Faculty of Journalism
Lomonosov Moscow State University

World of Media

Journal of Russian Media and Journalism Studies

Issue 4, 2025

World of Media
Journal of Russian Media and Journalism Studies
Issue 4, 2025

Designer: Elena Sirotina, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia
Cover designer: Arina Balantseva, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia

First published in 2025 by the Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University

Printed in Moscow, Russia
9 Mokhovaya, Moscow, 125009, Russia

ISSN 2307-1605 (print)
ISSN 2686-8016 (online)

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LEAD ARTICLE

Voices unheard: The struggle of indigenous language journalism on Nigeria's media landscape[1]

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To cite this article: Salawu, A., & Adeyeye, B. (2025). Voices unheard: The struggle of indigenous language journalism on Nigeria's media landscape. *World of Media. Journal of Russian Media and Journalism Studies*, 4, pp. 5–26. DOI: 10.30547/worldofmedia.4.2025.1

Abstract

Journalism can be deemed successful when the receiver of the message understands what is being circulated. This is especially possible when the message being disseminated to the receiver is in a language familiar to them. This study examines the factors responsible for the lack of development of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria. The study specifically sought to investigate the social, linguistic, and economic factors that inhibit the growth of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria, studied the consequences of media policies and regulations on indigenous language journalism, and assessed the dearth in education and its influence on the non-development of indigenous language journalism. The study was anchored on the cultural imperialism theory and adopted the exploratory research design. Interviews and document analysis were the data collection methods**.** Non-probabilistic, purposive sampling was employed for the research. Twenty-four interviews were conducted to collect data from journalists and officials of the Lagos State Ministry of Information and selected Chief Orientation and Mobilization Officers (COMO) of the State Directorate of the National Orientation Agency. Systematic content analysis (SCA) was used to analyse interview transcripts. Additional themes were proposed based on insights emerging from the data, expanding, separating or combining existing themes as needed. The study found that the dominance of

[1] This study was supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (grant number 141934).

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English as the official language and the nonviability of indigenous language journalism from sociolinguistic and economic factors are challenges for indigenous language journalism in Nigeria. Findings also show that journalists' lack of language competence in indigenous languages, the predominance of the English language over indigenous languages in journalism practice, and the lack of a framework for education were the bases of contention related to the underdevelopment of indigenous language journalism. The study concluded that the shift of the language towards English, driven by its perceived prestige and domination in numerous areas, offers a substantial barrier to the expansion of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria. It recommends the creation and execution of policies that recognise the value of indigenous languages and promote their preservation and development, especially in journalism.

Keywords
Indigenous languages, indigenous language journalism, journalists, language policy, language competence, sustainability.

Introduction
Nigeria has a multiplicity of ethnic groups and languages. The nation has a rich cultural heritage and diversity, making it distinctive in terms of identities and traditions. Thus, indigenous languages constitute a multiplicity and critical aspect of Nigeria's cultural heritage. However, despite this linguistic diversity, Nigerian indigenous language journalism has consistently lagged. The underdevelopment of indigenous language journalism has been significantly shaped by the historical setting of Nigeria's colonial past (Falola, & Heaton, 2008; Ndinojuo et al., 2020). English was established as the language of government, instruction, and the media during the colonial era. As a result of linguistic encroachment, native languages were suppressed and a hierarchy where English was seen as superior was established. The use and acceptance of indigenous languages in official and formal areas, including media, were severely restricted and limited to informal contexts. Due to their perceived trustworthiness and ability to give fair opinions of newsmakers and actors, the public prefers to obtain their information from traditional newspapers (Jamiu et al., 2022).

Based on the population statistics made available by Statista (2025), Nigeria has a population of 237.5 million. The country is categorized as one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse countries in the world. Nigeria is a linguistically diverse country with over 500 languages (Maikanti et al., 2021), but many languages are currently endangered. "As predicted by scholars, as

many as 60 to 90% of the world's languages, about 6.900 of them, are at risk of extinction within the next 100 years" (Maikanti et al., 2021). As it relates to English speakers, which happens to be the official language, the degree of fluency and literacy levels depend on use and exposure. The major ethnic groups in Nigeria include Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. In terms of size, Hausa is the largest (when including second-language speakers), followed by Yoruba and Igbo. There are several media outlets in Nigeria, ranging from radio to television and print outlets. There are community or state radio stations that broadcast exclusively in indigenous languages. Stations like *Amuludun FM* (Yoruba) and *Orisun FM* (Yoruba) transmit primarily in the local language.

Language is essential in the diverse population's identity, culture, and social interaction. Nigerians are generally firmly attached to their "own" language, often linked to ethnic and regional identity (Okunogbe, 2024). For many, their mother tongue is a source of pride and a medium for expressing their cultural heritage. However, attitudes towards language use in social contexts may differ. Urbanization, education, and globalization have led to the widespread use of English, the official language. This is especially true in formal and public sector environments. English is seen as the language of power, prestige, and economic opportunity, but this contrasts with some who find the native language less valuable in these areas (Salomone, & Salomone, 2022). Many Nigerians, especially in rural areas or specific ethnic groups, are committed to preserving their local languages.

Indigenous language journalism entails the practice of reporting and distributing news in the native language of a particular ethnic group rather than the dominant or official language, such as English. This form of journalism plays a vital role in maintaining cultural identity. It encompasses forms of media designed and produced by indigenous communities, serving as an essential means of cultural expression, communication, and political participation. These media institutions may include newspapers, radio broadcasting, digital platforms, and television programmes created by indigenous peoples to meet their specific social, political, and cultural needs. They serve as an effective platform for political self-determination (Nsereka, & Papamie, 2021). It allows indigenous communities to express their concerns, influence policy, and challenge outside forces that often undermine their interests. Indigenous language journalism ensures the transmission of cultural knowledge through its expression, promotes coverage, and ensures effective communication within Nigeria's linguistically diverse society (Odiboh et al., 2018; Owolabi, 2021). While some news organizations translate news from English to indigenous

languages, others do everything in indigenous languages, from news production to presentation. A good example of such a station is *Faaji FM*, located in Lagos, Nigeria.

Scholars have studied the business models of indigenous newspapers (Salawu, 2006, 2012, 2013), the enduring challenges of indigenous publishing, and the contributions and potential roles of indigenous journalism and newspapers (Buthelezi, 2016; Onyenankeya, & Salawu, 2019; Oyesomi et al., 2020; Wa Mberia, 2015). Scholars have also identified some challenges facing indigenous language journalism (Daramola, 2013; Onyenankeya, & Salawu, 2019; Salawu, 2006; Sunday et al., 2018; Tanjong, & Muluh, 2006; Vinck, 2006; Yusuff, & Osunnuga, 2018). However, few studies have examined the struggle of indigenous language journalism on the Nigerian media landscape. Although previous research has focused mainly on examining the challenges faced by indigenous language journalism, the factors that have led to its decline have not been investigated; thus, a study of this nature is needed. The study underscores the challenges that hamper the development of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria. It specifically aims to identify the social, linguistic, and economic factors that hinder the development of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria, examine the impact of media policies and regulations on indigenous language journalism, and investigate the role of education in contributing to the underdevelopment of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria. The authors believe that the findings will have important implications for indigenous newspaper publishers, communication researchers, technology experts, and journalists involved in indigenous language journalism.

Media policies and regulations on indigenous language journalism in Nigeria

Language practices, values, and management choices are all included in its language policy (Bernard, 2004). Along with deliberate attempts to mould language practices through strategic planning, management, and implementation, it also represents a set of attitudes regarding language usage. Every legal document in Nigeria is derived from the Federal Republic of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, and any document that deviates from it is deemed invalid. While admitting the presence of other Nigerian languages, the Constitution designates English, Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba as official languages. Furthermore, Nigerian residents have the right to obtain information in any Nigerian language thanks to the Freedom of Information Act of 2011 (Obiora, 2025).

On the procedures and schedules for putting this clause into effect, the Act does not provide information. One document that focuses on the broadcasting community is the Nigerian Broadcasting Code (2014). Languages used in local communities must be given priority by community broadcast services, according to this rule. This suggests that English and Nigerian, especially the languages spoken in the nearby area, should be used for broadcasting. Public and private broadcasting stations are free to select the languages they believe are appropriate for their viewers, though this clause does not always impose a linguistic requirement on them. This serves as a supplement to the Nigerian National Language Policy (2023), a significant Federal Government of Nigeria project that establishes rules for the official usage of several languages in the country.

The policy's media provisions, particularly those pertaining to radio transmission, highlight the necessity of coordinated initiatives to support the efficient use of Nigerian languages in traditional broadcasting. According to Article 8 of the policy, broadcast media companies are required to make sure that at least 60% of their shows are presented in Nigerian languages that are widely spoken in the communities they serve. The number of languages that must be utilized in broadcast stations is not specified by these national regulations, even if they allow the inclusion of Nigerian languages, particularly those spoken in the near vicinity of media outlets.

Theoretical framework

Cultural imperialism theory

The notion of cultural imperialism was created in the 1970s to describe the state of the media at the time. According to Sengupta and Frith (1997), cited in White (2001), the nature of the media at the time, including print, radio, and television, promoted a one-way top-down transmission system from the dominating country to the dominated country. This theory resulted in a passive public and robust media. This condition led to complaints of media/cultural imperialism/marginalization and an imbalance in news flow worldwide. Unavoidably, these cries sparked demands for a new world information and communication order. Therefore, according to Boyd-Barrett (2019), cultural imperialism is the process by which the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any country is individually or collectively subject to significant external pressures from the media interests of any other country or countries, without a proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country affected.

Scholars like Fanon (1965), who emphasized how colonial powers used media and cultural tools to dominate and reshape colonized societies' consciousness, critically developed this idea. The theory was further developed by Schiller (1969); in 1976, he contended that international media flows, particularly from the United States, helped to solidify ideological and economic dominance over developing countries. Particularly in the context of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), these issues were at the center of global discussions in the 1970s and 1980s. The structural disparities in media ownership and representation around the world were highlighted by seminal reports like UNESCO's Many Voices, One World (1980), popularly known as the MacBride Report, and the conclusions of the 1981 Intergovernmental Conference on Communication Policies in Africa in Yaoundé (ICSCP, 2004). These initiatives directly challenged the predominance of Western-centric narratives in international communication by advocating for more equitable communication systems that value cultural diversity and support indigenous media production.

According to cultural imperialism theory, a society enters the modern world system when its dominant stratum is drawn to, coerced, compelled, and occasionally bought into modifying its social institutions so that they reflect, or even advance, the beliefs and structures of the system's dominant centre (White, 2001; Vysotskaya, Yanishevskaya, & Lobanova, 2024). According to this point of view, the dominance of one country by another is the essence of cultural imperialism, and multinational media organizations offer the ideal setting for this. White (2001), in support of another assumption of cultural imperialism, states that the media plays a vital role in constructing culture. Cultural imperialism has a broader scope and encompasses various dimensions beyond media, including education, language, religion, lifestyle, and consumer culture. The focus of this study is specifically on the *media and communication* dimension, often referred to as *media imperialism*, as it pertains directly to the mechanisms through which cultural dominance is exercised and sustained on the contemporary global communication landscape.

The theory is an important framework, as English dominates the media, limiting the visibility and use of indigenous languages and making it more difficult to preserve and revive them. Although global media corporations do not control Nigeria's media landscape, the use of English language as a communication medium undervalues the significance of indigenous languages. This not only prevents the growth of journalism in indigenous languages but also feeds the cycle of underrepresentation and cultural acculturation.

Cultural imperialism theory is relevant to understanding the struggle of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria's media scenario, as it highlights foreign languages, especially English dominance, that shape media narratives and materials. In Nigeria, where there are over 500 indigenous languages, cultural imperialism manifests itself through the marginalization of native languages in the mainstream media, where foreign languages often receive more attention, resources, and platforms. This inequality limits the representation of indigenous cultures and voices, eroding linguistic diversity. The dominance of English is due to historical colonial heritage and global media influences, reducing indigenous languages. Cultural imperialism theory helps analyze how journalism contributes to the comprehensive process of linguistic and cultural assimilation, and how indigenous languages promote indigenous identity in the face of global media pressures to preserve local heritage. pressures the practice of journalism faces.

Methodology

Research design

For this study, an explanatory research design was used. Explanatory research seeks to connect ideas to foster an understanding of causes and effects regarding a particular phenomenon and includes methods to examine why and how a phenomenon occurs (Moyo, 2022). The explanatory research design was chosen to understand the challenges faced by indigenous language journalism and the policies governing journalists' activities in this sector. The interview was the data collection method used for this study. The interviews focused on stakeholders and various agencies related to journalism. The interview method also allows flexibility and adaptability, which helps the researcher tailor the questions and trends that arise or additional information (Lim, 2024). This elasticity is important when considering the peculiarities of gender, sociocultural complexities, and technology. These factors make a clearer comprehension of the distinctions and the importance of a study of this nature.

The research location is in Lagos, Nigeria. The state is well-situated for this research. It has a variety of ethnic designs, is officially recognized as the commercial centre of Nigeria and is home to many indigenous language media (K ngb , 2020). Some indigenous language media outlets in Lagos include *Alaroye* and *Akede* newspapers, *Radio Lagos*, *Faaji FM*, and *Bond FM*, which also broadcast in indigenous languages. Owolabi and Hassan (2023) emphasize the importance of promoting cultural and historical identity to the diverse population of Lagos through various sources of indigenous language media,

including printed media, radio, and television stations. These outlets, which provide news, entertainment, and educational information, especially in Yoruba, show that the importance of Lagos as a melting pot of cultures is highlighted through the interaction of trade dynamics and linguistic media (James et al., 2023).

Sample

Non-probabilistic, purposive sampling was employed for the research, with the initial participants referring the researchers to others interested in participating (snowball sampling). The same method was used to select government officials and publishers of indigenous language journalism materials.

Twenty-four interviews were conducted to gather data for this study from journalists, including those working for indigenous language newspapers, officials from the State Ministry of Information in Lagos State, as well as selected Chief Orientation and Mobilization Officers (COMO) of the State Directorate of the National Orientation Agency (see *Table 1*). These interviews were conducted to reveal the problems, failures, and limitations of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria. The respondents were explicitly chosen following the principles of qualitative research, highlighting the importance of gathering many viewpoints to understand the topic under study (Gentles, & Vilches, 2017). Respondents were interviewed in English. The age and socioeconomic standing of the participants guaranteed the data's quality, since it correctly reflected the stakeholders' demographic profile. Data were verified by reviewing the transcripts to ensure that the questions asked during the interviews and discussions produced the desired results.

Table 1

Sample distribution

Interviewees	**Number**
Journalists, including those working for indigenous language newspapers	8
Officials from Lagos State Ministry of Information	8
Chief Orientation and Mobilization Officers (COMO) of the State Directorate of the National Orientation Agency (NOA)	8
Total number	**24**

Source: Authors.

Data analysis

Systematic content analysis (SCA) was used to analyze interview transcripts. Building on the framework established by Franzosi (2008), following the methods outlined by Amu et al. (2017), the analysis involved categorizing similar responses into groups and different topics to help deepen the understanding of the data. Social scientists and researchers in communication studies commonly use SCA to examine various sources, including literature, field notes, and interview transcripts. Using clear coding guidelines, SCA allows the researcher to condense large amounts of text into smaller content categories. The transcripts were carefully read to identify existing themes. As the analysis progressed, additional themes were proposed based on insights emerging from the data, expanding, separating, or combining existing themes as needed. This iterative process ensured a detailed and comprehensive representation of the participants' views. This is supported by the rigorous framework recommended by Bamidele and Pikirayi (2023), which emphasizes the importance of flexibility in developing themes to collect qualitative data efficiently.

Results

A thematic analysis was conducted across several questions to explore the different opinions and perspectives of the respondents on the struggle for indigenous language journalism on Nigeria's media landscape. Respondents were asked to share their opinions based on study objectives. Thematic analysis of the responses revealed several key themes related to the study.

Dominance of English as the official language

The results of the interviews affirmed that indigenous language journalism faced challenges and stiffened competition due to the dominance of the English language. Respondents averred that the growth of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria has faced challenges due to the dominance of English as the official language. In the view of one respondent (a journalist):

Indigenous language journalism has contested mainstream journalism, whose dominant language is English. The dominance of English has limited the representation of indigenous language journalism.

The interviewees added that the historical setting of English supremacy in Nigerian language policy can be understood from the perspective of British colonization, which had a critical role in defining the country's linguistic environment. A COMO from NOA noted that:

The popularity of the English language in Nigeria limits cultural expression and identity. This in most situations, reclaims our rich cultural heritage to the background.

Respondents also noted that many media institutions, including radio and television stations, frequently use untrained personnel who need more skills and understanding to communicate effectively in indigenous languages.

The economic non-viability of indigenous language journalism

The interviewees noted that the economic sustainability of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria is a vital element that significantly impacts the country's development. However, the journalism in the indigenous language in Nigeria has declined over the years due to the dominance of English-language media outlets. Additionally, economic constraints such as lack of funding and financial assistance have hampered its expansion. The decline in indigenous language journalism in Nigeria has been attributed to a few historical events. To buttress this, a respondent (journalist) observed that:

The economic non-feasibility of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria is due to limited funding. The number of readers is small. The preference for English-language media hampers the development of a stable drive for indigenous language media to thrive. This and the lack of institutional support hinder the sustainable development of the market for indigenous language media.

Additionally, respondents noted that a key influence is the British colonization of Nigeria, which led to the prevalence of the English language across almost all areas of human endeavour, including the media. This development has affected indigenous language journalism.

Lack of trained journalists

The place of indigenous languages in cultural preservation cannot be overemphasized. Laying credence to this, an interviewee (a journalist) noted:

A shortage of professional journalists proficient in indigenous languages poses a challenge to advancing indigenous language journalism in Nigeria. Journalists are trained in the English language, which hinders them from being able to produce good content in their indigenous dialects. This limitation not only affects the potency of indigenous language journalism but also metamorphoses into dormant voices that are unable to project the needs of hinterland communities.

The respondents noted that the lack of trained journalists confines their capacity to report and cover news in native languages effectively, resulting in errors and misinterpretations in indigenous language journalism. As a result,

the credibility of this type of journalism must be improved, undermining the trust of the audience. Putting credence to this, a respondent (journalist) noted that:

The targeted educational programs and workshops should focus on developing journalism skills in indigenous languages. Media organizations and universities can work together to provide specialized training, emphasizing journalists' language proficiency and integrity, bringing about a new generation of indigenous language journalists.

The respondents agreed that the lack of trained journalists who can read and write in these indigenous languages poses a challenge to developing and advancing indigenous language journalism. They also stressed the need to train journalists in local languages to improve their language skills in these languages.

Language competence of journalists towards indigenous languages

The respondents noted that education is critical to developing language and literacy skills. Individuals may not achieve the essentials of engaging in journalism effectively if the educational possibilities in indigenous languages are restricted. Journalists who are proficient in their native language can effectively produce content in that language. Effective communication with sources, interview subjects, and the audience requires language competency. An interviewee (Journalist) noted that:

The linguistic proficiency of journalists in indigenous languages in Nigeria is a significant obstacle to developing indigenous language journalism in Nigeria. This is because many journalists are more fluent in English than their native language. This lack of ability affects the quality and accuracy of the content, making it difficult to appeal to local audiences and accurately reflect cultural nuances and fluency in the native language.

The national primary education policy requires that indigenous language be used as the medium of instruction during the early years, usually the first three years. At the secondary level, indigenous languages are offered as elective courses, though their accessibility may differ depending on the area and available resources. Although English is the primary focus, bilingualism is common, and the original language enhances everyday English. Training journalists in indigenous languages in higher education is becoming increasingly popular in the community. Although there is little official training in indigenous language journalism, the role of media is especially pertinent to rural populations and regional concerns like agriculture.

Lack of access to education and media infrastructure

Respondents agree that access to quality education in indigenous languages can be difficult, particularly for those in remote locations or low-income families. This inhibits their ability to participate in journalism and contributes to the growth of indigenous language media. The development of the media infrastructure required for indigenous language journalism is influenced by education and literacy. This inhibits their ability to participate in journalism and contributes to the growth of indigenous language media. The development of the media infrastructure required for indigenous language journalism is influenced by education and literacy. A journalist told that:

The lack of quality education and media infrastructure in many parts of Nigeria dramatically hinders the development of indigenous language journalism. Many local communities lack the resources to train journalists in their native language. Media organizations often do not have the tools or platforms to produce and distribute content in these languages. This difference creates a cycle of disadvantage, in which native-language media encountered problems in thrives due to limitations in education and infrastructure.

They added that a lack of infrastructure impedes the growth and accessibility of indigenous language journalism. The availability and visibility of the English-language media infrastructure can affect language preferences among journalists and the public.

Discussion

The findings of the study affirmed that indigenous language journalism faced challenges and stiffened competition due to the dominance of the English language. The growth of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria has faced challenges due to the dominance of English as the official language. The economic sustainability of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria is a vital element that significantly impacts the country's development. However, indigenous language journalism in Nigeria has declined over the years due to the dominance of English-language media outlets. Furthermore, economic constraints such as a lack of funding and financial assistance have hampered its expansion. However, realistic options exist to improve the economic feasibility of this type of journalism in Nigeria. The decline of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria has been attributed to a few historical events. For instance, Salawu (2006) notes that only some African languages are currently written,

particularly in the print media, and readers generally do not favour the existing (African) indigenous language newspapers.

Indigenous language journalism in Nigeria is critical to cultural preservation. According to Tshabangu and Salawu (2022), indigenous languages serve as a communication medium and carry cultural knowledge, customs and identity. Nigeria, a varied country with more than 500 spoken languages, considers indigenous language journalism a vital tool for preserving and promoting cultural heritage. These communities effectively share their stories, history, and viewpoints with a larger audience through newspapers, radio programs, and online channels in indigenous languages. This type of journalism enables the diffusion of information and facilitates the expression of indigenous perspectives, preventing the marginalization or erasure of indigenous voices and experiences. Furthermore, indigenous language journalism empowers local communities by giving them a platform to discuss important topics and challenge mainstream narratives that frequently ignore their concerns. Nigeria may nurture cultural diversity, strengthen social coherence and ensure the preservation of its rich cultural history for future generations by recognizing and supporting indigenous language journalism (Oyedele, & Hungbo, 2021; Adesina et al., 2018; Folayan et al., 2018).

However, indigenous language journalism in Nigeria has various problems, the most significant of which is the need for more skilled journalists. According to Mohammed (2019), the absence of indigenous language journalists is a crucial barrier to developing and maintaining indigenous language journalism. It is worth noting that Nigerian journalists often speak English better than indigenous languages. This limitation limits their ability to report and cover news in native languages effectively, resulting in mistakes and misinterpretations in indigenous language journalism. Okon et al. (2022) as well as Adesina et al. (2020), also agree with the general challenges newspapers face in Nigeria. As a result, the credibility of this type of journalism must be improved, undermining the trust of the audience. Aspiring journalists can acquire the language skills needed to properly communicate and report on challenges in indigenous communities in a culturally sensitive manner (Salawu, 2013).

Findings from this study demonstrate the significance of laws that regulate the media in advancing indigenous languages in Nigeria. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as well as educational policies, projects the need to promote indigenous languages, bringing to the fore the significance of various cultural identities and social inclusion. The constitution mandates the development of languages for national integration and cultural diversity. The

Constitution mandates the development of languages for national integration and cultural diversity. At the same time, the National Education Policy advocates using indigenous languages in primary education to learn and strengthen cultural heritage. However, the implementation by state agencies has been inconsistent. Adegbija (2004) discusses the impact of media policies and legal guidelines on indigenous language journalism in Nigeria in his analysis of the challenges of current language planning. Nigeria has had complicated and diverse linguistic environments, with more than 500 indigenous languages spoken at some point. However, indigenous languages were marginalised in media spaces as an instantaneous result of English supremacy due to the legitimacy language and the residual impact of colonialism

Findings also show that the obstacles to competing with English-language media for indigenous language journalism are diverse, including dominance problems, restricted sources, and linguistic changes. These barriers underscore the critical need for guidance and investment in indigenous language journalism as an excellent way to preserve and promote indigenous cultures and languages (Molale, & Mpofu, 2020). The problems of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria to compete with English-language media can be traced mainly to media policies. Whether deliberate or unintentional, these policies have produced an unfair playing discipline that harms indigenous language journalism. As a result, the rich cultural legacy and perspectives contained in indigenous languages are frequently overshadowed by the dominance of the English language media.

The findings of this study show that education is critical in developing language competence and literacy skills. Individuals may not achieve the essentials of engaging in journalism effectively if the educational possibilities in indigenous languages are restricted. The development of a qualified pool of journalists in indigenous languages can be hampered by a lack of education and literacy in indigenous languages (Ajepe, & Ademowo, 2016). Proficiency in an indigenous language enables journalists to create content in their indigenous language effectively. Journalists can conduct interviews, gather information, and write news articles or reports using the specific linguistic nuances and cultural context associated with the indigenous language. Education and literacy programmes that emphasize indigenous languages can contribute to the development of proficient journalists capable of producing quality content (Salawu, 2008). Language proficiency is essential for effective communication with sources, interviewees, and the audience.

Language proficiency affects access to information in indigenous communities. In Nigeria, where English is often the language of formal

education and official communication, English learners have greater access to information sources, including government documents, academic publications, and online resources (Obinyan, 2010). This linguistic disparity can limit the availability of reliable information in indigenous languages for people who can only understand their indigenous language, impeding the development of indigenous language journalism (Ugwu, 2020). Although the implementation varies, teaching indigenous languages in elementary and secondary school curricula is common throughout Nigeria. This can contribute to a progressive reduction in the usage and promotion of indigenous languages, particularly in journalism. Individuals may prefer to utilize English for journalistic reasons, as they gain proficiency in English through formal schooling, resulting in a drop in demand for indigenous language journalism (Olaopa, 2025). As a result, when English becomes the preferred language for media consumption and production, there is a decrease in demand for indigenous language journalism. Indigenous languages are sometimes used with incorrect grammar, pronunciation, and spelling. The lack of publishing houses, broadcasting facilities, and other media outlets that cater to indigenous languages may be due to a lack of educational resources and support (Motsaathebe, 2023).

The cultural imperialism theory holds sway in this study because it proposes that dominant cultures impose their values, language, and norms on subordinate cultures. This often erodes indigenous traditions and language. The dominance of English in Nigeria's media is a prime example. Because it marginalizes local languages and their languages are representative in the mass media industry, English is the official language as the primary medium of news and communication, creating barriers for many Nigerians who are more proficient in their mother tongue. This linguistic dominance hampers the growth of Nigerian indigenous language journalism, limiting the growth and impact of local languages. For example, the main media plays little role; thus, cultural richness and diversity are still low. This development promotes the dominance of the English language and reinforces cultural imperialism by making younger generations less likely to be interested in speaking their native languages.

Conclusion and recommendations

The decline in the advancement of Nigeria's indigenous language journalism has been attributed to many reasons. The study has demonstrated that language proficiency, language change, unequal access to education, lack of media infrastructure, and market demand all hamper the advancement of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria. These interconnected factors shape the country's

indigenous language journalism landscape. Language proficiency is crucial to the development of indigenous language journalism since it allows journalists to create content and engage with local communities more effectively. However, the language shift towards English, which is driven by its apparent status and domination in many sectors, is a major barrier to the expansion of indigenous language media. The underdevelopment of indigenous language journalism is worsened by unequal educational access, which limits the possibilities for aspiring journalists from marginalized communities and creates a skills and knowledge gap.

Market demand and feasibility also contribute to the underdevelopment of indigenous language journalism, as advertisers and sponsors frequently choose English-language media because of its wider reach and more extensive consumer base. The study concludes that the struggle for indigenous language journalism on the Nigerian media landscape is enormous. The study concludes that social, linguistic, and economic factors impede Nigeria's underdevelopment of indigenous language journalism. These elements include the predominance of English as the official language, the lack of qualified journalists, and the economic viability of indigenous language journalism. Additionally, media laws and policies have a significant impact on Nigerian indigenous language journalism. The underdevelopment of indigenous language journalism is impacted by these media policies and regulations; the policies suppress indigenous language journalism; thus, they struggle to compete with English-language media. The role of education that influences the underdevelopment of indigenous language journalism in Nigeria also plays a key role. This is so because the language competence of journalists toward indigenous languages is limited.

Based on the conclusion above, the following recommendations can be made. First, there is a need for the government to come up with policies that address the peculiarity of indigenous languages to promote their sustainability and expansion. Second, efforts should be put in place to advance education and literacy programmes that foster the development of indigenous languages. Third, authorities, such as the government and private individuals, should prioritize indigenous language infrastructure for the development of indigenous language journalism. These infrastructures should include, but not be limited to, the establishment of publishing houses, broadcasting facilities, and Internet platforms in native languages. They should also provide resources to support the establishment and maintenance of indigenous language media companies. Lastly, public understanding of the value of journalism in indigenous languages

should be increased. By actively consuming and promoting indigenous language content, audience involvement and support for indigenous language media can be boosted. In addition to giving the audience a sense of pride and ownership, this can raise demand for journalism in indigenous languages.

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ARTICLES

The impact of digital media on play activity in preschool children: A psychological study[1]

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To cite this article: Gavrilova, M., Dvorskaya, E., & Sukhikh, V. (2025). The impact of digital media on play activity in preschool children: A psychological study. *World of Media. Journal of Russian Media and Journalism Studies*, 4, pp. 28–45. DOI: 10.30547/worldofmedia.4.2025.2

Abstract
In the context of intensive mediatization of childhood, children's consumption of digital media from an early age has become a widespread phenomenon, causing concern among parents and educators. This study focused on analyzing the intensity of digital media consumption as a factor potentially leading to negative changes in play activities and social interactions among preschool children. The study involved over 500 children and their parents. The results indicate that prolonged screen time is associated with characteristics such as lack of emotional attachment to toys, reliance on media trends when selecting toys, and rapid loss of interest in them. However, the assumption that children's lack of familiarity with current media narratives leads to peer rejection or inability to participate in joint play based on animated films or digital games was not supported.

Keywords
Mediatization of childhood, screen time, play, sociometric status, preschool age.

Introduction
In the context of intensive digitalization of childhood, preschoolers' consumption of digital media has become ubiquitous and pronounced. Video viewing and

[1] This research was supported by the Russian Science Foundation, grant number 22-78-10097-П.

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digital games are rapidly becoming preferred activities for children, driven not only by their high sensory appeal and interactivity (Edwards, 2014; Buzina et al., 2024; Lakicevic et al., 2025) but also by the targeted design of digital products for child audiences and their active marketing promotion (Marsh, 2017). Screen time duration is steadily increasing, raising justified concerns in the scientific community due to accumulated data on its potential negative impact on cognitive and emotional development (Lakicevic et al., 2025). Importantly, the negative effects are mediated not by screen time itself but by the displacement or transformation of traditional activities with developmental potential, such as play, reading, creativity, and live communication (Bergmann et al., 2022). This study aimed to investigate the potential impact of the mediatization of childhood on play activity – the leading activity in preschool age (Vygotsky, 2016; Bukhalenkova, & Chichinina, 2023; Larin, & Sadovnikova, 2024).

Theoretical background

Mediatization of childhood

The mediatization of childhood represents a comprehensive sociocultural process of integrating media and digital technologies into the daily lives of children, leading to a transformation of traditional practices of socialization, learning, and development (Krotz, 2024; Livingstone et al., 2019; Dunas et al., 2024). This process is characterized not merely by an increase in the quantity of media in children's lives, but by a fundamental change in the ways they interact with the world, form their identity, and build social relationships (Marsh et al., 2019; Fan, Luo, & Chan, 2025).

In the context of preschool age, mediatization acquires particular significance, as it coincides with a sensitive period for the development of key cognitive, social, and emotional competencies (Vygotsky, 2016). Contemporary research demonstrates that by the age of 6, most children in developed countries actively use various digital devices, with screen time significantly exceeding recommended guidelines (Common Sense Media, 2021). This is driven by both the accessibility of digital technologies and changes in parenting practices, where media are increasingly used as a means of organizing children's leisure and learning (Plowman, 2015).

The theoretical understanding of the mediatization of childhood is approached through several complementary theoretical frameworks. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory allows for the analysis of mediatization as a process permeating all levels of child development: from the microsystem (family practices of using digital devices) to the macrosystem (cultural and economic

factors determining the production and distribution of children's content (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). Vygotsky's sociocultural approach emphasizes media as cultural tools that mediate children's psychological development (Vygotsky, 2016). In this context, the concept of mediation acquires particular importance, describing how adults and peers help children make sense of media content (Clark, 2011).

The complexities of researching the mediatization of childhood are associated with the rapid obsolescence of research tools, the need to account for numerous contextual factors, ethical issues related to studying children's digital practices, and the interdisciplinary nature of the field. Indeed, the first quarter of the 21st century has witnessed a fundamental shift in how media are embedded in children's lives and activities (Livingstone et al., 2019). Whereas early research could operationalize media exposure as an isolated variable, for example time spent watching a specific TV program, today the integration of media into the child's lifeworld cannot be so precisely operationalized. The issue is not simply an increase in the number of screens, or the volume of content consumed by the child; it is a qualitative change in the very nature of the interaction.

Media have ceased to be a separate activity and have become a "habitat" or environment (Livingstone, 2019; Marsh et al., 2019; Kruzhkova et al., 2024; Wei, & Ong, 2025). For instance, early models were based on the child's active and purposeful attention to media (e.g., a child sitting down to watch a cartoon). Today, a significant portion of media exposure is background in nature (Christakis, & Hale, 2025). A television playing in the background, advertising screens in public spaces, and music all exert a cumulative and implicit influence. This transformation can also be observed in how children's play has become intertwined with media consumption (Rubtsova, & Salomatova, 2022). Most modern toys are not just dolls or figures, but characters from animated series, complete with YouTube channels, mobile applications, and online games. By playing with such a doll, the child interacts with an entire media narrative. Thus, the mediatization of childhood is a complex, distributed, hybrid, and context-dependent phenomenon. Understanding its mechanisms and consequences requires a comprehensive approach that integrates theories from various fields of knowledge and accounts for the dynamic nature of children's interaction with the digital environment.

While the psychological effects of screen time are widely studied, this research contributes to the sociology of media and childhood studies by investigating how media consumption transforms not just individual behaviors, but the fundamental cultural practice of play. We examine play as a mediator

between the macro-level forces of the media industry (marketing, narratives) and the micro-level outcomes in child development. Thus, this study speaks directly to core questions in media studies about the incorporation of media into everyday life, the commercialization of childhood culture, and the formation of shared media-based social codes among peers.

Screen time

Screen time represents the most frequently used quantitative indicator of the intensity of childhood mediatization in research (Sigman, 2012). The scientific literature commonly distinguishes several types of screen time based on various classification criteria (Sweetser et al., 2012). Based on the nature of interaction with content, passive screen time (watching videos, TV programs) and active screen time (using interactive applications, video games) are distinguished. According to the social context, individual and co-use/co-viewing screen time (watching or using devices together with parents or peers) are differentiated. Based on content, educational, entertainment, and mixed screen time are identified (Council on Communications and Media, 2016).

Meta-analytic studies demonstrate the ambiguous influence of screen time on the development of preschool children. On the one hand, prolonged passive screen time (more than 1-2 hours per day) is associated with negative consequences for cognitive development, including reduced executive functions, attention, and language abilities (Madigan et al., 2020). Associations have also been noted between excessive screen time and problems in the socio-emotional domain, including difficulties with emotion regulation and reduced empathy (Twenge, & Campbell, 2018). On the other hand, educational screen time of moderate duration can have a positive impact on the development of early literacy and mathematical understanding. An important moderator of the influence of screen time is the social context: co-viewing and discussing content with parents mitigates potential negative effects and promotes learning transfer (Barr et al., 2020).

Play in the context of the mediatization of childhood

A significant body of empirical evidence confirms the positive role of play in the development of self-regulation, language, social skills, and other key competencies in preschool children (Gavrilova et al., 2023; Bukhalenkova, & Chichinina, 2023; Fleer, 2022). Play represents a symbolic modeling of reality, through which children recreate familiar social relationships and norms (Vygotsky, 2016; Veraksa, 2022). The structure of play includes the

following components: *plot* – the aspect of reality recreated in play (e.g., playing hospital); *content* – specific actions and relationships between characters (e.g., the process of treating patients); *roles* – generalized behavioral models corresponding to specific situations (e.g., the role of a kind doctor); *rules* – prescriptions dictated by the role or established by participants (e.g., the sequence of actions during a patient visit); and finally, *play actions* – specific symbolic actions performed in accordance with the role (Elkonin, 1966; Smirnova, & Ryabkova, 2010).

The plot, roles, and content of play naturally reflect the socio-cultural context and are therefore subject to change (Elkonin, 1966). Consequently, play activity can significantly transform under the influence of changing childhood conditions. In the context of mediatization, this influence manifests itself, on the one hand, in a reduction of time devoted to play, and on the other hand, in the fact that play content increasingly revolves around recreating popular media narratives and actions of animated film characters (Gavrilova et al., 2023). Relying on ready-made narratives may limit children's ability to independently create original plots but can also foster a shared context and serve as a basis for joint play with peers (Hinkley et al., 2018). At the same time, there is a widespread concern that children unfamiliar with current media narratives and characters may be excluded from play interactions due to their inability to support popular plots.

In addition to the transformation of play itself, the associated children's toy industry is also undergoing mediatization (Marsh, 2017; Plowman, & Luckin, 2004). Toys serve simultaneously as objects of play, elements of cultural context, and products of the global entertainment industry (Mertala et al., 2016; Stephen, & Edwards, 2017). The digitalization of the toy market leads to the instantaneous spread of trends that displace more traditional children's toys (Marsh, 2017). Digital trends are quickly embodied in physical objects and permeate children's play through active marketing and commercialization of the toy industry.

Individual toys popularized by the media environment achieve viral prevalence among children (Adachi, & Willoughby, 2017; Edwards et al., 2017). However, many such toys not only fail to meet the age-related needs and developmental tasks of children but may also diminish the developmental potential of play by limiting children's autonomy and initiative in creating play narratives. To illustrate this point, a study analyzing children's toy preferences showed that the motivation for choosing trendy toys was largely unrelated to play intent but was determined by external characteristics and their popularity in the media environment (Gavrilova et al., 2023).

Sociometric status as an indicator of play involvement

Sociometric status, in the context of developmental psychology, reflects a child's ability to function successfully within a social group, establish and maintain positive relationships with peers, and participate effectively in joint activities (Rubin et al., 2015). The number of choices a child receives from peers as a preferred play partner is of interest not only as an indicator of social competence but also as a measure of the play experience of a preschool-aged child (Cillessen, & Marks, 2017).

A child's play involvement might be linked to their sociometric status because play competencies, such as the ability to generate attractive play narratives, flexibly change roles, and resolve play conflicts enhance the child's value as a potential play partner (Bukhalenkova, & Chichinina, 2023). Furthermore, children with high sociometric status gain more opportunities to participate in complex forms of play, creating a positive feedback loop for the development of their play and social competencies (Veraksa, 2022).

The methodology for assessing sociometric status in preschool age has its specificities. The most common approach is the use of a nomination method, where children are asked to identify preferred partners for various types of joint activities, such as play, task completion, or birthday celebrations (Cillessen, & Marks, 2017). The number of positive nominations received serves as an indicator of the child's sociometric status.

Within the context of the mediatization of childhood, the question arises of how changes in play activities associated with digitalization influence children's sociometric status. Some researchers express concern that a focus on individual interaction with digital devices may reduce children's interest in cooperative play and hinder the development of social skills (Twenge, & Campbell, 2018). Other authors point to the potential for positive influence through the creation of a shared cultural code and new themes for joint play (Fleer, 2022). Empirical data remain contradictory, underscoring the need for further research in this area.

This study aimed to empirically test the hypothesis that intensive digital media consumption is associated with negative characteristics of play and suboptimal toy selection strategies among preschool children. The key variables of digital media consumption included the duration of active and passive screen time.

Methods

Participants

The study involved 528 children (50.3% girls) aged 6 years (M = 6.75, SD = 0.33). The sample was formed using a continuous method from the

population of several general education preschool institutions in Moscow, Russia. The inclusion criteria were informed consent from parents/legal guardians for the child's participation; the absence of diagnosed neurological or psychiatric disorders; and the absence of developmental disabilities significantly impairing understanding of instructions.

The study and consent procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, Lomonosov Moscow State University (approval number: 2024/0223), dated 27.04.2024. The primary ethical requirement was fulfilled by obtaining written informed consent from all parents/legal guardians. In addition, following child-friendly protocols, each child provided verbal assent after a researcher explained the procedures in an age-appropriate manner, ensuring their voluntary participation.

Measures

To assess children's digital media consumption, play characteristics, and toy preferences, a special parent questionnaire was developed. The survey included a block of questions aimed at measuring the child's screen time, differentiated into passive (video viewing) and active (gaming, video calls) use of digital devices, as well as calculation of total screen time. Specific play behaviors were assessed through statements capturing stability of play interests and toy preferences ("The child prefers to play with a specific type of toy", "Favorite toys change according to trends", "Loses interest in new toys on the same day", "Is emotionally attached to their toys"). To control for socio-demographic factors, the questionnaire included items on parental education level and subjective assessment of family material well-being.

Assessment of children's sociometric status within the peer group was conducted using Kolominsky's (1984) sociometric method. The procedure involved an individual interview aimed at identifying children's preferences for cooperative activities. Each child was asked two questions: (1) "Name three children from your class whom you would invite to your birthday party" and (2) "Name three children from your class whom you like to play with". Responses were anonymized using identification numbers. For both tasks, the number of peer nominations received by each child was recorded. Status categories were defined as follows: popular (≥5 nominations), average status (1–4 nominations), and rejected (0 nominations). The final sociometric status score was calculated based on both tasks. The procedure took approximately 10 minutes per child and was administered by trained researchers following a standardized protocol.

Statistical analyses were conducted using jamovi (Version 2.6) [Computer Software]. Partial correlation analysis was employed to examine relationships between study variables while controlling for socio-demographic indicators.

Results

The first step involved examining descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) of the main variables (see *Table 1*). Analysis using partial Pearson correlation revealed consistent negative associations between parental education level and all digital media consumption indicators: passive ($r = -0.182$, $p < 0.001$), active ($r = -0.162$, $p < 0.001$), and total screen time ($r = -0.202$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables

	M	SD	1	2	3
Passive screen time (hours per week)	10.61	6.23	—		
Active screen time (hours per week)	5.82	6.61	0.529***	—	
Total screen time (hours per week)	16.54	11.37	0.865***	0.884***	—
Sociometric status	2.10	0.72	-0.067	0.003	-0.041
Prefers calm, structured games	3.63	1.33	-0.108*	-0.011	-0.058
Loses interest in new toys on the same day	1.83	0.78	0.198***	0.171**	0.210***
Favorite toys change depends on trends	2.17	0.91	0.224***	0.119	0.184**
Emotionally attached to their toys	2.87	0.84	-0.068	-0.130*	-0.135*
Parental education level	5.40	1.15	-0.182***	-0.162***	-0.202***

Note: controlling for Age and Gender; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

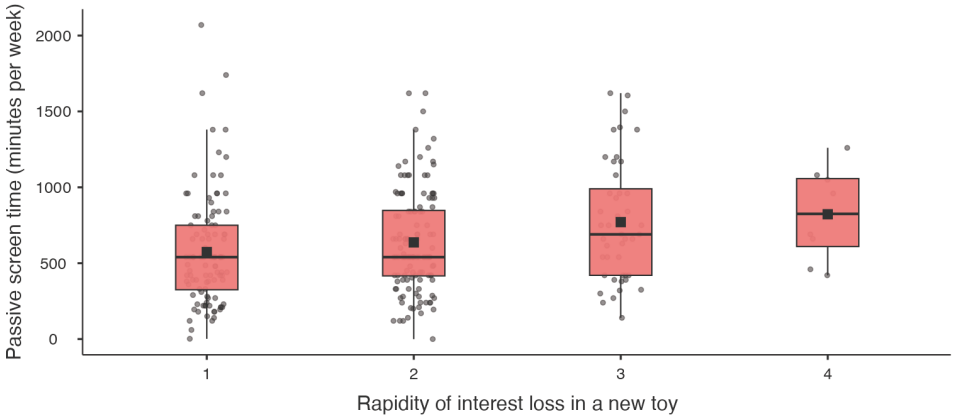
An Independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the scores of boys and girls on several variables. A significant difference was found in children's emotional attachment to their toys, with girls ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.73$) reporting significantly higher attachment than boys ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.89$); $t(294) = -3.86$, $p < .001$. A significant difference was also found for the 'Active' scale, with boys ($M = 381.92$, $SD = 441.10$) scoring higher than girls ($M = 302.35$,

SD = 343.76); $t(491) = 2.20$, $p = .028$. No statistically significant differences were found between boys and girls on the following variables: passive screen time, total screen time per week, the number of peer selections as a play partner, preference for quiet activities, rapid loss of interest in a new toy, the tendency for favorite toys to change with trends.

Given that preliminary analyses revealed significant gender differences in both screen time (specifically, active consumption) and several play-related indicators, partial Pearson correlations were conducted controlling for respondents' age and gender. This analysis revealed statistically significant relationships between digital media consumption indicators and characteristics of children's play activity. Specifically, the tendency for rapid loss of interest in new toys was positively associated with all types of media consumption: passive ($r = 0.198$, $p < 0.001$) (See *Figure 1*), active ($r = 0.198$, $p < 0.001$), and total screen time ($r = 0.210$, $p < 0.001$). Dependence of play preferences on media trends showed significant positive correlations with passive ($r = 0.224$, $p < 0.001$) and total screen time ($r = 0.184$, $p < 0.01$). Interest in calm, structured games was significantly negatively associated with passive screen time ($r = -0.108$, $p < 0.001$). The degree of emotional attachment to toys was significantly negatively correlated with active ($r = -0.130$, $p < 0.05$) and total screen time ($r = -0.135$, $p < 0.05$). Regarding the sociometric status of children in the peer group, no statistically significant relationships with screen time indicators were found ($p > 0.05$). However, at the trend level, a weak negative association was observed between passive screen time and the number of sociometric choices received by the child in the play partner selection task ($r = -0.062$, $p = 0.056$) (See *Figure 2*).

Figure 2

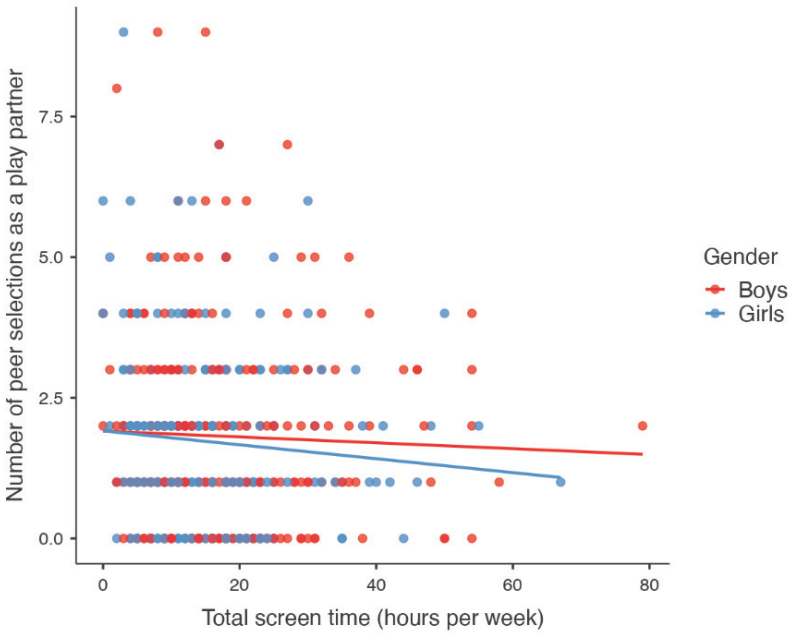
Passive screen time distribution across levels of rapid toy interest loss



Note: The variable "Rapidity of interest loss in a new toy" represents parental responses to the statement "The child loses interest in a new toy on the same day" on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Figure 2

Scatter plot of the number of sociometric choices received by the child as a play partner and total screen time



Discussion

The results of this study shed light on specific aspects of the transformation of play activity in the context of childhood mediatization (Bergmann et al., 2022). The obtained data confirm the research suggestion that active consumption of digital media by children can lead to negative effects that transform traditional play.

The significant relationships found in the study between screen time duration and such play behavior characteristics as rapid loss of interest in new toys, dependence on media trends when selecting toys, and reduced emotional attachment to them are consistent with the theoretical assumption about the negative impact of digital media on the structure and content of play activity in preschoolers. As emphasized in the works of Elkonin (1966), play represents a complex form of symbolic modeling of social reality, where the toy serves as a key means of implementing play ideas and embodying plots. The obtained data suggest that intensive consumption of digital media can transform the perception of toys: instead of being a tool for creative realization, they begin to be perceived as objects of temporary consumption. This confirms concerns about the negative impact of excessive and unregulated commercialization of the toy market on the quality of play in modern children (Smirnova, & Ryabkova, 2010; Veraksa, & Sukhikh, 2020). It is worth noting the differential influence of various types of screen time on play characteristics identified in the study. Passive consumption of media content demonstrated the most pronounced negative correlations with parameters of play behavior.

These findings can be considered as confirmation of the suggestion that ready-made media narratives limit children's opportunities for independent construction of play plots (Hinkley et al., 2018). Unlike passive consumption, active forms of digital device use, involving interaction, can provide children with variable models for plot construction and play development while maintaining an element of uncertainty and opportunities for creative choice. An important result is the absence of significant relationships between screen time indicators and children's sociometric status, including based on trials of peer selection of play partners. This indicates the preservation of the need for joint play in modern children regardless of digital media consumption. At the same time, the negative relationship at the trend level suggests that the common concern that children unfamiliar with current media narratives and characters may be excluded from play interactions due to their inability to support popular plots is not supported. At the trend level, an inverse relationship is observed, where children with maximum screen time are the least preferred among peers. In sum,

the first hypothesis of the current study was supported. We found significant positive associations between screen time and negative play characteristics, including rapid loss of interest in toys, a preference for trendy media-linked toys, and reduced emotional attachment. The second hypothesis was not supported by the obtained data. Contrary to the assumption that children with low media exposure would be socially disadvantaged, we found no significant link between screen time and sociometric status.

The conducted study demonstrates the complex influence of mediatization on the play activity of preschool children, which fully aligns with theoretical conceptions of mediatization as a profound sociocultural process transforming childhood. The obtained results point to specific mechanisms through which digital technologies are altering traditional practices of socialization and development. From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems approach, the study's results demonstrate the influence of mediatization across all levels of the child's developmental ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). The identified significant association between parental education level and children's screen time confirms the importance of family practices regarding digital device use as an element of the microsystem. More educated parents are likely more aware of the potential risks and opportunities of digital media, enabling them to establish a more balanced mediated environment (Clark, 2011). The absence of a significant link between screen time and sociometric status indicates the preservation of children's capacity for social adaptation within the preschool setting, despite intensive media consumption. This reflects the resilience of children's sociality and the effectiveness of socialization institutions at the mesosystem level. The dependence of play preferences on media trends reflects the influence of the global entertainment industry and marketing strategies on local practices of children's play, demonstrating the impact of macrosystemic factors.

From the standpoint of Vygotsky's sociocultural approach, digital media serve as contemporary cultural tools that mediate psychological development (Vygotsky, 2016). Prefabricated media narratives become psychological tools that shape the content and structure of children's play, manifesting in the predominance of reproductive scenarios over creative ones. Theoretically, co-use of media with adults could serve as an effective tool for development within the zone of proximal development; however, the obtained data indicate a deficit of high-quality mediation in most families.

The results underscore the critical importance of mediating digital experience, in line with Parental Mediation Theory (Clark, 2011). The identified

negative effects are particularly pronounced with passive content consumption without adequate adult mediation, confirming the idea that the meaning of media content is constructed through social interaction rather than passively absorbed. This points to the necessity of developing mediation competence among parents and educators as a key condition for the positive adaptation of children to the realities of a mediatized childhood.

The theoretical significance of the study lies in its substantial contribution to the development of the theory of childhood mediatization. The results demonstrate that mediatization is not merely a technical phenomenon but a profound sociocultural process, the effects of which are indirectly reflected in children's play and consumer culture regarding the selection and use of toys.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow establishing causal relationships between variables. Second, the use of parent questionnaires may contain elements of social desirability bias and subjective assessment of children's behavior. Third, the sample was limited to children from Moscow preschool institutions, which limits the generalizability of the results to other regions and cultural contexts. Fourth, the study did not account for qualitative characteristics of the consumed media content, focusing primarily on quantitative indicators of screen time.

Conclusion

The present study yields several important conclusions regarding the influence of mediatization on the play activity of contemporary preschoolers. The findings indicate that this influence is complex and multifaceted, reflecting the nuanced ways digital media are integrated into early childhood development and daily routines. On the one hand, the empirical evidence suggests that prolonged interaction with digital devices, particularly in the form of watching video content (categorized as passive screen time) is associated with specific, observable changes in play behavior. Children with significant screen exposure tend to demonstrate a rapid loss of interest in new toys, weaker emotional attachment to them, and a marked preference for toys aligned with popular media trends. These behavioral patterns indicate that ready-made visual narratives and characters may constrain opportunities for independent creative development and the elaboration of self-generated play scenarios. This dynamic potentially transforms a toy from a tool for implementing a child's own ideas

into an object of transient novelty, fostering a more consumer-oriented rather than creator-oriented relationship with play materials.

On the other hand, the study did not identify a significant association between the level of media consumption and a child's sociometric status within the peer group. This significant result indicates that the fundamental human need for direct social interaction and cooperative play remains robust, even within the context of intensive childhood mediatization. Furthermore, a child's capacity to build relationships, gain acceptance, and be perceived as an interesting partner in play does not appear to be determined primarily by their familiarity with current media content. This finding helps to mitigate common societal concerns that children who are less engaged with the dominant digital context may inevitably experience social isolation or peer rejection, suggesting instead that core social skills and personal characteristics retain their primary importance in peer-group dynamics.

Several promising directions for future research emerge from these findings. First, longitudinal studies are strongly recommended to move beyond correlations and establish causal connections, thereby investigating the long-term developmental effects of childhood mediatization. Second, a more refined and granular analysis of the qualitative parameters of media content—such as its narrative complexity, pacing, character development, and interactive demands—and their specific relationship with various cognitive and social aspects of children's play activity is necessary. Third, it appears particularly worthwhile to explore the educational and developmental potential of hybrid "phygital games" (physical + digital), which are considered by some researchers to effectively bridge digital and real-world play experiences, possibly offering a balanced model that leverages digital engagement while supporting tangible social interaction and creative manipulation.

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Exploring the antecedents of news avoidance behavior among university students in Pakistan

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To cite this article: Imran, F., & Ali, F. (2025). Exploring the antecedents of news avoidance behavior among university students in Pakistan. *World of Media. Journal of Russian Media and Journalism Studies*, 4, pp. 46–69. DOI: 10.30547/worldofmedia.4.2025.3

Abstract

News avoidance has emerged as a growing concern, influencing how information is received, shaping civic engagement, and forming individual perspectives. This study investigates the key factors contributing to this behavior, particularly in the evolving media landscape where traditional news sources face increasing competition from digital platforms. Conducted across six universities in two metropolitan cities in Pakistan, the research aims to explore the complexities of news avoidance behaviors through a survey-based methodology with a purposive sampling approach. A total of 558 university students participated in the study, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of diverse variables influencing news consumption habits. The study examines critical factors, including news overload, news fatigue, the perception of "news finding the individual", trust in news sources, political interest, news efficacy, negativity in news, and information overload. These variables were systematically analyzed to determine their influence on news avoidance. Among them, two significant predictors emerged: news fatigue and the perception that "news finds me". These findings highlight the intersection of media consumption habits and individual traits, providing deeper insights into the behavior of university students in Pakistan. By identifying the key drivers of news avoidance, this research contributes to the theoretical framework of media studies while offering practical recommendations for fostering greater engagement with news. Addressing the psychological and

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behavioral dimensions of news consumption can help develop strategies to encourage informed and active participation in news discourse, particularly in an era of rapidly evolving digital media.

Keywords
News avoidance, news consumption, news engagement, political interest, Pakistan.

Introduction
The modern media environment has experienced remarkable changes in how news is consumed, driven by the swift progression of digital technologies. Although news is now more readily accessible than in the past, allowing for consumption at any time and location, it has also given rise to a significant trend: news avoidance. News avoidance is the deliberate and persistent avoidance of news content through selective exposure or complete disengagement (Palmer, & Toff, 2020; Stroud, 2010; Mitchelstein, & Boczkowski, 2010). News avoidance is a significant phenomenon, particularly among the younger generation. Research suggests that individuals who actively avoid news have pre-existing perspectives about news that shape their attitudes and behaviour (Toff, & Nielsen, 2022). This news avoidance behaviour among people seems to be new, but early research has also traced this concept. Early research, such as Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (2000) and Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien (1970) highlighted how individual characteristics influence news consumption and avoidance. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) identified reasons for news avoidance, including perceptions of irrelevance, negativity, and bias. Zaller (2004) noted that news is avoided when perceived costs outweigh benefits. The role of social media in news avoidance has also been explored, with Pentina, Covault, and Tarafdar (2016) finding that social media users are less likely to avoid news due to the personalized nature of content. Recent studies, especially post-COVID-19, have shown a nuanced relationship between anxiety levels and news consumption (Newman et al., 2021; Nielsen et al., 2020).

In literature, various factors have been identified as precursors of news avoidance. These factors encompass news overload, political interests, trust in news media, and the concept of "News Finds Me" (Bruine de Bruin, Saw, & Goldman, 2020; Gil de Zúñiga, & Diehl, 2019). Furthermore, news fatigue has emerged as a principal motivator, leading individuals to refrain from news consumption as a coping strategy (Fitzpatrick, Harris, & Drawve, 2020). Additionally, family characteristics and news habits have been associated with

news avoidance behavior (Shehata, 2016). Scholars have now categorized news avoidance into intentional, driven by negative sentiments towards news, and unintentional, stemming from a preference for other media content (Bode, 2016; Prior, 2005; Skovsgaard, & Andersen, 2020). Some other factors contributing to this trend include the overwhelming volume of news, especially on topics like politics and COVID-19, and the negative emotional impact of news consumption (Newman et al., 2022). This phenomenon is observed not only in Western countries but also in Pakistan, where issues like media manipulation and information overload during the pandemic have exacerbated news avoidance (Rathore, & Farooq, 2020; Adam et al., 2023).

Pakistan offers a unique and compelling setting for studying news avoidance, particularly in light of its vibrant yet highly complex media environment. The country has witnessed a rapid evolution in its media industry over the past two decades, transitioning from state-dominated broadcasting to a landscape with over 90 private television channels and a rapidly expanding digital news sector (Mulla, 2020). While this proliferation has enhanced access to information, it has also intensified the saturation of political content, sensationalist reporting, and frequent ethical controversies. The Pakistani news cycle is often dominated by coverage of political instability, security threats, and national crises, which can lead to emotional exhaustion and news fatigue among consumers (Saeed et al., 2021). These dynamics are exacerbated by deep-seated challenges such as state influence over editorial decisions, inconsistent regulatory frameworks, and fierce competition for audience attention, all of which contribute to diminishing public trust in mainstream media (Akhtar, & Pratt, 2016). As a result, patterns of disengagement and selective news avoidance have become increasingly visible, particularly among younger, digitally active populations.

Within this context, the present study investigates the antecedents of news avoidance among university students in the metropolitan city of Lahore and the industrial city of Sialkot, two urban centers that offer contrasting yet insightful perspectives on youth media behavior. The study adapts and tests motivational factors previously identified in Western contexts to assess their relevance and explanatory power within Pakistan's distinct socio-political environment. Through this, the research aims to uncover the unique drivers of news avoidance in Pakistan and contribute to the global literature on this phenomenon. Guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the study posits that media consumption, and avoidance, is an active, purposive behavior shaped by individuals' needs.

Literature review

News overload pertains to the sensation of being inundated by the abundance and regularity of news materials, contributing to detrimental impacts on mental well-being, including feelings of unease, tension, and weariness. This phenomenon can be attributed to the continuous 24-hour news cycle, the pervasiveness of news across social media platforms, and the incessant notifications originating from news applications. In essence, "news overload" signifies an excessive accumulation of news content or processed information in various spheres (Holton, & Chyi, 2012; Vartanova, 2025). The proliferation of news across social media has raised concerns about news overload, leading to news avoidance (Zhang et al., 2022; Dunas, & Babyna, 2024). Studies show a positive correlation between news overload and news avoidance, where the overwhelming volume of news prompts individuals to withdraw from news consumption (Park, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, news avoidance served as a coping strategy, though it also negatively impacted civic engagement (Ohme et al., 2022). Attitudes toward news media influence avoidance behaviors, with negative perceptions correlating with higher avoidance (Edgerly, 2022; Rabeson et al., 2024; Javed et al., 2025). Thus, news overload's relationship with news avoidance is multifaceted, involving perceptions, attitudes, and coping mechanisms. So, to test this relationship between news avoidance and news overload based on the literary evidence, the following is suggested:

H1: News overload is positively associated with news avoidance

The "News Finds Me" (NFM) perception, identified by Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl (2019), refers to individuals' belief that they do not need to actively seek news because they expect to receive pertinent updates through social media networks. This shift in news consumption habits has been facilitated by the rise of social media and personalized news algorithms. Research by Strauß Huber and Gil de Zúñiga (2021) shows that heavy social media use, large social networks, and active political discussions increase the likelihood of adopting the NFM perception, whereas older age, higher education, and belonging to priority ethnic groups decrease it. Segado-Boj et al. (2019) found that the NFM perception correlates positively with news consumption but not with news sharing, indicating that while individuals may consume more news passively, it doesn't necessarily lead to increased sharing. Similar trends in passive news consumption were observed in a study by Vu (2025), which examined news consumption patterns among Vietnamese media students, highlighting the dominance of smartphone-centric and social media-driven news engagement. Recent studies have linked the NFM perception with news avoidance, suggesting

that individuals who expect news to find them are less proactive in seeking news and more likely to avoid it (Goyanes et al., 2023).

H2: News Finds Me is positively associated with news avoidance

Political interests refer to the attitudes, beliefs, and values that individuals or groups hold regarding political issues, policies, and decision-making processes. In the book "Political Interest and Participation in Germany," the concept of political interest is given, which refers to the degree of attraction or concern an individual or group holds towards political issues, institutions, and processes. The author emphasizes that political interest is a complex construct encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioural elements (Rebenstorf, 2013). Political interest significantly influences political behaviors and democratic engagement. It is a stable personal disposition and an intrinsic motivation that drives engagement in political activities, including news consumption (Blais, & St-Vincent, 2011; Lecheler, & de Vreese, 2017; Prior, 2010; Shah et al., 2007; Strömbäck, & Shehata, 2010). In media-rich environments, those with minimal political interest can easily avoid news in favor of entertainment, utilizing diverse media channels and tools to exclude political content from their consumption (Strömbäck et al., 2013; Prior, 2005). Conversely, those with high political interest increase their news consumption in these settings. A longitudinal study in Sweden (1986-2010) showed that as media options grew, political interest had a stronger positive impact on news engagement (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2013). Similarly, Prior (2005) found that in the U.S., access to a wide array of media options led to a preference for entertainment over news among individuals with low political interest, reducing their political knowledge.

H3: Political interest is negatively associated with news avoidance

As observed by Fisher (2018), there exists no unanimous agreement on the precise definition of trust in news media. Nevertheless, certain researchers have proffered their own explanations of trust in news media. According to a study by Newman et al. (2021), trust in news denotes the level of confidence individuals have in the precision, impartiality, and dependability of news organizations and the information they disseminate. This notion of trust in news is intricate and multifaceted, influenced by an array of factors such as political ideology, media literacy, and exposure to misinformation. It stands as a critical constituent within a robust democracy, facilitating well-informed decision-making and ensuring the accountability of elected representatives. Trust in news remains a multidimensional construct shaped by a diverse spectrum of factors, encompassing political

orientations, media aptitude, and encounters with misinformation. A primary driver of this behavior is a pervasive lack of trust in media and news content, even when verified for accuracy. Studies have revealed that distrust in media is a critical factor in news avoidance (Ardèvol-Abreu, Hooker, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2018; Islam, Das, & Tabassum, 2023). For example, a Reuters Institute survey found that many news avoiders cite mistrust as a key reason (Schrøder, 2015). This skepticism towards news media is also prevalent in Pakistan, where mistrust in electronic news media stems from biased reporting and sensationalism (Saeed et al., 2021). Similarly, distrust was a notable factor among Spanish respondents, where nearly 30% avoided news due to doubts about its truthfulness (Serrano-Puche, 2020). Cross-sectional studies affirm that trust in news is a significant predictor of news avoidance globally (Toff, & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). Additionally, qualitative explorations highlight how distrust in corporate and governmental influences on news prompts some individuals to resist news consumption as a strategic choice (Woodstock, 2014). Thus, it is evident that media distrust substantially contributes to news avoidance, leading to the hypothesis four.

H4: Trust in news is negatively associated with news avoidance

News efficacy, similar to self-efficacy, refers to an individual's confidence in their ability to effectively find, understand, and use news. This concept has become crucial in today's complex media landscape. High news efficacy is associated with proactive information-seeking behaviors, whereas low news efficacy correlates with news avoidance (Park, 2019; Yan et al., 2016). Additionally, those with high news efficacy are better at managing cognitive loads and interruptions while consuming news (Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, & Polavin, 2020; Basoglu, Fuller, & Sweeney, 2009). Conversely, low news efficacy leads to increased news avoidance, particularly when individuals feel overwhelmed by news overload on social media (Park, 2019).

H5: News efficacy is negatively associated with news avoidance

News fatigue, the feeling of exhaustion from constant news exposure, has become a prevalent issue, particularly in the digital age. Studies have shown that repeated exposure to the same news issues and the overwhelming volume of news contribute significantly to news fatigue (Gurr, & Metag, 2021; Schumann, 2022). This fatigue often leads to news avoidance as a coping mechanism (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020). Surveys indicate that a significant portion of the population feels "worn out" by the amount of news available, particularly in crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic (Gottfried, 2020; Fletcher et

al., 2018). The relationship between news fatigue and news avoidance is well-documented, with individuals using avoidance to manage the cognitive burden and emotional distress caused by excessive news exposure (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2020). Hence, the hypothesis is:

H6: News fatigue is positively associated with news avoidance

Negativity in news, characterized by the predominance of negative content, has significant implications for news consumption behaviors. Exposure to negative news can increase stress and anxiety, prompting individuals to avoid news to preserve their emotional well-being (Boukes, & Vliegenhart, 2017; Wagner, & Boczkowski, 2019). This avoidance is particularly noted during crises, where the relentless focus on negative news can be overwhelming (Toff, & Kalogeropoulos, 2020; Ytre-Arne, & Moe, 2021). Studies indicate that demographic factors, such as gender and education, influence the propensity for news avoidance due to negativity (Grabe, & Kamhawi, 2006; Skovsgaard, & Andersen, 2019). Consequently, the hypothesis is:

H7: Negativity in news is positively associated with news avoidance

Information overload occurs when the volume of available information exceeds an individual's capacity to process it, leading to stress and decreased productivity (Allen, & Wilson, 2003; Bawden, & Robinson, 2009). In the context of news consumption, this overload can result in news avoidance as a strategy to cope with the cognitive burden (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2020). Studies highlight that excessive news from social media contributes to this phenomenon, affecting perceptions of journalistic norms and increasing susceptibility to misinformation (Lee, Kim, & Koh, 2016; Tandoc, & Kim, 2022). Strategies such as filtering and withdrawing are commonly used to manage information overload, but their effectiveness varies (Savolainen, 2007). Therefore, the hypothesis is:

H8: Information overload is positively associated with news avoidance

This research incorporates the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), which elucidates why individuals select media to satisfy specific psychological and social needs. It emphasizes the active role of media selection in fulfilling these needs (Stark, & Schneiders 2022; Shestova et al., 2025). UGT helps understand news avoidance, linking it to factors like news overload, News Finds Me perception, political interests, media trust, news efficacy, negativity in news, news fatigue, and information overload. Studies show that news overload and fatigue positively correlate with news avoidance, while political interest and trust in news negatively correlate (Edgerly, 2022; Goyanes, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Gil de

Zúñiga, 2023). News Finds Me perception increases avoidance, as does low news efficacy, and negativity in news content leads to avoidance as a self-protection mechanism (Tsfati, & Cappella, 2003; Prior, 2010). UGT's framework is supported by research demonstrating that individuals avoid news to manage cognitive strain and emotional stress from excessive or negative news, seeking gratifications from more manageable and trustworthy sources (Ruggiero, 2000; Schumann, 2022).

Sample and method

Participants' characteristics

This research utilized a cross-sectional survey design with a quantitative approach to investigate news avoidance among university students. Participants were enrolled in ADP, BS, MPhil, and PhD programs at six universities located in Lahore and Sialkot, two prominent cities in Pakistan. The selection of Lahore and Sialkot as research sites was guided by their contrasting socio-economic, media, and educational profiles, which allow for a more comprehensive understanding of news avoidance behaviors among university students in urban Pakistan. Lahore, the capital of Punjab and the country's second-largest city, serves as a major media hub, housing several leading news organizations, media schools, and cultural institutions. It is characterized by high media exposure, political discourse, and a diversified urban youth demographic (Chaudhary, & Abdullah, 2020; Saud, & Ashfaq, 2024). In contrast, Sialkot is a mid-sized industrial city known for its export-driven economy and conservative social structure, offering a different yet increasingly digitalizing context for media consumption (Rabia et al., 2020). By comparing student populations in these two cities, the study captures both high-density media environments and relatively peripheral urban experiences, enhancing the external validity of the findings across different types of Pakistani cities.

Furthermore, both cities have high student populations, with numerous public and private universities, making them ideal for purposive sampling focused on youth media behavior. To uphold diversity across academic disciplines, a purposive sampling technique was implemented, enhancing the findings' generalizability. This method effectively targeted individuals who were most pertinent to the study's goals while also capturing a wide range of news consumption and avoidance behaviors. Ultimately, 558 responses were gathered, as participants voluntarily completed the survey.

Measures

This study employed a structured questionnaire consisting of validated scales adapted from prior research to measure key constructs relevant to news

consumption and avoidance behaviors. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Constructs such as news avoidance, news fatigue, news overload, information overload, trust in news media, political interest, news efficacy, negativity in news, and news finds me perception were measured using established multi-item scales drawn from previous empirical studies. A summary of each construct, including the number of items used, conceptual focus, and original sources, is provided in *Table 1*.

Table 1

Summary of constructs and measurement scales

Construct	Measurement description	Items	Source
News avoidance	Assesses the extent to which individuals intentionally avoid news and the reasons for avoidance	5	Pentina et al. (2015)
"News Finds Me" (NFM)	Measures the perception that news will automatically reach the individual without active search	6	Song, Gil de Zúñiga, & Boomgaarden (2020)
News overload	Evaluates feelings of being overwhelmed due to the volume and frequency of news exposure	6	Chen, & Masullo Chen (2019)
News fatigue	Assesses emotional exhaustion caused by repetitive news consumption; includes 3 additional adapted items	9	Song et al. (2017) plus adapted items
Information overload	Measures difficulty in processing excessive information from various sources	15	Chen, & Masullo Chen (2019); Beaudoin (2008); Eppler, & Mengis (2004)
Trust in news media	Measures confidence in the accuracy and reliability of news across print, electronic, and digital platforms	5	Watson, Peng, & Lewis (2019)
Political interest	Captures interest in political affairs and engagement with political news	5	Lee, & Kim (2017)
Negativity in news	Evaluates perceptions of news as overly negative and emotionally distressing	7	Bachleda et al. (2020); Goyanes et al. (2023)
News efficacy	Measures confidence in understanding, interpreting, and evaluating news content	3	Park (2019)

Source: Authors

Data collection

The survey was administered in person at six universities in Lahore and Sialkot. Permission was obtained from university authorities prior to conducting the research. Printed questionnaires were distributed in lecture halls, and students were invited to voluntarily complete the survey within 15 to 20 minutes. In-person administration facilitated a high response rate and enabled clarification of any ambiguities. The study followed ethical guidelines, ensuring participant anonymity and confidentiality throughout data collection.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed with Smart PLS 4.1 version. First, the measurement model was checked for reliability and validity. Reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), and validity was checked with convergent validity using Average Variance Extracted (AVE). After the measurement model met the required standards, the structural model was tested. Path coefficients were examined using bootstrapping with 5000 resamples to see if the relationships between constructs were significant. R-squared (R^2) values showed how well the independent variables explained news avoidance. Effect size (f^2) and predictive relevance (Q^2) were also calculated to support the structural model. This analysis helped explain how news fatigue, news overload, and trust in news media relate to students' news consumption and avoidance.

Results

This research study analyzes the demographic distribution and various factors influencing university students in Pakistan, aiming to understand the causes of news avoidance behavior. The information is categorized by gender, locality, qualification, and the university attended. A total of 558 university students were surveyed in Pakistan. These participants included 267 (around 47.8%) males, and 291 (about 52.2%) females. This indicates that the sample is relatively balanced in gender, with a slightly higher proportion of female respondents.

The participants in this study are from two primary cities: Lahore and Sialkot. Of the total respondents, 278 (about 49.8%) are from Lahore, and 280 (around 50.2%) from Sialkot, resulting in nearly equal representation from both areas. In this group, 45 respondents (approximately 8.1%) have completed an ADP, 501 (approximately 89.8%) hold BS degrees, and 12 (approximately 2.2%) have achieved MPhil degrees. In this case, most of the respondents possess a BS degree; however, fewer of them have completed either ADP or MPhil degrees.

The participants belong to different universities across Pakistan. The distribution within these institutions is: USKT: 126 respondents (approximately 22.6%), UMT Sialkot: 103 respondents (about 18.5%), GAUS: 45 respondents (around 8.1%), UCP: 121 respondents (approximately 21.7%), UOL: 103 respondents (about 18.5%), and UMT Lahore: 60 respondents (approximately 10.8%). The highest participation comes from USKT and UCP, while the least representation is from GAUS. Overall, this picture shows the demographic characteristics of university students in Pakistan who participated in this study on news avoidance behavior. The distribution of gender, locality, education level, and university attended provides a comprehensive account of the sample's composition, essential for deriving meaningful conclusions about factors underlying news avoidance behavior among Pakistani university students.

Table 2 reports psychometric properties of the different survey constructs used in this study. It describes the reliability and validity of the measurement instruments used in the research. The measured constructs involve aspects related to news consumption behaviours, attitudes, and emotional responses. Values of Cronbach's Alpha, which describe internal consistency, express the degree of homogeneity of items within each construct. All the constructs have a high internal consistency, ranging from a minimum of 0.73 to a maximum of 0.886. It means that the items within each construct are consistently measuring the intended latent variable. Composite Reliability (rho_a and rho_c) underlines the reliability of the constructs by considering both the internal consistency of the items constituting the construct and the variance extracted by the latent variable. Values of both types of composite reliability are consistently high, ranging from 0.736 to 0.889, showing strong measurement consistency and reliability.

AVE represents the variance captured by the latent variable in contrast to the variance due to measurement error. The AVE values range from 0.512 to 0.727, surpassing the threshold of 0.5 recommended, which suggests sufficient convergent validity. This therefore indicates that the survey constructs have good psychometric properties, which also justifies the reliability and validity of the measurement instruments applied in measuring news consumption behaviours and attitudes. These findings reinforce the acceptability of the results of this study and further add to the robustness of the research output.

Table 2

Reliability and validity of scales

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)
Information overload	0.886	0.889	0.904
Negativity in news	0.848	0.861	0.884
News avoidance	0.773	0.774	0.846
News efficacy	0.812	0.821	0.889
News fatigue	0.827	0.845	0.87
"News Finds Me"	0.73	0.736	0.817
News overload	0.809	0.827	0.861
Political interest	0.854	0.828	0.888
Trust in news	0.781	0.79	0.848

Source: Authors

Direct effects of different news consumption factors on news avoidance, as proposed by the structural model analysis in SmartPLS, are shown in *Table 3*. From the significant predictors, news fatigue turned out to be a strong determinant of news avoidance, with a positive effect size, $\beta = 0.287$, $p < 0.001$, and a T-value of $t = 5.48$. Correspondingly, "News Finds Me" perception had the most substantial positive effect on news avoidance, $\beta = 0.321$, $p < 0.001$, supported by a T-value of $t = 6.776$. These results point towards the fact that individuals who feel fatigued due to news and those relying on passive news consumption through social networks are more likely to avoid news.

In contrast, a number of factors did not have a statistically significant impact on news avoidance. These included information overload ($\beta = 0.037$, $p = 0.492$), negativity in news ($\beta = 0.028$, $p = 0.590$), news efficacy ($\beta = -0.049$, $p = 0.281$), news overload ($\beta = 0.090$, $p = 0.096$), political interest ($\beta = 0.050$, $p = 0.443$), and trust in news ($\beta = -0.045$, $p = 0.353$). Although news overload narrowly approached significance, its effect failed to reach the threshold necessary to be impactful. These results point out that cognitive and contextual factors like overload, trust, and political interest have limited direct influences on news avoidance behavior.

In order to confirm the structural model, further measures like effect size (f^2) and predictive relevance (Q^2) were calculated. The f^2 values represented small to medium effects by significant predictors, news fatigue ($f^2 = 0.076$) and "News Finds Me" perception ($f^2 = 0.103$) had the most significant effects. Other variables such as information overload ($f^2 = 0.002$), negativity in news

(f^2 = 0.001) and political interest (f^2 = 0.003) had negligible impacts. The news avoidance Q^2 value was 0.204, which shows a good predictive relevance, and the model is able to explain variance in the dependent variable. All these findings together prove the strength of the structural model and its applicability in investigating antecedents of news avoidance.

Table 3

Direct effect between news consumption factors and news avoidance

Variables	Original sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values
Information overload News avoidance	0.037	0.042	0.053	0.687	0.492
Negativity in news a	0.028	0.035	0.053	0.538	0.59
News efficacy a	-0.049	-0.052	0.045	1.079	0.281
News fatigue a	0.287	0.284	0.052	5.48	0***
"News Finds Me" a	0.321	0.319	0.047	6.776	0***
News overload a	0.09	0.087	0.054	1.665	0.096
Political interest a	0.05	0.051	0.065	0.768	0.443
Trust in bews a	-0.045	-0.03	0.048	0.93	0.353

Source: Authors

*Note: Significance level= * p ≤ .05; ** p ≤ .01; *** p ≤ .001*

Discussion

The study sought to identify the antecedents of news avoidance among Pakistani university students, focusing on a range of variables related to news consumption behaviors. The findings revealed that only two variables, news fatigue and the perception of "News Finds Me", significantly influenced news avoidance. Specifically, news fatigue showed a strong positive correlation with news avoidance, indicating that individuals who experience exhaustion from constant news exposure are more likely to disengage from news consumption. Similarly, the 'news finds me' perception positively predicted news avoidance, highlighting the tendency for individuals who passively rely on social networks for news to avoid actively seeking news, aligning with prior studies by Gil de Zuniga and Diehl (2019) and Palmer and Toff (2019).

These results highlight the interplay between psychological overload and passive media reliance in shaping avoidance behaviors, particularly among digitally native youth in developing contexts like Pakistan. In an era of algorithmic news feeds and 24/7 digital access, such patterns may exacerbate information gaps, reducing civic participation and informed decision-making (Newman et al., 2022). Comparatively, similar trends have been observed in Cyprus media landscapes, where fragmented news flows during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased news fatigue and avoidance, as audiences grappled with polarized content and information overload (Spyridou, & Danezis, 2022). This cross-cultural resonance suggests that news avoidance is not isolated to Western or South Asian contexts but is amplified in regions with high media saturation and political instability.

Contrary to expectations and previous research (Song et al., 2017; Park, 2019), news overload did not correlate significantly with news avoidance. This finding highlights the complex nature of news consumption habits, where some individuals can process a high volume of news without actively evading it. For instance, in Bangladesh, a country with socio-economic similarities to Pakistan, young audiences exhibit varying trust in media amid overload, which indirectly influences avoidance without a direct causal link (Islam et al., 2023). Extending this, Vartanova et al. (2019) found that Russian journalism students expressed a desire to filter news due to "unfiltered news flow". Despite this, their news diaries showed that they were not completely disengaged from topics they claimed to be "tired" of, such as some international news. This indicates that while students might express a desire for selective avoidance, it does not always lead to complete disengagement from certain topics. Political interest demonstrated a complex yet statistically insignificant relationship with news avoidance, resonating with the findings of Strömbäck et al. (2013) and Toff and Kalogeropoulos (2020), which emphasize the conditional nature of this relationship. Trust in news media was negatively associated with news avoidance, though not at a significant level, aligning partially with Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2018) and Tsfati and Cappella (2003), who argued that trust plays a crucial role in shaping media consumption patterns.

Furthermore, no significant correlation was found between news efficacy and news avoidance, diverging from prior studies such as Edgerly (2022), which emphasized the importance of confidence in news understanding. Negativity in news showed a positive but statistically insignificant relationship with news avoidance, consistent with observations by Bruine de Bruin et al. (2020). Lastly, information overload failed to predict news avoidance significantly, contrasting

with earlier research by Bruine de Bruin et al. (2020) but aligning with findings from Lee et al. (2016). These non-significant results may reflect the resilience of Pakistani youth to negativity and overload, possibly due to habitual exposure to crisis-driven news (Rathore, & Farooq, 2020). In contrast, a study by Simons et al. (2021) highlights an intergenerational gap in Russia that leads to a failure in transmitting cultural memory between "analogue" and "digital" generations. This generational divide may lead to a different dynamic, where younger audiences cope with information overload by selectively filtering rather than completely avoiding it.

The study offers theoretical contributions by extending the uses and gratifications theory to understand news avoidance behaviors. By emphasizing the roles of news fatigue and the "News Finds Me" perception, the research aligns with the theory's focus on how individuals actively or passively fulfill their needs through media. Specifically, it demonstrates how individuals experiencing fatigue from overexposure to news or passively relying on social networks for news gratification are more likely to avoid active news consumption. Practically, the findings suggest that enhancing media literacy, personalized content delivery, and balanced reporting can mitigate news avoidance. Tailored educational programs and innovative content framing are recommended to foster informed news consumption among university students. From a broader implications' perspective, these findings imply risks to democratic discourse in Pakistan, where news avoidance could widen knowledge gaps and reduce political engagement among youth, a demographic crucial for societal change. The results emphasize the need for news organizations and policymakers to address the reasons behind news avoidance. By recognizing the effects of news fatigue and personal perceptions of news exposure, they can develop strategies to reduce news avoidance behavior and promote a more engaged news-consuming society. This could include promoting diverse, non-sensationalist platforms to rebuild trust and lessen fatigue.

Conclusion and limitations

This research effectively explores the complex dynamics of news avoidance among Pakistani university students. Through the study of some of the key variables, which include news overload, the "News Finds Me", political interest, trust in news, news efficacy, news fatigue, negativity in news, and information overload, the study offers a lot of understanding on the factors behind such a behavior. The results demonstrate great importance of news fatigue and the perception of the "News Finds Me" on the news avoidance and reflect the overlap

between personal media behavior and specific traits in a specific environment. These findings highlight the need to focus on the emotional and behavioral aspects of using the media to reduce tendencies of avoidance.

These antecedents reflect the global trends of passive news consumption within Pakistan's rapidly digitalizing and politically unstable media landscape, which could impact civic literacy and engagement. Additionally, Pakistan's situation illustrates how the deterioration of political stability and crisis reporting can lead to a fatigue-like detachment from news. This supports the idea that news avoidance is not unique to Pakistan, but part of a broader global trend driven by technological factors and declining trust in institutions. Furthermore, news avoidance may contribute to the spread of echo chambers by reducing exposure to diverse perspectives, thereby affecting the democratic process.

In the context of the findings from this study, there are some limitations that must be emphasized with regard to the nature of the research approach and scope. The purposive sampling can be subject to certain biases in participant selection, which may ultimately limit generalizability of findings to a wider group of university students in Pakistan. Even though purposive sampling is advantageous in terms of focusing on the particular qualities of interest, it is not fully representative of diversity within a wider population. As a consequence, such findings may only be relevant outside of the context of the sampled population to a limited degree. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the research provides a snapshot of participants' attitudes and behaviors that do not take into account temporal dynamics that may be influencing the pattern of news avoidance. The study relies on self-reported data; thus, it is prone to response bias which may impact the actual news consumption patterns being reported. Finally, attention to specific cities and cultural contexts in the case of Pakistan places serious limitations on the generalizability of findings from this study to other areas that may have different media consumption habits and sociocultural variables. Although the selected variables cover a wide range of determinants, some influences on news avoidance, such as psychological factors or media literacy, were not included.

In the light of such limitations, a number of avenues could be suggested for future research. First of all, more diversified and representative methods of sampling may be selected to enhance the external validity of findings. Besides, gender, personality traits, and media literacy can act as moderators for these relationships. Longitudinal studies could illuminate how news avoidance behaviours themselves evolve and the way in which the importance of these factors leading to avoidance evolves over time. Integrating qualitative

insights from interviews or focus groups could yield a fuller understanding of the motivations underlying the avoidance of news. The interaction between media literacy and news avoidance might better clarify how individuals at different levels of media literacy use news information. With the increasing technological changes in media, one might also examine the influence of emerging technologies in future studies on news avoidance behaviour. Finally, interventions that attempt to reduce news avoidance might be designed and their efficacy in improving informed news consumption tested to further our overall understanding of news avoidance and some of its possible solutions.

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Universities' media communication strategies: Theoretical foundations and implementation features

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To cite this article: Gureeva, A. (2025). Universities' media communication strategies: Theoretical foundations and implementation features. *World of Media. Journal of Russian Media and Journalism Studies*, 4, pp. 70–94. DOI: 10.30547/worldofmedia.4.2025.4

Abstract

The article examines media communication strategies of universities in the context of implementing their "three missions": scientific, educational, and social. In this context, a strategic approach is essential for planning and implementing media communication activities at a university. According to this approach, the work of subject matter experts should be aligned with the university's general concept or strategy for development. A review of literature enables us to pinpoint where the media communication strategy fits within the general communication strategy of a university and identify its essential features: as a rule, it has a delayed effect and aims to develop long-term relationships with target audiences. The author analyzes current media communication practices of relevant university departments using the method of expert interviews with university officials and studies publicly available, documented media communication strategies. There are two approaches to working with media communication strategies in universities: the first one sees the strategy as an undocumented "action plan" not formalized in a document, whereas, according to the second one, the strategy exists as a local regulation. In certain universities, such a formal document not only sets the main goals and objectives of a relevant department but also contains performance indicators and key communication narratives, which makes the strategy more functional in terms of the tactical operation of a communication department. The results

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of a comprehensive review of the actual practices and vision of what is "proper" in media communication work, as shared by the universities, reveal several dimensions of a media communication strategy, including conceptual, process, organizational, and contextual ones, and target audiences of a university's media communication strategy. The building blocks of each of these dimensions can be represented as a standardized framework of a university's media communication strategy, which includes the university development strategy, goal setting, contributing factors, target audience groups, and three stages, i. e. development, implementation, and performance evaluation.

Keywords
Mediatization, mediatization of research and education, university media communications, university media communication strategy, strategic communications.

Introduction
Higher education is inextricably intertwined with what is going on in society, its social, economic, and political elements, and cannot therefore be taken out of the context. A higher-education system shapes our society by nurturing the intellectual elite, contributing to a new generation of human capital, translating the set of values, and offering broader capabilities to individuals. Various economic and political institutions determine the ever-changing order of society for the higher-education system, prioritize different types of government support, and define the prospects for further development of science and education.

Academician Viktor Sadovnichy, Rector of Lomonosov Moscow State University and President of the Russian Union of Rectors (2019), highlights that successful universities always pursue three fundamental goals that can be called "university missions". This first educational mission focuses on training skilled professionals capable of addressing present-day challenges. The second research mission involves producing new knowledge and technology critical to science and innovation development. The third social mission is related to a university's participation in society. Universities play a crucial role in improving regional economies, shaping public opinions, conducting expert assessments and consultations, and delivering educational projects for the general public. They become cultural and scientific exchange clusters and contribute to the integration of various stakeholders into a single extensive communication network.

At the present stage, academic organizations traditionally fulfill several key roles as social institutions and at the request of the state: the transfer of knowledge

from generation to generation (education as the first university mission), the production of scientific knowledge and the assurance of technological sovereignty (science as the second university mission), and the formation of a cultural and value-based foundation for the individual, as well as their socialization and even upbringing (society as the third university mission). These roles dictate the need for the comprehensive goal-setting of media communication activities and the structuring of countless multidirectional information flows. The fundamental diversity of media communication activities of an academic organization becomes one of the factors that brings to the forefront the discussion about the principles of their organization within the academic and professional community.

Today, each and every Russian university has its own development strategy or program (often referred to as a roadmap or by other names), which outlines the university's advancement across its core competence areas in the long term (3 to 15 years). However, a strategic approach is not often employed for a university's media communication activity, either as research optics or as a practical concept. This study, therefore, seeks to address the lack of a conceptual and categorical description of university media communication strategies that takes into account diverse aspects of their activity.

Theoretical approaches to university media communications

In terms of theory, the concept of a media communication strategy is infrequently addressed in scholarly discourse. Instead, researchers focus on marketing, communication, or communicative strategies (Ahmed, 2024; Dugin, 2024; Nefedova, & Anikina, 2024). Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize the significance of a clear definition and description of a media communication strategy as such, given the powerful influence of the mediatization process on all spheres of society (Vzorin et al., 2024; Gago-Galvagno et al., 2024). At the same time, one can find a substantial body of research devoted to strategizing, as well as to marketing, advertising, and sales strategies, along with descriptions of their various classifications and types (Færch, & Kasper, 1984; Thompson, & Strickland, 2006; Balmer, 2012; Price, 2015; Romashko, 2016; Werder et al., 2018; Kvint, 2019; Nazaykin, 2019; Capriotti, Carretón-Ballester, & Zeler, 2024; Sörensen et al., 2024).

It is worth noting that the specific features of the scientific and educational sphere render a purely marketing-based approach not entirely appropriate for universities. Nevertheless, the main elements of a marketing communication strategy and a media communication strategy are similar in many respects: "A

marketing communication strategy represents a comprehensive impact on both the internal and external environment and includes the full range of measures to promote information about a product or service. The integration of various forms of communication makes it possible to achieve synergy, which leads to greater results than could be obtained through their separate use. For this reason, integrated marketing communications have increasingly been used to implement a marketing communication strategy. <…> The set of tools within a communication strategy for development includes advertising, exhibitions, personal network sales, sales promotion, public relations, sponsorship of various events, etc. In this case, the different forms of communication complement one another. This unlocks synergy that exceeds the effectiveness of individual communications taken as a sum" (Romanyuk, 2020: 49).

The polysubjective character and the transformation of target audiences from external to internal categories and vice versa, the seasonal prevalence of different target audiences, the high social value of a university's activities, and the advocacy of national causes both domestically and internationally – all of this requires recognizing a media communication strategy as a distinct and significant area of both theoretical research and practical application.

It is also necessary to note the terminological diversity in defining the concept of a media communication strategy and understanding its place within the hierarchy of marketing communications and communication strategies (Zakharova, 2014; Gureeva, 2015, 2020). Historically, the concept of "strategy" was used in military policy and understood as the art of war, but this concept has found a wider scope of application over the past decades. If we look at the entire history of the development and public understanding of the term "strategy," a second, business vector can be identified, along with a third, state policy, which was added somewhat later. Undoubtedly, the first semantic field historically associated with the definition of this concept was warfare (Gavra, 2015: 231). Sun Tzu, who stated that "all warfare is based on deception," laid the foundation for what came to be called military strategy. Originally, strategy (from the Greek στρατηγία, "generalship") was understood as the science of war, in particular the science of generalship, i. e. a general plan of military activity designed to achieve major long-term goals and encompassing an extended period of time.

In business, one can find a broad range of definitions for strategy and a considerable variety of strategies themselves. The choice of a particular strategy by managers means that, among all paths and actions they could have chosen, they decided to follow this route and conduct their business in this manner. Without a strategy, a manager has no thought-out course to follow, no roadmap

to manage by, no unified action program to produce the intended results (Thompson, & Strickland, 2006: 12).

In general terms, a company's strategy represents the comprehensive management plan that strengthens the company's position on the market and provides efforts coordination, consumers' attraction and satisfaction, successful competition, and achievement of global goals (ibid: 32). Today, nearly every university has its own development strategy (or development program, which, by its very nature, amounts to a strategy), typically with a planning horizon of five to ten years.

In the most general sense, "strategy is a model of behavior that an organization follows in order to achieve its long-term goals" (Cassells, 2000). One also incorporates the important categories of problems and resources into the concept of strategy, it may be defined as a general program of action that sets out priorities, identifies problems, and allocates resources for achieving the primary goal. More strictly, strategy is "a specially designed program of action, based on long-term planning and aimed at achieving a complex goal using limited resources" (Gavra, 2015: 231). Strategy is always associated with the most important long-term (strategic) goals, mission, and values of a social actor. A strategic decision, therefore, is a decision regarding the allocation of resources to achieve a long-term goal (Gavra, 2021).

It should be noted that the term "strategy" may be employed across a fairly broad range of meanings (a long-term plan, a guiding principle of behavior, a position, or a program of prospective actions). Its application is meaningful not only at the level of the social actor (organization) as a whole, but also at higher communicative and, more broadly, societal levels.

A detailed description and theoretical insights are necessary to distinguish and compare marketing, communication, and media communication strategies, due to the diversity of scholarly approaches and interpretations of their structural interrelations. Nevertheless, it should be clearly stated that, within the scope of this study and considering the specific character of the scientific and educational sector, a university's media communication strategy can be reliably considered part of its overall communication strategy. This strategy operates alongside the marketing strategy, which promotes university products and services, and the creative strategy, which involves direct communication with target audiences without using media channels.

Overall, researchers distinguish two main interpretive tracks in understanding communication strategy: the linguistic track and the marketing track (Gavra, 2019). It should be clarified at the very beginning that the concept

of a communicative strategy is more linguistic in nature and is not of interest within the scope of this study, as communicative strategy is mainly used in linguistics, cross-cultural communication theory, and pedagogy. In the broadest sense, a communicative strategy is understood as a plan for achieving the communicator's goals, i. e. a scheme by which an individual constructs a model of their speech behavior to accomplish communication objectives.

Unlike a communicative strategy, the concept of a communication strategy is applied in communication management, communication planning and design, marketing, political and business communications, public relations, and advertising (Gavra, 2019). In his works, Gavra defines communication strategy as a long-term program, which is based on the overall strategy of a social actor, balanced in terms of resources, and aimed at achieving the actor's strategic goals through information and communication interactions with both the external and internal environments. The author further emphasizes that the development of a communication strategy involves the sequential formulation of three types of strategies: a marketing strategy, a creative strategy, and a media strategy (Gavra, 2019). Thus, a media communication strategy is a component of the overall communication strategy and is of equal significance to the marketing strategy, rather than being part of it.

The confirmation of this approach comes from the works of other contemporary theoreticians and applied researchers in the field of social sciences: "A brand communication strategy is large-scale planning for brand promotion aimed at achieving specific goals. It is based on brand positioning and addresses the challenges of communicating with particular groups of target audiences (TAs). The goals of the strategy may include creating a specific brand image or maintaining and enhancing consumer loyalty to the promoted brand as a whole and to its individual products. The outcome of developing a communication strategy is a plan (tactical stages) of marketing communications to be implemented in a comprehensive manner in accordance with the objectives of each stage" (Malygina et al., 2017: 39). As researchers note, a communication strategy is based on three main components: marketing analysis, a creative concept, and media planning.

The foundation of a communication strategy is the strategic goal of the social actor (not a communication goal, but a long-term, large-scale social, political, or business goal). To achieve this goal, a fundamental system of values/ideas is formulated, combined with a positioning concept, which the social actor conveys to their audience(s) in order to influence their attitudes and, ultimately, their behavior.

Thus, the main characteristics of a communication strategy can be summarized as follows (Gavra, 2019):

- A close connection with the strategic goals and objectives of the social actor;
- Reliance on the mission, philosophy, and values of the strategizing actor;
- Focus on controlling the mind and behavior of significant (strategic) audiences;
- Long-term nature, aiming for a delayed but meaningful effect;
- The use of information and communication resources;
- The capacity to integrate and coordinate the marketing, creative, and media strategies of the actor.

As mentioned above, we adopt the position that the communication strategy takes precedence, viewing marketing strategy as an integral and essential component of the communication strategy of political, business, or socio-cultural actors. A communication strategy implies two groups of goals: global (strategic) goals and operational/tactical goals designed for a specific and clearly defined temporal horizon.

An interesting approach was suggested by Zakharova (2014), who classifies university communication strategies into three types, depending on strategic goals and underlying principles: strategies based on trust, indifference (background presence), and givenness. The researcher emphasizes that, in practice, universities primarily use either indifference-based or, less frequently, givenness-based strategies. In the first case, informational messages serve merely as a background, failing to build trust, with no clear understanding of the need for dialog with target audiences, or, where such dialog does exist, it occurs in a fragmented manner. The second type, based on givenness, is characteristic of universities that have the status of a "national heritage," where communication support is less critical and primarily focuses on maintaining the existing status. Based on her classification of university communication strategies and the assessment of their application, the author formulates the following principles of a university communication strategy: the principle of trust, the fulfillment of the social mission, the principle of openness and transparency, and the principle of long-term relationships.

There is a substantial body of scholarly work devoted to strategic communication as a core element of the communication strategy itself. In the most general terms, strategic communication refers to communication that ensures the development and implementation of a social actor's strategy through its specific, i. e. communication resources, means, and tools (Gavra, 2015: 231). Thus, researchers (Gavra, 2021) identify the following delayed effects of strategic communications:

- Process changes;
- Institutional changes;
- Changes in the macrostructure of the market, both economic and political;
- Changes in the power relations in the market;
- Changes in the public climate;
- Reappraisal of values;
- Changes in aesthetic models, aesthetic revolution, etc.

This delayed effect and lack of obviousness to everyday consciousness and to contemporaries in general give strategic communication a special ontological status. The conclusion as to whether this communication is strategic cannot be made a priori. It becomes such only when strategic effects occur. At the same time, it is quite possible that communication was intended to be strategic, but macro-effects did not occur. In this case, the communication can no longer be regarded as strategic. In addition to the need to achieve a strategic effect, Gavra (2021) identifies six other important elements that determine whether communication can be recognized as strategic. These elements are: actor's intentionality and goal orientation (strategic communication always has an actor); a focus on managing the behavior of target audiences and reinforcing their behavioral patterns, rather than just their consciousness; a stable relationship with the corporate or actor's strategy; the direct, indirect, or latent involvement of audiences in achieving the strategic goals of the principal actor and the final integration of the positions and communicative behavior of the principal actor and stakeholders; communication ensures the coherence and synergy of distributed players (with multiple target audiences and their characteristics, the task of strategic communication is to bring all flows to a common denominator of strategic effect, to generate communicative synergy, thus the task of strategic communicators is to form what is called a conceptual umbrella); integration of informational influences and direct actions (Gavra, 2021: 17–19).

Media communication strategy and media activity cannot be considered separately from each other, they act as a single whole, because only through activity (the university's work in the information space) can a strategy manifest itself, and the very nature of this activity is the type (character) of strategy. A media communication strategy can be proactive and reactive, planned and spontaneous, formalized and intuitive, and so on. Conceptually, the media communication strategy of the university can be formulated as follows: the media communication strategy of a university is an integrated approach and systematic (purposeful) information activity aimed at promoting and popularizing science and education, reputation management, correlated with the main social functions of education

as a social institution and the missions of a modern university and based on the overall development strategy of the university.

The main characteristics of a media communication strategy can be summarized as follows:

- It is based on the mission, vision, and values of the strategizing object and is aimed at achieving its strategic goals;
- It has a long-term planning horizon and is designed to generate delayed effects (economic, social, societal, etc.);
- Its implementation involves the use of specific media tools and other information and communication resources;
- It clearly correlates with marketing and creative strategies; as a rule, the marketing strategy is developed first, followed by the creative strategy, and then the media communication strategy;
- It demonstrates flexibility and adaptability to change;
- It is aimed at building long-term relationships with target audiences.

In most universities, however, the role of communications is typically restricted to specific functions, such as information dissemination, coordination, motivation, public relations, advertising, etc. At the same time, there is usually no unified communication concept. Communication is often seen as a basic function not only for the marketing complex, but also in the overall formation of a university's marketing strategy. Without denying the possibility of using various marketing tools, a university's overall strategy is ultimately based on a communication-centered approach.

The primary drivers for the development of a university's communication strategy include the prioritization of the quality of higher education; correlation with the university's mission and vision for development; adaptation to the changing needs of its target consumer segments; and self-identification as a basis for building competitive advantages (Morozova, 2013).

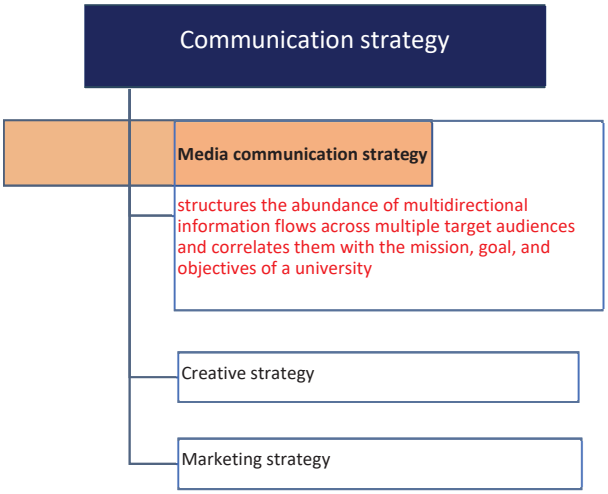
Several conditional stages in the development and implementation of a communication strategy can be identified: 1) an initial audit or monitoring of the state of the information environment; 2) setting the goals of the communication program; 3) provision of resources, including human resources; 4) development of the communication program; 5) implementation; 6) performance evaluation.

Thus, summarizing the various scholarly approaches to the understanding and role of a university's media communication strategy, one may define a university's communication strategy as a long-term program, which is based on the overall strategy of university, balanced in terms of resources and components, and aimed at achieving the university's strategic goals through information and communication interactions with both the external and internal environment (*Figure 1*). A media

communication strategy, as part of universities' communication strategy in addition to marketing and creative strategies, is a long-term program for achieving a universties' strategic goals through interactions with all groups of external and internal target audiences through the direct mediation of media resources.

Figure 1

The role of a media communication strategy in universities' communication strategy



Source: Author.

A media communication strategy has the capacity to transform media communication flows (which are essentially media communication capital) into other types of capital: economic (grants, subsidies, extrabudgetary funds, etc.), social (university image, interaction with the target audience, etc.), and political (the level of the university's influence in the social and political realm and the scientific and educational sphere). Strategic goals are, in essence, a vision of the target dynamics of a social actor over a significant period of time. Operational/tactical goals derive from the strategic ones and ensure their implementation within specific time frames through the use of communication tools.

As we noted earlier, the basic research problem is that complex entities of national importance, such as scientific and educational organizations, still lack a complete conceptual and categorical description of their media communication strategy and its individual elements that would reflect the various aspects of their activities. Therefore, the aim of this study is to form a comprehensive, verified understanding of the media communication strategy of a Russian university as a key social institution

that currently faces a number of critical challenges that go beyond the traditional understanding of the functions of a scientific and educational organization.

Methods

This study is based on data obtained during a series of expert interviews with Russian university staff responsible for strategic media communication planning and the implementation of information policy (vice-rectors, heads of press services) (N=13). The sample of respondents was selected based on the positions of universities in the Media Activity Ranking of Universities, which was compiled by the Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education (M-Rate)[2]. The ranking included the following institutions: large organizations that are leaders in terms of their presence in the information space (leaders[3], n=5); organizations whose outreach performance is more modest (average performers[4], n = 4); organizations occupying objectively low positions in terms of media communication activities (underperformers[5], n=4).

The sampling also took into account the geographical location of the universities (the sample includes organizations from eight federal districts) and different "status" characteristics, largely related to the level of state support (including federal universities, national research universities, regional flagship universities, and universities without these statuses).

In 2024, the author conducted 13 expert interviews with university staff. The guide used for the interviews was based on several thematic blocks. The present study synthesized the data from responses addressing the following question topics: goal setting in universities' media communication activities; the influence of external and internal factors on strategic planning in the field of media communications; human resources for media communication support of scientific

[2] The Media Activity Ranking (M-Rate) was first presented by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation in 2021 at the international festival "Russian Creative Week". It was created in response to the need to increase the transparency of universities' activities and stimulate their media activity. The ranking developed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education highlights to the professional community the key areas of media communication work and the criteria for evaluating its effectiveness. It is particularly important to note that a university's position in the M-Rate affects the overall performance indicators of the rector and, ultimately, the size of the performance-based bonus.

[3] The leaders in this case are the universities that were included in the top 20 universities at the M-Rate universities.

[4] The average performers in this case are the universities that were included in the list of 40-100 lines of M-Rate universities.

[5] The underperformers in this case are the universities that were included in the list of 150-200 lines of M-Rate universities.

and educational organizations; main target audiences of universities and areas of media communication activities; evaluation of the effectiveness of a scientific and educational organization's media communication strategy. In addition, a comparative analysis of two media communication strategies of Russian universities was conducted: one was provided by a respondent from the Leaders group, the other by an employee whose university ranks as an average performer on the M-Rate.

Results

Two approaches to developing a media communication strategy can be identified based on the interviews with representatives of Russian universities. The first approach involves a separate document that formalizes the main components and principles for implementing the media communication strategy. In the second approach, the strategy remains an undocumented plan of action in the media space, which is shared by all involved actors but is not formalized in a special document.

In this study, 10 out of 13 interview participants reported the absence of such a local regulation (*Table 1*), but only two of the three universities that reported having such a document were able to provide it for analysis.

Table 1

Availability of a documented media communication strategy

Universities	*Leaders*					*Average performers*				*Underperformers*			
	U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7	U8	U9	U10	U11	U12	U13
Do you have a documented communication strategy?	no	no	yes	no	no	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	no	no

Source: Author.

Some respondents, from both leading and mid-ranked universities according to the M-Rate, said that they plan to develop and adopt such a document. In this context, the position of one university (from the Leaders group) is particularly noteworthy, where the decision not to formalize the media strategy was a deliberate choice: *"I have no guarantee of complete confidentiality of the document if it passes through all the regulatory channels. Our university is very large, and leaks are inevitable. A media communication strategy is too candid a document for a limited audience. <…> I see no point in adopting a declarative ('skimmed') document just for the sake of having one." (U5, SFU)*

An analysis of two media communication strategies provided by universities, in which the strategies are formalized as separate documents, shows the difference in the approaches of higher education institutions to drafting such documents and their functional application. The results of comparing the two documents according to formal and substantive criteria are presented in *Table 2*.

Table 2

Comparison of communication strategies of two universities

	Strategy 1 (Average erformers)	**Strategy 2 (Leaders)**
Document size	13 p.	71 p.
Planning horizon	2030	2030
Structural elements (sections)	1. General 2. Goals, objectives, and principles of the communication strategy 3. External environment, target audience 4. Current position 5. Strategic goal and vision 6. Strategy implementation mechanisms 7. Final provisions	1. Strategic goals of the university's development until 2030 2. Development of the university's communication activities until 2030 2.1 Communication goals and objectives of the university 2.2 Current positions of the university in the Media Activity Ranking of Universities (Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education) 2.3 SWOT-analysis of the university 2.4 Target audience groups 2.5 Communication model of the university 2.6 Channels of communication with target audiences 2.7 Organizational structure for communications control 2.8 Open data policy of the university 2.9 Corporate partnership policy 2.10 Alumni policy
Availability of formulated statements on the desired positioning of the university	Yes	Yes
Availability of numerical KPIs (Key Performance Indicators)	No	Yes

Source: Author.

Both documents focus on the development of media communications until 2030. They record the current position of the universities and the external and internal conditions affecting them, identify key target audiences, and outline the university's positioning in a thesis-like format.

Nevertheless, we believe there is a fundamental difference in the availability of specific performance indicators. Strategy 1 (Average performers) sets out the expected results of strategy implementation, the mechanism and frequency of their evaluation: *"The implementation of the development strategy is evaluated on the basis of monitoring the results and reporting on strategic areas. At the monitoring level, the effectiveness of target programs, projects, and specific activities of the communication strategy is tracked. The University's strategy implementation should be monitored at regular intervals, at least once every six months. As the management system develops, a transition to continuous monitoring of strategy implementation will be made".*

In contrast, Strategy 2 (Leaders) not only postulates the need to monitor the achievement of results but also defines specific indicators: a 20% increase in the number of visitors to the university's resources, a 1.5-fold increase in the total audience of the university's official communities, and 45,000 mentions of the university in the media per year. The year 2025 serves as a benchmark, which suggests that these indicators are intermediate and intended to evaluate the effectiveness of media communication activities from a tactical perspective.

An analysis of the document structures also suggests that Strategy 2 covers a wider range of issues, including those indirectly related to the work of the media communication unit. For example, the strategy provides a detailed account of the university's overall development goals until 2030 and outlines the policies for alumni and corporate partners. In essence, these areas are largely the responsibility of the relevant departments, as noted in the corresponding sections. Nevertheless, an understanding of the key vectors of the university's development is also necessary for media communications specialists who interact with external target audiences.

It should be noted that the differences outlined above do not imply a higher or lower quality of either strategy. We believe that in this case, the distinction reflects the different purposes of the documents within the university's overall system of local regulations. At the document level, Strategy 1 formalizes, to a greater extent, the goals, objectives, and scope of activities of the media communication department, its place within the university's structure, and the necessity of collaboration with other structural units. Strategy 2 also performs these functions, but it can also be considered an internal "working" paper of

the relevant department, which assists in regular performance evaluation and tactical planning.

From the perspective of a research-based approach to strategy and the convenience of analyzing the university's media communication activities, it seems more effective to have a media communication strategy, approved and endorsed by the management and aligned with the overall development plan (program/strategy) of the university.

Key features and elements of universities' media communication strategies

Based on an analysis of academic works and our own data obtained during a series of expert interviews, we can identify the following key characteristics of a strategic approach to media communication activities: a close connection with a university's strategic goals and objectives; reliance on the three missions and values of a university; a focus on controlling the mind and behavior of all target audience groups; long-term planning with an emphasis on a delayed but meaningful effect; the use of various media communication resources and the publication of content on such resources catering to the thematic interests and format preferences of the audiences that these platforms aggregate.

We propose that the main elements of a university's media communication strategy be understood as follows. First, conceptual dimension: the foundation of a university's media communication strategy, linked to a conceptual understanding of the university's missions, goals, and roles in the scientific and educational sphere at the current stage. Second, process dimension, related to the stages of work on the media communication strategy. Third, organizational dimension of a university's media communication strategy, related to the human resources and staffing. Fourth, contextual dimension of a university's media communication strategy, related to the external and internal factors affecting its development and implementation. Fifth, target audiences of a university's media communication strategy. A description of each of these five elements is provided below.

Conceptual dimension

The foundation of a university's media communication strategy is the university development strategy/program with respect to the three missions of a university: educational, research, and social. The full-fledged implementation of all three of these functions (especially the third one) is impossible without media communication support. Thus, the global goals of implementing a

university's media communication strategy are not related to communications, but to strategic achievements in the scientific and educational sphere. In today's mediatized reality, the university's third, social mission becomes a fundamental characteristic for the realization of the other two missions: science and education.

Process dimension of a university's media communication strategy

The work on a university's media communication strategy includes three main stages. First of all, it is *strategy development (strategic level)*. This stage involves a series of interrelated actions: defining the key goals and objectives that the university's media communications should address at the current stage; analyzing factors that may influence the planning and implementation of media communication activities; identifying target audiences and taking into account their communication needs and media consumption patterns; determining communication technologies and methods; defining semantic patterns and topics of information flows; determining criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of the strategy, and formalizing the strategy in the form of a media communication matrix by target audiences and a roadmap by seasons/months/other calendar units. Second stage is *strategy implementation (tactical level)*. This stage involves the work of specialists guided by the existing roadmap, with adjustments made during implementation. Finally, it is *strategy evaluation (tactical level)*.

The main criteria for evaluating media communication strategies by Russian universities are predominantly qualitative rather than quantitative indicators, which is also due to the specific features of the mediatization of the scientific and educational sphere. Based on expert interviews with university representatives, it can be concluded that when evaluating the effectiveness of media communications, they either pay more attention to qualitative indicators (which "predetermine" quantitative ones) or recognize the importance of an integrated assessment of both qualitative and quantitative indicators and their interrelatedness. In this connection, one of the respondents gave the following example to illustrate the integrated approach: *"When there is a large reach (quantitative assessment) but low engagement (qualitative assessment), an in-depth analysis and focus group are conducted to identify the reasons [for the decline in engagement]" (E6)*. This is confirmed by another informant: *"The conflict [between the two types of indicators] arises when the quantitative indicator is high (clicks on a banner ad) and the qualitative indicator is low (conversion into applications)" (E9)*. It is worth noting that there is no correlation between the university's position in the M-Rate and the point of

view of the media communication department on the ratio of the two types of indicators.

Organizational dimension of a university's media communication strategy

Here a specialized department responsible for planning, organizing, and monitoring media communication flows should be mentioned. All employees of such departments can be conditionally divided into three groups according to their functions: an administrative unit that manages the team, develops communication strategies, monitors the results of their implementation, and is responsible for ensuring the alignment of the department's work with the university's objectives; a team of authors who produce textual and audiovisual content; a content promotion team that adapts the authors' materials for various distribution platforms by the administrative unit for the university's presence.

A distinctive feature of the human resources policy in a university's media communication department is the focus on recruiting staff from within the institution. Students, alumni, and faculty members account for at least half of the staff of the media communication department, and in many cases, they form the majority (ranging from 70% to 100%). When it comes to the size of information departments in academic organizations, the study found that the universities have between one multi-tasking employee, who combines the functions of press secretary, PR officer, marketer, SMM specialist, etc., and a staff of 20 people.

At the same time, as expert interviews revealed, a media communication department may consist of an even larger number of professionals, while the overall number of participants engaged in media communication activities (excluding full-time staff) can reach several hundred. Thus, there is no direct correlation between quantitative indicators and performance: minimum and maximum values were recorded both in the group of leaders and in the group of underperformers. This is true for both full-time employees and those involved in the university's media communication activities on a voluntary basis.

It should be noted that the heads of relevant departments define the category of participants in media communication work in different ways. In some cases, the category is understood broadly and includes dozens or even hundreds of individuals, such as staff from related units, students, management representatives, faculty acting as media experts, and researchers who have their personal accounts and "publish information about what they do with reference to the university". At the same time, in other universities, the number of full-

time employees and participants in media communication activities differs only slightly, which means that this involves a narrower circle of employees from related departments and representatives of the administration.

A number of key criteria can be identified for the organizational structure of a communications department in an academic organization based on the concepts of "ideal" or "proper": it should report directly to the senior management of the organization; its activities should be aligned with the work of other structural units; it should not deviate from its specific role, and its functional responsibilities should be separate from those of other departments.

Contextual dimension of a university's media communication strategy: External and internal factors

All factors taken into account by experts responsible for the media communication support of universities' activities can be divided into two groups: external and internal. *External factors* include economic factors, related to the state of the national economy; political factors, related to the political arena of the country; technological factors, related to the development of information and communication technologies; sociocultural factors, related to the characteristics, preferences, and attitudes of the population; the competition factor, related to the rivalry among participants in the higher education market for limited resources such as applicants, workforce, and funding. *Internal factors* include the human resources factor, related to the staffing potential of the relevant structural unit; the corporate factor, related to collaboration among the departments and the effectiveness of intra-university communications; the resource factor, related to the technical capacity for implementing the strategy; the value-and-culture factor, related to the system of values and organizational culture adopted and shared within the institution; the factor of importance to management, related to the rector's commitment to and interest in the effectiveness of the university's media communication activities.

Russian universities whose representatives participated in expert interviews tend to pay more attention to internal rather than external factors when developing and implementing their media communication strategies. However, universities with more successful media communication strategies are generally more inclined than average to acknowledge the impact of external factors on the development and implementation of their strategies. Their "sensitivity" to the changing realities of the external environment (including the political and economic contexts, the activities of competitors, and the consideration of these

factors in their work) enables them to plan their media activities appropriately. Universities that demonstrate more modest results in media communications are those whose information policy is subject to micromanagement by management and whose internal communication system between different departments is poorly established. These institutions tend to evaluate the influence of the leadership significance factor and the corporate factor higher on average than universities in other categories. Furthermore, they evaluate the influence of the corporate factor and the factor of importance of their work to management higher than universities in other categories.

Target audiences of a university's media communication strategy.

Internal target audience includes students, faculty, and staff. *External target audience* includes prospective students from Russia, prospective students from other countries, parents of prospective students (in Russia and abroad), government organizations, Russian academic community, international academic community, Russian business community, international business community, and media and bloggers in Russia and abroad. Despite the diversity of message recipients, the results of expert interviews with university representatives show that the main work of universities is focused on three key target audiences: prospective students, current students, and employees.

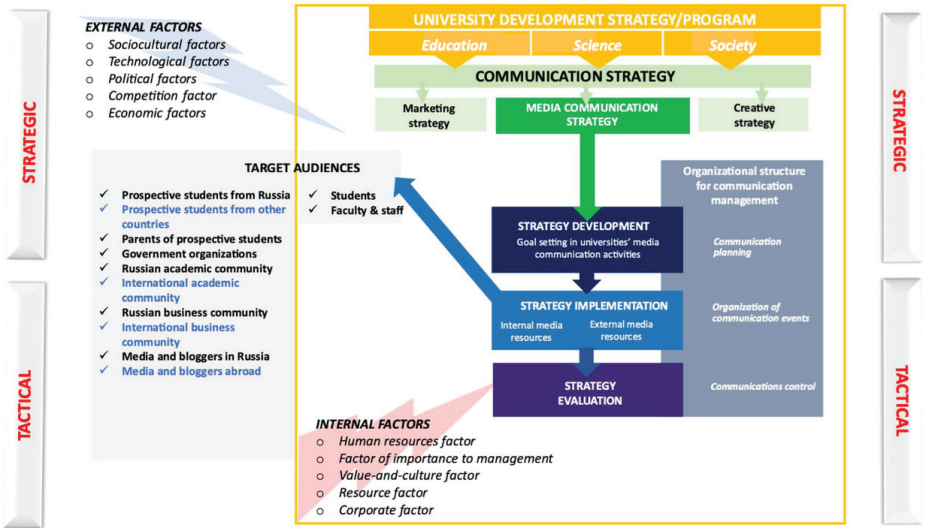
Target audiences in the scientific and educational sphere have their own specific characteristics: first, they are polysubjective, i.e., highly diverse and numerous; second, they have the ability to transition from external target audiences to internal ones; and third, the so-called non-institutionalized communication participants command a large part and have the greatest significance among all university target audiences.

It is worth noting that as some leading universities transition to the University 4.0 model, their media communication strategies increasingly emphasize the need to work with commercial partners both in Russia and abroad. Since the transition to a new national model of higher education in Russia is expected to be associated with a significant increase in the role of industrial partners in the educational process, we can expect a further intensification of media communication work by a much larger number of universities targeting the business community and state corporations as key audiences.

The proposed set of elements of a media communication strategy in their interrelationship can be presented in the form of a diagram (*Figure 2*).

Figure 2

Diagram of a university's media communication strategy



Source: Author.

Discussion and conclusion

In the context of the transformation of the media system, changing patterns of media consumption, and the increasing pace of mediatization of social practices, modern universities are compelled to regularly revise their media communication strategies, adapting them to new realities and taking into account the evolving media preferences of different target audiences.

The urgency, complexity, and multifaceted nature of the challenge of transforming the information policy of higher education institutions predetermine the multiplicity of approaches to addressing this challenge and the search for various options and mechanisms for effective communication management. The application of modern management approaches and tools, such as process and project approaches, the balanced scorecard system, management information technologies, quality management systems, and ranking score technologies, which enhance the responsiveness of a university's internal environment to external changes, becomes a necessary condition for the innovative development of a university. A global resource for updating and modernizing the communication policy of universities is a conscious awareness of the inevitability of change and development. In a university committed to innovative development, transformation processes acquire a sustainable character, and an adaptive, flexible system for managing the information environment is created.

The key characteristics of a strategic approach to media communication activities include a close connection with a university's strategic goals and objectives; reliance on the mission, philosophy, and values of a university; a focus on controlling the mind and behavior of all target audience groups; long-term planning with an emphasis on a delayed but meaningful effect; the use of various media communication resources and the publication of content on such resources catering to the thematic interests and format preferences of the audiences that these platforms aggregate.

A standardized framework of a university's media communication strategy is based on and supported by the university's overall development strategy and includes goal setting, two sets of contributing factors, two broad target audience groups, and three stages: development, implementation, and performance evaluation. The global goals of implementing a university's media communication strategy are not related to communications, but to strategic achievements in the scientific and educational sphere.

A strategic approach to media communication activities involves purposeful efforts by professionals to develop, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of the media communication strategy. The main criteria for evaluating media communication strategies by Russian universities are predominantly qualitative rather than quantitative indicators, which is also due to the specific features of the mediatization of the scientific and educational sphere.

The key elements of a university's media communication strategy include several dimensions: a conceptual dimension; a process dimension, related to the stages of work on the media communication strategy; an organizational dimension of a university's media communication strategy, related to the human resources and staffing; a contextual dimension of a university's media communication strategy, related to the external and internal factors affecting its development and implementation, and target audiences of a university's media communication strategy.

In today's mediatized reality, the university's third, social mission becomes a fundamental characteristic for the realization of the other two missions: science and education. Thus, the media communication strategy serves as a foundation for the implementation of all three missions of a modern university.

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ISSN 2307-1605

ISSN 2686801