar et al., 2024).

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Agricultural adaptation strategies include optimising geographic distribution, cultivating climate-resilient crops, adjusting cropping patterns, developing water-saving irrigation systems, and enhancing disaster prevention capacities (Liu et al., 2021).

Media framing of climate change influences public perception and understanding of this global issue, and media portrayals affect public cognition and responses (Schuldt & Roh, 2014). A study of US newspapers found that although articles on climate change decreased from 2007-2008 to 2011-2012, there was an increased focus on the public health aspect (Weathers and Kendall, 2015). Additionally, framing has shifted from apocalyptic futures to more diverse narratives, with a "Sustainable Future" frame emerging alongside the "Global Doom" and "Local Tragedies" frames (Guenther et al., 2021). Framing varies across countries and political ideologies, as seen in Indian newspapers (Billett, 2009), and differences between conservative and liberal newspapers in Chile (Dotson et al., 2012).

News media framing of climate change has agenda-setting and framing effects that impact public understanding and behaviour (McCluskey et al., 2016). The terms "global warming" and "climate change" evoke distinct cognitive associations across political affiliations. Conservatives associate heat-related impacts more with "global warming", while liberals associate these impacts equally in both terms (Schuldt and Roh, 2014). This highlights the importance of language choice in climate communication. Media framing effects vary across facets of public opinion, with stronger effects on future expectations than current attitudes (Sheafer & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2010). Media framing shapes public discourse on climate change, but its efficacy can be influenced by political partisanship, personal identity, and terminology (Benjamin et al., 2016).

Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) frame analysis is a prominent methodology in media-framing research. Their scale encompasses five news frames: responsibility, human interest, conflict, morality, and economic consequences (Muhamad and Yang, 2017). This deductive approach enables researchers to investigate how news narratives are framed across various topics and media platforms and continues to be an important tool for examining media framing in news coverage. As media landscapes evolve, researchers may need to adapt and integrate diverse framing analysis techniques to capture the complexities of contemporary communication (Knüpfer and Entman, 2018).

Climate Action Goal 13 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stresses urgent measures to address climate change and its effects by incorporating adaptation and mitigation strategies. This goal aims to enhance education, awareness, and the institutional capacity for climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction, and early warning systems (Hwang et al., 2021). Cities incorporate these aspects into local climate action plans, acknowledge synergies, and avoid conflicts and trade-offs (Grafakos et al., 2019). This integrated approach is vital for sustainable urban development and efficient resource use. Transformative solutions are crucial for addressing highend climate change because conventional strategies may be insufficient to prevent major disruptions in social-ecological systems (Tàbara et al., 2018). Effective climate action under SDG 13 requires a balanced and integrated approach to adaptation and mitigation strategies. Climate change has significantly impacted Tamil Nadu. Districts such as Dharmapuri, Vellore, and Tiruvannamalai

have faced severe groundwater depletion, highlighting spatial variability. Despite the water levels exceeding 8 m under various climate scenarios, the region remains largely unaffected owing to its elevated topography (Rao et al., 2020). This is in contrast with the vulnerabilities observed elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. Climate change pressures on Tamil Nadu's water resources, particularly groundwater, are vital for agriculture. The spatiotemporal variations identified in groundwater storage will help water resource managers and policymakers formulate strategies to enhance food and water security (Chinnasamy and Agoramoorthy, 2015). Although some areas showed resilience to specific climate change impacts, the overall trend indicates the need for comprehensive adaptation and mitigation measures in Tamil Nadu.

While climate change is a global issue, its manifestations and media representations differ markedly across regions. Tamil Nadu, with its coastal vulnerability, urbanisation, and frequent climate-related disasters, offers a unique context for examining the media framing of global environmental challenges. There is limited research on how the media have framed climate change in regional contexts, particularly in Tamil Nadu, South India. This represents a gap in our understanding of how this global issue is perceived and communicated at the local level. Tamil Nadu, with its diverse ecosystems, extensive coastline, and vulnerability to climate-related events such as cyclones and droughts, offers a unique perspective on climate change impacts and adaptation strategies. Exploring how local media outlets in Tamil Nadu frame climate change could provide insights into the region's specific challenges, public awareness, and policy responses. This study does not assess behavioural changes or cognitive impacts on the audience. Instead, it focuses on mapping how climate change is represented in print media using frame analysis.

Materials and Methods

This study examines climate change framing in *The Hindu*, one of south India's leading English language newspapers, in the calendar year 2023. *The Hindu* has an average daily circulation of 4,81,197 copies in Tamil Nadu and 1.5 million copies in India, with readership approximately three times the circulation figures. The analysis of *The Hindu*'s coverage highlights how the framing techniques are used when reporting on climate change in the Indian context. The study has employed frame analysis by combining Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) framework with the Climate Action (SDG 13) frame from the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The articles were analysed using MAXQDA software, employing the frames developed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), added up with the Climate Action frame derived from SDG13. With regard to the unit of measurement, one predominant frame was identified and coded for each newspaper article studied.

The Responsibility frame within climate change discourse highlights the role of governments in addressing environmental challenges. This frame emphasises the need for policymakers to take decisive action, implement regulations, and formulate strategies against climate change. The Conflict frame evokes the tensions in allocating resources to combat climate change. It examines the competing interests of stakeholders, including industries, environmental groups, and communities, as they

contend with limited resources and influence in shaping climate policies. This framework highlights the geopolitical dimensions of climate change, such as disputes between developed and developing nations regarding historical emissions and climate finance distribution. The Economic frame examines the financial implications of climate-related risks, particularly those associated with weather events. It evaluates the costs of climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies and potential economic opportunities from transitioning to a low-carbon economy. The Human Interest frame provides a personal dimension to climate narratives by focusing on individual stories and experiences. This frame makes the abstract concept of climate change relatable to the public. It also showcases the efforts of individuals and grassroots organisations to combat climate change, inspiring others to take action. The Morality framework incorporates moral and ethical considerations into climate discourse, exploring questions of intergenerational justice, global equity, and moral obligations to address climate change. It examines the disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations and future generations, raising questions regarding fairness and responsibility. The Climate Action frame concentrates on practical strategies for adapting to climate change impacts and reducing greenhouse gas emissions, emphasising proactive measures and innovative solutions. This frame focuses on technological advancements and policy interventions that can contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation. The Climate Action frame also emphasises the urgency of taking immediate and sustained action, stressing the importance of setting ambitious targets and implementing comprehensive strategies across all sectors. These frames collectively provide a multifaceted approach and offer diverse perspectives on climate change. The objective of this study is to identify and analyse the different frames used in climate change articles published in *The Hindu*, focusing on six specific frames: responsibility, conflict, economic, human interest, morality, and climate action. While Lasswell's communication model also encompasses audience effects (with what effect), this study concentrates on the 'who says what in which channel' components using frame analysis. It does not assess audience response. The following are the research questions:

RQ1: How is climate change framed in the media coverage of *The Hindu* in Tamil Nadu during the year 2023?
RQ2: What are the most prevalent frames identified in the study?

Findings and Discussion

The Responsibility frame is frequently employed, appearing in 168 articles and constituting 28% of the total, as shown in Table 1. It focused on the role of governments in addressing climate change. The high frequency suggests *The Hindu* emphasise holding policymakers accountable and advocating for governmental intervention. While the Responsibility frame underscores government actions, the Economic frame underlines financial implications, illustrating the interconnected nature of policy decisions and economic outcomes. The Economic frame, the second most prevalent, appears in 112 articles (19%) and concentrates on the financial consequences of climate change. The economic considerations lead to discussions of resource allocation in the Conflict frame. This transition showcases how financial

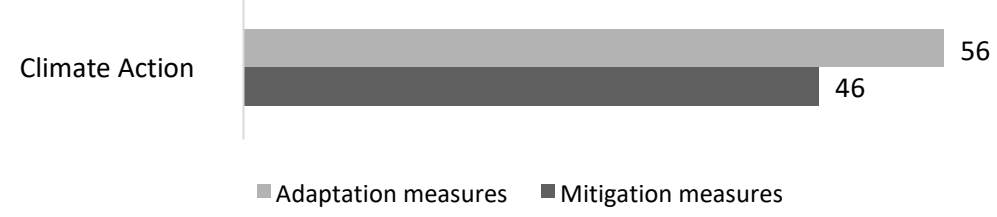
concerns give rise to tension among stakeholders. The Conflict frame appears in 103 articles (17%), highlighting tensions in allocating resources to combat climate change. The Climate Action frame accounts for 17% of the articles (102 articles), focusing on strategies for adapting to and mitigating climate change impacts. While the Climate Action frame focuses on broader strategies, the Human Interest frame complements them by bringing issues to a personal level, making impacts and solutions more relatable. The Human Interest frame, used in 88 articles (15%), introduces a personal dimension to climate narratives by focusing on individual stories and experiences. The personal stories lead to discussions of moral and ethical considerations captured in the Morality frame, bridging individual experiences with broader questions on justice and moral responsibility. The Morality frame, the least frequently used, appeared in 27 articles (4%), incorporating ethical considerations into climate discourse.

Table 1. Distribution of Frames by Frequency and Percentage

Frames	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Climate Action	102	17%
Conflict	103	17%
Economic	112	19%
Human Interest	88	15%
Morality	27	4%
Responsibility	168	28%
Total	**600**	**100%**

The Climate Action frame comprises the adaptation and mitigation measure subframes. The adaptation measures discussed in 56 articles, as shown in Figure 1, focused on strategies to adjust to climate change impacts, such as developing resilient infrastructure, implementing water-saving techniques, and adopting climate-smart agricultural practices. The mitigation measures featured in 46 articles addressed the root causes by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, covering topics such as renewable energy projects, carbon capture technologies, and carbon footprint reduction policies. For instance, an article on the rejuvenation of waterbodies focused on how storage capacity in tanks, rainwater harvesting, and wastewater reuse will improve water resilience in Tamil Nadu as a climate action measure.

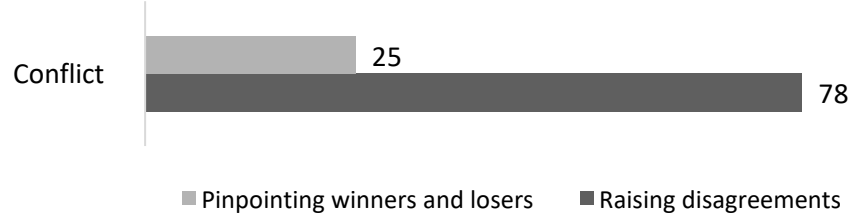
Figure 1. Frequency Distribution of the Climate Action Frame and Subframes



The Conflict frame includes two subframes: identifying winners and losers, and highlighting disagreements. The pinpointing winners and losers was framed in 25 articles, as shown in Figure 2, discussed the conflicting social implications in various

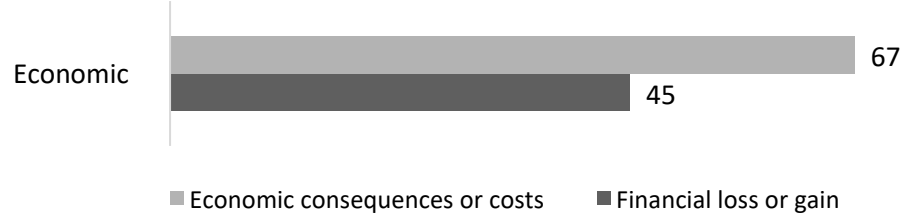
sectors. The rising disagreements were framed in 78 articles and focused on conflicts among stakeholders, including governments, industries, and environmental groups, and the debates on resource allocation, policy decisions, and international climate agreements. For instance, the article on the UN's Conference of Parties (COP28) underscored the disagreements over language on fossil fuels that led to a deadlock, with developing countries demanding more financial support while some developed countries hesitated to commit, highlighting a significant conflict in addressing climate change equitably.

Figure 2. Frequency Distribution of the Conflict Frame and Subframes



The Economic frame comprises two subframes: mentioning economic consequences or costs, and referring to financial losses or gains. The mentioning economic consequences or costs subframe was framed in 67 articles, as shown in Figure 3, and they explored the financial implications of climate change and associated policies, including implementation costs, economic impact of climate- related disasters, and benefits of transitioning to a green economy. The financial loss or gain subframe was framed in 45 articles and emphasised the direct financial effects such as insurance claims from extreme weather events, renewable energy investments, and economic opportunities from sustainable practices. For instance, the article on the popularity of seafood highlighted that seafood exports hit a record high as a union minister highlighted the economic growth in seafood exports, despite growing concerns about the impact of climate change on fisheries and marine resources.

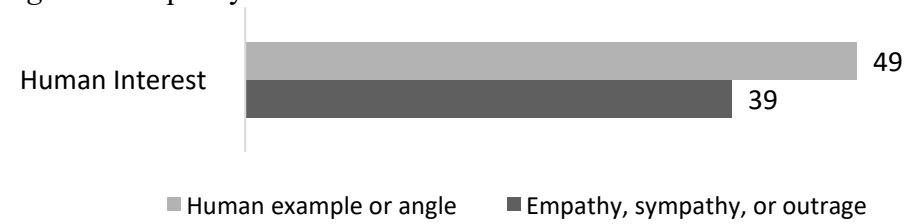
Figure 3. Frequency Distribution of the Economic Frame and Subframes



The Human Interest frame has two subframes: attributing a human example or angle, and carrying adjectives that generate empathy, sympathy, or outrage. The first subframe emphasised personal narratives and experiences associated with climate change in 49 articles, as shown in Figure 4. It incorporated stories of individuals and communities affected by climate change, underscoring their challenges and resilience. The second subframe employed emotive language to evoke emotional responses from readers in 39 articles to foster an emotional connection with the audience. For instance, an article on the impact of women on extreme weather events emphasised

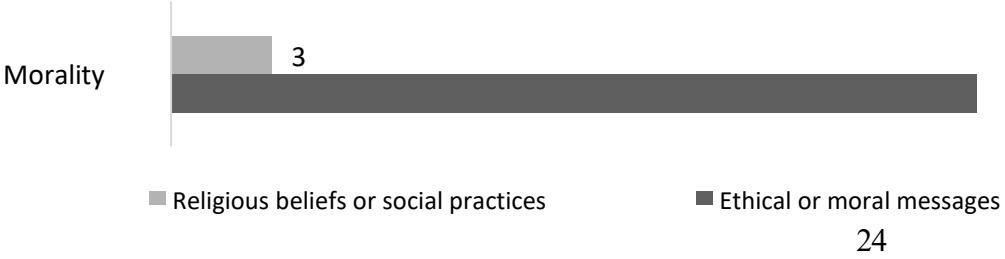
that women bear the brunt of extreme weather events due to gender roles, with reports showing their higher risk of loss during calamities and their unpaid labour increasing due to climate-induced challenges.

Figure 4. Frequency Distribution of the Human-Interest Frame and Subframes



The Morality frame has two subframes: mentioning religious beliefs or social practices, and embracing ethical or moral messages. The first subframe was present in only three articles that examined the influence of religious beliefs and social practices on climate change perceptions and actions. The second subframe was more prevalent and appeared in 24 articles, and explored broader ethical considerations such as intergenerational justice, global equity, and moral obligations to address climate change.

Figure 5. Frequency Distribution of the Morality Frame and Subframes

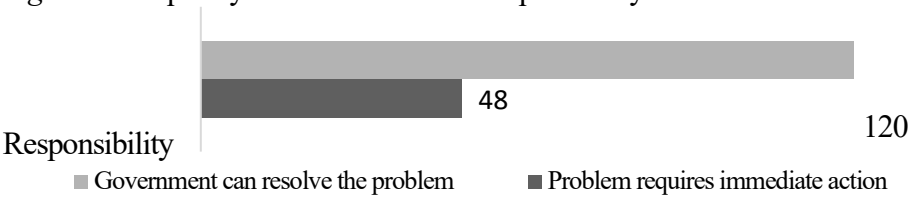


Alan Rusbridger, former editor-in-chief of *The Guardian*, while undertaking The Guardian Newspaper Climate Campaign, targeted the fossil fuel lobby rather than the carbon emissions of individuals. This is probably because individuals form the main constituency of the newspaper, and they need to be kept in good humour. However, in this study, we could see articles by leaders like the President and the Prime Minister calling upon Indian citizens to reduce carbon emissions, and to lead a simple lifestyle – which takes the Indian climate discourse a level higher on the moral plain. In an article on how Buddha's teachings can solve global problems, the Prime Minister said that each person should contribute to climate change through lifestyle choices, such as eating habits and travel, and stressed that Buddha's teachings can provide solutions to contemporary problems such as climate change.

The Responsibility frame has two subframes: advocating that the government can resolve the problem and attributing that the problem requires immediate action. The first subframe underscored the role of governmental bodies in addressing climate change, as evident in 120 articles, as shown in Figure 6, exploring government policies, regulations, and initiatives to mitigate climate change and promote sustainability. The second subframe focused on the critical need to address climate change issues, which

were framed in 48 articles, emphasising swift measures to avert catastrophic climate consequences. For instance, an article said that the Tamil Nadu government will release scientific data on carbon emissions by each of its departments as the state government is aspiring to realise the net zero goal ahead of the national target of 2070.

Figure 6. Frequency Distribution of the Responsibility Frame and Subframes



The Responsibility frame, identified as the most frequent in this study, highlights the role of governments in addressing climate change as shown in Table 2. This aligns with Schuldt and Roh (2014), who emphasised the impact of media framing on public perception and policy advocacy. The Economic frame, that addressed the financial implications of climate change, also emerged prominently. This is consistent with Singh and Singh (2017), who discussed economic costs and potential benefits of climate-smart agricultural practices. The Conflict frame, emphasising tensions in resource allocation, aligned with Dotson et al. (2012), who explored competing interests in climate policy debates. The Human Interest frame evoked a personal dimension to climate narratives, making it more relatable to the people was aligned with Schuldt and Roh (2014), who noted that different frames can stimulate emotional response. The Morality frame, although least frequent, incorporated ethical considerations into climate discourse and aligned with Benjamin et al. (2016), who emphasised the importance of ethical messages in shaping public attitudes. *The Hindu*'s articles highlighted intergenerational justice and global equity, challenging readers to consider moral and ethical obligations. The Climate Action frame emphasised practical strategies for adaptation and mitigation, reflecting the integrated approach advocated by Hwang et al. (2021) in their discussion of SDG 13.

Table 2. Frequency distribution of frames and subframes

Frames	**Subframes**	**Total**
Climate Action	Does the article cover adaptation measures of climate change?	56
	Does the article feature mitigation measures of climate change?	46
Conflict	Does the article pinpoint winners and losers?	25
	Does the article raise disagreement between individuals, groups, or countries?	78
Economic	Does the article mention an economic consequence, or the cost of the expense involved?	67
	Does the news article refer to any financial loss or gain at present or soon?	45

Human Interest	Does the news article attribute a human example or a human angle?	49
	Does the news article carry adjectives that generate empathy, sympathy, or outrage?	39
Morality	Does the news article mention religious beliefs or social practices?	3
	Does the news article embrace any ethical or moral message?	24
Responsibility	Does the news article advocate that the government can resolve the problem?	120
	Does the news article attribute that the problem requires immediate action?	48
Total		**600**

Conclusion

This study analysed the framing of climate change in *The Hindu*'s newspaper coverage in Tamil Nadu in 2023 by examining 600 articles through six distinct frames, namely responsibility, conflict, economic, human interest, morality, and climate action. The findings indicated that the Responsibility frame is the predominant frame, underscoring the central role of governments in addressing climate change, as vital issues like climate change are addressed mostly by government agencies as a societal responsibility. The Economic frame focused on financial implications, featured prominently, reflecting the recognition of the economic stakes involved in climate change. The Conflict frame highlighted tensions in resource allocation and illustrated the complex dynamics of climate change discourse with the competing interests of stakeholders. The Human Interest frame evoked a personal dimension to climate narratives, making it more relatable to the public by featuring emotional connections. The Morality frame, although least frequent, incorporated moral and ethical considerations into the climate discourse. The Climate Action frame focused on practical strategies for adaptation and mitigation, reflecting the approach advocated by SDG 13.

Based on the findings, it is recommended for newsrooms to broaden their climate coverage by incorporating underrepresented frames, particularly those on ethics, grassroots resilience, and public agency. Policymakers can use these insights to develop climate messages that are more inclusive and emotionally resonant. The dominance of institutional framing may lead to a policy-centric narrative, which could potentially restrict citizen engagement. The least prominence of ethical and justice-oriented frames indicates a major gap. It is imperative to adopt more inclusive and critical storytelling to represent the complex social dimensions of climate change.

Limitations of Study

Limitations of the study are that it does not address internal editorial policies, journalists' ideologies, or gatekeeping mechanisms, and audience response. Although

framing patterns are identified, the underlying newsroom practices fall outside the scope of this research.

For Future Research

Future research might consider employing interview-based methodologies to explore production-level dynamics. Audience-level investigations may be conducted using media effects frameworks, such as that of Potter (2012). Future research may also investigate how these frames affect readers' perceptions through media effects modelling.

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Balancing Freedom and Structure: Tight–Loose Cultural Orientations in European Student Radio Organisations

*By Ari Hautaniemi**

This paper examines the organisational culture of European student radio stations through the lens of the tight–loose cultural continuum, drawing on the author's previous studies that explored these organisations at the levels of artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions using Edgar Schein's model of organisational culture. European student radio stations exist within resource-constrained and transient environments, requiring constant adaptation. This paper reinterprets data from three earlier empirical studies, an analysis of organisational artefacts, a competing values framework analysis of espoused values, and a qualitative case study of core assumptions, through the theory of cultural tightness and looseness. The findings reveal how stations balance flexibility and structure, with some gravitating toward tighter rules for stability, while others maintain looser norms to foster creativity. The paper contributes to understanding the organisational dynamics of youth-driven, mission-oriented media institutions, offering a analytical framework to evaluate how cultural regulation shapes their evolution.

Introduction

European student radio stations offer a unique and compelling context for studying organisational culture in turbulent environments. University, college, campus and student radio stations are primarily volunteer-run, often housed within higher education institutions, and characterised by high turnover, limited resources, and a strong community-oriented mission (Sauls, 2000; Freeman, 2022; Wallace, 2008; Raymond, 2016; Hautaniemi, 2022; 2024a; 2024b). Despite their precarious structures, many student radios remain operational for years, even decades, reflecting a resilient form of cultural organisation. Norms, the shared, often unwritten expectations that guide how members of an organisation behave and interact, are crucial for organisational permanence. By shaping predictable action patterns, norms reduce ambiguity and allow organisations to function smoothly without formal rules or supervision. (Gelfand et al., 2023; Cabra et al., 2022; Gross and Vostroknutov, 2022.) In doing so, they contribute to structural stability and continuity, especially in dynamic or volunteer-driven environments.

This paper investigates cultural regulation through norms within European student radio organisations by revisiting qualitative survey and quantitative interview data from European student radio stations collected originally for holistic organisational culture exploration (Hautaniemi, 2022; 2024a; 2024b; forthcoming). It explores the strength of norms in the independent yet interconnected levels of

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organisational culture; artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions (Schein, 2010). While each layer captures different dimensions of culture, it is imperative to examine them as a whole to better understand the normative structure of the culture as a whole. To interpret the findings, the paper draws on the theory of tight and loose cultures (Gelfand et al., 2006; Gelfand et al., 2011; Gelfand, 2018), which classifies national cultures, regions, and organisations based on the strength of their norms and tolerance for deviance. Tight cultures have strict rules and a low tolerance for ambiguity; loose cultures emphasise flexibility and openness.

Student radio thrives on looseness, creative experimentation, decentralised leadership, and informality while operating in an environment with high volatility and uncertainty, including technical reliability, fluctuating funding, and high volunteer turnover often following the academic year (Freeman, 2022; Hautaniemi, 2024a). As such, student radio provides an ideal case for exploring how cultural tightness and looseness play out in normative structures.

Understanding this balance is increasingly important in today's organisational landscape, where volatility, decentralisation, and hybrid working arrangements have disrupted conventional models of leadership and control and where the only thing constant is change (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2015). Grassroots and volunteer-driven organisations, in particular, offer insight into how collective norms can substitute for formal structure and how cultural logic shapes behavioural expectations in uncertain conditions.

This study contributes new empirical insight by re-coding original data with a tight–loose framework, revealing how protective norms appear in volunteer media settings in ways that prior studies did not capture. It also adds to a broader conversation about norms in contemporary, voluntary, precarious and creative organisations by showing how tight and loose elements operate across different cultural layers. Building on Schein's (2010) three-level cultural framework, this research evaluates findings from European student radio stations through Michelle Gelfand's (2018; Gelfand et al., 2006) theory of tight and loose cultures. Its key research question is how European student radio stations manifest and balance tight and loose cultural orientations while navigating volatility, creativity, and organisational persistence.

Literature Review

Organisational Culture and Norms

Organisational culture is the shared system of meanings that shapes how people behave, interact, and interpret organisational roles. At its core, it encompasses the norms, values, assumptions, and artefacts that collectively define what is considered acceptable, necessary, or taboo within the organisational context. (Schein, 2010) Norms, informal rules and expectations governing behaviour play a central role in maintaining and transmitting culture across individuals and groups (Feldman, 1984; Cabra et al., 2022; Gelfand, 2018).

Edgar Schein's (2010) influential model of organisational culture describes culture as existing on three interrelated levels. At the surface level are artefacts, the visible expressions of culture such as rituals, management practices, and communication styles. Just beneath are espoused values, which reflect the organisation's stated principles, goals, and strategies. The deepest level consists of basic underlying assumptions. They are unconscious beliefs about reality, human nature, and organisational life that guide and govern behaviour and attitudes. Norms operate at all these levels but are especially significant in bridging values and assumptions. They translate abstract beliefs into specific behavioural expectations that members follow in daily practice (Schein, 2010; Feldman, 1984; Cabra et al., 2022). These, in turn, manifest in the artefacts that, without understanding the deeper layers, would be hard to understand.

Norms function as the unwritten rules of organisational life, guiding how to act in particular situations (Cabra et al., 2022). They shape how meetings are run, how conflict is handled, and how status is signalled. Unlike formal rules or policies, norms are learned through observation, interaction, and socialisation. New members internalise them through implicit cues, imitation, and feedback from peers and leaders. As such, norms are a key mechanism by which culture is sustained and transmitted over time (Cabra et al., 2022; Schein, 2010; Gelfand, 2018).

The importance of norms becomes particularly visible in times of cultural change or disruption (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). When organisational change initiatives challenge existing assumptions or values, they also unsettle established norms. Resistance to change often stems from the disruption of behavioural expectations, as individuals may feel uncertain or threatened when norms become unclear or contested (Martin, 2002; Schein, 2010; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2015). Thus, any effort to shift culture must contend with the persistence and adaptability of norms, which both reinforce and sometimes contradict official values or strategic goals.

Tight–Loose Theory and Cultural Regulation in Organisations

The theory of tight and loose cultures, developed and explored in recent years by American cultural psychologist Michelle Gelfand (2018; 2012; Gelfand et al., 2006; 2011), provides a framework for understanding the strength of social norms and the degree of tolerance for deviant behaviour within societies and organisations. This theory posits that cultures can be categorised as "tight" or "loose" based on these characteristics.

Strong social norms and a low tolerance for deviant behaviour characterise tight cultures. These societies often have a history of ecological and historical threats, such as high population density, resource scarcity, and territorial conflicts, which necessitate strict adherence to norms to maintain social order (Gelfand et al., 2011; Gelfand, 2012; 2018). In tight cultures, there is a greater emphasis on conformity and uniformity, and deviations from established norms are met with significant sanctions (Gelfand et al., 2006; Gelfand, 2018; Meng, 2022). Groups facing high societal threats develop stronger social norms. In comparison, those facing little threat can afford weaker norms with less punishment for deviance (Roos et al., 2015; Gelfand, 2018). This cultural tightness influences various aspects of society,

including leadership styles, where autonomous leadership is more endorsed and charismatic leadership is less favoured (Aktas et al., 2016).

In contrast, loose cultures have weaker social norms and a higher tolerance for deviant behaviour. These cultures are more permissive and open to diversity and change, allowing for a broader range of acceptable behaviours (Gelfand et al., 2011; Gelfand, 2012; 2018). Loose cultures often arise in environments with fewer external threats, allowing for greater individual freedom and innovation. This cultural looseness is reflected in, e.g., consumer behaviour, where advertising themes often promote ideals and norm deviance (Li et al., 2017).

The tight and loose cultures theory has been applied in various organisational settings to understand and influence employee behaviour, creativity, leadership preferences, and organisational culture. It has significant implications for understanding cross-cultural differences in multiple domains, including organisational dynamics, e.g., perceptions of tightness or looseness, which can moderate the impact of perceived unfair discrimination on employee attitudes (Marcus et al., 2022; Gelfand, 2018). Additionally, the theory provides insights into how cultural norms influence creative behaviour in organisations, with looser team cultures fostering greater creativity and the ability to adapt to and endorse changes in both external and internal environments (Gelfand, 2018; Shi et al., 2023).

In organisations perceived as tight, supportive behaviours are more strongly related to positive employee attitudes. In contrast, negative behaviours have less impact than in loose cultures. This suggests that tight cultures may mitigate the effects of unfair discrimination on employee attitudes (Marcus et al., 2022). Cultural tightness negatively affects employee creativity by reducing work engagement. However, transformational leadership can mitigate this negative impact, suggesting that leadership style plays a crucial role in managing the effects of cultural tightness on creativity (Shi et al., 2023). In student radio settings, one must remember that students often lead organisations with little or no previous management experience (Raymond, 2016). This makes it unlikely that transformational leadership is carried out in such organisations, at least not intentionally. Instead, traditional management's tight, hierarchical "default mode" might become a practical choice for dealing with uncertainty (Hautaniemi, 2024a).

Informal cultural tightness, characterised by unwritten norms and social sanctions, has a more significant negative impact on employee creativity than formal cultural tightness. This highlights the importance of understanding formal and informal organisational cultural dynamics (Chua et al., 2024). In tight cultures, there is a preference for dominant leaders, reflecting a need for strong leadership in environments with strict norms. This preference is mediated by authoritarianism and a desire for dominant leadership styles (Chen et al., 2023).

Tight cultures are less likely to deviate from national cultural norms. Still, purposeful diversity strategies can help develop unique organisational cultures even in tight environments. This interplay between national and organisational cultures is crucial for fostering distinct identities (Lee and Kramer, 2016).

The application of tight and loose culture theory in organisational settings reveals its significant impact on employee attitudes, creativity, leadership preferences, and the development of organisational culture (Tsai et al., 2023). In settings where most of

the operations rely on volunteer work, such as a student radio station, the commitment and motivation of the people are critical.

Student Radio Stations in Europe

Student radio refers to broadcasting or streaming radio stations affiliated with higher education institutions with substantial student involvement in content production, programming, and governance. While terminology varies (college radio in North America, campus radio in Canada and parts of Europe, and university radio in Latin America), the shared foundation is participatory media shaped by youth initiative and autonomy (Sauls, 2000; Wall, 2007; Fauteux, 2015). These stations serve as platforms for experimentation, alternative expression, and learning by doing, setting themselves apart from the more hierarchical and standardised logic of mainstream broadcasting. One of their defining pedagogical features is the trial-and-error learning model, where students gain hands-on experience in technical production, editorial judgment, and content creation (Scifo, 2007; Laor, 2019; Priestman, 1999; Raymond, 2016). These stations also embody community orientation and locality. Content often reflects the campus and surrounding community's specific social and cultural dynamics. In many European countries, student radio aligns legally and philosophically with community media, which values participation, non-commercialism, and democratic control (Coyer and Hintz, 2010) while connecting to early educational endeavours of European radio (Pavlik, 2017). According to UNESCO (2017), this media model includes access for non-professionals, horizontal decision-making, empowerment through skill-building, and an explicit focus on amplifying marginalised perspectives.

Over the past century, student radio has upheld a cultural identity grounded in non-commercialism, representational diversity, and a commitment to subcultural or underrepresented voices (Rubin, 2015; Fauteux, 2015; Slotten, 2008; Tremblay, 2003). American college stations have often championed musical and political countercultures, whereas European stations present a more heterogeneous landscape. While some replicate the independent ethos of U.S. models, others, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, have emerged as tools of civic inclusion and minority empowerment (Doliwa, 2015; Planšak, 2010). In countries like the UK, student radio has often been technologically experimental and geared toward youth culture (Bailey, 2023). In many cases, student radio aligns with the values and structures of community media: participatory production, access for non-professionals, nonprofit orientation, and horizontal governance (Coyer and Hintz, 2010; UNESCO, 2017).

Student radio stations face persistent organisational challenges despite this ideological and structural distinctiveness. Audience retention and relevance are difficult to maintain in a saturated digital media landscape. As students increasingly turn to streaming platforms and podcasts, radio must compete with more polished, algorithm-driven content. Maintaining authenticity while staying relevant is a delicate balance (Freeman, 2022).

Volunteer turnover and loss of institutional memory are endemic. As student involvement is inherently transitory, many stations struggle to preserve continuity in operations, values, and technical competence. Adding to the challenge, student radio

stations are primarily operated and managed by students, the youth with no previous managerial experience, not to mention the lack of expertise to manage constant change. (Raymond, 2016; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2015; Hautaniemi, forthcoming.)

Editorial independence is another source of tension. While many stations promote independent thinking and activism, university administrations may seek to frame student radio as an institutional PR tool. These clashing perspectives can lead to conflict over the station's mission and autonomy (Berryman, 2022; Scifo, 2007). Also, as some stations house students and community members doing their own thing, tensions may arise with content choices and over the station's key focus (Wilson David, 2015; Wallace, 2008).

The management of student radio stations typically falls to rotating groups of students, sometimes supported by a faculty advisor or station manager. This person may be a technical expert, compliance officer, mentor, or institutional liaison (Raymond, 2016; Sauls, 2000). However, these advisory roles are frequently under-resourced and lack apparent institutional authority (Freeman, 2022).

As Freeman (2022) notes, student radio must be "liquid, flexible, and adaptable," reflecting evolving student identities, addressing fragmented audiences, and amplifying diverse perspectives to sustain. Sustainable management often requires a balance between creative freedom and operational stability, in other words, between tight and loose norms (Hautaniemi, forthcoming).

These organisational characteristics make student radio a compelling context for exploring cultural regulation through the lens of tight–loose theory. Loose cultures tend to flourish in environments where innovation, diversity, and decentralised decision-making are critical, aligning with the ethos of many student radio stations. At the same time, tight norms often emerge in high uncertainty, ecological or social threat, and institutional fragility (Gelfand 2008; 2018). Constant personnel change, resource volatility, and pressure to prove legitimacy to host institutions introduce situational instability.

Methodology and Data

According to Schein (2010), organisational culture should not be interpreted by focusing only on one layer but by examining the interplay of artefacts, espoused values, and core assumptions. This study is based on the original empirical data collected for three earlier articles by Hautaniemi (2022; 2024a; 2024b; forthcoming), examining the different layers of the organisational culture of European student radio stations.

First, this research employs qualitative survey data from European student radio stations 2018. The survey investigated the practices, choices and views on the station's role. It was aimed at station managers, faculty advisors and editors (later called 'managers'). The managers were chosen as respondents because they have decision-making capacity and a presupposed comprehensive view of their station's organisational practices and choices. Data from 90 respondents from 21 countries were gathered, of which fifty-one were managers, representing 46 individual stations from 19 countries. Second, the exploration is based on qualitative interview material

from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with active station staff and volunteers in Austria, Finland, and Ireland conducted in 2019-2022. These original materials form the empirical base for all three published studies by the author. As the research data is several years old, one should consider it cautiously. Nevertheless, as cultures often resist change and alter slowly (Schein, 2010; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2015; Parker and Bradley, 2000), it offers a relatively contemporary glimpse into the organisational culture of European student radio stations.

While the previous articles each analysed one layer of organisational culture separately — artefacts (Hautaniemi, 2022), espoused values (Hautaniemi, 2024a), and underlying assumptions (Hautaniemi, 2024b) — this study re-examines the complete data set through an additional theoretical lens. Building on Edgar Schein's (2010) three-level model of organisational culture, it interprets how norms of tightness and looseness (Gelfand, 2011, 2018) manifest at each level. This approach enables a more integrated understanding of how visible structures, declared priorities, and deeply held assumptions work together to balance freedom, responsibility, and resilience in volunteer-run youth media.

The analysis draws on survey questions about rules of conduct, management structures, strategic plans, and systematic procedures for the norms found on the artefact layer. It asks about their significance for the organisation on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is the least, and 10 is the most important. Here, their mean level implies the tightness of the culture, with standard deviation explaining how universal this measure is.

On the norms found on the values layer, the Competing Values Framework (CVF) analysis sum variables (Hautaniemi, 2024a) are explored to analyse which cultural logic (Clan, Adhocracy, Hierarchy, Market) implies looser or tighter norm systems. The CVF, developed by Cameron and Quinn (2011), is a widely used model for analysing organisational culture by mapping competing demands along two dimensions: internal versus external focus and flexibility versus control. Crossing these dimensions produces four core cultural types: Clan (collaborative and family-like), Adhocracy (innovative and entrepreneurial), Hierarchy (structured and rule-bound), and Market (competitive and results-oriented). These typologies are calculated through survey instruments that ask respondents to rate the extent to which each set of characteristics describes their organisation. For this research, scores for each culture type were averaged to reveal the dominant cultural logic, indicating relative tightness or looseness.

For the core assumptions layer, the original interview transcripts were revisited to analyse them from the norms' perspective, identifying how participants described what is expected, accepted, discouraged, or controlled within the station community. Special attention was given to statements about responsibility, accountability and peer expectations.

By applying this additional layer of interpretation, the study clarifies how student radio stations construct protective norms that help sustain their identity and operations under high turnover, limited resources, and open participation. This re-analysis expands the empirical value of the original data by showing how tight–loose cultural dynamics operate not in isolation but across interlinked layers of organisational life.

Results

The following sections present the findings from re-analysing the original survey and interview data, structured according to Schein's (2010) three-level model. Each layer highlights how cultural tightness and looseness appear in concrete organisational elements.

Organisational Artefacts

The artefact layer of organisational culture encompasses the visible structures, rules, and operating procedures that dictate how organisations coordinate activities and maintain order (Schein, 2010). A prominent sign of a tight culture is the widespread presence of formal management structures. In fact, 78% of survey respondents indicated that their station has an official management framework, demonstrating that such defined coordination mechanisms are prevalent in this otherwise fluid sector. Moreover, when asked to rate how systematic their station's management is on a scale from 1 (not systematic) to 10 (highly systematic), respondents provided an average score of 6.3 (standard deviation (SD) = 1.6). This moderate score suggests that while many stations employ routine procedures, some blend formal approaches with more flexible and informal practices.

Strong signs of tightness are also evident in how stations adhere to strategic plans and rules of conduct. Respondents rated their adherence to the strategic plan highly, with a mean score of 8.7 (SD = 0.6). Similarly, the average score for how strictly the explicit rules of conduct are followed was notably high at 7.8 (SD = 1.2). These figures indicate that while stations promote creative freedom in programming and participation, they still rely on formal rules and plans to uphold consistent standards, protect their reputation, and coordinate the behaviour of volunteers.

Nevertheless, the moderate rating for overall systematicity implies that this tightness isn't uniform across all areas. Rules, strategies, and structures coexist alongside more flexible day-to-day practices, allowing rotating volunteer membership and diverse local contexts. This observation supports the notion that tight and loose norms operate simultaneously at the artefact level: while tightness manifests where oversight and compliance are necessary, looseness thrives where openness and adaptability hold value.

The survey data reveal that European student radio stations are neither entirely informal nor fully bureaucratic. Instead, they balance protective procedural norms and opportunities for autonomy, aligning with the broader tight-loose continuum that enables them to maintain their operational resilience and identity amid ongoing changes.

Espoused Values

Espoused values represent the explicitly stated ideals, strategic objectives, and principles that guide how members believe the organisation should function (Schein, 2010). While artefacts are the observable outputs, espoused values reflect the aspirational logics that shape them.

Again, drawing on the survey data allows for examining how student radio organisations position themselves on the axis of four ideal-typical culture types: Clan, Adhocracy, Hierarchy, and Market (Cameron and Quinn, 2011). These categories reflect different value orientations, ranging from flexibility and collaboration to structure and competition.

Aligning the stations on the Competing Values Framework axis reveals that these organisations primarily embody Clan and Adhocracy cultures, which are generally characterised by more flexible norms (Hautaniemi, 2024a; Cameron and Quinn, 2011; Gelfand, 2011). Clan cultures thrive on trust, teamwork, and informal connections rather than strict rules, fostering consistency through shared commitments instead of formal enforcement (Gelfand et al., 2006). On the other hand, Adhocracy cultures focus on risk-taking, innovation, and adaptability, often relying on minimal formal constraints and a high tolerance for straying from standard procedures (Gelfand, 2011; 2018; Gelfand et al., 2006).

Interestingly, some stations also exhibit Hierarchy and Market culture elements, indicating areas where tighter norms come into play (Hautaniemi, 2024a). Hierarchy culture promotes standardised processes and clear authority structures, while Market culture emphasises performance metrics and competitive outcomes (Cameron and Quinn, 2011). The coexistence of these cultural types suggests that student radio stations selectively integrate stricter norms within a broader loose cultural framework, balancing openness with necessary regulations to ensure operational stability and protect their reputation (Hautaniemi, 2024a; forthcoming; Gelfand, 2011; Marcus et al., 2022).

Underlying Assumptions: Identity and Purpose

At the deepest level of organisational culture lie the basic underlying assumptions that form the cognitive, often unconscious and emotional core of how people interpret what is legitimate, meaningful, and valuable within a given setting, influencing norms that protect what is cherished. Analysing interviews from three European student radio stations in Austria (CCR 94.4), Finland (Radio Tutka) and Ireland (Flirt FM), the underlying beliefs show a consistent balance of openness and protective norms. FlirtFM participants describe their station as an inclusive, flexible environment, a safe "port in the storm" where people of different ages and backgrounds are present.

> *That freedom is something that we definitely protect very dearly, and we really want people to express themselves and not feel that they must fit into something because they can do it here. (Flirt FM)*

If someone goes against the community, it may cause conflict in an otherwise collaborative organisation. Volunteers are encouraged to experiment and find unusual ideas, reflecting what student radio scholars (Sauls, 2000; Fauteux, 2015; Doliwa, 2015; Freeman, 2022) describe as an alternative, participatory ethos. This focus also underscores a normative expectation of being unique and thus using the offered airtime carefully instead of goofing around or mimicking mainstream celebrities. There are clear informal expectations that sustain minimum standards: One can't just go on air if they don't know what they're doing. Such controls demonstrate how

protective norms emerge in loose cultural contexts where quality, trust and core identity are at stake (Hautaniemi, forthcoming).

Radio Tutka illustrates a similar mix. Everyone can join, and students freely pitch and eventually do their own shows. Yet strong informal expectations shape reliability. The norm of accountability runs strong, as not fulfilling one's task causes friction. Even though based on voluntarism, one is expected to carry out what is agreed upon.

CCR 94.4 students describe their station as a family-like place where crazy ideas that do not fit the mainstream formats can, and should, flourish. This freedom is not unconditional as, again, one must show the idea doesn't compromise the station. New contributors must ideate and demonstrate basic competence before getting airtime. Taking the initiative to learn how to cope with broadcasting and, as one interviewee said, learning to be open-minded to be able to provide novelty are pivotal:

> *If you work in radio, you can't just stay on your level of interest; you have to be open-minded. There needs to be this motivation to be curious and to get to know different opinions as well. (CCR 94.4)*

These protective checks reinforce informal tightness where operational reputation is at stake, supporting Gelfand's (2018) claim of pockets of tightness within otherwise loose cultures protecting the most important values (Hautaniemi, forthcoming).

The interviews confirm that while European student radio stations embrace looseness in how they invite people, test new content, and adapt to constant change, they also depend on tight norms wherever reliability, credibility, and internal cohesion must be safeguarded. This layered balance between freedom and protective expectations illustrates how informal norm regulation sustains identity and operational predictability in volunteer-driven, youth-led organisations (Gelfand, 2018).

These patterns underscore a central paradox: freedom is a sacred and regulated value. Members can express themselves, but not in ways that violate the group's ethos. They are welcome to take initiative, but more so if they conform to the group's mission and normative expectations. From the perspective of tight–loose theory, the underlying assumptions of student radio suggest that tight norms can emerge from loose cultures as mechanisms for protecting deeply held beliefs. In student radio, autonomy, authenticity, and expressive integrity appear policed through informal yet powerful cultural scripts. These scripts ensure continuity and coherence in an otherwise volatile organisational environment, compensating for high turnover, limited institutional memory, and the absence of durable formal authority (Hautaniemi, forthcoming).

Examining artefacts, expressed values, and fundamental assumptions indicate that European student radio stations possess structured and flexible aspects within their culture. Established rules of conduct, management frameworks, and professional expectations create robust norms that guide behaviour, particularly when accountability and continuity are essential. Conversely, open programming, non-hierarchical coordination, and hands-on learning practices foster a sense of autonomy and encourage experimentation, a defining feature of student radio underlining a loose, permissive normative atmosphere. This layered dynamic invites

a broader conversation about how tight-loose dynamics can illuminate organisational resilience, especially in precarious, volunteer-driven environments.

Discussion

The findings confirm that European student radio stations manage the tension between freedom and structure through a balanced mix of loose and tight cultural norms. By re-examining original survey and interview data with Gelfand's tight–loose framework, this study shows that protective norms emerge where operational continuity, trust, and quality must be safeguarded, even in fundamentally open, experimental, and volunteer-driven organisations. This supports prior work on domain-specific tightness (Gelfand, 2011; 2018) and extends it by demonstrating how informal peer norms and community expectations substitute for formal hierarchy in youth-led cultural organisations. By parallel applying Schein's (2010) model, the study also clarifies how surface-level artefacts, stated values, and underlying assumptions produce a resilient cultural architecture that helps student radio stations thrive in unstable contexts.

European student radio stations sustain themselves through a layered balance of freedom and protective structure. Each cultural layer contributes differently to this balance but is deeply interconnected. At the artefact level, strict norms are reflected in written rules, formal management structures, and strategic plans establishing minimum behaviour standards in volunteer-based organizations. This framework provides stability, especially amidst frequent turnover. However, there's also flexibility in day-to-day operations, allowing DJs creative expression, welcoming new contributors easily, and fostering an atmosphere of informality. This balance ensures that tight norms govern critical areas like legal compliance. At the same time, there's still room for innovation and creative exploration.

Moving to the espoused values layer, the stations primarily embrace openness, trust, and innovation over rigid rules. These values promote (and presuppose) experimentation and collective engagement while also recognizing the importance of hierarchical traits, such as leadership accountability and process consistency. This dynamic creates a tension between the desire for flexibility and the need for the stability that tight norms provide, aligning with Gelfand's (2018) view that tighter norms often arise in response to social threats.

At the assumptions layer, members view student radio as a "family-like" environment conducive to innovation. This sense of freedom is tempered by informal expectations, such as honouring commitments and showing respect for peers, as well as subtle peer sanctions for violating these norms. Thus, despite strong formal authority, tight social norms surface to maintain trust and credibility, characterized by less overt but more nuanced forms of sanction.

The connections across these levels make clear that tight and loose norms are not contradictions but complementary. Tight artefacts reinforce stated values of responsibility and reliability. Loose practices and flexible values nurture the experimental, alternative identity that defines student radio's cultural distinctiveness. Deep assumptions about autonomy and self-expression ensure that protective norms

are accepted by members as legitimate, not imposed. Together, these layers form a coherent cultural system that allows stations to adapt and survive in volatile conditions, even when this system may not be intentionally structured due to lack of experience (Hautaniemi, forthcoming).

This study aimed to clarify how European student radio stations navigate the challenge of fostering creative freedom while ensuring organizational stability in dynamic volunteer environments. Previous research primarily focused on describing visible structures, value positions and deeply held beliefs (Hautaniemi, 2022, 2024a, 2024b). The new analysis reveals how protective norms can arise even in seemingly loose cultures, helping to stabilize behaviour, protect identities, and ensure predictability. This nuanced dynamic supports Gelfand's (2018) argument that tightness can be domain-specific and informal while also expanding on this idea by showing that informal peer regulation can effectively replace formal hierarchy in youth-led, low-resource media settings.

These findings contribute to ongoing discussions in organisational sociology about how norms uphold structure and predictability amid constant membership turnover, limited funding, and open participation (Marcus et al., 2022; Chua et al., 2024). Rather than viewing tightness and looseness as opposing cultural forces, this study suggests they serve as complementary strategies that promote resilience and continuity while maintaining the experimental and alternative spirit central to student radio. These organisations operate through a dynamic interplay of tight and loose cultural elements that vary by layer, domain, and perceived organisational risk. The culture of student radio is defined by open access to programming, freeform content, and decision-making, reflecting a strong ethos of autonomy, inclusivity, and creative experimentation, hallmarks of loose cultural environments as described by Gelfand (2011; 2018). These practices align closely with previous studies' pedagogical and ideological articulations (Sauls, 2000; Fauteux, 2015; Laor, 2019: Freeman, 2022), where student radio is positioned as an alternative space within the media landscape, non-commercial, participatory, and youth-led.

Yet, even within this loose organisational context, normative tightness consistently emerges. These expectations reflect a form of domain-specific tightness (Gelfand, 2018), where regulation is strategically applied to protect the station's functioning under conditions of high uncertainty and resource scarcity (Reilly and Farnsworth, 2015; Raymond, 2016; Freeman, 2022). Viewed through the deepest level of organisational culture, the core assumptions as described by Schein (2010), beneath championing openness, the stations articulate clear normative expectations about representation and cultural fit: one must take the initiative, find their voice and support a community with a purpose to make a stand, to be an alternative to mainstream media. While student radio is often framed as a sanctuary for personal expression and social critique, there are usually unspoken expectations around commitment, stylistic (alternative) alignment, and performative competence. These informal but widely recognised expectations govern who belongs and what constitutes "real" student radio (Hautaniemi, forthcoming). In line with Schein's (2010) understanding of culture as a system of unconscious assumptions and Gelfand's (2018) assertion that even loose cultures strictly protect their sacred

values, these internal norms serve as invisible but powerful anchors of cultural tightness.

In student radio, social sanctions, informal gatekeeping, and oral traditions of leadership succession maintain group cohesion without formal structures, ensuring continuity despite constant flux. These findings reinforce the literature on participatory and grassroots media, which often balance inclusive access with firm ideological commitments to specific social values. The findings also reinforce that student radio participants function within unwritten traditions that regulate leadership transitions and group belonging. (Coyer and Hintz, 2010; Wilson David, 2015; Wall, 2017; Freeman, 2022; Hautaniemi, forthcoming). Crucially, these norms do not emerge from top-down directives or institutional frameworks but from an organisational culture that has evolved through shared experiences, internalised beliefs, and assumptions about the station's place in the world (Schein, 2010).

The strategic nature of these tight norms offers a model of resilience. As Freeman (2022) argues, student radio must become liquid, flexible, and adaptable, all referring to looseness. Still, this fluidity is supported by precisely those norms that enforce accountability and coherence, elements of tight cultures.

Conclusions

This paper re-examined the organisational culture of European student radio stations by applying Gelfand's (2011, 2018) tight–loose framework directly to original survey and interview data. This re-analysis demonstrates novel insight into how informal tight norms sustain volunteer organisations, a dimension that prior analyses (Hautaniemi 2022, 2024a, 2024b) did not systematically trace. The findings demonstrate that tight and loose cultural elements coexist within these volunteer-driven media organisations, appearing differently across visible artefacts, stated values, and taken-for-granted assumptions. Rules of conduct, strategic planning, and behavioural expectations show how protective norms create localised predictability and safeguard the stations' legitimacy. At the same time, flexible programming, open membership, and experimental formats keep participation accessible and creativity alive.

By showing how tight norms can be informally enforced in loose, decentralised contexts, this study extends tight–loose theory into the domain of youth-led, grassroots media — a setting that is rarely studied in this way. In doing so, it answers calls in recent literature (e.g. Chua et al., 2024; Marcus et al., 2022) to examine how informal norm systems affect behaviour, identity, and resilience in contemporary organisational life. This layered dynamic illustrates how groups with high turnover and scarce resources can maintain coherence through a balance of cultural freedom and domain-specific regulation.

Beyond student radio, these insights have broader relevance for research on civil society organisations, creative collectives, and other informal communities that combine open participation with the need for organisational resilience. Future studies could build on this re-analysis by exploring how informal norms evolve over

time, how they are passed down between waves of volunteers, and how they interact with formal governance structures in similar hybrid organisations.

Studying student radio through the tight–loose framework opens up new possibilities for understanding how organisations manage cultural ambiguity and normative tension, simultaneously championing openness and innovation and managing constant existential uncertainty. In a field where creative licence and operational precarity coexist, the theory of tight and loose cultures offers an illuminating analytical lens for examining how and what kind of cultural boundaries are shaped, defended, or blurred under unstable conditions. It allows us to ask: How is freedom balanced with responsibility in an environment built on autonomy and voluntary participation? Where do informal rules emerge to protect shared values? Moreover, how do tight and loose elements manifest in various cultural layers, from artefacts to espoused values to deeply held beliefs and assumptions?

The findings presented here contribute to broader organisational culture research by reinforcing the importance of examining what organisations say or do and how meaning, behaviour, and belonging are managed through formal and informal channels. Schein's (2010) model proves helpful in disentangling how tight and loose norms manifest differently across cultural layers. The tight–loose framework (Gelfand et al., 2006; Gelfand, 2018) provides a heuristic to understand why certain areas attract greater regulatory control. In the case of student radio, tightness emerges not to suppress creativity but to preserve freedom responsibly, a paradox that underscores the functional adaptability of these youth-led, volunteer-run media organisations.

This study has several constraints. First, it is limited by its reliance on a limited set of data that is not very current, which, although offering a coherent, layered view of organisational culture, restricts the breadth and generalisability of the findings. The exclusive focus on European student radio stations means the results may not fully apply to other regional or institutional contexts with different regulatory or cultural conditions. Additionally, the retrospective application of tight–loose theory involves reinterpreting data not collected initially for that framework, which may result in omitting relevant indicators. Student radio's inherently informal and fluid nature, high turnover, contextual variability, and evolving peer norms make capturing enduring cultural patterns difficult. Future research should incorporate comparative, longitudinal, or ethnographic approaches to better trace how tight and loose norms develop, shift, and reproduce over time in similarly precarious organisational environments.

Despite these constraints, the current paper offers another critical view on student radio. While some research has been done on North American college radio (e.g., Sauls, 2000; Wallace, 2008; Raymond, 2016; Fauteux, 2015), European scholarship remains limited and fragmented. It is simultaneously a grassroots communication platform, a community-building tool, and a learning environment that empowers hundreds if not thousands, of young people annually through direct participation in media production. As such, this unique form of participatory media and surprisingly resilient organisational culture demands more research. This study, and others like it, contribute to filling that gap, bringing visibility to an often overlooked yet immensely valuable media form.

The findings also have societal and hands-on implications. They provide practical guidance for leaders, funders, and policymakers who support volunteer-based, youth-driven organisations with minimal formal hierarchy. By clarifying how protective norms emerge alongside openness, the findings show that careful, domain-specific rules can stabilise creative, participatory cultures without undermining their core mission. Student radio stations illustrate how informal norms of accountability, trust, and peer sanctioning substitute for formal oversight, offering a template for other grassroots media, NGOs, or activist collectives that face similar resource constraints and high turnover. Supporting these organisations means recognising that resilient participation depends not only on external funding and policy but also on sustaining the informal social norms that make freedom and continuity possible.

This study contributes to organisational theory by demonstrating that small, volunteer-led, and ideologically fluid organisations can maintain coherence and resilience through strategic, domain-specific tightness. When taking into account that culture management is often viewed as a strenuous task demanding strategic insight, experience and formal leadership training (Schein, 2010; Alvesson and Svenningson, 2015), student radio stations interestingly manage without such skillset, excelling in creativity (Sauls, 2000; Raymond, 2016). Being part of a voluntary organisation like student radio is often fueled by fun. As Laaksonen and Hietala (2023) have suggested, leaders can leverage humour and fun to create an organisational culture of openness, positive atmosphere and well-being, all prerequisites of innovation. This elicits an intriguing question in future research: how does having fun impact the balancing act of freedom and structure?

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Personalized but compromised? Geo-Targeted Algorithms and User Autonomy in MENA Digital Advertising

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This paper explores the breadth of intricate dynamics of algorithmic personalization and user autonomy in digital advertising, with a depth into the geo-targeted algorithms within the MENA region. As digital media increasingly rely on data-driven strategies to influence consumer behavior, understanding how these algorithms shape user experiences becomes paramount. By employing a qualitative exploratory study, this paper investigates the implications of personalized advertising on user choice and autonomy. Through multiple intensive interviews with MENA region end-users, we assess how geo-targeted algorithms curate advertising content, often leading to experiences that users perceive as both personalized and compromised. The findings may reveal that while users appreciate the relevance of personalized advertisements, they simultaneously express concerns about their autonomy and the extent of their informed choice. This study relies on media system dependency theory to illustrate how reliance on digital platforms shapes the user expectations and behaviors. The insights from the analysis may underscore the need to critically evaluate how geo-targeted advertising not only influences user decisions but also impacts the perceptions of advertising in the digital landscape. Ultimately, this research may provide broader knowledge in media studies by highlighting the ethical implications of algorithmic personalization in digital advertising. As advertisers navigate the challenges posed by data-driven marketing, the study may advocate for greater transparency and user empowerment in the advertising ecosystem. By examining the complex relationship between algorithmic personalization and user autonomy, this paper may contribute to understanding of the importance of fostering an informed and autonomous user base in the MENA region and beyond.

Introduction

In an era increasingly defined by data-driven decision-making, digital advertising has evolved into a highly personalized and pervasive within the new media ecosystem. Central to this transformation is the deployment of algorithmic personalization, where user-generated data, such as browsing behaviour, location, and platform engagement, is monitored to tailor advertising content in real time (Ullah et al., 2016). As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes more embedded in media infrastructures, digital users are exposed to content that not only reflects their preferences but also inevitably shapes them, often without their full awareness (Ali et al., 2019).

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A particular asset of personalisation is geo-targeted advertising, which uses location-based data to deliver content believed to be most relevant to a user's current or usual location setting. While this technique offers strategic benefits to marketers, it raises critical concerns about user autonomy, defined here as the individual's capacity to make informed and independent decisions. The intersection of these variables, algorithmic personalization, geo-location data, and user autonomy: presents both technological media innovation and ethical questions.

This study investigates how digital users in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region perceive and experience personalised, geo-targeted advertising. Although existing literature has explored algorithmic influence in various contexts (Hocutt, 2024; Zuboff, 2019), dynamics within the MENA region remain underexplored. Grounded in Media System Dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976; Kim, 2020), this research aims to critically examine how platform-driven personalisation may both serve and subvert user interests in the digital world.

Literature Review

The rise of data-driven advertising strategies has transformed the way users experience digital media. Machine learning is being utilized more, with a goal to enhance marketing and branding tactics, and promote consumer-brand relationships (Chen, 2023). By improving accuracy and enabling real-time decision-making, algorithms are completely changing the marketing landscape (Maddodi and Upadhyaya, 2023). One of the central mechanisms in this transformation is algorithmic personalisation, which refers to the use of algorithms that analyze user data to deliver tailored content, such as advertisements, that align with individual interests, behaviors, and demographic profiles (Ullah et al., 2016). A core subcategory of this practice is the use of geo-targeted algorithms, which customize content based on a user's current, real-time or inferred location (Ali et al., 2019). These technologies aim to enhance advertising relevance and efficiency but also introduce complex ethical and autonomy-related questions.

In digital media, user-generated data, defined as information voluntarily or involuntarily produced by users through their online engagements, serves as the key insights for such personalisations (Mansell, 2015). Through the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in media, these systems adapt advertising strategies, often without clear user consent or comprehension (Ali et al., 2019). While AI-driven personalisation enables advertisers to maximize campaign performance, scholars have increasingly questioned how this intervention affects user autonomy (Marrie, 2023), which in this context refers to an individual's ability to make informed, unmanipulated decisions about content consumption (Hookway and Perryman, 2023).

Studies conducted in different political and cultural contexts than the MENA region, suggest that personalised advertising revealed an uncertainty in response by users. On one hand, individuals often value the increased relevance of advertisements (Kim et al., 2025). On the other hand, they express unease over the lack of transparency in how personal data is collected, harvested and deployed (Ullah et al., 2016). As Hocutt (2024) observes, this duality creates a paradox of personalisation:

users feel both recognised and surveilled. Such ambiguity may be intensified when personalisation is driven by blurry algorithms that hinder user understanding and agency.

To unpack these issues, media researchers often turn to media system dependency theory, which argues that the more people rely on media systems to fulfill personal and social goals, such as understanding, orientation, or entertainment. The more influence media have, the more it shapes their attitudes and behaviours (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976). In algorithmically mediated environments, this dependency extends to the digital platforms that determine what content users see and engage with. As platforms filter ads based on location and behavior, users may find themselves locked into feedback loops that reinforce prior behaviors while limiting exposure to alternatives (Hookway and Perryman, 2023).

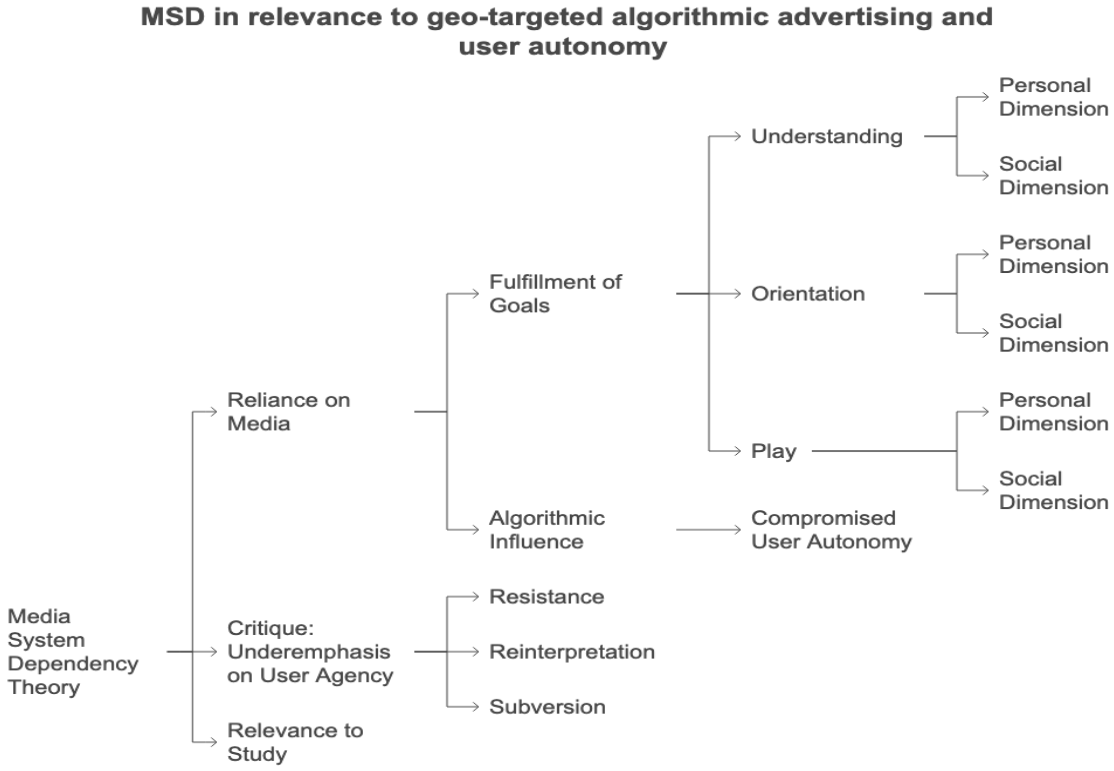
However, the empirical literature remains disproportionately focused on North American users and platforms, revealing a significant geographical gap in current research. For instance, despite rapid digitisation and social media adoption in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), there is a dearth of studies examining how geo-targeted algorithmic personalization is perceived or experienced by users in this region (Hocutt, 2024; Theseus, 2013). Cultural sensitivities, regulatory frameworks, and digital literacy levels in MENA countries could all shape how users navigate and interpret personalised digital content (Younis, 2024). Understanding these regional dynamics through a theoretical framework is essential for producing a globally relevant body of knowledge.

From a theoretical framework perspective, Media System Dependency (MSD) theory is particularly relevant to the present study. MSD argues that users depend on media to fulfill three types of personal and social goals: understanding, orientation, and play (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984), which could be utilized to investigate how geo-targeted algorithmic advertising affects user autonomy in the MENA regio MSD was first articulated by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), provides a multidimensional perspective on how individuals' reliance on media systems influences their perceptions, emotions, and behaviors. At its core, MSD presents media as a powerful tool not inherently, but through the relational dependencies formed with individuals and other social systems, especially during periods of uncertainty or societal changes (Kim, 2020).

In the context of digital advertising, orientation goals, such as decision-making about purchases or behaviors, are especially vulnerable to media influence when algorithmic systems dominate the flow and visibility of information. Thus, user autonomy may be compromised when individuals unawarely rely on transparent algorithmic structures to guide their choices.

Critically, MSD theory has evolved to accommodate digital environments. As Kim (2020) explains, the theory's ecological and multilevel approach allows for the examination of how macro-level structures (e.g., platforms, algorithms) shape micro-level user experiences. However, one critique of MSD is its underemphasis on user agency in highly interactive, participatory media spaces. While the theory rightly highlights structural imbalances, it may overlook how digitally literate users resist, reinterpret, or control their media content and consumption (Livingstone, 2011).

Image 1. Illustration of MSD in relevance to Geo-algorithms



Despite these limitations, MSD remains a robust lens for this study. It facilitates a critical interrogation of how algorithmically personalized media environments not only fulfill user needs but also powerful forms of influence, particularly in data-driven, commercially saturated contexts like digital advertising in the MENA region.

This paper aims to address this knowledge gap and also foregrounds and puts into perspective the ethical implications of exporting personalisation models that may not align with local norms. As Hocutt (2024) argues, future work must advocate for greater algorithmic transparency and user empowerment, particularly in emerging markets where regulatory oversight may lag behind technological advancement.

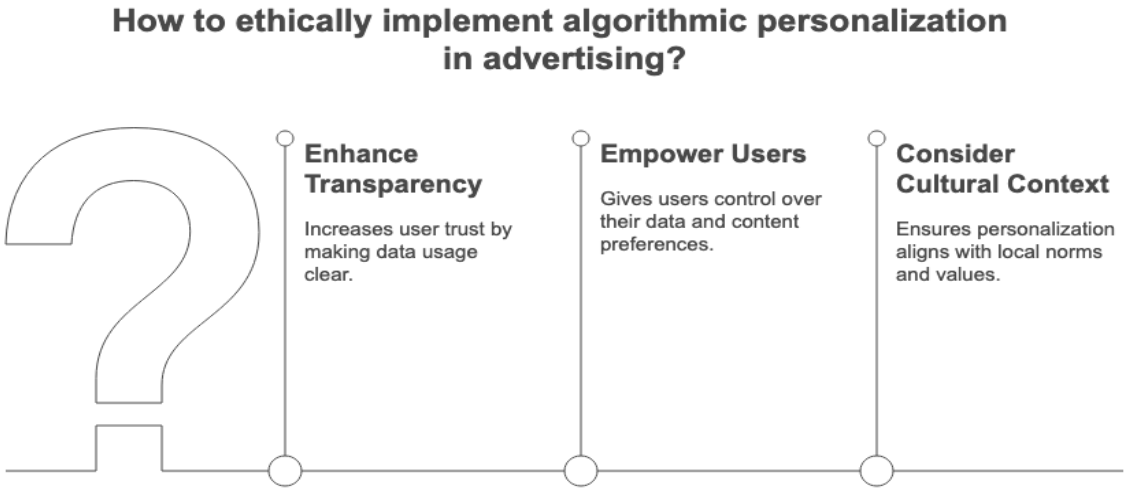
Aim

The aim of this study aims to explore the interplay between algorithmic personalisation and user autonomy in digital advertising, with a specific focus on geo-targeted advertising practices within the MENA region.

By exploring how location-based algorithms shape users' advertising experiences and decision-making processes, this study seeks to understand the extent to which personalised advertising enhances or undermines user autonomy. It employs the

Media System Dependency (MSD) theory as a conceptual framework to explore how users' reliance on digital platforms mediates their perceptions, choices, and vulnerabilities within algorithm-driven digital media.

Image 2. Illustration of the Research Aim



Objectives

1-To define and contextualize algorithmic personalization and geo-targeted advertising within digital media studies.

This objective entails synthesizing literature on artificial intelligence (AI), user-generated data, and algorithmic design in advertising systems (Ullah et al., 2016; Ali et al., 2019). It establishes a conceptual foundation to understand how digital platforms utilise behaviour, engagement and locational data to curate, filter or boost content.

2-To investigate how end-users in the MENA region experience and perceive personalized advertising.

The study will explore the dual nature of these experiences, how users find geo-targeted ads relevant yet potentially intrusive, through qualitative data from in-depth interviews. This responds to the gap in existing research, which has largely overlooked the cultural and technological differences of the MENA region (Hocutt, 2024).

3-To evaluate the extent to which personalised advertising influences user autonomy and informed choice.

Drawing on media system dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976; Kim, 2020), this objective examines how users' reliance on digital platforms

for understanding, orientation, entertainment and decision-making shapes their trust/control or vulnerability to algorithmic influence.

4-To assess the ethical implications of geo-targeted advertising within the broader context of media dependency and user empowerment.

The study aims to identify potential risks related to privacy, content-intervention, manipulation, and consent, advocating for transparent algorithmic practices and policy recommendations that support ethical advertising standards.

5-To contribute to the development of regionally sensitive, user-centered frameworks for evaluating algorithmic media systems.

By addressing the under-researched MENA context, the study aims to generate insights that are both theoretically grounded and locally relevant, thus enriching global discussions on digital advertising ethics and digital media users' rights.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory approach to investigate how digital users across the MENA region perceive algorithmic personalisation in geo-targeted advertising and its influence on their autonomy. Given the study's aim to uncover the various user experiences and perceptions, qualitative methods are appropriate for capturing the depth and complexity of individual interpretations within diverse sociocultural contexts (Silverman, 2021). MSD theory further supports a qualitative design, as the theory emphasizes user–media relationships that are embedded in social, cognitive, and affective processes (Kim, 2020).

Research Design

The research employed semi-structured interviews to explore participants' digital habits, media consumption behaviors, and interactions with location-based advertising content. Semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility to dive into the individual experiences, while maintaining consistency across key thematic areas, including digital platform use, engagement with branded content, perceptions of personalisation, and sense of user control over online media content (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015).

Sampling and Participants

A total of ten participants were purposively selected to represent a cross-section of users in the MENA region. The sample included three users from Egypt (two from Cairo and one from Alexandria), three from the United Arab Emirates (Abu Dahbi & Dubai), two from Morocco (Rabat), and two from Oman (Muscat). While participants' locations were diverse, other demographics and criteria such as age group (30-40), Professional occupation, screen time of four hours or more per

day, and high Media Literacy rates were constant. Furthermore, participants were chosen based on their active engagement with specific digital media platforms such as Meta products, Youtube and TikTok. This standardisation of the platforms is based on the frequency and accessibility within the MENA region. However, the diverse geographic and cultural elements enabled the study to explore potential regional differences (Fahmy, 2024), nevertheless, in perceptions of geo-algorithmic advertising and user autonomy.

Data Collection

Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted either in English or Arabic, depending on participant preference. Interviews were held remotely.

Interview questions were developed to explore four key domains: (1) general digital media use and platform preferences; (2) awareness and perceptions of algorithms and personalised advertising; (3) reactions to location-specific content and trends (4) the perceived impact of algorithmic personalisation on brand trust and consumer autonomy. All interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed. Arabic transcripts were translated into English by bilingual researchers to maintain data integrity and allow cross-case thematic analysis.

Analysis & Results

This study employed thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to interpret qualitative data gathered through ten semi-structured interviews with digital media users across the MENA region. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility in identifying recurring patterns while maintaining the contextual richness of user experiences. Initial coding was conducted inductively and iteratively, with themes emerging around users' perceptions of digital advertising, geo-personalization, and autonomy in decision-making. These themes were then organized in alignment with the study's theoretical framing and objectives.

Theme 1: Geo-Personalisation and Location-Sensitive Feeds

Codes: algorithmic customization, location-driven trends, shifting newsfeeds, For You Page (FYP), Explore, Facebook Marketplace, TikTok Shop, External links.

Users consistently described changes in their digital experiences based on geographic location. These changes impacted both content relevance and perceived autonomy. "*When I changed my location, my newsfeeds were altered*." (Moroccan user)

"*My TikTok For You Page (FYP) seemed very different when I travelled, although my interests and following are the same*." (Egyptian user, Cairo)

The variability in platform behavior, even with constant user inputs, suggests a strong system-level media dependency, where users' informational goals are subtly redirected based on algorithmic assumptions (Kim, 2020).

Theme 2: Trends, Brands, and Cultural Framing

Codes: Trend propagation, Influencer dynamics, National identity, Emotional targeting, Peer pressure, Sense of belonging, Community influence.

Participants indicated that their exposure to trending content and brands shifted based on regional cultural or commercial priorities.

One Emirati user admitted: "*I consider myself not easily influenced. However, I bought Dubai Chocolate because my Instagram page was boosted by this trend*."

Here, MSD's goal-orientation framework is evident, as the user's desire for social affiliation (social play) and regional identity becomes entwined with consumption choices.

Theme 3: Deceptive Curation and Ethical Ambiguities

Codes: Misleading branding, Data manipulation, Currency change, Language adaptation, Style format, Price misrepresentation

A recurrent concern was deception through personalised content. This includes assumptions of brand origin and price transparency.

"*I was once targeted on an Instagram page… the price was quite affordable, I assumed it's a local brand. However, after purchase, the email showed the page was an overseas predator and asked me to pay extra for tariffs*." (Egyptian user, Giza)

This illustrates how algorithmic opacity and commercialisation can manipulate an informed choice, central to user autonomy and ethical advertising standards. This finding heightens the urge to understand the interchanging relation between algorithms and fintech (Amer, 2024).

Participants consistently expressed concerns over the lack of transparency in personalised advertising, particularly in relation to region-specific pricing. One of the most revealing patterns in the interviews was the perceived algorithmic manipulation of prices based on users' geolocation, a practice that challenges the fairness and ethics of algorithm-driven marketing.

"*I always compare hotel and flight prices from different locations. I am sure I pay differently, usually way more than my family and friends, although we stay at the same hotel for the same amount of days*." (Egyptian user, Cairo)

This participant's experience reflects a broader skepticism regarding the equity of algorithmic systems. It reinforces the notion that personalisation, while seemingly neutral, can create discriminatory pricing structures that undermine user trust and informed choice, a key concern in digital consumer autonomy.

From an MSD theory perspective, the user is attempting to regain control over orientation goals, such as planning travel, by cross-checking platforms, which illustrates an active yet forced dependency due to blurry or opaque media behavior (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976; Kim, 2020). This finding aligns with Ullah et al.'s (2016) work on privacy and algorithmic surveillance, and it expands the discourse by providing region-specific evidence from the MENA context, where differential pricing is not only a technical outcome but a socially perceived injustice.

Theme 4: Digital Advertising and Contextual Influence on Decisions

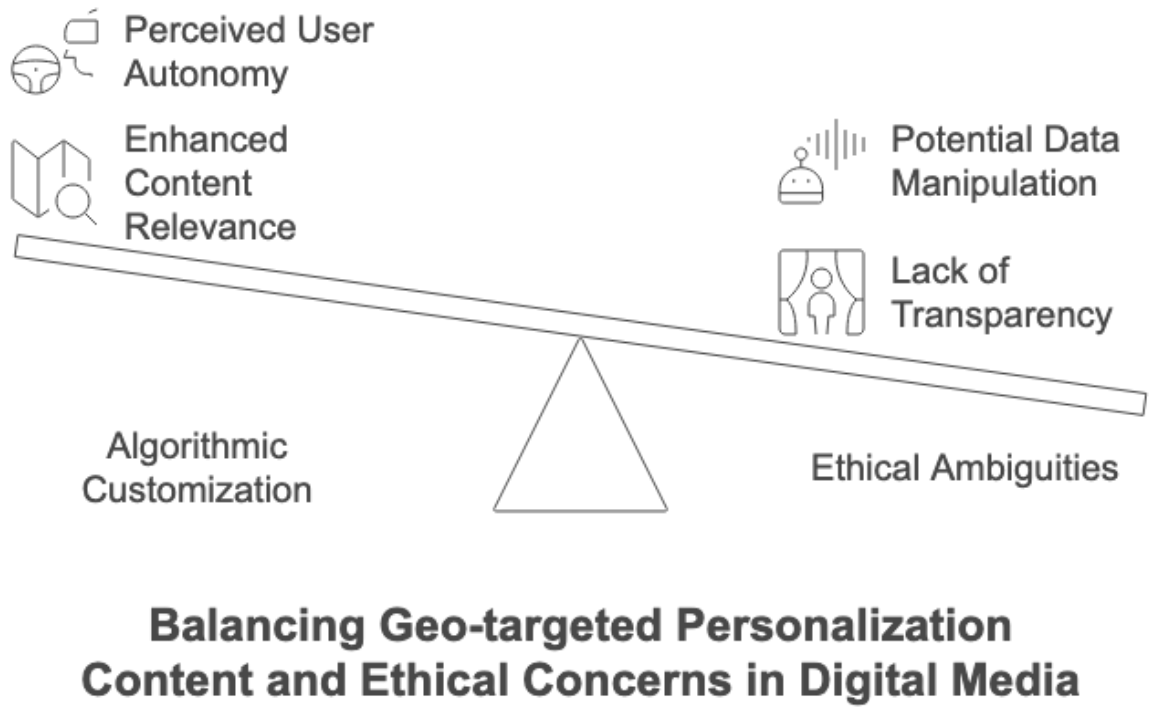
Codes: Ethical filtering, Location-triggered memory, Boycott brands, Community and Solidarity.

Users also noted how their socio-political context influenced how ads were presented and interpreted.

One user from Cairo remarked: "*I only boycott brands complicit with war and support local ones when I am back in Cairo. My social media ads remind me of the war crisis in the Middle East based on where my location is*."

This demonstrates that algorithmic advertising does not operate in a vacuum, it engages with emotional and ideological dimensions, sometimes reinforcing existing beliefs, and at other times exploiting them.

Image 3. Illustration of the Unbalanced Relation between Customisation & Ethical Considerations



The themes reveal that digital advertising in the MENA region is not merely a branding mechanism but a dynamic socio-technical process that deeply shapes user experience. Geo-targeted personalization, even for highly media literate users, affects how users perceive trends, trust brands, and make decisions. Through the lens of Media System Dependency theory, it is clear that the more users rely on digital platforms for orientation and understanding. This outcome raises questions of transparency, ethics, and autonomy in the digital age.

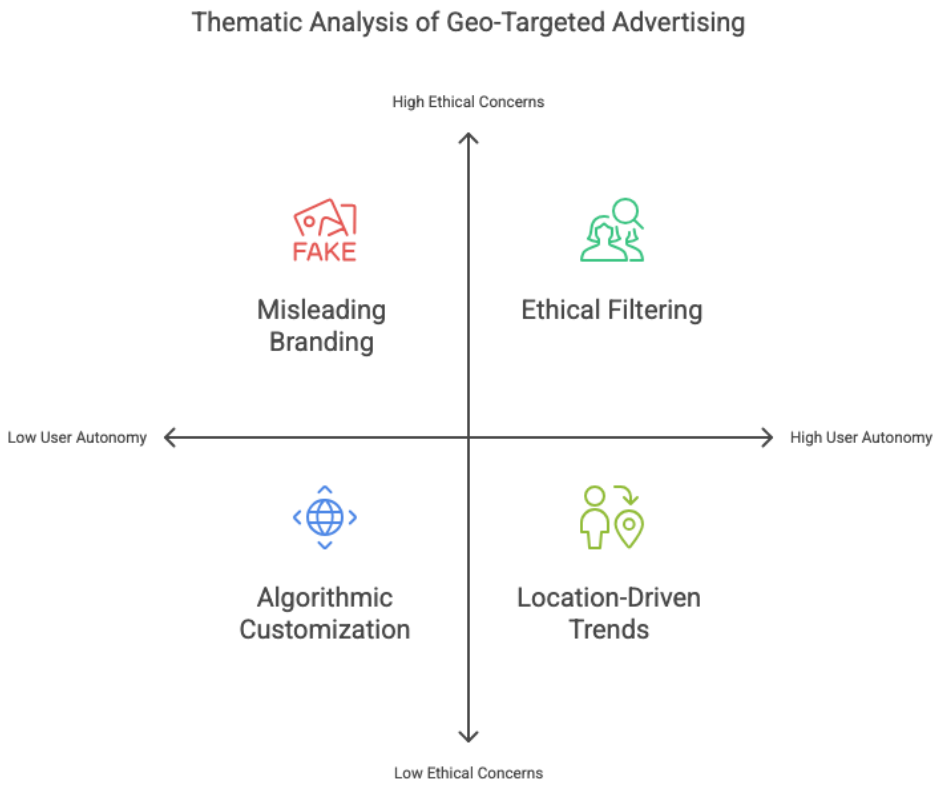
While this methodology offers original insights into the interplay between algorithmic personalization and user autonomy, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the geographical scope, although investigating four MENA countries, remains limited in fully capturing the region's cultural and economic diversity. Furthermore, participants from urban capital cities of Egypt, UAE, Morocco, and Oman may not reflect the digital realities of rural users or those in less connected communities.

Secondly, the time frame of data collection, relying on single interviews, restricts understanding of how users' perceptions might shift over time or across seasonal advertising cycles, especially in advertising peak season during the month of Ramadan. Thirdly, the study's methodological parameters, including the focus on specific platforms like Meta products, YouTube, and TikTok, may limit the exploration of other emerging digital spaces such as Snapchat, LinkedIn and viral mobile games and apps, which may conduct different algorithmic strategies. Finally, the relatively narrow age range and high media literacy levels of participants for the exploratory purpose of the research, may mean that the study may not fully account for generational or literacy-based variations in user autonomy. Addressing these limitations in future research could deepen the understanding of geo-targeted advertising's ethical impacts within diverse MENA contexts.

Discussion

This study explored the complex relationship between algorithmic personalisation and user autonomy in geo-targeted advertising across the MENA region. Drawing on MSD theory, the findings illustrate how users' dependency on digital platforms for orientation and decision-making provides them a personalized experience, yet they often fall vulnerable with reduced control to non-transparent algorithmic structures. The thematic analysis reveals four key areas: Geo-personalisation, Trend influence, Deception in curation, and Ethical decision-making. The originality of the data provided an insightful understanding of the geo-targeted personalisation within a new socio-cultural context.

Image 4. Illustration of Mapping the Autonomy and Ethics in Algorithms



The first objective of the study aimed to define algorithmic personalisation. As the literature has noted, algorithmic systems use user-generated data and artificial intelligence to optimize digital advertising based on behavioral and locational data cues (Ullah et al., 2016; Hocutt, 2024). The findings confirm this, with multiple users reporting significant alterations to their newsfeeds and recommendation algorithms when changing locations. This aligns with existing research (Ali et al., 2019), but extends it into the MENA region, addressing a noted geographical gap in the literature. For instance, Egyptian and Moroccan participants highlighted distinct content shifts and regional targeting that subtly reframe user perceptions, fulfilling Objective 2 regarding regional user experiences.

In line with MSD theory, this study confirms that users' increasing dependency on digital platforms for orientation makes them target to manipulation through geo-personalised content. Thematic codes such as "location-driven trends" and "algorithmic customisation" illustrate how platforms shape what users view as socially relevant or commercially valuable. These results mirror the theory's notion that when individuals depend on media for orientation and decision-making, media systems gain greater influence over users' beliefs and actions (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976; Kim, 2020). This was notably reflected in the Emirati user's statement, referencing the purchasing of a trending locally-based brand. The decision was initially out of his personal preference and despite the individual

resistance, he confirmed the social trend based on his current location. This insight highlights how personalization leverages emotional and social dimensions of dependency, which resonates with the role of digital media and user determination as self-learners in a Heutagogical framework (Marrie, 2024).

Objective 3, which explored the influence of advertising on user autonomy, was especially evident in themes related to deceptive branding and ethical ambiguities. Users described instances of misleading pricing and brand origin confusion. Demonstrating occurrences and experiences that are consistent with Ullah et al.'s (2016) critique of data manipulation in targeted advertising. For example, the Egyptian participant who encountered unexpected international tariffs after assuming a brand was local underlines how algorithmic opacity compromises informed decision-making, echoing broader concerns about ethical digital advertising (Hocutt, 2024).

Regarding ethics, Objective 4, the focus on the ethical implications of geo-targeted advertising is reflected in users' responses to content that dealt with socio-political instabilities and uncertainty in the economic environment. Participants cited boycotting brands complicit in regional conflict and feeling targeted by content that exploited their emotional responses. This suggests that while users may exhibit agency and control, their responses are still, yet, influenced and shaped by geographic curation. Hence confirming MSD's relevance in today's algorithmic media structure.

Finally, this research addresses the literature gap by offering empirical, region-specific insights into MENA users' engagement with digital advertising based on geo-algorithmic content. While media personalisation has been extensively studied in marketing contexts and indicated an enhanced experience, this study introduces culturally situated experiences that questioned the notion of algorithmic neutrality. The results call for greater transparency and ethical responsibility in platform design and content curation. This argument is reinforcing Objective 5 and advocating for regionally responsive media regulation.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This study explored the relationship between algorithmic personalisation and user autonomy in geo-targeted digital advertising within the MENA region. Anchored in MSD theory (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976; Kim, 2020), the paper investigated how users interact with, perceive, and navigate digital media with location-sensitive advertising content across platforms such as Meta products, Youtube and TikTok. Through qualitative, semi-structured interviews with users in Egypt, UAE, Morocco, and Oman, the study has reached several insightful data concerning the ethical and cognitive implications of algorithmically mediated experiences.

The literature review established a growing concern within digital media studies regarding the influence of artificial intelligence and location-based algorithms on consumer behavior (Ullah et al., 2016; Ali et al., 2019). However, existing work largely neglects the unique socio-technical dynamics of the MENA region. This study addressed that gap by contextualising geo-personalised advertising within

regional digital cultures and by offering empirical accounts of how users interpret algorithmic influence on their digital journeys and media conception.

Thematic analysis provided four overarching areas of concern: geo-personalisation and location-sensitive feeds; trend and brand perception; deceptive digital curation; and ethics-driven decision-making. These themes reflect a paradox between user dependency and reliance on digital media for orientation and their diminishing autonomy and control over the content, due to the lack of transparency in curation. MSD theory provided a useful framework for understanding how dependency on media systems, especially for decision-making and social validation, can affect the user's autonomy when systems are manipulative or even unclear.

By fulfilling this regional and theoretical gap, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on ethical advertising and user rights in digital media studies. It reaffirms the importance of transparency in algorithmic designs, and calls to empower users with meaningful control over how their data, which is utilized and interpreted on the digital platforms.

Beyond the research methodological and regional contributions, this paper coined algorithmic personalisation and algorithmic compromisation as an original and impactful terminologies that may grab deeper scholarly and corporate attention. By positioning algorithmic personalisation and compromisation as a critical findings, this paper invites future debates about how algorithms shape user experiences in complex patterns, which may rank it as an essential for researchers, policymakers, and advertisers to prioritize fairness and user empowerment within digital media.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the limitations discussed within the Methodology, there are several recommendations for the future research.

Longitudinal and cross-cultural studies, a larger and more demographically diverse participant base would improve the generalisation of the findings. Including users from small cities or rural areas, rather than capital cities. Comparisons between the media consumption of age groups and different platforms. Different socio-economic backgrounds across MENA would uncover additional insights and further layers of algorithmic personalisation experiences.

Adopt alternative or mixed methodologies, while this study used qualitative interviews, future research could benefit from ethnographic methods, where researchers document their own digital experiences across locations to provide immersive, autoethnographic insights (Pink et al., 2016).

A mixed-method approach, combining interviews with surveys or behavioral tracking, may allow for statistical generalization while retaining contextual nuance. Explore alternative theoretical frameworks: While MSD theory provided foundational insight, theories like Surveillance Capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) or Uses and Gratifications may offer additional perspectives, particularly around agency, resistance, and data commodification.

A systematic content analysis of algorithmically served advertisements across regions could validate user claims and reveal patterns of commercial targeting, deception, or manipulation.

On the other hand, a narrower geographical focus, may provide an alternative perspective. Future research work might benefit from a country-specific case study (e.g., Egypt or UAE) to explore legal, cultural, and algorithmic dynamics in greater depth, offering higher contextual precision. Integrate platform-specific studies, algorithm behavior varies by platform. Future research should consider comparing personalisation models across TikTok, Meta products, and YouTube to better understand their differential impact on autonomy and perception.

Finally, this study advocates for greater ethical accountability in digital advertising and calls for regional digital media studies that keeps pace with ever-changing and evolving algorithmic environments.

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Navigating the Digital Space: Analyzing the Role of Egyptian Entrepreneurial Podcasts on Business Growth and Fostering Entrepreneurship

*By Mariam Amer**

Podcasting is rapidly growing in Egypt as a part of the popular culture, where listeners are attached to an audio content discussing diverse social, political, lifestyle and cultural aspects. Consequently, entrepreneurs and media companies found an opportunity for commercial interest and expansion in the podcasting, hence leveraging it to a professional level that makes it more accessible and affordable for the Egyptian audience. Podcasting, like any other medium, has been reshaped by media "platformization", where it enabled podcasting to act as an intermediary between diverse users for instance, suppliers, professionals, producers, customers, advertisers, and entrepreneurs that will be particularly investigated in the research paper. This study examined the role of pod casts in driving business growth through the empowerment and information given in the knowledge-sharing platform of podcasting. Moreover, the paper discussed the impact of the success stories narratives and expertise shared on business innovation, through the systematic analysis of a selection of entrepreneurial podcasts. The researcher identified the themes, strategies, market insights, activities and practices and advice provided to the entrepreneurial listener. Lastly the study scrutinized the authenticity as well as the reliability of the podcasts, thus promoting a new type of trust and engagement with its listeners. The researcher utilized qualitative research to some selected Egyptian entrepreneurial podcasts that are significantly growing as an entrepreneurial expert for business innovation and growth, therefore contributing to the fathom of modern communication tactics regrading business success in a competitive Egyptian landscape.

Introduction

Business growth and entrepreneurship are one of the aspects that had been greatly affected by podcasting in Egypt, where the personal communication between a success story or a successful businessman and the listeners, created a sense of community and trust that usually is non-existent in any traditional media, especially when it comes to an intricate topic like business expansion and enterprising. Consequently, the foundation for podcasting in business growth and entrepreneurship grew stronger and became more credible when it comes to starting business tips, getting funds and sponsorship, and running daily business

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operations. On another note, podcasting acted as a source of networking and discovering new business opportunities for some people, making it a cost-effective marketing channel for attaining more engaged niche markets (Haque and Zdravkovska, 2023). Since the popularity of podcasting is growing in Egypt, then their role in influencing entrepreneurs who are looking for business growth and branding strategies, is becoming inevitable, hence significant research and investigation is required.

The concept of individual consumption has changed rapidly because of the progression in the digital technology, specifically the podcasts platform. Podcasts became a popular medium as it offers both education and entertainment in a wide range of subjects in a convenient and accessible way as it could be easily streamed on laptops, mobile phones, and smart tablets. Also, the idea of lasting an average of hour, made them suitable for the daily use. When it comes to entrepreneurship, podcasts were positioned as an impactful medium especially for the young generations businesspeople who seek knowledge, expertise and advice (Mohamed, 2024). Arab and international podcasts usually shed the light on the success stories of diverse businesspeople through tackling their failures, personal growth stories and scalability, thus acting as a motivational source as well as a guide for its audience (Berry, 2016).

In Egypt there a several aspects that needs to be considered before shaping any career, these could be societal, religious, cultural and political. The need for something aspirational and self-improving is a key juncture for the businesspeople educational and entrepreneurial development, and podcasts played such a role and fulfilled the need for its businesspeople listeners, as it would immensely affect their career routes. The study investigated the podcasts' content in terms of motivations, challenges, and opportunities emerging in the Egyptian media landscape. Moreover, the current study is aiming to fill the gap found in the Egyptian literature regarding the entrepreneurial/business podcasts, where studies of Egyptian podcasts in general are abundant, but entrepreneurial podcasts in specific are scarce.

Literature Review

Podcasting in Egypt

Podcasts are considered a two-way communication medium, where the hosts make sure to engage their listeners through email marketing or activities on the social media pages, unlike radio that is considered a one-way communication traditional medium. Usually, the podcasts provide personal growths stories as well as tips and tricks for problem solving, that constitutes the base for business topics (Dumas as cited in Kemppainen, 2022). Additionally, podcasts, especially business ones, provide diverse promotional activities (Kemppainen, 2022). In Egypt, podcasting took a different turn, where it flourished as a medium with less censorship, therefore it attracted many listeners as it satisfied their relative needs. A study conducted by Dessouki et al. proved that Egyptian audience viewed

podcasts to be more honest, direct and accessible while multi-tasking when compared to radio as the it is considered a scripted medium. Also, it showed that the most popular podcasts platforms are Spotify, Anghami, Apple Podcast and YouTube. They also favor short lengths episodes as they listen to it while commuting or before bedtime (2023).

Podcast and Entrepreneurship

Podcasts are immensely growing and becoming popular, where its impact and trustworthiness are now competing with traditional media. Consequently, adopted every media content, where social, educational, entertainment, and business content thrived in the podcast platforms (Stoll et al., 2021). Several research were conducted measuring the impact of podcasts on business people motivational sense of always becoming aware and up to date regarding business insightful trends, and the results showed that it served as a key aspect in providing insights for business performance as well as business guidance (Waddingham et al., 2020). Meanwhile, another study took the same path in measuring the impact of podcast on business transformation, and a thematic analysis was conducted, where entrepreneurship, sustainability, start-ups and psychological capital were analyzed because of podcast listenership resulting an improvement in organizational performance as well as originating and sustaining businesses (Elton and Moore, 2022).

Similarly, another study measured the advantages of the podcast's listenership, however this study was confined to only one educational platform, where the results showed that podcasts enabled students to acquire the asynchronous learning skills. In other words, students were able to do in-depth analysis and discussion because of the engagement feature found that nurtures active learning, thus achieving entrepreneurial education (Vidal et al, 2021). Learning while listening became a popular theme that was generated through podcasts, where business podcasts acted as educational yet entertaining media content. Managers and businesspeople started to rely on podcasts as a method for learning and stopped being skeptical, especially since it is considered a passive learning process, where the listeners do not exert any effort in obtaining the knowledge. Consequently, it became popular yet reliable source of information, particularly in business and start-up industries, entrepreneurs now can easily grasp the ideas being presented in an engaging manner (Waddingham et al., 2020).

Social media in general played a positive significant role on business growth, a study was conducted measuring the impact of social media on business growth and empowerment on females' entrepreneurs, and the results were the following, 95% of the sample assured that the presence of social media was essential for their business origination. The study discussed that before digital entrepreneurship males usually had higher percentages of originating businesses than females, however after digital entrepreneurship, the females contributed more to the investments (Miniesy et al., 2022). Meanwhile, another study that is more concerned with podcasts, where it measured the themes and approaches portrayed in the content, found that podcasts usually tackle futuristic updated topics in general, and

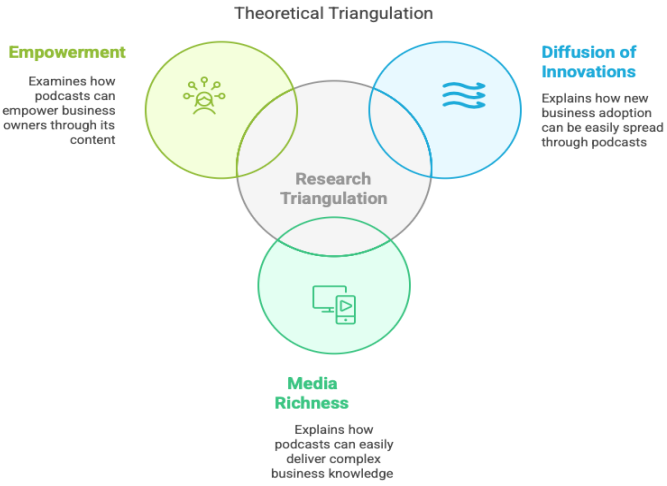
business topics in specific, however the dynamics changes from a podcast to another depending on the host's aims suitability (Welz et al., 2021). Nevertheless, another study conducted to measure the impact of storytelling on entrepreneurship innovation, and the results contradicted with what mentioned above, where it found that the narrative content found in podcast offer limited guidance and businesspeople plan their own path (Burnell et al., 2023). Contrastingly, a study examined 11 podcasts for intimacy and emotions, and it found the following, podcasts embodied the form of personalized journalism, where it succeeded in building an intimate relationship between the guests and the listeners, and it stated that "self-reflexivity and transparency of the reporting process have become "staple ingredients" of podcasting," (Lindgren, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

The current study depended on a multi-dimensional theoretical model, where it combined *diffusion of innovation, media richness and empowerment theory.* Diffusion of innovation theory was applied here to explain how new idea and adopted behaviors through online technologies are spread throughout audience (García-Avilés, 2020). The study dealt with podcast entrepreneurial content to be the *innovative idea*; the businesspeople (listeners) are the considered the *adopters* who might benefit from the discussed business strategies in their own business. Meanwhile the guests acted as the *early adopters* through their narration of their success, failure, and improvement stories. Finally, the *adoption stages* might be reflected in the episodes through the story telling of their business experience.

Media Richness was applied as well in terms of explaining the effectiveness and richness of podcasts in disseminating complex information (Ishii et al., 2019), where they offer *expressive tones, passionate cues,* and *fervent story telling technique*. Additionally, it serves as a medium that offer deep analysis for complex business topics like market insights, strategies, trends, consumer behavior, and scaling plans explained through empirical depth. Finally, the study resorted to *Empowerment Theory* because it served as the psychological aspect for the research (Masullo Chen, 2016), where the kind of business stories shared through the examined podcasts have an impact on the business owners' *cognitive empowerment* through knowledge offered on strategy, innovation, and business literacy. The stories of perseverance, determination, and fortitude acted as *psychological empowerment.* Lastly, sharing all life lessons learned through business ownership can lead to *community empowerment.* Consequently, the provided theoretical triangulation employed podcasts to be something beyond a normal communication tool, where they acted as mediators of innovation, rich enlightening medium, and empowerment platform.

Figure 1. Theoretical Triangulation



Research Questions

RQ1: In what ways do the content of the Egyptian entrepreneurial podcasts discusses and reflect business empowerment and growth? (Empowerment Theory)
RQ2: What frequent themes, strategic approaches, market insights, and entrepreneurial practices are discussed across selected podcast episodes? (Media Richness Theory)
RQ3: What natures of success stories and expertise insights are discussed in entrepreneurial podcasts, and how these narratives entice business innovation? (Diffusion of Innovation & Empowerment)
RQ4: To what extent do the tone, storytelling techniques, guest selection, and supporting evidence add to the genuineness and reliability of the entrepreneurial podcast? (Media Richnes Theory)

Methodology

In this study, the researcher applied qualitative content analysis, since the main aim was to examine the role of podcasts in driving business growth; consequently, the stories and narratives were examined to measure the strategies, market insights, activities and practices and advice provided in the podcast content. This method is used to analyze textual data, where it involves the counting of categories to identify the examined data patterns and foresee its insightful meanings and impact (Forman and Damschroder, 2007). Accordingly, a thematic coding sheet was constructed to measure the following variables, business empowerment and growth, themes, strategic approaches, market insights, entrepreneurial practices, success stories, expertise insights, business innovation, genuineness and reliability. Additionally, each variable acted as an independent theme and had its own sub-themes measurement to test it *(Appendix1: coding sheet & operational definitions)*.

Sample

The study resorted to purposive sampling, where the podcasts and episodes were deliberately chosen to act as a diverse content to provide an indirect comparative analysis on the one hand. On the other hand, to provide an array of diverse knowledge and expertise since the study aim was examine this modern communication tactic on business growth in general. Additionally, the number of followers and subscribers acted as a significant aspect in the selecting process. Accordingly, different types of Egyptian business podcasts were chosen, and they were the following, Business BelArabi (Business in Arabic), The AI, Making It, Al Mal Al Halal (Clean Money), Khamsa Business (five business), and Madraset Al Estethmar (School of Investment). Two episodes were selected from each podcast, where each one had its own business type to serve the diverse purpose of the study and the business types were the following, Education, Application Developer and Chatbot, Banking, Sports, Real Estate, Architecture, Fintech, Fashion, Furniture, Consumer Financing, Financial Services and Transportation.

Method of Data Collection

A coding sheet was created for the qualitative content analysis, where the study chose the podcasts episodes to be the *unit of analysis.* They were specifically chosen as they constitute the core of the scrutinized content, where they reflect the motivational language, personal stories growth, scalability, strategic planning, innovation, resilience, marketing and funding techniques, consumer behavior, operations, turning points, and the trend forecasting the study wish to measure. Additionally, the *unit's* selection process was constructed on diverse content, where the elected guests had different business industries to provide a range of knowledge, which is the depth aimed from the study in the first place. Meanwhile, the *categories* of the current study were created as themes to examine the designated media, nevertheless the study developed *categories* and *sub-categories* as its measurement tools. Those categories are the following, *empowerment, business growth, themes, strategic approaches, market insights, entrepreneurial practices, success stories, expert insights, business innovation, genuineness*, and *reliability.*

Results

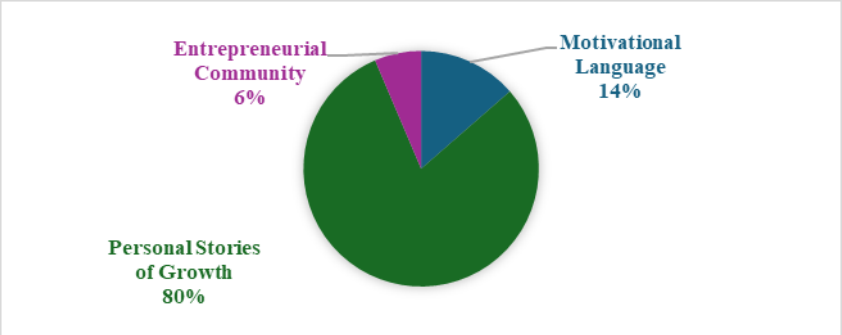
As discussed above the current study applied qualitative content analysis, where a thematic coding sheet was created to measure the pre-determined study variables, which are:

1. Business Empowerment and Business Growth

Empowerment was measured by the analysis of the following sub-variables, *motivational language, personal stories of growth,* and *entrepreneurial*

community, and the results were all the podcasts provided personal stories, yet the only *one* episode discussed the importance of being part of a growing entrepreneurial local community, and another *two* mentioned some encouraging phrases intended to inspire confidence. Meanwhile **Business Growth** was measured by the analysis of *scalability, revenue and growth measurements*, and *strategic planning*, and the results go as follows, 11 podcasts discussed strategies and insights on how to enable business to scale and to grow exponentially, *ten* mentioned some of their KPIs and financial milestones, for instance ""Valu's valuation of 250 million dollars, with Amazon's investment, acts as an evidence for a significant growth metric", and more than half of the podcasts *(seven)* provided their view of their expansion tactics and future progressions.

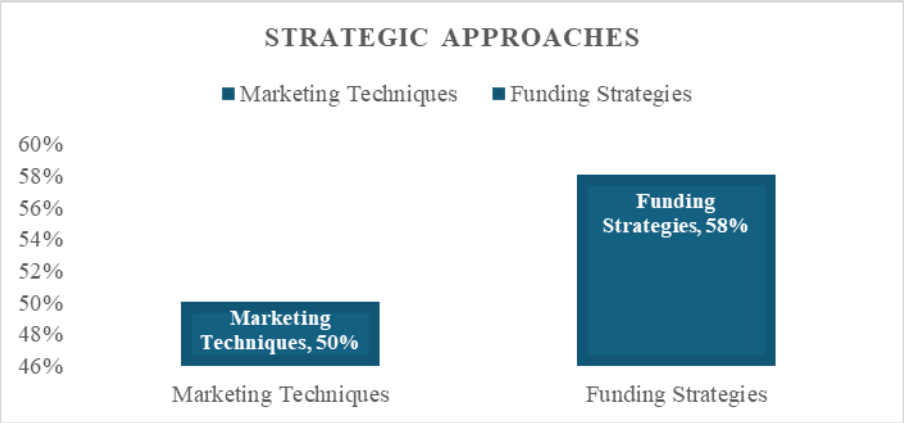
Figure 2. Empowerment Results



2. Themes, Strategic Approaches, Market Insights, and Entrepreneurial Practices

Themes mentioned in the study was measured by the examination of the following sub-variables, *innovation* and *resilience* and the qualitative results showed the following, most of the episodes (*eight, 67%)* discussed new ideas through resourceful problem solving and creative business models that reflected the *innovation* variable. Meanwhile, resilience was reflected in 11 podcasts that chatted stories showing perseverance, failure, and recovery plans. **Strategic Approaches** variable was measured through the analysis of the following, *marketing techniques* and *funding strategies.* Half of the sample was found to be using social media for building brand image and identity, while the other half did not do any sort of online marketing and used the word-of-mouth on the one hand. On the other hand, *seven* podcasts discussed the importance of funding either its seed funding or bootstrapping or external investment or arbitrage or venture capital, yet the rest of the sample advised not have any sort of funding to avoid board approvals and business complications especially in the early years.

Figure 3. Strategic Approaches Results



Market Insights is examined through the analysis of the *market trends* and *consumer behavior*, where both shared the same results, as *nine,* 75% of the sample, podcasts mentioned how they use the customers' needs, wants, and online behavior in their marketing strategies, and explained the importance of monitoring both, the local and international market shifts. **Entrepreneurial Practices** variable was measured through *operations* and *hiring and team building,* where almost all the sample (11 episodes) shared their recruiting stories and what management style should be followed, yet almost half the sample (*five episodes, 42%)* shared their daily operations, workflow, and daily task management.

3. Success stories, Expert Insights, and Business Innovation

Success Stories was measured through the analysis of *start-to-scale journeys* and *turning point moments,* where 75% of the episodes shared their growth business stories from the beginning till their actual performance now, and 92% of the sample emphasized on the key decisions and challenges they faced that made them change their course of business once and for all.

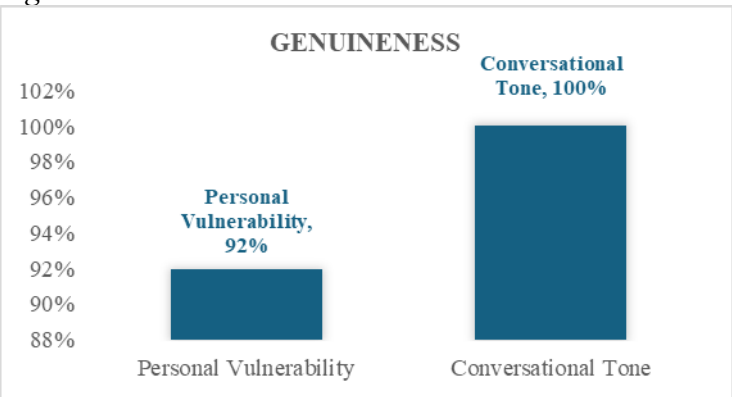
Meanwhile, **Expert Insights** was investigated through two concepts, *professional advice* and *trend forecasting*. The results showed that 100% of entrepreneurs shared actionable recommendations and business advice, and only 58% of the entrepreneurs' shared projections, predictions and assessment of where their industries are heading. **Business Innovation** was measured through *tech-driven approach* and *inventive adaptation,* where almost half the sample (*five episodes)* advised the use of technology and online space to build value and brand identity in the market, and *eight episodes* shared their experience on how they transformed their business in the time of crisis or during pressure.

Figure 4. Success Stories Results

4. Entrepreneur Genuineness and Reliability

Genuineness was investigated through the examination of the following concepts, personal *vulnerability* and *conversational tone.* The results found that almost all the sample (*11 episodes)* the entrepreneurs shared their failures, doubts, struggles, and transparency with themselves on the one hand. On the other hand, 100% of the sample, all the episodes reflected unscripted speaking style, where the guests were going with the flow and speaking from the heart, with no pre-planned script. **Reliability** was measured by the analysis of *guest qualifications* and *cited business facts or figures,* the results found that 100% of the sample, all guests, mentioned their educational backgrounds, extra qualifications and business expertise. While only 42% of the sample openly discussed their performance reports, statistics, or market research results.

Figure 5. Genuineness Results



Discussion

RQ1: In what ways do the content of the Egyptian entrepreneurial podcasts discusses and reflect business empowerment and growth?

The study found that the content of the Egyptian podcasts did not reflect the ***business empowerment aspect***, where reflected the personal growth stories only, yet motivational language and entrepreneurial community were not found. Consequently,

the whole empowerment aspect was not fully found, as most of the motivational speaking found in the episodes was mostly educational knowledge about the industry rather than in inspiring tone that boots confidence to the listeners. In other words, the episodes used lecture style conversation rather than an empowering and enabling conversation, where only *two* guests reflected that inspiring tone in their words, for instance "*All the blows that don't break your back make you stronger".* Additionally, the entrepreneurial community concept was not found much as well, where all the entrepreneurs were overwhelmed with their own experiences and none of them mentioned the importance of joining or building a community to help the new business owners and acts as compass to guide to the right path to overcome common mistakes, only *one* guests mentioned its non-existence indirectly in the following answer, "the lack of a robust environment for investors to exit their investments." Nevertheless, all the sample provided personal stories that reflects growth that eventually acted as an empowering and enabling concept, where these stories all revolved around either financial difficulties or leaving secured-job, as most of the entrepreneurs left a secure job and took a leap of faith in what they believe would be their best opportunity, "I encountered a difficulty of fundraising initially, having to sell personal assets like my car and motorcycles to fund the growing business," and "I left a secure banking job for the FinTech/non-banking financial services sector with EFG Hermes, yet it presented as a significant personal and professional leap for me later on." Nonetheless, the current study's results contradicted with a study conducted by Miniesy, Elshahawy & Fakhreldin (2022), where they found that 95% of their sample assured empowered existed through social media.

The study found podcasts drove towards ***business growth*** in its content, where the episodes smoothly discussed and showcased scalable business types, and provided strategies and insights on how to maintain profitable scalability, customer growth, effective KPIs and financial millstones. Nevertheless, the future of a company and its progression was not tackled as much, where most of the guests discussed it in a form of the existing situation and how they reached this level of accomplishment, but a detailed future tactic and expansion strategy was not found in all episodes. In other words, podcasts teach how to begin a business and maintain daily operations for average profits, but it did not insightfully discuss how to reach the maximum potential of it. The above results correspond with diffusion of innovation theory as business growth was disseminated through social media (García-Avilés, 2020).

RQ2: What frequent themes, strategic approaches, market insights, and entrepreneurial practices are discussed across selected podcast episodes?

The current study found that both *resilience* and *innovation* concepts were clearly reflected as the tested ***themes*** in the podcasts, where the entrepreneurs shared their creative ideas and problem-solving techniques that are reflected in the following results, *"if you want to be a CEO, you need to have an agency and think from the first principles perspectives, more like a rebel,"* and *""I founded a company initially focused on financing tuk-tuks, a unique approach at the time. The company later expanded to finance motorcycles, tricycles, and home appliances."* Those results are congruent with the study results of Welz et al. (2021), where it stated that podcasts

content dynamics are changeable and updated. ***Strategic Approaches*** were not clearly found based on the current study finding, where most of the entrepreneurs did not rely on social media marketing technique for building brand identities, and did not resort to venture labs and external funding for business expansion or initiation, which reflected their weak role in the entrepreneurial business contrasting what was expected of them.

Market Insights were evidently found in the study results, where guests discussed their marketing trends through the monitoring of the local and global shift occurring in their own industries, where some of them discussed the challenges of localizing a business that started in Europe, or globalizing a purely Egyptian need in terms of market differences and consumer behaviors towards some financial products. Additionally, they described how to handle the local peak economic phases to attract foreign investment that evidentially would change the business landscape in Egypt in later stages. Moreover, the entrepreneurs emphasized on the importance of studying the consumer behavior in terms of gathering insights on their needs and wants, and their selective interactive behavior. They highlighted the importance of being customer-centric, acquiring constant feedback, know their pain points, preferences and fears, offer something for the community not just the revenues of the product (having a social role and applying CSR, corporate social responsibility, as part of the product branding, offering the customized experience, offering offline service and presence for some businesses, simplifying the customer experience and offering instant-activating services.

Entrepreneurial Practices were thoroughly discussed in terms of team hiring and recruitment yet was not explored much in terms of daily operations and workflow. Nevertheless, the only work ethic that was mentioned by some of the businesspeople is the high-speed performance and willingness to work long hours and sacrifice personal time. In other words, the emphasis was on the concept of sacrificing personal and leisure time to be totally disbursed in your business project, that was the key plan for success when it comes to daily operations. Meanwhile, recruitment plan was greatly discussed in detail, where they thoroughly explained how a team should be picked and hired for their businesses, for instance, they identify first the talent and might offer partnership opportunities, they need the loyal, passionate, agile, hard-working, intelligent social skills to eventually build a strong company culture. *For some business the team building is the second important step that comes after securing a funding*. The study found that hiring brilliant people, even if they eventually leave, contributes to the ecosystem as a positive outcome and a "*natural evolution*" for the business. Congruently, these findings reflected the *media richness theory* assumption, where the strategies and market insights as well as the personal stories shared in passionate cues and emotional tones positively affected the perception of entrepreneurs (Ishiic et al., 2019). Additionally, the study findings contradict to some extent with the application of *media richness theory,* where Egyptian podcasts did not reflect the competence to deliver complex business content like strategic approaches and entrepreneurial practices, yet it succeeded in reflecting marketing insights, innovation and resilience. In other words, the study could not declare the degree of richness of the Egyptian podcasts.

RQ3: What natures of success stories and expertise insights are discussed in entrepreneurial podcasts, and how these narratives entice business innovation?

The study found that ***success stories*** was significantly shared by the studies sample where they discussed their business journeys from start-to-scale (the normal trend of beginning small and having an exponential growth through the business performance itself), as well as discussed turning points moments that changed their perspectives and shifted their business performance. Most of them stressed on their turning points stories more, where claimed that this is what made the business scale as it was the unexpected twist, for instance, pivoting to local manufacturing instead of importing, key players in the team resigning, being acquired by the major global players in the e-commerce industry, getting funds, resorting to performance marketing, etc. Those findings reflect *empowerment theory* in the cognitive, psychological and community perspectives as mentioned above (Masullo Chen, 2016). Nevertheless, a study conducted by Burnell, Neubert and Fisher (2023) contradicted with those finding, where its results showed limited guidance and limited impact on business growth. ***Expert Insights*** was highly found in the current study, where all business people provided insightful and creative recommendations on how to start and grow different business models, as well as provided detailed prediction of where their businesses are heading locally and globally. Almost all of them advised to seek mentorship wisely, where a new businessperson needs to trust his gut but seek validation. Maintaining good relationships with former colleagues, competitors as well as being agile and customer centric. *Diffusion of innovation theory* was clearly applied in these variables, where the *success stories* and the *insights* acted as the new business innovation that made the podcasts guests serve as the early adaptors conveying the adoption of new ideas.

Business Innovation was not found much in the studied sample, where less than half the entrepreneurs used tech-driven strategies to build brand value. However, most of them shared their expertise in changing some of their business decisions when faced with pressure or crisis as part of being adaptive and agile. For instance, using tech-driven service for fraud detection, cyber security and decrease of carbon footprint, integrating the online and offline retail stores to adapt to market penetration and consumer needs. Yet, most of the businesspeople stated that technology was used for the product building, and not for the brand value in the market, this was not discussed in the examined podcasts.

RQ4: To what extent do the tone, storytelling techniques, guest selection, and supporting evidence add to the genuineness and reliability of the entrepreneurial podcast?

The current study results showed a high degree of ***genuineness*** exemplified by the sample, where all shared their failure and personal doubts stories reflecting their susceptibility, and all of them spoke from the heart, where no script was reflected in their narration. In other words, the unscripted speaking and personal vulnerability showed the humane side of a successful businessman, which is the main idea behind having the podcast in the first place, as it should be a knowledge and experience sharing platform reflecting self- acceptance, realistic feelings, challenges, self-doubts

and advising against form of self-sabotaging. The later results are congruent with the results of a study conducted by Lindgren (2023), where it found that podcasts embodied intimacy and emotions. ***Reliability*** was fully found in the studied sample because of the following, all the sample shared their educational qualifications, however, not even half of them shared their business performance in terms of reports, statistics and numbers. In other words, they thoroughly discussed their businesses stages in terms of scaling and expansion from a generic yet emotional sense, but few of them shared actual numbers that reflects actual growth. The results of this question, however, acted congruently with *media richness theory*, where the key elements measured showed high degree of richness and effectiveness of the Egyptian podcasts through the tone, the genuineness and the educational credentials adding more trust and belief to the measured medium.

Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations

Conclusion

The current study examined the role of Egyptian business podcasts in driving business growth through the empowerment gained after being exposed to the knowledge-sharing platforms. Despite selecting different types of podcasts to provide a comparative analysis in the content, nevertheless, there is no significant difference found, where all of them followed the same questioning and narration technique, as they focused on the emotional aspect of the businesspeople journey and not the practical insights for free enterprise. The study shared some insightful results, where podcasts' content did not contribute much to business empowerment, yet it had a significant contribution to business growth. From the theoretical perspective RQ1 was supported by the empowerment theory as shared knowledge contributes to empowering listeners. Innovation and Resilience were clearly reflected as well as the market insights, however, strategic approaches and entrepreneurial practices was reflected as much. RQ2 was somehow aligned with media richness theory, yet not fully because of the following two variables, strategic approaches and entrepreneurial practices. The success stories and expert insights were found to entice the business innovation, drawing on the theory of diffusion of innovation in RQ3. Finally, tone, storytelling technique, and guests' selection was found to have a great impact on the genuine nature of the podcast but did not contribute much to its reliability, reflecting media richness theory evaluation and application in RQ4.

Limitations

The study limitation is reflected the in the following, the data was gathered from only 12 episodes and that would limit the results generalization. The study lacked audience insight as it only examined the content and not the impact or engagement level. The study tried to cover as much as possible business types, yet not all was covered that might distress the balance and the depth of the current study.

Recommendations

For future studies, its recommended to explore the listeners perspective, where an analysis of their opinion regarding the shared-knowledge, and its actual impact on their awareness and their entrepreneurial intent, as well as its impact on their business success, maybe in terms of higher sales, brand loyalty, etc. Longitudinal studies were would beneficial as it would track the podcasts' overtime and evaluate its outcomes, thus understanding more its impact on business growth and empowerment. Comparative study would be a great asset to the literature, where comparison between Arabic and English podcasts would be noteworthy, or comparative analysis between GCC countries, and examining one podcast would be more resourceful than examining different ones. Last, adding a deep psychological aspect more to the study, digging deeper in the empowerment variable and scrutinizing its different cognitive and emotional types on listeners, this would elevate from the study since media is an interdisciplinary study.

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Appendix 1.

Categories	Sub-Category	Operational Definitions
Empowerment	Motivational Language	Use of encouraging words or phrases to motivate actions and inspire confidence.
	Personal Stories of Growth	Guests narrate their own journeys and experience of how to overcome challenges and eventually succeed.
	Entrepreneurial Community	Importance of building a local entrepreneurial community.
Business Growth	Scalability	Discussing strategies and insights that enable business scalability
	Revenue or Growth Measurements	KPIs, financial milestones, or customer growth.
	Strategic Planning	Future discussions about company progression and expansion tactics.
Themes	Innovation	New ideas, inventive problem-solving, or distinguishing business models.
	Resilience	Stories that highlight perseverance, tenacity and failure retrieval.
Strategic Approaches	Marketing Techniques	Constructing brand names, social media, or marketing tactics.
	Funding Strategies	Seed funding, venture capital, etc.
Market Insights	Market Trends	Observing the local or global market shifts.
	Consumer Behavior	Understandings into what customers want and needs, and their interactional behavior.
Entrepreneurial Practices	Operations	Examples of daily practices, time management, or workflow.
	Hiring & Team Building	Advice or stories about recruiting or managing teams.
Success Stories	Start-to-Scale Journeys	Stories reflecting the growth of a business from start to scale.
	Turning Point Moments	Key decisions that altered the progression of a business.
Expert Insights	Professional Advice	Actionable advices from guests with expertise. (seek others help)
	Trend Forecasting	Prognostications or evaluations of where the industry is heading.
Business Innovation	Tech-Driven Approach	Use of technology to build value or grow and shine in the market.
	Inventive Adaptation	Stories about renovating under pressure or during crisis.
Genuineness	Personal Vulnerability	Guests or hosts sharing failures, doubts, or struggles, being honest with oneslf.
	Conversational Tone	unscripted speaking styles.
Reliability	Businessperson Qualifications	Educational qualifications, background, or business experience.
	Facts or Figures	Reports, research, statistics, etc.