

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **News worthiness and Public trust in sub-Saharan African: Examining the impact of tabloid journalism in Zambia**

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**This study set out to understand the role of tabloid news content in establishing public news trust in Zambia. The study compared tabloid news stories (usually frowned upon as unprofessional by most African journalists and scholars) to professional news writing styles, which are rooted in Western journalism education. Drawing from studies that critique tabloid journalism as consumed by people lacking critical abilities to analyze professional news content, the study predicted that: (1) the consumption of tabloid news was not positively correlated to the lack of education/ability to critically analyze 'professional' news content; (2) individuals exposed to only professional news content in form of hard news will indicate lower levels of trust for the media if compared to those exposed to tabloid news content; (3) tabloid news will serve as a moderating factor between media trust and mistrust. This theoretical model was tested with quasi-experiments and surveys using data collected from over 319 participants from online media platforms belonging to selected media outlets in Zambia. The results supported the proposed model on the role of tabloid news content and public trust. Additional analyses suggested that there was no positive correlation between the consumption of tabloid news and education; therefore, debunking the idea that critical analysis of news content in Zambia resided among the educated individuals.**

**Key words:** Tabloid, sensational news, professional journalism, newsworthiness, media trust, zambia daily mail, Mwebantu Media, Zambia Watchdog, Zambia Media Landscape.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The quest for a normative definition for news and what should characterize news content, especially in tabloids has been a recurring theme in African scholastic discourse (Kerunga et al., 2020; Chama, 2017; Wasserman, 2010; Mfumbusa, 2010). Most of these debates are situated within the broad paradigm of

professionalism – a largely contested notion in journalism. A number of scholars still grapple with the idea of whether the field of journalism is a craft, profession, or trade (Kasoma, 2010). An elaborate discussion of this debate from a Western perspective, where this kind of scholarship mostly abounds, advocates

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for traditional approaches that have seemingly stood the test of time. As Pompper and Hoffman (2018) indicate in their invitation remarks to the special issue of the *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* (JMCQ), "...we invite scholars to build upon traditional approaches for understanding mass media's role in defining and amplifying news" (p. 663). The traditional approaches referred to here are especially rooted in the western conceptualization of journalistic values.

This kind of emphasis on traditional approaches is iterated not only in western scholarship, but even among African scholars, who for the most part owe their journalism education system to the West. As Mfumbusa (2010) had observed, most African media scholars tend to privilege formal journalism training and traditional values (Mfumbusa, 2010) in opposition to journalistic practices that emanate from grassroots/community-oriented training. The inverted pyramid method emphasized in journalism education in Africa, continues to infiltrate and dictate the styles of news reporting and writing. In other words, most journalists are bound by the 'textbook' journalistic rules to an extent that their styles of writing and reporting only resonate with handful of the members of the audience. This has led journalism to be considered a field of haste (Nyamnjoh, 2005), privileging hard news stories and treating them as proxy for news reporting and writing. While hard news stories have become the major characterizing feature of professional journalism, soft news mostly residing in sensational/tabloid<sup>1</sup> journalism. As a result, values such as proximity, impact, oddity, and relevance, tend to be given less importance (Muchangwe and Gondwe, 2020; Bunce et al., 2016).

Despite the fact that tabloids have become the major custodians of soft news, and a platform where the majority find their voices, most media scholars in Africa take a moralistic approach to studying tabloid/sensational journalism and dismissing it as an inferior form of journalism. Others go beyond to suggest that the style of reporting is inappropriate for sub-Saharan democracy and its people. Against the backdrop of these strident debates is the question of what should constitute professional news reporting in African journalism and whether that resonates with what the audience believes as important. The idea not to assess the ethicality of tabloid journalism, but to understand what constitutes professional journalism in Zambia, and how the audience perceives tabloid versus professional journalism, which in this case is equated to mainstream media journalism driven by journalistic principles of ethics and styles of writing.

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, 'Tabloid' and 'sensational' journalism are interchangeably used to denote a "type of popular, largely sensational journalism that takes its name from the format of a small newspaper, roughly half the size of an ordinary broadsheet". In most sub-Saharan Africa, sensational media is mostly associated with tabloids

This study contributes to the growing area of value in the literature of professional journalism in Africa and what many journalists consider as tabloid journalism (which most scholars associate with sensationalism) produced by non-professional journalists and/or media outlets. It attempts to answer the questions of authenticity of tabloid news content by questions examining how people in Zambia respond to tabloid news as it relates to media trust and credibility. Furthermore, the study examines whether a certain type of people, particularly those with low academic qualifications, are more prone to consuming tabloid news content than those who are considered educated. The idea draws from most media studies that treat tabloid journalism as inferior to 'professional' journalism (Zelizer et al., 2000; Nerone, 2013; Örnebring and Jönsson, 2004; Campbell, 2001). The study sought to determine whether there is a relationship between the consumption of tabloid journalism in Zambia and the ability to critically analyze the news, and whether what is considered as tabloid and unprofessional news items are mostly consumed by a certain kind of audience – in this view, an audience that has little or no education, and, therefore, regarded as having less critical abilities to analyze what is deemed as "professional news writing" styles. Overall, the study was able to demonstrate that true professionalism now resides in "Tabloid/sensational journalism", not because they follow the structures from textbooks enforced by Journalism curricular in Africa that mostly "Western-oriented", but that they have understood the context of the people, and have devised a strategy that is key to the roles of journalism.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The structure of 'News' in African Journalism

By and large, African communication scholarship imitates western directions and writing styles for research (Wasserman, 2019; Traber, 1989). Little effort is dedicated to identifying what affects the media in Africa. What constitutes a true African media is actually determined by the number of western traits it exhibits – the more western a media appears, the more professional its journalists are considered (Mutsvairo, 2018). As Nyarko and Teer-Tomaselli (2018) asserts in the chapter of Mutsvairo's edited book, "the idea of Africa is itself a Western construct", therefore, "Africanizing" the discourse is just another irony for Westernization (Gondwe, 2018). Such a tendency has led to a huge schism between the modernized elites and the vast majority that experience poverty (Gondwe, 2018; White, 2008). The media in this case is equally entangled in a web that constantly seeks to identify itself as elite (run by educated journalists); sustained by politicians that seek to advance an agenda; and supported by advertising companies that aim to maximize profits – pushing the

media to align more towards the market model.

When issues, such as *fake news*, #MeToo movement, and even issues with no proximal impact hit the headlines in western scholarship, African researchers equally embrace them as theirs; for they represent currency and importance. In the same way, when catastrophes occur in Africa, and western media defines them as newsworthy, the African media and scholarship equally takes the same strategy of making those events seem more important above anything else. If Western scholarship perceives an event in Africa as negative, the African scholars will embrace the same perspective. This relationship works in reverse too; if the western output is positive, the African perspective usually follows suit. For example, consider the number of studies and the approaches that came from events such as the Tahrir square protests or even the Zimbabwe and the President Robert Mugabe Saga. The truth is that there is a scarcity of research that reflects independent African scholarly thought. Such approaches among African scholars renders useless all the real issues that affect the local people and with potential to accurately define 'real' news. The result is "ferment in the field" of Journalism and Mass Communication (White, 1983).

Mfumbusa (2008) and Djokotoe (2004) do not only see this problem as rooted in market models, but in the education system that seeks to privilege 'haste' over other news values. In a study conducted among journalists in Zambia, Djokotoe observed that many journalists were driven by 'getting the scoop' of the story and learning to implement the idea of accuracy in this process. Unfortunately, this particular emphasis on 'getting the scoop' tends to ignore the promotion of skills and genres such as feature writing, editorials, and column writing in which most issue-based journalism and true news values that impart the greatest impact on society are found. In other words, while most journalists are skilled in 'professional' news reporting, the work produced is neither profound nor different from what most citizen journalists offer. This results in most news stories lacking incorporative creativity, engagement, and relevance (Kovach and Rosentiel, 2014) in the sense that their focus is only on issues that satisfy the elite minority, while ignoring the larger population.

Chama (2017) would assert that we can only revert to the understanding of 'real news' in Africa if we make in-depth reporting a priority. This statement is in opposition to the common 'professional' journalistic approaches that tend to privilege hard news stories that for the most part focus on reporting 'big names' and in haste, with less in-depth content. According to Chama (2017), a 'true journalistic story' begins after the events have been reported in form of hard news. This implies that when a story is "reported," the work is done in haste, therefore, leaving behind core issues that might require a deeper dive. For example, a story about water sanitation can be reported yet without a follow-up, the story cannot be

developed into a full-fledged account of impactful events and subsequent reparations. Djokotoe (2004) ideas that journalism should be rooted in genres that encourage editorials and feature reporting highlight the same ideas. For Djokotoe, news ideas go beyond fact-checking and 'witch-hunting' (as most mainstream media journalists in Zambia have resorted to) to emphasize the truthfulness of the context of the story and not the actual facts. In other words, facts become less important if they are not serving the contextual purpose of the general community.

Asimeng-Boahene, (2010) observes that such kind of reporting that privileges context is what most African journalists are comfortable with – by nature, Africans are storytellers and use different genres to drive a point. It is through these writings that Africans come to understand the values of news and subsequently define it to meet the "watchdog" standards elaborated by Sturmer and Rioba (2000). According to Sturmer and Rioba (2000), most journalists are now 'Watchdogs in Chains' in the sense that they can only 'bark' with no effect because they have ignored the values that inform news in African societies.

### **Tabloid Journalism verses 'professional journalism'**

In a perfect world, professional journalism places a lot of emphasis on contextual and in-depth reporting, while Tabloids are perceived as reporting in a scanty, sensational and exaggerated manner that has nothing to do with development issues. However, a critical analysis suggests that the opposite is true for both media types if ethics was considered a secondary variable. A number of studies have shown that African media systems that consider themselves professional tend to look down upon those that practice sensational journalism (Wasserman, 2010). As an offset, proponents of sensational/tabloid journalism consider 'professional' media systems as lacking the true basis for what constitutes 'real news' for the African people (Okumbe et al., 2017). Accordingly, they accuse their competitors of mimicking Western styles of reporting believed to be rooted in character assassination, 'vendetta journalism,' and the understanding that only political issues and 'big names' make 'news' (Gondwe, 2014; Mabweazara, 2018; Windrich, 2006). Kasoma (1995) castigates such kind of reporting as lacking the qualities of real African styles of news, and only playing to the galleries of Western dictations. For example, when the West declares an era of 'fake news' (as it was of the 2016 US elections) then the whole of scholarship in Africa turns to 'fake news'. The same was seen with the Arab uprising, the #Metoo movement, and many other events.

For Kasoma (1996), such reporting gravitates towards 'vendetta' reporting while ignoring what Djokotoe (2004) referred to as, 'issue-based journalism' – a form of grassroots reporting that seeks to highlight the main issues affecting society and not just chasing big names

for 'click-worthy' news. Issue-based journalism, according to Djokotoe (2004), sometimes defies the traditional 'professional' text-book journalism to accommodate styles that best deliver a message to its audience. As Traber (1989) had earlier observed, while 'text-book' journalism is ideal for instituting professional journalism in Western countries, African journalism should refrain from amalgamating western models in African fabrics. There is need for African journalists to find a model and style that speaks and serves their communities.

The above statement echoes the style and structure of news reporting that has been overlooked and accused as soft and unprofessional yet posing as a hallmark for what most people in Zambia would consider as newsworthy. This type of news reflects Gans (1979; cited in Usher, 2011) "*Multiperspectival News*", as a form of reporting that "seeks news about other subjects which are newsworthy for the variety of audiences in the total news audiences... It is a kind that also obtains news from many other sources, including ordinary citizens, and reports a variety of political, ideological, and social viewpoints/perspectives" (Usher, 2011). Chama (2017) and Wasserman (2010) would equate these ideas in Africa to the performance of sensational or yellow journalism, which for a long time has been exclusively defined in tandem with tabloids. For Wasserman (2010) tabloid journalism and its journalists "should be given credit for coding, reading between the lines, and appropriating media content in a way that is sometimes more of a ritual than a deliberation" (p. xi).

As Chama (2017) and Wasserman (2010) had earlier asserted, telling a 'true journalistic story' in Africa goes beyond fact-checking to include narratives of people's daily lives, which for many, are still precarious, dangerous, difficult, and uncertain. This argument also gives credence to Benson (2009) who saw '*multiperspectival news*' as existing in both 'professional' and 'tabloids. According to Wasserman (2010), critics of sensational or tabloid journalism "have not bothered to find out why such media outlets are popular, what they mean to their audiences, or how they articulate their daily lives...often the criticism directed at the tabloids centers around incredulity or ridicule at stories that defy belief" (p. xi), even when they are the ones that affect the majority of the people. For this reason, to tell an African story, as Zelizer (2004) had argued in her book, would also entail revisiting some of the dominant assumptions that pose as a whole hallmark for scholarly debates in the field of journalism.

### **Tabloid Journalism and public trust in sub-Saharan Africa**

When it comes to what people need versus what people want, journalistic practices in Africa are still at crossroads. How much engagement and creativity a journalist should

apply to a story is still a difficult question to answer. For many, the conventional way of presenting a story is the most ideal. However, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014) assert that most people want both hard news and soft stories (p. 148) This suggests the idea of sensational journalism that many scholars refer to as 'unprofessional' and/or fake (Nerone, 2013; Örnebring and Jönsson, 2004; Campbell, 2001) is still relevant in the formation and understanding of newsworthiness. In its conventional sense 'sensational reporting' denotes unacceptable standards of reporting in the field of journalism. This kind of reporting is perceived as 'rumor mongering,' producing unfounded information that is not based on facts (Scott, 2017; Mfumbusa, 2010). Chama (2017) and Wasserman (2010) have called this 'tabloid' journalism to refer to a kind of reporting under scrutiny for its lack of respect to the defined standards of journalism. Most 'professional' journalists are hesitant to acknowledge it as a form of journalism. Instead, professional journalists perceive it as simply a form of "yellow journalism," which is agitational, adversarial, muckraking, and lacking the substance of real journalism (Mfumbusa, 2010; Musa and Domatob, 2007). Kasoma (1996) challenged the nature of its operation, arguing that tabloid journalism, which is usually sensational, is especially advanced by tendencies of naming and shaming through local jargons loaded with sexual innuendos and exaggerated headlines (Chama, 2017: 2). Politicians, such as the former Tanzanian President, Julius Nyerere, were explicit to assert that African countries were not ready to afford the luxury of an adversarial and muckraking media.

Scholars that argue in favor of sensational/tabloid reporting assert that, while it is characterized by 'rumors' that have less or no scientific basis, the proximity and impact they cover within their society is well-founded (Wasserman, 2010). The styles of reporting and the coverage of stories they have come to embrace, reflect the true impact of journalism in Africa. According to Wasserman, such stories take an in-depth approach to identify the real issues that affect society and present them in a more creative way (p. xii). This implies that media outlets that employ sensational reporting take an extra interest in their society to identify issues that are relevant, engaging, and interesting to their audience. "Despite the pejorative approaches through which the elite discuss sensational journalism, its value is beyond its perception" (Wasserman, 2010: xii). The implication is that tabloid journalism in Zambia, captures the real essence of 'true story-telling' in the sense that it articulates the narratives and lived experiences of the people's daily lives. For example, the author questions what a 'true story' of the millions of people undergoing hardships would look like - it is that which tells a story resonating with people's lifestyle, culture, and other everyday events, as expressed in sensational media and events. This is a skill that most journalists lack. It operates on the basis of what it assumes is interesting

and “newsworthy” to people on grassroots.

Recent studies from the West are also emerging to support “sensational reporting” after the backlash that occurred during the era of “Yellow Journalism” in the United States. A study conducted by Kalika and Ferrucci (2019) discusses how mainstream media reporters are implementing *TMZ* (an entertainment media outlet) strategies to draw the attention of the audience and remedy the “dying” journalism. In their content analysis findings, the authors indicate that *TMZ*’s success was based on four main strategies namely: paparazzi-based content, document-based reporting, sports-themed material, and reader polls. In short, Kalika and Ferrucci are suggesting the idea that “making readers part of the news was a new opportunity for many media outlets” (p.13) not only to increase consumption but also to be able to meddle ‘*what the audience think about*’. Grant (2019) also found that sensational news platforms online were recording successful results because of their ability to provide important spaces of aspiration, self-making, and debates among the people in Rwanda.

According to Grant (2019), these platforms had the capability to “document and give value to the everyday experiences of the local people and create an alternative perspective of Kigali different from that presented by the government-controlled press” (p.119). By such virtues, the people, at all levels consider themselves as participating in news formations with a higher probability of consuming and trusting what is more directly proximal and impactful to their lives. In sum, studies the consumption of tabloid/sensational has been burgeoning in huge numbers in most sub-Saharan countries (Chama, 2017; Wasserman, 2010; Mfumbusa, 2010). What is not substantiated is the type of people that consume such kind of media. Many assume that because of their stereotypes, tabloid/sensational media are especially consumed by the uneducated individuals with less critical abilities of critiquing ‘professional’ news content. This and many assumptions made us ask the following question:

**RQ1:** *Is there relationship between consuming Tabloid/sensational news and the lack of education/ lack of the capacity to critically analyze news content in the Zambian media.*

**Rationale:** A myriad of research have been done to suggest that education, measured through formal levels of education, predicts the degree to which one can critique and event or analyze an article. Most studies about sensational reporting in Africa suggest that the majority of people that consume sensational news are uneducated, and therefore, less critical (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2016; Hackett, 2016; Chibuwe and Ureke, 2016). The study argues under this hypothesis that the consumption of sensational news is not determined by the level of education, but by the trust and attachment one has to the story. This statement leads to the

assertions and research questions provided below in the following manner:

**RQ2a:** *Will individuals exposed to only professional journalism indicate lower levels of trust in the media than those exposed to both traditional and non-traditional news content?*

**RQ2b:** *Will individuals exposed to only Tabloid/sensational news media exhibit high levels of trust in the media than those exposed to both traditional and non-traditional news content?*

**RQ3:** *Will Tabloid/sensational news moderate the relationship between media trust and mistrust*

Research question three (**RQ3**) seeks to determine whether people that consume both hard news and sensational news exhibit higher levels of media trust than those that only consume hard news stories. In this way it can be measured whether sensational news acts as a moderating factor between media trust and mistrust in Zambian systems.

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed survey method and a quasi-experiment conducted between February 1st, 2019 and March 30th, 2019, after receiving the Institutional Review Board Approval on January 22, 2019. Government media and other highly ranked private media outlets, such as the *Zambian Daily Mail*, were considered for professional hard news stories because of their circulation and credibility. Other media such as *Mwebantu Media*, *The Zambian Watchdog*, and *Zambian Media landscape* represented what many consider “rumor mongering” news outlets and, therefore, sensational. Media type to represent Tabloid/sensational were categorized with the help of two trained coders yielding reliability results ranging between 0.88 and 0.94. The media outlets were selected based on their type of stories, and their disregard for normative journalism rules. The media in question were selected because of the readership, as well as the impact and credibility factors as indicated by Amazon’s “Alexa” – an online tool that categorizes a list of credible media sources in a country by measuring the percentage of daily time on site, the percentage of daily page views per visitor, the percentage of traffic from search, and the number of total sites linking to that source. Therefore, the criteria for selecting these media were based on Alexa, and a manual inspection of which medium had the most engaged followers.

### Survey sample selection

A total of 500 participants from a population of more than 10,000 were selected based on their active participation in the online platforms hosted by the aforementioned media outlets. The names were selected based on how often they posted or commented on the topic. Each selected member should have either posted or commented on at least three topics on social media platforms of the aforementioned media outlets. These media outlets, mostly nested on Facebook, host more than 3 million participants in total who were potential participants. The participants were limited to 500

individuals because of time constraints and for manageability purposes. The 500 participants were arrived at after calculating the confidence interval that provided us with CI 4.02 calculated at 70 percent. The whole process involved a manual and painstaking skimming of various posts to identify the main participants in the group that is, posting or commenting to the discussions online. The 500 were individually contacted by the researcher and the trained coders and invited to participate in the study. The invitation process simply involved sending an individual Facebook message. The selected sample size stood to represent the population of the Zambian media consumers because of its diversity. Generally, by leveraging online participation, the study was able to draw participants from across the country. Of the 500 respondents contacted, 319 participants responded to our requests. The 319 comprised of 267 participants recruited from various social media networks around the country and 52 other respondents who were physically recruited by the second researcher who administered the questionnaires. The same survey was physically administered to people with less access to the internet, thus less participation online from rural communities without access to the internet. The two samples included different age groups, ethnic tribes, political, and religious affiliations.

### Design and procedure

The designed and pretested questionnaire comprised of 43 items with six major sections that sought to examine: (1). Demographic characteristics, (2) level and kind of media genre consumed by respondents, (3) levels of media trust, (4) perception of news media as a whole, (5) attitude towards sensational news, and (6) attitude towards mainstream news. Besides demographic characteristics, all measures used established seven-point semantics on a Likert scale. Statements such as “I get my main news from (named sensational media outlets such as *Mwebantu* Media, Zambia watchdog, Zambia landscape, etc.)”; “I trust news from mainstream media”; “I identify myself more with issues from sensational media”; “I identify myself more with issues from mainstream media”, etc. characterized the survey questions. In order to get the respondent's views on the kind of media they consume as well as the levels of trust they have for their choices, Open-ended questions that asked them to list and rank the media they consume hierarchically based on the trust levels were also featured.

### Experimental design

Participants for the experiments were recruited from members of the surrounding communities whose media consumption was noticeable. Although they were not a representative of the entire country, their responses were considered necessary. As an addition to the survey. The experiment was designed for a 2 x 2 between-subject, which allowed us to manipulate our study group organized by Radio Kabangabanga, located in the rural township of Solwezi, Zambia. (There is nothing particularly special about using Radio Kabangabanga as the center point. The study leveraged its ability to bring together people of different beliefs and characteristics in their programming (Believing that it was the best possible place to recruit the participants given the cordial relationship shared with the radio director). Only members older than 18 were recruited, therefore, allowing us to host a total of 40 respondents. The 40 participants were randomly picked from the 52 participants that were physically contacted. Participants were required to provide informed consent and compensated with approximately \$3.00. The demographic characteristics included an equal split of both genders (20 males, 20 females) from different households with ages ranging from 23 to 81 years, with the average age being 33 ( $SD = 22.46$ ).

Furthermore, 57% of the respondents indicated that they were college graduates and middle class (considered elite in this case), while the remaining 43% comprised of high school graduates and dropouts (considered the uneducated and less critical).

### Study design

Four conditions were created to which all the participants were assigned. Ten participants were exposed to hard news political and professionally designed journalistic news stories generated by professional volunteering journalists; exposing the other 10 to sensational news stories that were also generated by the same volunteering professional journalists; third, the next 10 were exposed to both sensational and hard news stories, and the other 10 were treated as a control group and exposed to none. All articles were written in a way that they discussed issues pertaining to their communities: Issues of water sanitation, witchcraft, poverty, health, and country politics – for example, one story was about a “witch family” crash-landing in their community; an incidence involving an unknown family that was found naked in a particular neighborhood. The act automatically suggests the practice of witchcraft. Other stories involved the spilling of chemical wastes in a local river, an incidence that was only reported by ‘sensational media’.

Furthermore, stories on politics and economics such as highlighting the economic trajectory of the mines within the same area were included. Figure 1 has a story run by both the mainstream and sensational media outlet. Furthermore, participants were placed in either one of the two conditions through which they were asked to assess the kind of news stories they consume and trusted most, and also report on the strength of their responses same stories. Also, 93% of the respondents rated the chosen articles as real. The reality of these articles was based on the real issues happening in their society except that the reported statistics were not scientifically grounded.

### Measures

The procedure involved asking participants to go through the assigned articles and reporting their levels of believability and trust of the news story. Participants were also asked to determine which story/stories they felt spoke to their needs. The controlled group was given similar questions that sought to determine the kind of media and news stories they felt addressed their needs – particularly, those with proximal impact. The same aforementioned issues were addressed in the questions. RQ1 was measured through surveys by simply asking the respondents to indicate their levels of education and their understanding of the story in question. Education was measured by asking the respondents to indicate their levels of education (primary, high-school, and college/university level). On the other hand, the ability to critique the news content was measured based on the “known in the news” vs the “unknowns in the news. The three variables were measured on a self-devised 1 – 7 Likert scale through which the respondents were asked to indicate their level of knowledge of the topic in the news, whether they have the integrity to honestly spot the biases in the news, whether they spend time in taking an organized approach to seeking out the best possible truth to the story, their tolerance to listening to views that oppose their beliefs, and the openness to reconsider a new appraisal when the evidence points to the opposing view.

The second and third research questions (RQ2a, RQ2b, and RQ3) were measured using the global measure of trust drawn from the Van Duyn and Collier (2019) study, and as earlier proposed by Tsifti and Capella (2003). Therefore, a similar question was asked, “How much time do you think you can trust (a named media organization –mainstream and sensational) to report the news that



**Figure 1.** Variations in consumption between sensational and mainstream media in Zambia.  
 Note: images screen-captured from outlet homepages.

**Table 1.** Average scores, variance, and coefficient.

Scale	Mean	Variance	Alpha
Attitudes towards news reporting in Zambian media (8)	5.36	0.21	0.85
Level of trust for media as a whole in Zambia (5)	4.86	0.26	0.88
Perceptions of tabloid/sensational media in Zambia (7)	5.93	0.04	0.93
Perception of political news in Zambia (6)	6.20	0.68	0.78
Kind of genre frequently consumed (6)	4.02	0.73	0.84
Group influence of media consumption (8)	5.13	0.46	0.89

addresses your needs in a fair way?" A Likert scale addressing the responses from 1 – 7 (1 as in never and 7 as in all of the time) was equally employed. On average, participants trusted sensational media, *most of the time* (M= 27.22, SD= 2.40) and hard news stories, *some of the time* (M=19.37, SD = 4.20).

**RESULTS**

**Data analysis**

The overall sample consisted of 41.7% men and 58.3% women for both surveys and experiments. The total average age for the two methods yielded a mean of (M = 20.82) with the majority (77%) of the respondents classifying themselves as educated and in the working-class. The study further used Cronbach’s alpha to test the reliability of our scales that yielded the generally accepted guidelines of 0.70 (Hair, 1989). The findings are presented in Table 1.

**Survey**

A series of multiple regression analyses were performed

to respond to the hypothesis that sought to assess whether individual choices for a particular media source are determined by their levels of education. Attitude towards the two aforementioned news media served as dependent variables, while education levels and the ability to critique news content where the independent or predictor variables. Gans (1979) conceptualization of ‘actors and activities’ in the news were borrowed as our criteria for determining the predictor variables for the ability to critique the news (pp. 8-19). Therefore, the predictor variables included levels of education, which was dummy coded by indicating the “knowns in the news,” “unknowns in the news,” and “activities in the news.” The R-square, collinearity statistics, and coefficient estimates indicate that there is no positive correlation between the kind of media one consumes and their education level (-.078). Particularly, an average of 88.7% of the respondents indicated that they consumed a news story based on its political values, if the story addressed issues that were happening in their proximal communities, and/or if at least they knew someone in the community in which a story was happening. This average number included individuals that considered themselves as educated. However, the difference between the

**Table 2.** Individual attitude towards news media in Zambia.

	Unstandardized estimates	Standard error	Standardized estimates	t	p-level	Collinearity statistics
	B	SE	$\beta$			VIF
Intercept	3.946	0.845		4.174	0.05	
Edu-level	-0.078	0.056	-0.72	-.521	0.612	2.015
Unknowns	0.22*	0.077	0.284	4.434	0.013	2.113
Knowns	0.39*	0.061	0.173	3.341	0.011	2.411
Activities	0.44*	0.089	0.291	5.163	0.001	2.624
R <sup>2</sup>	0.16					
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.13					

Not: \* = p<0.05.

educated and the less educated was that one group mostly consumed sensational/tabloid news for entertainment while the later thought of it as addressing pertinent issues in their communities. This supports **RQ1** to indicate that education levels in Zambia had less influence on the selection of what kind of information/media genre one chooses to consume.

As Table 2 indicates, the criteria for deciding what kind of news media to consume<sup>2</sup> was determined by the ability to critique the content, which showed little or no correlation with the levels of education in our case. In both cases, the findings indicate that the elites and the non-elite suggest a strong ability of critiquing news content for trustworthiness. In other words, this implies that the ability to consume news media is contingent on the ability of being able to critique that media regardless of the level of education. Although education imparts someone with the skills to critique a news media, our findings suggest that even the “uneducated” did poses that ability except that it was limited by what they only knew. Generally, depending on the topic, the educated individuals exhibited similar limitations. In particular, it was observed that on a scale of 1-7, attitude towards news reporting increase by 0.22, 0.39, and 0.44 for a unit increase in the values of individuals’ perceptions of the “known in the news,” the “unknown in the news,” and the “activities characterizing the news,” respectively.

## Experiment findings

The experiments examined **RQ2a** and **RQ2b** that sought to measure whether individuals exposed to either “Professional” or sensational/tabloid news will exhibit variations in the levels of trust for the Zambian news media. An OLS regression was performed across all conditions with the treatment variables and exposure

to different media genres as the independent variables and media trust as our outcome. As per rule, the variables were first dummy coded, assigning a 1 to those exposed to hard news stories and a 2 to those exposed to sensational media. An overall model indicate that the exposure had statistical significance ( $\beta = -0.54$ ),  $t(447) = 4.23$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . However, individuals exposed to hard news from mainstream media indicated lower trust for general news reported in the Zambian media ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ) in comparison to those that were exposed to sensational/tabloid news media ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 0.21$ ). The same applied to the kind of media the respondents believed addressed their need. To be specific, the overall results indicate that all respondents exposed to both media believe that sensational/tabloid media addresses issues that pertain to society ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 0.37$ ). The correlation coefficient of .086 suggest that the motivation for a news story consumption was strongly associated with the extent to which the respondents felt the story addressed issues that had proximal impact to them than mere political story with great impact yet only at an aggregate level.

Furthermore, the study examined research question three (**RQ3**), to determine whether the consumption of sensational news media could remedy the problem of news mistrust in the Zambian media. First, the levels of consumption were measured in the two types of media outlets. A seemingly sensational story published by the mainstream and professional media outlet was selected, The Zambian Daily Mail. This story was selected because a sensational media outlet reran it while accrediting the main source. The images below present the variations in consumption of story based on type.

The Zambia Daily Mail was the main host for the story, yet it only recorded 197 likes, 141 comments and 17 shares in a period of eight (8 h). *Mwebantu*, on the other hand, recorded more than 1.3K likes, 711 comments, and 43 shares within seven hours of re-running the story. These figures seem to suggest sensational media attracts more consumers than mainstream professional media in the sense that most people would prefer reading the same story from a sensational media platform.

<sup>2</sup> Note: the criteria for deciding what kind of news media one consumes was measured by running two separate regressions: one for the time spent with (or positive attitudes towards) mainstream media, and the other for the time spent with (or positive attitudes towards) tabloid media



However, this does not report whether the higher consumption of sensational news could remedy the problem of trust. As such, the controlled group (the group that indicated that they consumed both sensational and professional news) was used to measure the levels of trust. Findings suggest that individuals who recorded higher consumption of sensational news within the controlled group, reported higher levels of media trust ( $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) than those that recorded lower consumption ( $M = 2.31$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ). In addition, there was a marginally significant main effect ( $p < 0.072$ ) of consuming sensational news overall media trust ( $B = -0.07$ ),  $t(429) = -2.31$ ,  $p = 0.031$ ). These findings support in the rationale underlying RQ3 to assert that sensational media in Zambia has the capability of defining news if compared to hard news stories that mimic western approaches.

## DISCUSSION

This study set out to understand the relationship between the consumption of tabloid news content, media trust, and whether there was a connection between the type of news consumption and education. Particularly, the study asked whether individuals exposed to only professional journalism as defined by western scholarship indicated lower levels of trust as opposed to those exposed to 'tabloid' journalism; and whether tabloid news moderated the relationship between media trust and distrust. By controlling for the ethical implications, evidence shows that Tabloid/sensational media do connect with the people more than what most scholars refer to as "professional journalism". Because of the emphasized schism between Tabloid/sensational and professional mainstream media, most research have ended up linking African journalism and its journalists to lacking professionalism (Mfumbusa, 2010; Nyamnjoh, 2005). Albeit the empirical authenticity that these findings provide, their interpretations are problematic in the sense that they feed in the Western narratives of what and how journalism and professional journalists should look like.

However, journalistic professionalism, and especially in Africa is not an easy concept to understand (Mutsvairo and Bebawi, 2019; Kasoma, 2010; Mutsvairo and Columbus, 2012). Traditionally, it has been understood in textbook accounts, which for the most part fail to align with the status quo. Most media that employ such strategies work in the mainstream media that for the most part only serve a few elite and the government. According to Garman (2005), professionalism in Africa simply refers to the reliance on the "transfer of a certain parcel of knowledge plus a certain set of skills, together with a dose of ethics and accuracy mixed up in the ether of a critical humanities environment" (p. 201). This approach to professionalism ignores the context and needs of the people, therefore creating a gap between journalism and

its audience. For Gans (2011) "the notion of *multiperspectival* news is grounded on the concept of perspectives, which argues that people's positions and roles in society shape how society should be perceived by the media. Gans explained what news should look like saying:

*For example, poor audiences need business news like everyone else, but not about investing in the stock market or the latest newsworthy acts, legal or illegal, by corporate bigwigs. They need to know about the businesses in which they can afford to shop and the ones that will hire them, as well as the charitable and public agencies that can help them when they are jobless and in need (Usher, 2011).*

Gans refer to the notion of reporting issue-based stories that highlight the lifestyles of the local citizens, and not just stories of authoritative sources. The value for news should be defined by the attention it renders to the actions of local citizens, especially in political matters, and what their elected representatives are doing or not doing for them (Usher, 2011). The belief is that the grassroots approach would incorporate the local people more into the political process and would also offer citizens a platform to participate in the process of news making (Semujju, 2018). This is the kind of journalism seen in most sensational/tabloid stories with less regard to their ethical standards. As noted, most of these stories, though addressing what most media scholars would refer to as petty issues, they reflect the true meaning of Semujju (2018) community/alternative media and their possible impact to society.

This study affirms such conclusions by demonstrating that news genres that most professional journalists perceive as sensational/tabloid and unprofessional, have a strong bearing in the minds of most African audiences, and can be used as a criterion for arriving at a normative definition for what constitutes 'real news' in Zambia. The results provided evidence that individuals that consume more sensational news have a strong sense of trust in the media as their source of news. On the other hand, those that indicated higher consumption levels of 'hard news'/professional stories also exhibited high levels of mistrust for the news in Zambia. In general, these findings challenge the conventional understanding that only the 'uneducated' have a high tendency to consume sensational news. Choosing a media genre to consume was not associated with one's education levels or their ability to critique a story. Instead, people chose to consume a certain kind of media based on their affiliation, proximity, and impact. The more they felt the story addressed their issue, the more they were inclined to consume that kind of media. Tomaselli asks, "What exactly does it mean to tell a true story?" For him, telling a true story in Africa, and probably the rest of the world, goes beyond fact-checking, to include stories "that

resonate with the narratives of people's daily lives". Does this mean that we abandon stories about politics and other hard news items? According to Wasserman (2010), while statistics and verifiable sound bites are necessary for reporting 'hard news', a 'true news story' is characterized by the writing styles that accommodates the majority: being able to decode those statistics by reading between the lines and "appropriating media content in a way that is sometimes more of a ritual than a deliberation" (p.xi). Djokotoe (2004) referred to such form of journalism as "issue-based" journalism - a kind of journalism that is not driven just by events that replace each other in a haste way, but that responds to those particular events.

The Zambian situation, as reported in the findings attests to this problem. First, the study demonstrates that the level of education, as opposed to what many studies suggest, is not a criterion for the kind of news one chooses to consume. It is not because someone has less critical tools to assess a story that they choose to consume, but that the kind of stories presented in sensational media responds to the needs of the people. Although considered 'rumor mongering', such stories touch on the basis of the lifestyles of the people. They might not have an authoritative figure to confirm their authenticity, yet they mostly develop from within the communities, therefore, getting authentication from the same communities. They embarrass for the most part, but they also teach, entertain and even shape how society acts and consumes the media. Even among the elite/educated, as observed in our experiments, the levels of trust are not determined by 'elite news' (hard news), but by stories that speak to the hearts of the people. While facts may not be accurate in the news content, the contexts of the stories are perceived as accurate and trustworthy.

For many individuals in Zambia, hard news stories are viewed as simply upholding the status quo, and not designed to serve the people. Individuals buy a renowned newspaper or listen to some news media considered credible just for the sake of status. For example, many people in Zambia, and Africa at large would choose to subscribe to international media outlets such as CNN, BBC, Wallstreet Journal, New York times France 24, etc. not because they are interested in the news it offers, but because it elevates them to the status of an elite person. Many news stories in such media do not have a proximal impact on the consumers even when they choose to affiliate with them. At the end, they turn to the news that matters most to them – sensational. This kind of news is consumed with passion for it directly/indirectly impacts at a proximal level. If this is the case, therefore, what is presented as news in mainstream media lacks the essence and, therefore, does not qualify as news. At most, the definition for news in Zambia has a higher chance of being trusted if it is incorporated with sensational news reporting. This is strongly supported by

various studies that have shown that young people in the United States get their news from sensational/tabloid media outlets such as Late-Night TV shows and Show Biz (Kalika and Ferrucci, 2019).

Thus, the study does not advocate for unethical practices. Neither is the study recommending sensational/tabloid news as a way to address the lack of authenticity in Zambia. Instead, the problem is that most journalists in Zambia have failed to get in tune with their audience by repeatedly writing out of touch stories that are apathetic due to the inability to cause any meaningful change. Those that have attempted are unfortunately put under great oppression by the profession as well as various forms of censorship. Many scholars have called for community impact journalism training and community media training (Gondwe, 2014; Wasserman, 2010; White, 2008) among others as a way of redress, and the push by media pundits to professionalize the media as a whole poses a challenge for the thriving of sensational/tabloid media. The growing social media usage is slowly killing tabloids that were flourishing in the recent past years. However, a push for civility online accompanied with repressive laws and surveillance hinders the creative role of sensational news genres. Most countries in Africa, including Zambia, uphold draconian laws that push certain media into self-censorship and the lack of sensational reporting. On the other hand, the push for professional journalism among scholars is equally a hindrance to the survival of sensational reporting among some media outlets. Such tendencies push professional journalists into reporting strategies that focus on politics, creating a scenario where politics is wrongly portrayed as the only sphere that sells or attracts public interest. Future research should explore the various methods and strategies that journalists in Africa are now using to write a compelling message, especially amidst citizen journalism and bloggers who are becoming more popular than most traditional media. Research on trust should equally be pursued as a research avenue.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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