Perceived Media Bias, Trust in Journalism and Democratic Engagement in North Western Nigeria: A Qualitative Study

Dr Samaila Balarabe
Department of Mass Communication,
Hassan Usman Katsina Polytechnic, P.M.B. 2052, Katsina
s.balarabe2013@gmail.com
08036185648
DOI: https://doi.org/10.63725/zajcom.v11.i1.07

Abstract

The media play a constitutionally recognized role in promoting democratic accountability in Nigeria. However, persistent perceptions of media bias arising from political ownership, commercialization and identity politics have increasingly shaped public trust in journalism and democratic participation. This study explored how media audiences in North-Western Nigeria perceive media bias, how such perceptions influence trust in journalism and how trust or distrust affects democratic engagement. A qualitative interpretive design was adopted, involving in-depth semi-structured interviews with 45 purposively selected participants from Katsina, Kano and Sokoto States. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings indicate that participants viewed media bias as a structural outcome of political ownership, ethnic alignment and editorial influence rather than isolated professional failures. Although respondents generally respected individual journalists, they expressed limited confidence in media institutions because of perceived political and commercial interference. Distrust in journalism produced two contrasting outcomes: political withdrawal among some participants and more critical forms of civic engagement among others, including cross-checking information, reliance on alternative media and digital activism. The study contributes to media and political communication scholarship by demonstrating that distrust in journalism does not invariably weaken democracy but can also encourage alternative forms of democratic participation. It recommends strengthening editorial independence, promoting media transparency and expanding media literacy initiatives to enhance public trust and democratic engagement.

Keywords: Media bias, trust in journalism, democratic engagement, Nigeria

Introduction

The mass media occupy a central position in Nigeria's democratic system. Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution mandates the press to hold government accountable, reinforcing journalism's role as a watchdog, agenda setter and facilitator of public debate (McQuail, 2010; Oso, 2012). Historically, Nigerian journalism contributed significantly to democratic struggles, particularly during military rule, when the press challenged authoritarian governance despite censorship and political repression (Olukotun, 2004). This legacy established journalism as an institution expected to promote transparency, accountability and democratic governance.

Despite this democratic tradition, public confidence in Nigerian journalism has declined considerably. The post-1999 media environment has been shaped by commercialization, ownership concentration and increasing political influence, raising concerns about editorial independence and public accountability (Adesina, 2015; Oso, 2012). Consequently, many Nigerians perceive news organizations as serving political, economic or regional interests rather than the broader public interest.

Empirical studies support these concerns. Okoro and Onwumechili (2018) found that election coverage frequently reflected partisan and regional preferences through disparities in candidate visibility and framing. Likewise, Ojebode (2019) reported that audiences who perceived political or ethnic bias expressed significantly lower trust in journalism, while Adebayo and Oni (2021) identified political interference, sensationalism and commercialization as major predictors of declining media credibility. Similarly, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2023) observed that many Nigerians increasingly depend on social media and alternative online platforms because they perceive mainstream news organizations as lacking neutrality and independence.

Perceptions of media bias are particularly pronounced during elections, security crises and other politically sensitive events, where audiences often accuse media organizations of selective reporting, agenda manipulation and unequal representation of competing interests (Okoro & Onwumechili, 2018; Asemah et al., 2017). These perceptions are reinforced by Nigeria's polarized political environment, in which news is frequently interpreted through ethnic, regional and partisan identities. Hostile Media Effect Theory suggests that individuals with strong political or group identities are more likely to perceive media coverage as biased against their interests, even when journalists attempt balanced reporting (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). In Nigeria, where political competition is closely intertwined with identity politics, such perceptions are particularly significant.

The rapid expansion of digital media has further transformed the country's information environment. Although social media has broadened access to political information and citizen participation, it has also fragmented information sources and weakened the traditional gatekeeping role of mainstream journalism (Reuters Institute, 2023). As trust in conventional media declines, citizens increasingly rely on alternative information platforms despite widespread concerns about misinformation and disinformation.

Existing Nigerian scholarship has established important relationships between media ownership, political influence, audience trust and democratic participation (Adebayo & Oni, 2021; Ojebode, 2019; Adesina, 2015; Oso, 2012). However, most studies have relied on quantitative surveys, content analyses or institutional assessments, providing limited understanding of how audiences themselves interpret media bias and negotiate trust within their everyday social and political experiences. Moreover, little research has examined these issues within the distinctive political, cultural and security context of North-Western Nigeria.

This study addresses these gaps through a qualitative interpretive approach that explores how media audiences construct perceptions of media bias, evaluate journalistic credibility and understand democratic engagement. Focusing on North-Western Nigeria, where insecurity, intense political competition and strong ethno-religious identities intersect with high media consumption, provides context-sensitive insights into the relationship between media performance, public trust and democratic participation. By foregrounding audience experiences from an under-researched region of the Global South, the study contributes to broader debates on media bias, journalism and democracy while offering practical implications for media professionals, regulators and policymakers seeking to strengthen public trust in journalism.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to explore how perceived media bias shapes trust in journalism and democratic engagement among media audiences in North-Western Nigeria.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Explore how media audiences in North-Western Nigeria perceive and interpret media bias in news reporting.
2. Examine how perceived media bias influences audiences' trust in journalism.
3. Explore how perceptions of media bias shape democratic engagement and civic participation.
4. Examine the strategies media audiences adopt in negotiating and responding to perceived media bias.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do media audiences in North-Western Nigeria perceive and interpret media bias in news reporting?

2. In what ways does perceived media bias influence audiences' trust in journalism?
3. How do perceptions of media bias shape democratic engagement and civic participation?
4. What strategies do media audiences adopt in negotiating and responding to perceived media bias?

Literature Review

Media Bias in the Nigerian Context

Media bias has received considerable scholarly attention in Nigeria because of its implications for democratic governance, public trust and national cohesion. Although scholars generally agree that bias reflects the country's political, ethnic and socio-economic realities, they differ in explaining its origins.

Political economy scholars argue that media bias is primarily structural, arising from ownership concentration, commercialization and political interference (Umechukwu, 2018; Adesina, 2015; Oso, 2012;). From this perspective, editorial decisions are often influenced by political and economic elites who own or finance media organizations, particularly during elections and other politically sensitive periods. While these studies explain the institutional foundations of bias, they provide limited insight into how audiences interpret such influences during everyday media consumption.

Content-based studies similarly demonstrate patterns of imbalance in Nigerian news coverage. Okoro and Onwumechili (2018), for example, found significant disparities in candidate visibility, framing and tone during election reporting, supporting Hallin and Mancini's (2004) concept of political parallelism, which suggests that media systems frequently reflect prevailing political cleavages. Likewise, Asemah, Ekhareafo and Olaniran (2017) observed that reporting on insurgency and communal conflicts often privileges official narratives, reinforcing perceptions of selective reporting.

An alternative explanation is provided by the Hostile Media Effect, which argues that audiences with strong political, ethnic or ideological identities may perceive balanced reporting as biased against their preferred groups (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). In Nigeria's highly polarized political environment, perceptions of media bias therefore appear to result from the interaction between structural characteristics of the media system and audience interpretations shaped by identity and political affiliation. Despite these contributions, few Nigerian studies have

examined these dimensions simultaneously from the perspective of media audiences.

Trust in Journalism in Nigeria

Trust in journalism is widely regarded as an important indicator of media legitimacy and democratic performance. Nigerian studies consistently report declining confidence in mainstream journalism, although they identify different contributing factors.

Oso (2012) attributes declining trust to ownership influence and political interference, arguing that audiences increasingly question journalists' independence. Similarly, Ojebode (2019) identifies perceived political and ethnic bias as major determinants of declining confidence in journalism. Other scholars emphasize commercialization and professional practices. Adebayo and Oni (2021) argue that sensationalism, commercial pressures and declining investigative journalism have weakened perceptions of media credibility, while the Reuters Institute (2023) reports increasing reliance on digital and social media because many Nigerians perceive mainstream news organizations as insufficiently independent.

Although these studies provide valuable evidence of declining trust, they rely predominantly on quantitative surveys or audience trend reports. Consequently, they reveal the extent of public distrust but provide relatively limited understanding of how audiences construct, negotiate and sustain trust within specific political, cultural and media environments.

Media, Trust and Democratic Engagement in Nigeria

The relationship between media trust and democratic engagement remains contested. One perspective argues that declining trust in journalism contributes to political cynicism, voter apathy and reduced democratic participation because citizens become less willing to rely on media information for political decision-making (INEC, 2023; Dahlgren, 2009).

In contrast, another body of scholarship suggests that distrust in mainstream media may encourage alternative forms of civic participation. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that digital communication enables citizens to organize political action outside traditional media institutions. Similarly, Uwalaka, Rickard and Watkins (2018) demonstrate how Nigerian youths used social media extensively during the #EndSARS movement to mobilize support, disseminate information and coordinate collective action.

While these contrasting perspectives advance understanding of media trust and democratic participation, most previous studies rely on quantitative surveys, social media analytics or event-based analyses. Consequently, they explain whether citizens participate but provide limited insight into how individuals interpret media bias and how those interpretations influence their democratic engagement in everyday life.

Overall, existing scholarship demonstrates broad agreement that perceived media bias contributes to declining trust in journalism. However, less attention has been paid to how perceptions of bias, trust and democratic engagement interact as interconnected social processes. Furthermore, little research has examined these relationships within North-Western Nigeria, where insecurity, identity politics and intense media consumption create a distinctive context for understanding media credibility and democratic participation.

By adopting a qualitative, audience-centred approach, this study addresses these gaps by exploring how media users interpret perceived media bias, negotiate trust in journalism and construct democratic engagement within their lived social and political experiences.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in an integrative theoretical framework comprising Hostile Media Effect Theory (HME), Media Trust Theory and the Political Economy of the Media. These complementary perspectives explain how audiences perceive media bias, develop trust or distrust in journalism and translate these perceptions into democratic engagement. Collectively, the theories informed the development of the interview guide, the thematic coding process and the interpretation of the findings, while allowing new themes to emerge inductively during analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Hostile Media Effect Theory

Hostile Media Effect Theory posits that individuals with strong political or group identities tend to perceive even balanced media coverage as biased against their preferred positions (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). Such perceptions become more pronounced in polarized societies where news is interpreted through ethnic, regional, religious or partisan identities.

The theory is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where political competition is closely associated with identity politics. During elections and security crises, audiences frequently evaluate media reports according to whether they appear to favour or

disadvantage their social or political groups (Okoro & Onwumechili, 2018; Umechukwu, 2018; Asemah et al., 2017). Consequently, perceptions of media bias often reflect both the content of news and audiences' identity-based interpretations.

In this study, Hostile Media Effect Theory provided a framework for examining how participants interpreted media bias and how political, ethnic and regional identities shaped their evaluations of news reporting.

Media Trust Theory

Media Trust Theory conceptualizes trust as confidence in journalism's professionalism, independence, fairness, accuracy and commitment to the public interest (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). Trust therefore extends beyond individual journalists to the credibility of journalism as a social institution.

In Nigeria, political interference, commercialization and declining professional standards have increasingly challenged public confidence in journalism (Adesina, 2015; Oso, 2012). Ojebode (2019) further argues that audiences who perceive media reporting as politically or ethnically biased are significantly less likely to trust mainstream news organizations.

This theory guided the examination of how participants evaluated journalistic credibility, distinguished between individual journalists and media organizations and explained their trust in different media platforms.

Political Economy of the Media

Whereas Hostile Media Effect Theory and Media Trust Theory focus primarily on audience perceptions, the Political Economy of the Media emphasizes the institutional conditions under which news is produced. The theory argues that ownership structures, commercialization, state regulation and elite interests shape editorial decisions and constrain journalistic autonomy (McChesney, 2015).

Within Nigeria, media ownership is concentrated among political and economic elites, creating persistent concerns about editorial independence and the influence of political and commercial interests on news production (Oso, 2012). Consequently, perceptions of media bias are often rooted not only in audience interpretation but also in observable institutional arrangements that influence media performance.

The theory therefore provides an important structural perspective for understanding participants' views on ownership influence, political interference and editorial autonomy.

Integrating the Theoretical Perspectives

The three theories provide complementary explanations for the relationship between perceived media bias, trust in journalism and democratic engagement. The Political Economy of the Media explains the structural environment within which news is produced; Hostile Media Effect Theory explains how audiences interpret media content through social and political identities; and Media Trust Theory explains how these perceptions influence confidence in journalism and subsequent democratic participation.

Together, these perspectives enable a multi-level understanding of the phenomenon by linking institutional influences, audience perceptions and democratic behaviour. Their integration also strengthens the study by connecting participants' lived experiences with broader theoretical explanations while remaining open to inductively generated insights during thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative interpretivist research design to explore how media audiences in North-Western Nigeria perceive media bias, construct trust in journalism and understand democratic engagement. The interpretivist approach was considered appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, meanings and interpretations rather than measuring predetermined variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Research Design

A qualitative interpretive design was employed to generate contextually grounded insights into how audiences perceive media bias, evaluate journalistic credibility and make sense of democratic participation. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, the study aimed to understand participants' subjective experiences within their socio-political environment.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Katsina, Kano and Sokoto States in North-Western Nigeria. The region was selected because it combines intense political competition, persistent security challenges, strong ethno-religious identities and extensive reliance on both traditional and digital media. These characteristics provide an

important context for examining the relationship between perceived media bias, trust in journalism and democratic engagement.

Target Population

The target population comprised adult media users (18 years and above) residing in Katsina, Kano and Sokoto States who regularly accessed political and public affairs information through traditional media (radio, television and newspapers) and/or digital platforms, including online news sites and social media. Participants were selected because they possessed sufficient media exposure and civic awareness to provide informed perspectives on the issues under investigation.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, which is appropriate for identifying information-rich individuals with relevant experience of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015). Eligibility required participants to be adults, regular consumers of news and residents of North-Western Nigeria.

A total of 45 participants were interviewed across the three states. Sample size was guided by the principles of information power (Malterud et al., 2016) and data saturation (Guest et al., 2006). Data collection ceased when no substantially new themes emerged, indicating that sufficient conceptual depth had been achieved.

The three states were purposively selected because they represent important variations within North-Western Nigeria. Kano is the region's principal commercial and media centre with diverse media audiences; Katsina provides perspectives shaped by its political significance and prolonged security challenges; while Sokoto offers distinctive cultural, religious and political experiences as the seat of the Sokoto Caliphate. To enhance the breadth of perspectives, participants were selected to reflect variation in age, gender, educational attainment, occupation, political orientation and media consumption patterns.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between January and March 2026. The interview guide was developed from the study objectives and theoretical framework, covering participants' media consumption, perceptions of media bias, trust in journalism and democratic engagement.

The guide was pilot-tested with five media users in Kaduna State, which was excluded from the main study. Feedback from the pilot informed minor revisions to improve question clarity and sequencing.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in either English or Hausa, according to participants' preferences. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded, while field notes documented contextual observations and non-verbal cues.

Hausa interviews were transcribed in the original language before being translated into English. To enhance translation quality, selected transcripts were independently reviewed by an experienced bilingual communication scholar and identified discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Analysis began with repeated reading of transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial coding combined deductive codes, derived from the theoretical framework, with inductive codes emerging directly from participants' narratives.

Related codes were grouped into broader categories and refined into themes through iterative review to ensure conceptual coherence and distinctiveness. Themes were subsequently defined and interpreted in relation to the study's research questions and theoretical framework.

To enhance credibility and dependability, an audit trail documenting coding decisions, theme development and analytical reflections was maintained throughout the analysis. Participants' verbatim quotations are presented in the findings to illustrate and substantiate the themes.

Findings

This section presents the themes that emerged from the interviews, illustrating how participants perceived media bias, negotiated trust in journalism and understood democratic engagement within Nigeria's contemporary media environment.

Theme 1: Perceptions of Media Bias

Participants consistently perceived media bias as structural rather than accidental, attributing it to political ownership, ethnic alignment and editorial influence. Rather

than viewing bias solely as a failure of professional journalism, respondents regarded it as a consequence of the broader political economy of Nigerian media.

Political ownership emerged as the most frequently cited source of bias. Participants believed that media organizations owned or influenced by politicians and powerful business interests often promoted particular political agendas, especially during elections. Editorial decisions were widely perceived as reflecting the interests of owners and major advertisers rather than the public interest.

Ethnic and regional identity also shaped participants' interpretations of news coverage. Respondents frequently argued that media organizations favoured particular regions or groups while marginalizing others, especially in reporting elections, insecurity and governance. These perceptions were particularly strong among participants from conflict-affected communities, who believed that security reporting often reinforced stereotypes and underrepresented local realities.

Participants further identified selective reporting as an important manifestation of media bias. They argued that bias was evident not only in what was reported but also in the omission or limited prominence of stories considered politically sensitive.

These findings indicate that participants understood media bias as arising from both institutional factors and identity-based interpretations, reflecting the interaction of political economy and audience perception.

Theme 2: Trust in Journalism

Trust in journalism emerged as conditional rather than absolute. Participants clearly distinguished between individual journalists and media organizations, expressing greater confidence in journalists perceived as professional and ethical while questioning the independence of the institutions employing them.

Mainstream media organizations were frequently described as politically influenced, commercially driven and lacking editorial autonomy. Consequently, respondents often evaluated media credibility on the basis of individual journalists' reputation rather than institutional affiliation.

A notable finding was the relatively high level of trust placed in radio. Participants consistently regarded radio as the most credible medium because of its accessibility, use of local languages and stronger connection to community concerns. Television

and newspapers, by contrast, were more commonly associated with elite interests and political influence.

Overall, trust was shown to be selective, negotiated and continually reassessed in response to perceived media performance.

Theme 3: Democratic Engagement
Participants described two contrasting responses to perceived media bias.

The first was democratic withdrawal, reflected in reduced interest in political news, avoidance of election-related information and declining confidence in formal democratic processes. Some respondents deliberately limited their exposure to political news because they viewed it as repetitive, partisan and manipulative.

The second was critical and alternative engagement. Rather than withdrawing from politics, many participants reported becoming more active information seekers by comparing multiple news sources, participating in online discussions and engaging in digital activism.

Several respondents cited recent civic movements as evidence that citizens increasingly rely on social media and alternative communication networks when mainstream media are perceived as inadequate. These findings suggest that distrust in journalism does not inevitably reduce democratic participation but can redirect it towards alternative forms of civic engagement.

Strategies Adopted in Response to Perceived Media Bias
Participants described several strategies for managing perceived media bias.

The most common was cross-checking information across multiple media platforms before accepting political news as credible.

One participant explained: *"Whenever I hear a political story on one radio station, I don't accept it immediately. I listen to another station, check online newspapers and sometimes read what people are saying on Facebook before deciding what to believe." (Male, Kano State)*

Another respondent stated: *"Every media house has its own interest. If you depend on only one source, you may not get the full picture. That is why I compare different sources before making up my mind." (Female, Katsina State)*

Many participants also reported increasing reliance on alternative digital platforms, including social media, online news sites and citizen journalism, because these platforms offered multiple perspectives and faster access to information.

As one participant observed: *"Most times I get breaking news first on X or Facebook before it appears on television. Even if social media is not always accurate, it gives different opinions that help me understand what is happening." (Male, Sokoto State)*

Another participant remarked: *"Mainstream media sometimes avoid certain stories, but on social media people upload videos and eyewitness accounts immediately. That helps me compare different versions of events." (Female, Kano State)*

Participants also practised selective trust, placing greater confidence in journalists with established reputations for fairness and professionalism.

One respondent explained: *"I don't trust every station anymore. There are some journalists whose reports I respect because they are usually balanced. Once I know the reporter, I can decide whether to believe the story." (Male, Katsina State)*

Similarly, another participant noted: *"I trust individuals more than organizations. Some journalists still report fairly, even if the media organization itself is influenced by politicians." (Female, Sokoto State)*

Some participants described civic advocacy and community engagement as alternative responses to perceived media bias.

One participant commented: *"When I feel the media are ignoring an important issue, I share information online and discuss it with others. Sometimes social media gives ordinary people a stronger voice than television." (Male, Kano State)*

Another added: *"Instead of waiting for the media to tell our stories, we organize discussions in our community and use WhatsApp groups to create awareness about issues affecting us." (Female, Katsina State)*

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that participants were active interpreters of media content rather than passive recipients. Their responses show that perceived media bias encouraged information verification, selective trust, reliance on

alternative media and civic participation, suggesting that distrust in mainstream journalism may reshape rather than diminish democratic engagement.

Table 1: Summary of Themes Emerging from the Thematic Analysis
Based on the thematic analysis conducted in the study, the following thematic Table 1 summarizes the major themes.

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Description/Interpretation	Illustrative Participant Evidence
Theme 1: Perceptions of Media Bias	Political ownership and sponsorship	Participants perceived media bias as a structural outcome of political ownership, elite influence and advertiser pressure. News coverage was viewed as serving political and commercial interests rather than the public interest.	*"Most television stations support whoever owns them. During elections, you can almost predict the stories they will carry."* Male, Kano)
	Ethnic and regional alignment	Participants believed that media organizations favoured particular ethnic, regional or religious groups, especially in reporting elections and insecurity.	*"When security issues happen here, the media sometimes present us as if we are the problem instead of showing what is really happening."* (Female, Katsina)
	Selective reporting and agenda-setting	Respondents argued that media bias was evident not only in what was reported but also in what was ignored, underreported or given little prominence.	*"Some stories disappear because they are against powerful people. Sometimes silence is the biggest bias."* (Male, Sokoto)
Theme 2: Trust in Journalism	Conditional trust in journalists	Participants distinguished between individual journalists and media organizations, expressing greater trust in journalists perceived as professional and ethical.	*"I trust some journalists because they have integrity, but I don't trust the companies they work for."* (Female, Kano)
	Institutional distrust	Mainstream media organizations were widely perceived as politically	*"The media have become controlled by politicians. It is*

		influenced, commercially driven and lacking editorial independence.	*difficult to know whose interest they are serving."* (Male, Katsina)
	Radio as the most trusted medium	Radio was regarded as more credible because of its accessibility, use of local languages and stronger community orientation.	*"Radio speaks our language and discusses issues affecting ordinary people. That is why I trust it more."* (Female, Sokoto)
Theme 3: Democratic Engagement	Democratic withdrawal	Some participants reported reduced political interest, avoidance of news and reluctance to participate in elections because of distrust in the media.	*"Sometimes I stop following political news because it is always one-sided. It makes me lose interest in politics."* (Male, Katsina)
	Critical and alternative engagement	Other participants responded by verifying information across multiple sources, using social media, participating in online discussions and engaging in civic activism.	*"Instead of depending on television, I compare different sources online before deciding what to believe."* (Female, Kano)
	Digital activism and citizen participation	Distrust in mainstream media encouraged participants to use social media, citizen journalism and community networks to mobilize and express political opinions.	*"If the media ignore an issue, people now use WhatsApp, Facebook and X to make their voices heard."* (Male, Sokoto)

Source: Field Interviews (2026).

Table 2: Relationship between Themes, Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

Analytical link between research questions, themes and theoretical framework were demonstrated in Table 2 below:

Research Question	Main Theme	Sub-themes	Supporting Theory
How do media audiences perceive and interpret media bias?	Perceptions of Media Bias	Political ownership; Ethnic/regional alignment; Selective reporting	Hostile Media Effect Theory; Political Economy of the Media
How do perceived media bias influence trust in journalism?	Trust in Journalism	Conditional trust; Institutional distrust; Radio credibility	Media Trust Theory
How do perceptions of media bias shape democratic engagement?	Democratic Engagement	Democratic withdrawal; Critical engagement; Digital activism	Media Trust Theory; Hostile Media Effect Theory
What strategies do audiences adopt in response to perceived media bias?	Democratic Engagement	Cross-checking information; Social media reliance; Selective trust; Civic activism	Hostile Media Effect Theory; Political Economy of the Media

Source: Author's Thematic Analysis (2026).

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that perceived media bias, trust in journalism and democratic engagement are closely interconnected within the socio-political context of North-Western Nigeria. Rather than viewing media bias as isolated instances of poor journalism, participants consistently interpreted it as a product of broader political, economic and socio-cultural structures. This supports the argument that audience perceptions of media performance are shaped by both institutional realities and lived political experiences.

Consistent with earlier Nigerian studies (Ojebode, 2019; Adebayo & Oni, 2021; Oso, 2012), participants associated declining trust in journalism with political interference, commercialization and ownership influence. However, this study extends previous research by demonstrating that audiences distinguish between individual journalists and media institutions. While respondents generally respected journalists regarded as ethical and professional, they expressed considerably less confidence in media organizations perceived to be influenced by political and commercial interests. This distinction provides a more nuanced understanding of media trust than that offered by most survey-based studies.

The findings also resonate with research from other African contexts. Ogola (2011) reported that perceptions of political influence weakened confidence in Kenyan media during election periods, while Wasserman (2018) linked declining trust in South African journalism to ownership concentration, commercialization and political polarization. Similar patterns emerged in this study, although participants further emphasized the influence of insecurity, ethno-regional identities and historical experiences of marginalization, illustrating how local political conditions shape perceptions of media credibility.

The study also supports and extends Hostile Media Effect Theory. In line with Gunther and Schmitt (2004), participants frequently interpreted election and security reporting through political, ethnic and regional identities. However, their perceptions were not based solely on psychological predispositions. Respondents consistently referred to observable institutional factors including ownership structures, political influence and selective reporting as evidence supporting their judgments. This suggests that, within the Nigerian context, perceived media bias reflects the interaction between audience interpretation and structural characteristics of the media system. Integrating Hostile Media Effect Theory with the Political Economy of the Media therefore provides a more comprehensive explanation of audience perceptions than either perspective alone.

The relationship between trust in journalism and democratic engagement also proved more complex than commonly assumed. Previous studies have associated declining media trust with political cynicism, voter apathy and reduced democratic participation (INEC, 2023; Dahlgren, 2009). While some participants in this study reported withdrawing from political news and expressing skepticism towards formal democratic institutions, many others responded differently. Rather than disengaging, they increasingly verified information across multiple platforms, relied on alternative media and participated in digital civic engagement. This finding supports Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) argument that distrust in traditional institutions may encourage new forms of networked political participation and is consistent with Uwalaka, Rickard and Watkins' (2018) observations regarding digitally mediated activism in Nigeria.

The findings, therefore, challenge the assumption that declining trust in journalism inevitably weakens democracy. Instead, distrust appears to produce two possible outcomes: democratic withdrawal among some citizens and more critical, participatory forms of engagement among others. Which outcome emerges depends largely on citizens' access to alternative information sources, political efficacy and opportunities for civic participation.

The study further contributes to Media Trust Theory by demonstrating that trust is dynamic, negotiated and context-dependent rather than a fixed institutional attitude. Participants continually reassessed the credibility of journalists, media organizations and alternative information sources in response to changing political events and media performance. Trust was therefore selective and conditional, reflecting ongoing evaluations of fairness, independence and professional integrity.

The findings also extend the Political Economy of the Media by showing that audiences possess considerable awareness of ownership structures, commercialization and elite influence. Participants interpreted media credibility not only through news content but also through their understanding of the institutional conditions under which journalism is produced. This suggests that public perceptions of media bias are informed by broader knowledge of Nigeria's political and economic environment rather than by media content alone.

Overall, the study advances an integrated understanding of media bias, trust in journalism and democratic engagement by demonstrating that these processes are mutually reinforcing and shaped simultaneously by institutional structures, identity politics and audience interpretation. By grounding these relationships in the lived experiences of media audiences in North-Western Nigeria, the study contributes context-sensitive evidence to media and democracy scholarship and broadens the application of these theories beyond their predominantly Western settings.

Conclusion

This study examined how perceived media bias shapes trust in journalism and democratic engagement among media audiences in North-Western Nigeria. The findings demonstrate that participants interpreted media bias as a structural outcome of political ownership, commercialization and identity politics rather than as isolated professional shortcomings. These perceptions significantly influenced trust in journalism, with respondents expressing greater confidence in individual journalists than in media institutions, which were widely viewed as vulnerable to political and commercial influence.

The study further shows that declining trust in journalism does not produce a single democratic outcome. While some participants reported political disengagement and reduced interest in formal democratic processes, others responded by critically evaluating information, relying on multiple news sources and participating in digital and community-based civic engagement. These findings suggest that distrust in mainstream journalism can simultaneously weaken conventional participation and stimulate alternative forms of democratic involvement.

The study contributes to media and political communication scholarship by demonstrating that perceived media bias, trust in journalism and democratic engagement are mutually reinforcing processes shaped by institutional structures, identity politics and audience interpretation. By providing evidence from North-Western Nigeria, it extends existing theories beyond their predominantly Western applications and offers context-sensitive insights into the dynamics of media and democracy in emerging democratic societies.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, media institutions, professional associations and civil society organizations:

i. Media organizations, professional bodies and regulatory agencies should encourage the voluntary disclosure of ownership structures, editorial policies and major funding sources to strengthen public confidence while recognizing the diversity of media ownership models.
ii. Regulatory agencies, including the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC), should continue to strengthen mechanisms that promote editorial independence, accountability and professional standards, while minimizing undue political and commercial influence.
iii. Government, development partners and philanthropic organizations should expand support for public-interest, investigative and community media through transparent and sustainable funding mechanisms that safeguard editorial autonomy.
iv. Media institutions should strengthen internal editorial policies that reduce undue influence from owners, advertisers and political actors, while reinforcing ethical decision-making and professional accountability.
v. Journalism schools and professional associations should expand training in investigative reporting, fact-checking, digital verification and ethical journalism to improve reporting quality and public credibility.
vi. Government agencies, educational institutions and civil society organizations should collaborate to improve citizens' ability to evaluate news credibility, recognize bias and verify information across multiple platforms.
vii. Media organizations, technology platforms and independent fact-checking organizations should expand collaborative initiatives that promote verification, responsible digital communication and public access to credible information.
viii. Media organizations, election management bodies and professional regulators should continue to strengthen professional guidelines that encourage balanced

election coverage and conflict-sensitive reporting while avoiding stereotyping and exclusion.

ix. Media institutions should expand interactive programmes, town-hall discussions and community engagement initiatives that provide opportunities for inclusive public deliberation and democratic participation.

x. Given the high level of public confidence in radio, particularly in rural communities, policymakers and media organizations should continue to strengthen radio-based civic education while integrating television, digital and community media to reach diverse audiences.

References

Adebayo, S. O., & Oni, A. A. (2021). Media credibility and audience trust in Nigeria's digital news environment. *Journal of African Media Studies, 13*(2), 201–218. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00045_1

Adesina, O. C. (2015). Ownership structure and political influence in Nigerian media. *African Journalism Studies, 36*(3), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2015.1084582

Asemah, E. S., Ekhareafo, D. O., & Olaniran, B. A. (2017). *Perspectives on political communication in Nigeria*. Jos: University Press.

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action. *Information, Communication & Society, 15*(5), 739–768. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research inPsychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. London: Sage.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). London: Sage.

Dahlgren, P. (2009). *Media and political engagement: Citizens, communication and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage.

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods, 18*(1), 59–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903

Gunther, A. C., & Schmitt, K. (2004). Mapping boundaries of the hostile media effect. *Journal of Communication, 54*(1), 55–70. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02613.x

INEC. (2023). *Post-election review report*. Abuja: Independent National Electoral Commission.

Kohring, M., & Matthes, J. (2007). Trust in news media. *Communication Research, 34*(2), 231– 252. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650206298071

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. London: Sage.

Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research, 26*(13), 1753–1760. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444

McChesney, R. W. (2015). *Rich media, poor democracy: Communication politics in dubious times*. New York: The New Press.

Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Eddy, K., Robertson, C. T., & Nielsen, R. K. (2023). *Reuters Institute digital news report: Nigeria*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Ogola, G. (2011). The political economy of the media in Kenya: From Kenyatta's nation-building press to Kibaki's local-language FM radio. *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies, 32*(2), 20–35.

Ojebode, A. (2019). Journalism credibility, audience trust and democratic participation in Nigeria. *Journal of African Media Studies, 11*(3), 329–346. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams.11.3.329_1

Okoro, N., & Onwumechili, C. (2018). Election coverage and media bias in Nigeria. *African Journalism Studies, 39*(1), 50–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2018.1452950

Oso, L. (2012). Press and politics in Nigeria: On whose side? *African Journalism Studies, 33*(2), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2012.11477341

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). London: Sage.

Temin, J., & Smith, D. A. (2002). Media matters: Evaluating the role of the media in Ghana's 2000 elections. *African Affairs, 101*(405), 585–605.

Umechukwu, S. N. (2018). Political economy of media ownership in Nigeria. *International Journal of Media and Communication Studies, 10*(4), 32–41.

Uwalaka, T., Rickard, L. N., & Watkins, S. C. (2018). Mobile social media and protest participation in Nigeria. *Information, Communication & Society, 21*(6), 808–825. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1290126

Wasserman, H. (2018). *Media, geopolitics and power: A view from the Global South*. University of Illinois Press.