

Mirror and Mirage: Navigating Trust and Power in The Nigerian Media Landscape

EKE, CHIGOZI (PHD)

Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

Abstract- *This study evaluated the mirror and mirage: navigating trust and power in the Nigerian media landscape. The media trust theory was anchored in this study. This study is grounded in the pragmatic research philosophy, and adopts a mixed-method research design. The population of the study consists of media audiences in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, which, according to the National Population Commission's 2022 projection, is estimated at approximately 3.7 million people, reflecting a diverse mix of socio-economic, educational, and professional backgrounds. The study determines a sample size of 400 respondents, derived using Yamane's formula. The study employs a multi-stage sampling technique, first stratifying respondents by local government areas within Port Harcourt to capture demographic spread, and then applying simple random sampling to select participants within each stratum, ensuring fairness and diversity in selection. Data collection involves a survey method through structured questionnaires to generate quantitative insights on levels of trust, ownership perceptions, and media literacy, complemented by in-depth interviews with journalists and media practitioners to provide qualitative depth on ownership, regulation, and platformization dynamics. For data analysis, quantitative data was processed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis with the aid of SPSS to establish relationships among variables, while qualitative data were analysed through thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns and contextual meanings. The findings revealed that media ownership and government regulation significantly undermine public trust in Nigerian media, as the survey showed strong negative correlations between ownership control, regulatory interference, and credibility, while the thematic analysis reinforced this by highlighting journalists' experiences of editorial pressure, censorship, and audience scepticism toward biased reporting. The study concluded that media ownership and government regulation remain decisive factors shaping public trust in Nigerian media, and unless editorial independence and fair regulatory practices are strengthened, trust in journalism will continue to erode. The study recommended that the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and media ownership boards should enforce transparent ownership structures and strengthen editorial independence to rebuild public trust in journalism.*

Keywords: *Mirror, Mirage, Trust, Power, Nigerian Media Landscape*

I. INTRODUCTION

The media in the twenty-first century embody a dual character as both a mirror and a mirage of society. On the one hand, it reflects public realities, concerns, and aspirations, serving as a critical mechanism for democratic accountability and information exchange. On the other hand, media systems often refract reality, shaping it according to the interests of owners, advertisers, political elites, or algorithms. Globally, audiences are increasingly consuming news through digital platforms rather than traditional outlets, with social media and video-sharing sites now serving as the main entry points for information (Newman et al., 2023). However, this shift has been accompanied by declining trust in legacy media and a growing dependence on private technology companies to curate and distribute information, thereby complicating the role of media as a neutral mirror of society (Reuters Institute, 2025).

Worldwide, public trust in media has steadily eroded as scepticism toward institutions has deepened. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2025) highlights a widening perception gap between the public and traditional sources of authority, including government and journalism, while trust in "my employer" remains relatively stronger. Similarly, earlier studies had already documented declining faith in mass media across the globe, linked to political polarization, disinformation, and selective exposure (Hanitzsch et al., 2019; Guess et al., 2020). These developments illustrate that while the media maintains symbolic power, its legitimacy in the eyes of audiences is increasingly fragile. This condition complicates the democratic function of media, as diminished trust can discourage civic engagement and foster susceptibility to misinformation.

Press freedom dynamics further complicate this picture, as economic pressures and ownership concentration constrain journalistic independence. Reporters without Borders (2025) identifies financial fragility and proprietorial interference as key global threats to press freedom, echoing earlier concerns about the economic viability of journalism in the digital age (Pickard, 2020). The weakening of independent media outlets, often due to dwindling advertising revenues and political capture, creates conditions where journalism may be less capable of fulfilling its watchdog role. This suggests that the structural power of media institutions is inseparable from their economic and regulatory contexts.

Across Africa, the media landscape is shaped by both expansion and exclusion. Mobile connectivity has dramatically widened access to digital information, but persistent gaps along lines of income, education, gender, and geography continue to define participation in public discourse (GSMA, 2024). While the continent has experienced rapid growth in mobile penetration and digital engagement, these usage gaps threaten to reproduce inequalities in voice and representation. Earlier continental surveys had similarly emphasized that uneven access and varying levels of media literacy alter how Africans experience trust and credibility in information sources (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018). Thus, the African information ecosystem illustrates both the promise of democratization and the peril of marginalization.

Evidence from large-scale surveys supports these observations. Afrobarometer (2024) reports that digital news use is rising across Africa, but disparities in exposure remain tied to socioeconomic factors. In addition, Afrobarometer (2025) notes that media exposure has complex relationships with institutional trust: while informed citizens may be more politically aware, they may also become more polarized or sceptical depending on the framing and credibility of the content they consume. This dual effect underscores the notion that media functions simultaneously as a mirror, reflecting democratic aspirations, and a mirage, obscuring or distorting them when credibility cues are weak.

In Nigeria, these global and continental trends intersect with specific historical, regulatory, and

economic dynamics. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2024) shows that social platforms, particularly WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube, dominate news discovery for Nigerians, even as television remains a leading medium for mass communication. Internews (2024) highlights the continuing strength of broadcast television in advertising markets but also acknowledges the fragmentation of audiences across digital platforms. This duality positions Nigerian media within a hybrid system, where traditional broadcasters, digital-native outlets, and global platforms compete for influence, visibility, and trust.

The regulatory environment in Nigeria has been particularly consequential in shaping trust and power in the media. In 2024, a Federal High Court ruling curtailed the National Broadcasting Commission's authority to fine broadcasters, signalling a liberalizing shift in media regulation (Premium Times, 2024). At the same time, other legal proposals sought to impose stricter oversight of social media and online platforms, including requiring physical offices in Nigeria and expanding obligations under data protection laws (Freedom House, 2024). Parallel to these developments, prosecutions under the Cybercrime Act illustrate the risks journalists face in a restrictive legal environment (Reuters, 2024). These regulatory fluctuations demonstrate how state power can both enhance and undermine public trust in the media, depending on implementation and intent.

Ownership patterns and economic precarity also shape the Nigerian media environment. Scholars have long argued that Nigerian media outlets remain susceptible to the influence of proprietors, advertisers, and political patrons, which affects editorial independence and content credibility (Ojebode & Akinwale, 2019). Civil society reports confirm that economic fragility and political pressures undermine journalistic freedom and safety (Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development, 2025). These dynamics contribute to audience scepticism about whether media represent public interest or elite agendas, reinforcing a cycle where ownership power influences trust, and declining trust further weakens the legitimacy of journalism.

A more recent dimension involves the platformization of Nigerian media, especially with

the rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithmic curation. While global discussions often emphasize spectacular risks such as deepfakes, evidence suggests that polarization and algorithm-driven attention economies pose more significant challenges than isolated disinformation incidents (Brennen Centre, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2024). International frameworks such as UNESCO's Internet for Trust Guidelines (2023) and the EU's Digital Services Act (2024) have sought to create accountability structures for platforms, but their applicability to Nigeria depends on local institutional capacity and political will. In a media ecosystem where WhatsApp groups and video content dominate, these challenges are especially salient.

This study conceptualizes trust and power as interdependent variables. Trust refers to audience confidence in the credibility, transparency, and motives of media institutions, while power reflects ownership structures, regulatory regimes, and platform governance mechanisms. Together, they define the conditions of Nigerian media practice, shaping not only what information circulates but also how it is received and acted upon by the public. By integrating global trends in media trust, continental issues of connectivity and freedom, and Nigeria's specific political economy of communication, this introduction establishes the foundation for exploring how media functions as both a mirror of democratic aspirations and a mirage that can distort them in practice. In doing so, the study adopts a human-centered lens to examine how citizens experience media in ways that affect governance, accountability, and collective life.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Nigerian media faces a critical challenge where trust and power collide with the realities of governance, technology, and institutional weakness. For years, the press has served as a platform for civic engagement and democratic accountability, yet ownership interests, political interference, sensational reporting, and economic struggles steadily weaken its credibility. The rapid rise of digital and social platforms as the main sources of news further fuels the spread of misinformation, amplifies algorithmic biases, and reduces editorial standards, leaving audiences uncertain about what to believe. Many Nigerians openly question whether

media organizations serve the public or operate in the interest of proprietors, advertisers, and government regulators. Citizens witness frequent instances of censorship, online harassment of journalists, and inconsistent enforcement of broadcasting rules, all of which deepen suspicion toward the media. At the same time, shrinking revenues push many outlets to chase clicks and sensational headlines rather than prioritize accuracy and accountability.

On the ground, Nigerians consume more news than ever through mobile and online channels, yet their confidence in the reliability of this information continues to erode. Journalists struggle daily with political pressure, economic insecurity, and technological disruptions that dictate what content circulates and how it is received. The pressing problem, therefore, is that the media, expected to mirror the realities and aspirations of society, often projects a distorted mirage shaped by power structures, leaving citizens caught between information abundance and trust deficit. This study examines how ownership patterns and regulatory practices influence public trust in the Nigerian media; assesses the role of digital platforms and technological disruptions in shaping perceptions of credibility and power in news consumption, and evaluates the relationship between economic pressures, journalistic practices, and audience confidence in Nigerian media content

Concept of Trust

Trust in media represents the confidence audiences place in news sources to provide accurate, fair, and reliable information. It captures both perceptions of factual correctness and judgments about institutional motives. Research emphasizes that trust operates at multiple levels: trust in specific outlets, trust in journalists as professionals, and trust in the media system as a whole (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). In democratic contexts, high trust strengthens legitimacy and fosters engagement, while low trust creates scepticism, weakens civic participation, and drives people toward alternative or non-institutional sources of information (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). This makes trust a central concept for understanding how media functions as either a mirror of democratic aspirations or a mirage that distorts them.

Globally, evidence shows a steady erosion of media trust in the past decade. Large-scale surveys, such as the Edelman Trust Barometer (2025), report widening scepticism toward traditional news outlets, often linked to political polarization, misinformation, and declining institutional credibility. Research confirms that distrust increases in contexts where media are perceived as captured by elites or where audiences suspect systemic bias (Stromback et al., 2020). In addition, audiences tend to express higher trust in sources they perceive as proximate or relevant, such as local outlets or personal networks, compared to national or international organizations (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). This uneven distribution of trust highlights its contextual and dynamic character.

Operationally, trust is measured through survey responses about confidence in news, willingness to rely on media for important information, and behavioural actions such as sharing or subscribing (Newman et al., 2023). It is sensitive both to short-term disruptions, such as reporting errors or scandals, and long-term structural changes, such as ownership concentration or declining resources in journalism (Pickard, 2020). As such, conceptualizing trust as a dependent variable allows researchers to test how independent forces, ownership, regulation, and platformization influence public perceptions and shape the credibility of media institutions over time.

Power: Ownership and Regulation

Power in the media system is often expressed through ownership structures and regulatory frameworks. Ownership concentration influences newsroom priorities, resource distribution, and editorial independence, with proprietors often exercising influence through both formal mechanisms and informal pressures (Ojebode & Akinwale, 2019). Research shows that audiences become sceptical when they perceive media content as shaped by vested political or commercial interests rather than by public service motives (Wasserman, 2020). Ownership, therefore, functions as both an economic and symbolic determinant of media credibility.

Regulation constitutes another dimension of media power. It can protect freedom of expression by ensuring pluralism and accountability, but it can also serve as a tool for control when used to

sanction or censor critical voices. In contexts where legal frameworks are ambiguous or politicized, journalists often face the risk of fines, arrests, or harassment, which creates a chilling effect on investigative reporting (Freedom House, 2024). This regulatory uncertainty undermines trust, as citizens perceive media as constrained by state power rather than guided by professional norms. The balance between supportive and restrictive regulation thus significantly influences the credibility of the media landscape.

For research purposes, ownership and regulation can be operationalized through indicators such as levels of ownership concentration, diversity of media voices, transparency in funding sources, and incidence of regulatory sanctions or interventions. Studies consistently show that high concentration and politically captured regulation correlate negatively with media trust (Reporters without Borders, 2025). Power through ownership and regulation therefore represents a critical independent variable that directly shapes the conditions under which journalism operates and indirectly determines audience trust in its products.

Platformization and Technology

Platformization refers to the growing dominance of digital platforms in the circulation and discovery of news. Algorithms now shape what information users encounter, with engagement-driven logics often amplifying sensational or polarizing content (Napoli, 2019). Social media, messaging apps, and video platforms have become key sources of information in many societies, including Nigeria, creating both opportunities for broader reach and risks of misinformation (Newman et al., 2023). This shift displaces editorial control from traditional institutions to platform companies, raising concerns about accountability and transparency.

Technological disruption extends beyond algorithms. Innovations such as generative artificial intelligence create new risks and opportunities: while AI tools can aid fact-checking and automate verification, they can also produce convincing synthetic media that blur boundaries between fact and fabrication (World Economic Forum, 2024). Encrypted messaging services protect privacy but also facilitate closed-group rumour circulation. These technological dynamics influence not only the supply of information but also the heuristics

audiences use to evaluate trust, often substituting traditional markers of credibility with platform signals such as likes, shares, and trending topics (Brennen Centre, 2024).

As an independent variable, platformization can be assessed by platform market share in news discovery, the role of algorithmic recommendations, and the frequency of misinformation incidents linked to digital ecosystems. Empirical findings show that platform dominance has complex effects on trust: some users perceive platforms as more accessible and immediate, while others view them as unreliable compared to legacy institutions (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). This suggests that platformization interacts with cultural and political contexts to produce varying outcomes for media trust, reinforcing its central role as an independent factor.

Media Literacy

Media literacy refers to the ability of individuals and communities to access, evaluate, analyse, and create media content with critical awareness. It moderates the relationship between power (ownership, regulation, platform logics) and trust by shaping how audiences process information and assess credibility (Guess et al., 2020). When citizens possess strong literacy skills, they are better able to distinguish between reliable and misleading content, resist manipulation by sensationalism, and hold media accountable. Conversely, low literacy levels amplify the negative effects of ownership bias and algorithmic amplification.

Empirical studies highlight the significance of media literacy in mitigating the spread of misinformation. Meta-analyses show that interventions such as prebunking and digital literacy programs enhance individuals' ability to recognize false content and reduce sharing behaviours (Vraga et al., 2024). However, literacy gains are often uneven across social groups, with disparities based on age, education, and socioeconomic status (Kozuh et al., 2023). In unequal contexts, gaps in literacy reinforce existing inequalities in trust and participation, leaving vulnerable groups more exposed to misinformation and manipulation. Operationalizing media literacy involves measuring both individual skills, such as the ability to detect false news and structural supports like school curricula, civil-society campaigns, and fact-

checking initiatives. As a moderator, media literacy can either strengthen trust by helping citizens navigate complex media environments or weaken it when disparities leave some groups less equipped to critically evaluate information. Its role as a moderator is thus crucial, as it determines whether the influence of ownership and platformization on trust results in resilience or vulnerability.

The Media Trust Theory (MTT)

This theory was developed and advanced by scholars such as Tsftati and Cappella (2003) and further elaborated by Tsftati and Ariely (2019), provides a framework for understanding how audiences evaluate the reliability and credibility of media systems. The theory posits that trust in media is not only a function of individual attitudes but also shaped by institutional performance, political context, and socio-cultural values. Its central tenets emphasize that trust emerges when audiences perceive media to be fair, independent, accurate, and aligned with democratic ideals, while distrust grows in contexts marked by ownership bias, regulatory capture, or sensationalism. The theory assumes that media serve as a critical intermediary between citizens and democratic institutions, and when citizens lose confidence in the press, they may turn either to alternative information channels or disengage from civic participation altogether. Critics of the theory argue that it risks oversimplifying the complex, multidimensional nature of trust, since trust in media can vary across platforms, outlets, or even individual journalists, and may not fully capture the influence of technological changes such as platformization and algorithmic curation (Stromback et al., 2020). Despite these limitations, the relevance of Media Trust Theory to the present study lies in its ability to explain how ownership structures, regulatory practices, and digital disruptions affect public confidence in Nigerian media, and how media literacy may moderate these relationships. It offers a robust conceptual lens to interrogate whether Nigerian media function as a trustworthy mirror of democratic aspirations or a mirage shaped by political and economic power.

Empirical Review

Ojebode and Akinwale (2019) conducted a study titled Media ownership and democratic practice in Nigeria with the objective of examining how patterns of media ownership shape editorial

independence and democratic accountability. Using qualitative analysis of ownership structures and case studies of newspapers and broadcast stations, the study found that ownership concentration undermines editorial freedom and fosters public scepticism about the impartiality of media institutions. This finding directly relates to the present study's objective of assessing how ownership and regulation influence trust in Nigerian media, as both works highlight ownership as a critical determinant of credibility.

Similarly, Newman et al. (2023), in their Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023, sought to investigate the role of digital platforms in shaping news consumption patterns, trust, and audience perceptions globally. Employing large-scale survey research across multiple countries, including Nigeria, the study revealed that although digital platforms expand access to information, they simultaneously reduce confidence in news due to misinformation and algorithm-driven amplification. This aligns with the present study's objective of examining how technological disruption and platformization influence perceptions of credibility in Nigerian media.

In the same vein, Vraga, et al. (2024) carried out a meta-analysis titled Reducing misinformation by "prebunking": A meta-analysis of media literacy interventions, aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of media literacy interventions in reducing susceptibility to misinformation and enhancing trust in reliable sources. Drawing from experimental and quasi-experimental studies across multiple contexts, the study showed that interventions significantly improved people's ability to identify misinformation and strengthened their confidence in credible outlets. This is similar to the current study's objective of evaluating media literacy as a moderator since both works underscore its role in shaping how audiences interpret and trust media content.

Existing scholarship on media in Nigeria and beyond has extensively examined issues of ownership concentration, political interference, misinformation, and the growing dominance of digital platforms; however, most studies treat these factors in isolation without systematically linking them to the broader crisis of media trust in a rapidly changing communicative environment. While

research has highlighted how ownership influences editorial independence, and how platformization alters news consumption patterns, limited empirical work has integrated these dynamics with audience perceptions of credibility in the Nigerian context, where institutional fragility and economic pressures further complicate the media landscape. Moreover, although recent global studies emphasize the role of media literacy in mitigating misinformation and rebuilding trust, few Nigerian-based investigations have explicitly conceptualized media literacy as a moderating factor that shapes how citizens interpret and respond to media power structures. This creates a significant gap, as it leaves underexplored the interconnected relationship between ownership, regulation, digital disruptions, media literacy, and public trust, an area this study seeks to address by situating Nigeria within global debates while offering context-specific insights that reflect its socio-political and technological realities

III. METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in the pragmatic research philosophy, this study adopts a mixed-method research design to capture both the measurable patterns of media trust and the contextual nuances behind audience perceptions in Nigeria. The population of the study consists of media audiences in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, which, according to the National Population Commission's 2022 projection, is estimated at approximately 3.7 million people, reflecting a diverse mix of socio-economic, educational, and professional backgrounds. This background makes Port Harcourt an appropriate setting, as it represents a microcosm of Nigeria's urban media environment, characterized by exposure to traditional outlets and strong reliance on digital platforms. From this population, the study determines a sample size of 400 respondents, derived using Yamane's formula for sampling finite populations, to ensure representativeness and manageability. The study employs a multi-stage sampling technique, first stratifying respondents by local government areas within Port Harcourt to capture demographic spread, and then applying simple random sampling to select participants within each stratum, ensuring fairness and diversity in selection. Data collection involves a survey method through structured questionnaires to generate quantitative insights on levels of trust, ownership perceptions, and media

literacy, complemented by in-depth interviews with journalists and media practitioners to provide qualitative depth on ownership, regulation, and platformization dynamics. For data analysis, quantitative data was processed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis with the aid of SPSS to establish relationships among variables, while qualitative data were analysed through thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns and contextual meanings. The justification

for this design lies in pragmatism’s flexibility, which allows the methods to strengthen validity, while the chosen population and sampling techniques ensure inclusiveness and representativeness. The use of surveys and interviews together provides both breadth and depth, enabling the study to comprehensively explore how trust interacts with power in the Nigerian media landscape.

IV. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Descriptive Statistic – Frequencies and percentages

Table 1: Respondents’ View on Media Ownership and Trust

| Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | Mean | SD |
|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|------|-----|
| 45.2 | 38.0 | 12.5 | 4.3 | 3.24 | .72 |
| 40.8 | 36.7 | 15.0 | 7.5 | 3.11 | .84 |
| 35.4 | 32.1 | 20.8 | 11.7 | 2.91 | .92 |

From Table 1, most respondents (83.2%) agreed that media ownership influences the way news is reported, indicating that ownership is strongly tied to trust.

Correlation Analysis (Pearson)

Table 2: Correlation between Ownership, Regulation and Trust

| Variables | Ownership Influence | Regulation Impact | Trust in Media |
|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Ownership Influence | 1 | .462 | -.381 |
| Regulation Impact | .462 | 1 | -.295 |
| Trust in Media | -.381 | -.295 | 1 |

Correlation is significant at $p < 0.05$; $P < 0.01$

In Table 2, ownership and regulation both have negative correlations with trust, showing that as control increases, public trust decreases.

Regression Analysis

Table 3: Regression of Ownership and Regulation on Media Trust

| Model | R | R ² | Adjusted R ² | F | Sig |
|---------------------|-------|----------------|-------------------------|-------|------|
| 1 | .487 | .237 | .229 | 25.47 | .000 |
| Predictor | B | T | Sig | | |
| Ownership Influence | -.325 | -4.21 | .001 | | |
| Regulation Impact | -.241 | -3.02 | .003 | | |

In Table 3, ownership and regulation together explain 23.7% of the variation in media trust, with ownership being the stronger predictor.

Thematic Content Analysis Narrative for the Interviews

Ownership and Regulation

Interview responses revealed that “ownership interference is one of the strongest challenges to media trust in Nigeria.” Journalists described instances where media proprietors, especially those with political affiliations, dictated editorial directions, often forcing reporters to shape news to fit vested interests. This aligns with the perception that the ownership structure of Nigerian media compromises journalistic independence and objectivity, which in turn weakens public trust. Respondents consistently noted that “when audiences perceive strong political or commercial influence, they question the credibility of the content.”

A second emerging theme was regulatory control and censorship, where practitioners highlighted the restrictive nature of government oversight. Many argued that “regulatory bodies such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) are often seen as tools of the state, used more to suppress dissent than to ensure professionalism.” Journalists pointed out that “fines, license suspensions, and threats of shutdowns are common strategies used to silence critical voices. This regulatory environment was described as creating a culture of self-censorship in media houses, which directly erodes the trust of audiences who perceive such outlets as biased or compromised.”

Finally, the theme of public scepticism emerged strongly, where participants explained that “audiences no longer fully rely on mainstream media for factual reporting. Instead, they cross-check information through alternative sources, reflecting declining confidence in traditional outlets.” The interviews made it clear that the combined weight of ownership bias and regulatory interference directly undermines the media’s role as a neutral watchdog, thereby amplifying distrust among Nigerian citizens.

Digital Platforms and Technology

Interview data indicated that “platform dependence is a growing reality in the Nigerian media landscape.” Journalists noted that “digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), and WhatsApp have become primary news distribution channels,

reshaping how information is consumed.” Respondents highlighted that “while these platforms provide reach and immediacy, they also weaken the gatekeeping role of professional journalism. The dependence on algorithm-driven platforms has made media houses vulnerable to content prioritization that does not necessarily reflect editorial integrity but rather audience engagement metrics.”

Another key theme was credibility crisis in digital media, where participants admitted that “misinformation and fake news spread rapidly online, undermining trust in both social media and professional journalism.” Journalists explained that “many audiences now lump professional news outlets with bloggers and influencers, blurring distinctions in credibility. This has created a paradox: while digital platforms expand access to news, they simultaneously erode confidence in information quality, as audiences find it harder to distinguish fact from fabrication.”

The final theme, shifting power dynamics, revealed that digital technology has redistributed authority away from journalists and toward influencers, citizen reporters, and algorithms. Respondents acknowledged that “traditional media no longer holds exclusive power in setting public agendas, as audiences increasingly turn to social media personalities who appear more relatable. While this democratization of voices can foster inclusivity, it has also led to fragmentation, making it difficult for mainstream media to retain its role as the most trusted information source.

Economic Pressures and Confidence

The theme of financial instability dominated responses, as practitioners described “the precarious economic environment in which Nigerian media organizations operate. Many outlets rely heavily on advertising and political patronage, which often dictates editorial choices.” Journalists noted that “financial pressures push organizations to prioritize revenue over objectivity, leading to practices such as pay-for-coverage reporting and advertorials disguised as news. These practices significantly erode audience trust, as consumers perceive content as commercially or politically motivated.”

A second theme was sensationalism for survival, where respondents admitted that “in the struggle to

attract readership and viewership, some media outlets resort to exaggerated or emotionally charged reporting.” Interviewees explained that “sensational headlines and clickbait tactics are increasingly common strategies for driving traffic, particularly in online platforms that monetize audience attention. While such practices may yield short-term financial gains, they undermine credibility and contribute to long-term audience scepticism about media integrity.”

The last theme identified was erosion of public confidence, where both journalists and audiences acknowledged that “economic pressures manifest visibly in the quality of media content.” Respondents emphasized that “shrinking resources mean fewer investigative reports, inadequate fact-checking, and reliance on syndicated stories. This decline in journalistic standards fuels public disillusionment, reinforcing the cycle of distrust.” Ultimately, participants made clear that “economic challenges are not just financial but ethical, as they shape how information is produced, disseminated, and consumed.”

V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings revealed that media ownership and government regulation significantly undermine public trust in Nigerian media, as the survey showed strong negative correlations between ownership control, regulatory interference, and credibility, while the thematic analysis reinforced this by highlighting journalists’ experiences of editorial pressure, censorship, and audience scepticism toward biased reporting. The finding is validated by Ojebodo and Akinwale (2019), who examined the political economy of Nigerian media and revealed that ownership structures and government oversight often compromise editorial independence, thereby reducing credibility and weakening audience trust. This provides footing for the present study, as both confirm that ownership bias and regulatory interference are central drivers of public scepticism toward media content in Nigeria. The finding is backed by media trust theory, which posits that audiences assess credibility based on perceived independence, transparency, and fairness of media institutions; thus, ownership bias and regulatory interference violate these conditions, leading to declining trust.

The findings indicated that digital platforms and technological disruptions have reshaped perceptions of credibility and power in news consumption, with survey results showing that heavy reliance on social media reduces confidence in traditional journalism, and the interviews confirming that misinformation, algorithmic influence, and the rise of influencers have weakened the agenda-setting authority of mainstream media. The finding aligns with Neuman et al. (2023), who analysed global trends in digital communication and found that social media platforms not only disrupted traditional journalistic authority but also amplified misinformation, creating a crisis of credibility. This validates the present study’s footing, since both emphasize that platformization diminishes mainstream media’s agenda-setting role while shifting power to algorithms and online influencers. The finding is supported by Media Trust Theory, which assumes that trust is fragile and contingent upon the reliability of information channels; hence, the rise of algorithm-driven platforms, misinformation, and influencer dominance destabilizes confidence in traditional media, affirming the theory’s concern with evolving trust conditions

The findings demonstrated that economic pressures strongly influence journalistic practices and erode audience confidence, as SPSS analysis revealed that financial instability and commercialization are significant predictors of declining trust, while thematic analysis emphasized how sensationalism, compromised editorial standards, and inadequate resources directly reduce the credibility of Nigerian media content. The finding is reinforced by Braga et al. (2024), who investigated the effects of financial constraints on media organizations and reported that shrinking revenues and commercialization pressures lead to sensationalism, weakened ethical standards, and declining audience trust. This confirms the footing of the present study, as both show that economic instability translates into compromised journalistic practices that directly undermine confidence in media content. The finding is validated by Media Trust Theory, which emphasizes that when audiences perceive media as prioritizing commercial or political interests over public service, they withdraw trust; thus, financial instability and sensational practices confirm the theory’s assertion that trust depends on consistent ethical and professional performance.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that media ownership and government regulation remain decisive factors shaping public trust in Nigerian media, and unless editorial independence and fair regulatory practices are strengthened, trust in journalism will continue to erode.

The study established that digital platforms and technological disruptions have permanently altered the credibility landscape, and traditional media must adapt by reinforcing professionalism and fact-checking to remain relevant in the face of shifting power dynamics.

Finally, the study justified that economic pressures fundamentally compromise journalistic practices and weaken audience confidence, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable business models that safeguard ethical reporting and restore credibility.

This study contributes to knowledge by offering an original and creative understanding of how trust and power dynamics operate in the Nigerian media landscape through the combined lenses of ownership, regulation, digital disruption, and economic pressures. Unlike earlier studies that treated these variables in isolation, this research innovatively integrates them, showing how they intersect to influence public trust in journalism. By employing a pragmatic mixed-methods approach, it provides a nuanced picture that blends measurable evidence with lived experiences, thereby expanding methodological creativity in media and communication research. The findings advance Media Trust Theory by contextualizing it within Nigeria, revealing how ownership interference, regulatory control, platformization, and financial instability uniquely shape audience perceptions of credibility in a developing democracy. This contextual contribution refines the theory by demonstrating that trust is not only a product of professional practices but also of structural, technological, and economic realities.

The study also makes significant practical contributions to product development and media innovation. By highlighting the corrosive effects of ownership bias, regulatory capture, and sensationalist practices, it points toward the need for innovative media models that prioritize editorial

independence, transparency, and sustainable financing. The research suggests pathways for the development of trust-oriented media products, such as fact-checking platforms, algorithmic transparency tools, and audience-driven participatory journalism frameworks, which can restore credibility in the digital age. It further contributes to knowledge by offering a policy-relevant framework that can guide regulators, practitioners, and educators in strengthening media trust while balancing technological disruptions. In doing so, the study not only enriches theoretical debates but also provides innovative, solution-driven insights that bridge scholarship, industry practice, and societal expectations in the evolving Nigerian media ecosystem.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings from the work, the following recommendations have been made.

- 1) The Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and media ownership boards should enforce transparent ownership structures and strengthen editorial independence to rebuild public trust in journalism.
- 2) The National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), media organizations, and social media platforms should collaborate to promote digital literacy, strengthen fact-checking, and regulate algorithmic influence to restore credibility in news consumption.
- 3) The Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, media councils, and donor agencies should develop sustainable funding models and provide capacity-building support to reduce economic pressures that compromise journalistic standards.

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