



AUDIENCE' SHIFT IN DECODING OF POLITICAL MEDIA MESSAGES CUM IMPACT ON CITIZEN ACCOUNTABILITY DEMANDS IN GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines the interplay between critical media theories and the workings of political media in Nigeria, focusing on how audiences decode political messages and how these interpretations influence citizen demands for accountability. Based on the Marxist theory, the Frankfurt School, the conceptualization of Ideological State Apparatuses as developed by Althusser, the idea of cultural hegemony by Gramsci, and the framework of encoding/decoding as proposed by Stuart Hall, the given work defines the dual role of media both as the means of elite control and as the space of citizen action. The study, with a qualitative and conceptually analytical approach, combines both empirical literature and theoretical approaches in order to demonstrate the active interpretation, negotiation and even resistance of the mediated political discourses by the Nigerian audience, and thus shape their understanding of governance and accountability. The results show that media influence is not deterministic; instead, it is mediated by the social, cultural, and political context, which highlights the need to evaluate the audience agency along with structural and ideological media forces. As a result, the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on political communication in the context of the emergent democracies because it highlights the possibilities of media as a source of power and a channel of participatory democracy.

Keywords: Audience, Decoding, Governance, Impact, Political Media Messages.

Introduction

The mass media plays a significant role in shaping political communication, public discourse, and civic engagement in contemporary societies. Through the dissemination of news, political commentary, and public affairs programming, media institutions provide citizens with information that influences how they perceive governance, leadership, and democratic accountability (Chadwick, 2017; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Sanusi et al., 2021; Nsude & Etumnu, 2023). The media is often considered an important institution in democratic societies that can enhance political engagement by spreading information, encouraging social discussion, and offering methods of governmental accountability (Couldry, 2019; Livingstone, 2020).

In addition to playing the role of an explicatory apparatus, the media is a cultural and ideological apparatus, thus playing a role in the construction of social meanings and political realities. The theorists of media and cultural studies suggest that media systems are integrated into the larger socio-economic and political systems that are involved in the production and distribution of messages (Fuchs, 2020; Couldry and Hepp, 2017). In turn, media content can be biased in terms of interests, values, and ideological leanings of the social forces that command a huge dominance over the communication resources (Murdock and

Golding, 1977; Wasserman, 2020). These processes make the media a very important location in the analysis of power, ideology and meanings of culture negotiation in the society.

The importance of the media in creating political consciousness has taken on ever greater importance in many developing democracies, and in Nigeria in particular. The media landscape in Nigeria is a diverse blend of old-fashioned communication tools, including print newspapers, radio, and television, and a fast growing digital and social media, which provide the public with an opportunity to discuss the political matters (Oso, 2012; Ojebode, 2019). These mediums have turned out to be central arenas, where political actors define policy stances, develop narratives of governance and strive to shape the opinion of the people. At the same time, the citizens turn to these media outlets more and more often to get access to political news and engage in discussions about leadership, governance, and accountability (Nyabola, 2018; Pate, 2018).

Nonetheless, the effects of media messages on audiences are never necessarily direct and consistent. Initial approaches in media studies were predisposed to believe that audiences were passive receivers of media messages, in such a way that it allowed hegemonic ideological discourses to influence the opinion of the masses without resistance. However, the modern literature emphasizes the negotiating and active interpretation of the meanings encoded in the media content by the audiences, according to their social experiences, cultural backgrounds, and political consciousness (Livingstone, 2020; Schroder, 2017). This paradigm shift emphasises the role of questioning not only the generation of media messages but also the ways in which these messages are interpreted by audiences in particular socio-political milieus.

This paper thus explores the interaction between critical media theories and the workings of political media communication in Nigeria with special focus on how the audiences decode political media messages and how those perceptions affect the demands that citizens place on accountability in governance. Through the combination of lessons learned in key critical traditions of media and cultural studies, the study will shed light on the nexus of media power, ideological influence and audience agency in modern political communication.

Statement of the Problem

The media is widely regarded as a central institution in democratic societies because it provides citizens with information necessary for political participation and public accountability. In the Nigerian setting, both established media platforms such as print press, radio programming, and televised shows and emerging digital and social media avenues have become the key channels through which the political actors spread political policy positions, campaign rhetoric, and governance discourse (Oso, 2012; Pate, 2018; Ojebode, 2019; Talabi et al, 2019). However, the spread of such channels has not relieved the anxieties about how political media content is prone to elite interests and how it advances the ideological systems of dominance in the society (Murdock and Golding, 1977; Couldry, 2019; Fuchs, 2020). The discussion, therefore, raises critical questions on how far the media institutions can influence the general understanding of the governance and whether the mediated messages can mobilize citizen demand to demand political accountability.

Despite the fact that media institutions have a significant power to shape political discourse, the audience is not a passive receiver of information. The modern media studies scholarship anticipates the agency of audiences, assuming that people are active interpreters, negotiators, and, in some cases, resisters of the meaning contained in media messages, as they draw on their socio-cultural experiences and circumstances (Hall, 1980; Livingstone, 2020; Schroder, 2017). In the Nigerian political context, where the issues of corruption, governance failures, and democratic accountability are considered dominant, the disposition of citizens to civic engagements and accountability requirements may be brought about with a substantive impact by the way citizens perceive political media messages. However, limited academic

research exists regarding the way in which the Nigerian audience interprets political media messages in terms of critical media theory, and how the interpretation of the message by the audience shapes the attitude of the citizens towards the government. This study therefore seeks to examine the relationship between critical theories of media and the decoding of political media messages in Nigeria, with particular attention to their implications for citizen accountability in governance.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between critical media theories and the decoding of political media messages, as well as their implications for citizen accountability in governance in Nigeria.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine how critical media theories explain the relationship between media institutions, ideology, and political communication.
2. Analyze how audiences decode political media messages within the Nigerian media environment.
3. Assess how audience interpretations of political media messages influence citizen demands for accountability in governance.

Scope of the Study

This paper explores the convergence of the critical media theory and the interpretive processes of political media discourse in the Nigerian media context. It questions the manner in which the audiences decipher political messages that have been passed through mass media outlets and the resultant effect of such interpretations to the way citizens view governance as well as their expectations of politicians in regard to political accountability.

The study takes a pure conceptual and theoretical approach. It makes use of the groundbreaking views of critical media and cultural studies such as the Marxist theory, the Frankfurt School, a concept of Ideological State Apparatuses established by Louis Althusser, a theory of hegemony of Antonio Gramsci, and an encoding/decoding model by Stuart Hall. The scope of analysis is limited to the Nigerian socio-political environment, where the available academic literature is used to clarify the interdependence of the media power, ideological influence, and audience interpretation in political communication.

Review of Related Studies

The influence of the media on political communication and civic participation has been a widely studied topic, and modern literature has confirmed the importance of both offline and online platforms. Globally, research has shown that media institutions do not simply provide information but also framing the political issues in such a manner that reflects the structural power relations and ideological orientations (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Chadwick, 2017; Couldry, 2019). To provide an example, Bennett et al. (2019) argue that political coverage often precursors elite opinion, shaping the way people perceive the government and its policy. Similarly, in the African situation, researchers note that mass media serves as a source of information and a channel of ideological reproduction, whereby stories are usually biased in favor of prevailing political and economic agendas (Fuchs, 2020; Wasserman, 2020). These observations serve to highlight that media impact is well embedded within the social framework, which makes the analysis of the audience interpretation inalienable in understanding the effect of political messages of the media.

The empirical studies in Nigeria define that audiences are not passive; they interact with the political media content in diversified platforms. According to Ojebode (2019), citizens in Nigeria have

become more and more aggressive in using social media to criticize political discourse, organise the masses, and demand inadequate governance. This is also the finding of Pate (2018) who claimed that citizens who saw political news on television and radio and were actively involved in listening to it were more likely to be involved in civic activities. These results suggest that social experiences, cultural backgrounds and political awareness significantly influence the interpretation of the audience in Nigeria, which in turn supports the need to adopt a theoretical framework that can accommodate the audience agency as is the case with the encoding/decoding model proposed by Hall (1980).

Moreover, the interplay between media framing and political campaigning and citizen accountability has been questioned in Nigeria. As an example, Asemah, Edegoh, and Ogwo (2017) showed that the media narratives often serve to validate the elite interests by presenting governance as the reserve of the few, and hence, suppressing the voice of the grassroots. On the other hand, Nyabola (2018) and Bosch (2017) pointed out that citizens are now becoming more resistant to these discourses by creating counter-discourses on online platforms, conducting online discussions, and organizing civic action. This testifies to the antagonism between media power and audience agency, and underlines the significance of analyzing how citizens bargain, oppose or acquiesce to media messages about politics in the Nigerian context.

These observations are also supported by comparative studies conducted outside Nigeria and provide more perspectives. Nyabola (2018) discovered in Kenya that social media enables the citizens to question dominant discourses, mobilise political action, and demand accountability of the leaders. In South Africa, Bosch (2017) found that audiences actively participate in understanding political news and tend to spread alternative interpretations of media messages in the network of communities. These studies demonstrate the transnational applicability of agency to the audience in political communication and indicate that similar processes are probably in place in Nigeria, whereby citizens have to negotiate a sophisticated media space shaped by historical, social, and political forces.

Although evidence is rapidly growing of audience agency, little research in Nigeria has been able to systematically apply critical theories of the media, including Marxist analysis, the Frankfurt School, the Ideological State Apparatuses of Althusser, hegemony of Gramsci, and the encoding/decoding model of Hall to the audience/political media and citizen accountability. Despite the fact that the current empirical studies define the areas of audience engagement and civic participation (Ojebode, 2019; Pate, 2018; Asemah, 2021) they often lack a theoretical framework that can explain why people interpret messages differently or challenge the elite-driven messages. The inclusion of the theoretical lenses provides a guide to understand not only the behavior of audiences but also the motivation and processes at work in particular ideological and structural settings.

Overall, the empirical and theoretical literature shows that the Nigerian citizens are engaging with the political media messages in a complex manner, negotiating meanings, adopting some or rejecting others. However, there is still a significant distance between taking empirical evidence and critical theoretical analysis to explain the interrelationship between media power, ideology and audience agency. This gap highlights the significance of the current research that aims to examine how political media messages are framed by the Nigerian audiences and how the meaning influences the expectations of the citizens on the government to be accountable. Through the combination of empirical knowledge and critical theoretical approaches, the study will attempt to produce an all-inclusive knowledge of media power and audience agency in the Nigerian political environment.

Theoretical Framework

Marxist Theory and Media Ideology

Marxist theory, originating from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1867/1976; 1970), provides a critical lens for understanding the structural relationship between economic power and ideological control in society. At its core, Marxism argues that the players who own the means of production are also the ones who influence the society mind and the dominant ideology. When used in relation to the media sphere, the given proposition suggests that political messages and media content are not neutral or autonomous but they generally reflect the prerogatives of elite classes with economic, political, and cultural power (Murdock, and Golding, 1977; Williams, 1977). The tendency to have media ownership concentrated among politically and economically endowed elites in the Nigerian case creates discourses that are structurally biased in promoting the elite views to the exclusion of the opposing voices. This type of structural control thus shapes the perception of the population regarding governance, leadership, and accountability, which strengthens deep-rooted hierarchies and economic inequality (Asemah, 2021; Fuchs, 2020).

Besides, Marxist concepts of false consciousness, ideology, commodity fetishism, and others are especially relevant to the analysis of political media. False consciousness is a condition in which the masses accept elite-based ideas without knowing that there is exploitation or inequality (Azeez, 2015; Storey, 2018). In the politics coverage of Nigeria, the failure or unfairness of the governance is sometimes portrayed as unavoidable or unchangeable, which implicitly discourages the population to take action and hinders the process of political mobilisation. Commodity fetishism, which is usually used to describe material objects, can be applied to politically saleable commodities, including election campaigns, party manifestos or policy promises. The symbolic capital that is attached to these politics products often hides structural injustices, and this makes the citizens more likely to consume or support the elite narratives without critically analyzing them (Williams, 1977; Ojebode, 2019).

The Marxist theory emphasizes the marriage between base and superstructure in the analysis of media. The superstructure depends on the economic base; this is, the industrial sectors, ownership structure, and material resources that determine the superstructure which encompasses the political, legal and cultural institution such as the media (Marx, 1867; Murdock and Golding, 1977). This relationship is expressed in Nigeria through the manner in which political reporting, editorial policies and media campaigns often serve the interests of media owners and the elite stakeholders. As a result, the Nigerian viewing audience gets a mediated reality that justifies elite authority and naturalizes social hierarchies. However, there are also analytical tools to study resistance provided by the Marxist theory, highlighting the fact that despite the media producing the elite ideology, citizens still have the ability to oppose or re-read these messages, thus, having a chance to engage in critical thinking and hold the government accountable (Nyabola, 2018; Bosch, 2017).

The Frankfurt School and the Culture Industry

The Frankfurt School, particularly through the works of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse, extends Marxist critique by focusing on the **cultural and psychological mechanisms of domination** in modern societies (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002; Jay, 1996). They argue that the mass media is a culture industry, producing standardized forms of cultural products and entertainment that inform our consciousness and support social stratifications already in place in subtle ways. The culture industry has power by working psychologically, creating an order of audience, which internalizes elite ideologies despite its claims of agency and choice. The Nigerian environment is no exception as mainstream press, televised news shows and political broadcasts habitually shape political processes in such a way that elite domination is normalized and governance is an entitlement of a few. This manipulation suppresses the critical

participation of citizens in the inefficiencies of the policy and the inefficiencies of governance, thus continuing the systemic inequalities (Fuchs, 2020; Asemah et al., 2017).

In addition to ideological hegemony, the Frankfurt School preempts the influence of pseudo-individuality and standardisation in the content of the media. Viewers have a variety of options, but these options are actually variations of the same hegemonic discourse, thus giving the appearance of choice but breeding conformity (Adorno, and Horkheimer, 2002; Storey, 2018). This trend is common in political messaging in Nigeria, especially during elections, where the media is used to push elite-affirming messages at the expense of the grassroots or opposition. As empirical studies show, citizens are subjected to recurrent ideological framing that dictates the views of what is considered to be political normalcy or acceptability, thus inhibiting action or activism (Ojebode, 2019; Nyabola, 2018). In line with this, the audiences might seem passive but the Frankfurt school explains the nuanced processes that guide cognition, opinion formation and political behavior.

However, the Frankfurt School recognizes the restrictions of the audience passivity, thus leading to more modern interpretations of the reception of media. Despite the omnipresence of structural and cultural pressures, the audience is not completely disempowered; they can re-read, negotiate or resist mainstream messages depending on their social context, experience and cultural awareness (Fiske, 1987; Livingstone, 2020). Digital and social media platforms have created platforms that allow citizens to interact with political content in Nigeria, thus creating counter-narratives, criticizing elite politics, and mobilizing civic action (Pate, 2018; Bosch, 2017). Such practices prove that the culture industry is not absolute, the interaction between structural media control and audience agency should be looked into to understand how political media influences the perception of governance and the requirement of accountability in full.

Louis Althusser and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs)

Louis Althusser (1971) introduced the concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) to explain how ruling classes maintain dominance not through overt force alone but by shaping ideology embedded within social institutions such as the media, education, religion, and the family. The way ISAs work is to interpellate the individuals, to place them in particular positions and to force their beliefs and behaviours in a manner that restores the social order that already exists. The mass-media is a powerful ISA in Nigeria that shapes political discourse, governance and civic engagement in ways that institutionalize elite power. The stories that are spread by newspapers, radio, television, and more and more social media promote the acceptance of hierarchical forms of political organization, making governance the prerogative of elite participants (Oso, 2012; Asemah, 2021). It is this ideological interpellation that shapes the perception and behavior of the citizens and usually discourages them to critically find out more about the governance or even to call it to account.

The theory developed by Althusser points out that ideology is active and persuasive, and not reflective in nature. The citizens are constantly subjected to dominant political and social discourses that they might adopt as natural or unavoidable (Althusser, 1971; Foucault, 1978). Political media in Nigeria often present success stories of policy and leadership as elite success and dissent or grassroots activism as a marginal or ineffective phenomenon (Ojebode, 2019; Pate, 2018). According to empirical studies, the recurring exposure to these narratives affects the general knowledge about the governance and political involvement and forms the perceptions of valid authority and tolerable political behaviour (Azeez, 2015; Nyabola, 2018). However, the ISA framework is also open to the potential of negotiation or resistance, as it emphasizes the fact that citizens are not completely passive and may decode and refute the ideological messages they get.

Moreover, the theory suggested by Althusser supplements audience-centred strategies with a structural account of the impact of media in shaping meaning without eliminating space to agency and contestation. Social media has emerged as an arena where citizens in Nigeria actively rebrand political

messages, criticize elite actions and organise collective action (Bosch, 2017; Livingstone, 2020). The interplay between the structural authority of ISAs and the interpretive authority of audiences is especially relevant in civic actions, mass campaigns, and social media discussing corruption, state failure, and policy injustices. As a result, the framework by Althusser does not only explain how much elite ideologies permeate Nigerian media, but also the circumstances in which citizens negotiate, oppose or alter these ideological forces, thus the provision of a theoretical gap between structure power and audience action.

Antonio Gramsci and Cultural Hegemony

The cultural hegemony is the concept developed by Antonio Gramsci (1971) that broadens the critical theory by pointing out that the dominant groups are keeping the reins not only through coercion but also through consent and ideological leadership. Hegemony works through instilling the values, norms and beliefs of elite groups into culture making them appear natural and advantageous to the rest of the society. Media tends to echo elite interests in the Nigerian political sphere by presenting political stories, decisions in policy, and structures of governance as valid and unchallenged. Television news, mass media, and radio shows have constantly portrayed governance and leadership as the prerogative of an elite group, which consciously shapes the perceptions of the masses and limits critical participation by the rest of the population (Asemah et al., 2017; Ojebode, 2019). This is the process that makes elite dominance not only perpetrated by force but rather by the will of the ruled and thus further highlighting the theory by Gramsci as a tool of analysis in the Nigerian political media.

Another important point that Gramsci makes is that a hegemony is not absolute but a negotiated one, which means that other groups may oppose, redefine, or struggle against the major ideologies. Empirical research in Nigeria shows that citizens tend to be critical of the content of media, which has created counter-narratives and formed grassroots movements (Nyabola, 2018; Bosch, 2017). The social media platforms especially have offered platforms through which the people challenge elite dominated narratives, discuss political matters and hold the leaders to account. These activities are a good example of what Gramsci means by contested hegemony where consent is not absolute and where negotiation opens a space to resist and bring change to the society. They also demonstrate the interaction of structural influence and audience agency, which plays an important role in explaining how political media influences the demands of citizen accountability in Nigeria.

The framework by Gramsci is complementary to other critical theories in that it brings together structural power and action of the audience. Although Marxist and Frankfurt views focus on the structural and ideological control and Althusser, on the issue, institutional interpellation, Gramsci pays attention to the negotiable and dynamic character of consent. It is especially applicable to Nigeria, where the media in politics is wide-spread, but viewers constructively perceive, oppose, or acknowledge messages depending on the social positions, cultural engagements, and political consciousness (Pate, 2018; Livingstone, 2020). The interaction between media, ideology and political participation is a critical perspective that Gramsci theory is applied to analyse the Nigerian audience by putting them in this negotiated hegemony in order to challenge elite dominance, assert civic rights and demand accountability.

Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model

The encoding/decoding model by Stuart Hall (1980) provides a powerful framework of understanding the dynamic relationship between the media producers and audiences. Hall argued that media texts are coded with values, assumptions and ideological priorities that its producers have, hence reflecting wider social, political and cultural situations. However, these messages are not passed down to the audience, who actively engage in the interpretive and negotiative process, which depends on personal experiences, social status, and cultural backgrounds (Fiske, 1987; Livingstone, 2020). The elite-centric representations of power, politics, and policy in the context of the Nigerian environment have become commonplace in political

media, where government, elections, or policy-making processes are presented in a manner that favors incumbent politicians or economically superior groups (Ojebode, 2019; Asemah, 2021). The model by Hall is hence unavoidable in explaining the way audiences can resist, redefine, or bargain such messages and hence predict the active nature of the citizens in the process of meaning-making.

Hall refers to three main positions of decoding, which include preferred, negotiated, and oppositional. Preferred decoding is a situation where the audiences completely receive the intended meaning of a message, thus identifying with the ideological position of the producer. Negotiated decoding happens when audiences both accept and question the message in part often incorporating hegemonic views with their experience of life. Oppositional decoding occurs when viewers entirely deny or reflexualize the intended meaning that generate other meanings, which challenge the prevailing ideology (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1987). Nigeria empirical evidence has indicated the use of all three decoding strategies by citizens. Using the example of political reporting, some viewers form opinions based on what they hear, but others claim to critically consume media content by using social media, mobilising on the grassroots, and debating communities, thus demonstrating the plurality of responses to the audience (Pate, 2018; Nyabola, 2018).

More importantly, the influence of structural media forces and the agency of audiences are bridged in the framework created by Hall which provides a subtle explanation of the political communication in Nigeria. At the same time Marxist and Frankfurt School approaches focus on structural and ideological domination, and Althusserian and Gramscian theories preempt that institutions will be the creators of meaning, Hall shows that viewers are co-producers of meaning. As an example, the Nigerian citizens can read between the lines of the televised political speeches, posts on social media, or newspaper editorials to promote the accountability agenda or challenge the elite discourse, which means that they actively shape the political discourse (Bosch, 2017; Livingstone, 2020). Having incorporated the model of Hall, researchers will be able to examine the not only creation of political media messages, but also its reception, negotiation, and related implications on civic participation and democratic accountability, which will make it a component of the theoretical foundation of the current research.

Synthesis of Theoretical Framework

The five vital theories, which include Marxist theory, Frankfurt School, Ideological State Apparatuses by Althusser, cultural hegemony by Gramsci, and the encoding/decoding model by Hall, are adjuvant lenses of analyzing the complex relationship between media, ideology, and audience in Nigeria. Together, these models explain the mechanisms through which political messages are created, shared, understood, and argued, with a focus on the interaction of structural power and agency of the citizens. Such a theory as Marxist theory, in turn, lays down the groundwork that media is deeply rooted in the social and economic power relations, and, as such, influences the content to benefit the elite and reinforce the social stratifications (Marx, 1867/1976; Williams, 1977). This structuralist approach explains the dominance of particular types of political discourses in the Nigerian media and, as a result, the silencing of other voices and the limitation of other discourses (Ojebode, 2019; Fuchs, 2020).

The Frankfurt School adds to the structural analysis with the anticipation of the psychological and cultural processes of control by providing the example of how media consumption can internalize elite ideologies through the culture industry and pseudo-individuality (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002; Storey, 2018). Audience might seem passive under these mechanisms, but, as shown in Nigeria empirically, citizens are critical of media content, which makes structural determinism as a purely structural approach limited (Nyabola, 2018; Bosch, 2017). The Ideological State Apparatus framework developed by Althusser also positions the media in institutional practices of the ideological apparatus to explain the process of interpellating the Nigerian citizens into adopting hierarchical political practices. In fact, the theory of Althusser and the empirical results demonstrate that audiences do not internalise ideology passively; they

interpret, negotiate and even resist it; thus, they demonstrate the dynamic relationship between structure and agency (Pate, 2018; Livingstone, 2020).

Cultural hegemony as it was conceived by Gramsci fills the gap between structural dominance and audience agency as it focuses on the fact that consent is not imposed unilaterally (Gramsci, 1971; Asemah et al., 2017). Political media in Nigeria often represents governance as the prerogative of the elite; however, citizens are aggressively fighting these representations using social media activism, grassroots politics, and alternative media. The practices demonstrate the contestability of hegemony, which supports the need to study the ways in which the audience interprets things and how citizens exercise their accountability. The encoding/decoding model by Hall puts this contestation into action and it provides a framework of how the audience decodes political messages be it in the preferred, negotiated or oppositional readings (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1987). The active participation of citizens in political reporting, discussions on social media, and civic advocacy in Nigeria support the presence of such decoding practices, indicating the active involvement of the audience in the development of political discourse and its demand.

All of these theories can be regarded as an overall method of the analysis of the reception of the political media in Nigeria. Marxist and Frankfurtian structural schools explain the preeminence of elite ideologies in the content of media, and Althusser and Gramsci offer a better understanding of how and why ideologies are exerted. The model by Hall fills the gap, as it prefigures the audience agency and explains how citizens actively perceive, bargain, and even challenge the narratives provided by elites. This synthesis confirms the interest of the study in the audience decoding of political media messages and its effects on the accountability requirements and proves that media influence is not unconditional and homogenous. The paper presents a powerful theoretical framework of political communication and citizen participation in modern Nigeria, because it combines structural, cultural and audience-based approaches.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptual-analytical approach, focusing on the relationship between political media, ideology, and audience interpretation in Nigeria. It draws primarily on literature review of scholarly articles, books, empirical studies, media reports, and social media discussions, integrating both classic and recent research to provide a historical and contemporary understanding of media influence and citizen engagement (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ojebode, 2019; Pate, 2018; Nyabola, 2018). The study applies critical theories, including Marxist theory, the Frankfurt School, Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses, Gramsci's hegemony, and Hall's encoding/decoding model, to interpret how political messages are produced, circulated, and decoded by audiences, and how these interpretations influence accountability demands. Ethical considerations were observed by citing all sources accurately and relying on verified and reputable literature. This methodological approach ensures a rigorous, theory-driven examination of the complex interplay between media, ideology, and citizen agency in Nigeria.

Discussion and Analysis

The political media in Nigeria runs in a compound game of elite domination, ideology, and interpretation of the audience hence developing public perception of governance and contributing to citizen accountability. The Marxist theory argues that the ownership of media by political and economic elites is designed to shape content in such a way that it advances their interests, which creates social inequalities and creates governance in a manner that marginalises the ordinary citizens (Marx, 1867/1976; Williams, 1977; Ojebode, 2019). Frankfurt School goes further and points at the psychological and cultural processes in which media standardize the content, propagate pseudo-individuality, and enforce conformity in a covert way, so that elite ideologies do not get challenged much (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002; Storey, 2018; Fuchs, 2020). The Ideological State Apparatuses by Althusser also elucidate the interpellation process of citizens by the media to entrench people in the existing social order and normalize the rule of elites, although

viewers are not completely passive and may redefine or rebel against the message depending on social status and consciousness (Althusser, 1971; Pate, 2018; Nyabola, 2018).

The idea of cultural hegemony developed by Gramsci is that the consent is negotiated but not imposed; in Nigeria, the evidence demonstrates that it is negotiated selectively, as citizens accept, challenge, or redefine the political narratives by responding to social media posts, engaging in community discussions, and activism, which results in the creation of counter-hegemonic discourses and holds the government accountable (Gramsci, 1971; Bosch, 2017; Asemah et al., 2017). These dynamics are operationalised through Hall encoding/decoding model, which shows that audiences decode media messages in a preferred, negotiated, or oppositional manner based on their cultural knowledge, social positioning and political awareness (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1987; Livingstone, 2020). These views in combination indicate that Nigerian audiences are in a mediated, negotiated space where structural power, ideological processes, and agency of the citizens are in a collision. This two-sidedness demonstrates that, on the one hand, political media may reinforce elite control and structural inequality but, on the other hand, it offers a space of civic participation, negotiation and participatory democracy, which can empower citizens to resist narratives and demand transparency and accountability in politics.

Conclusion

This study highlights the intricate relationship between political media, ideology, and citizen agency in Nigeria, showing that media both reflects and reinforces elite power while also providing avenues for audience interpretation, negotiation, and resistance. Based on the Marxist theory, the Frankfurt School, interpellation and ideological state apparatuses of Althusser, the concept of hegemony developed by Gramsci, and the encoding/decoding model created by Hall, it is clear that the Nigerian citizens are not only passive receivers of political messages. Instead, they pursue, refract and even challenge elite narratives actively in order to demand more transparency and accountability.

This analysis shows that media influence is not entirely deterministic or entirely mediated; it is disputed and negotiated, with structural and ideological pressures alongside audience agency existing. This duality highlights the importance of political media as an instrument of control and a civic space. The combination of all these theoretical views and empirical findings in the study indicates the need to empower citizens to carefully consume the media with the aim of enhancing democracy accountability in Nigeria.

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