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Media Use and Political Trust in Kenya: Media Malaise or Virtuous Circle?

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Although there is a large corpus of research on the relationship between media use and political trust, this scholarship mainly comes from the experiences of audiences in the West and Confucian Asia. The current study departs from these contexts by investigating the association between news media exposure and political trust in a growing African democracy—Kenya. Hierarchical regressions analyses were conducted using data from a national representative sample (*N* = 2,400). The findings show that news media use and particularly television news use is negatively related to political trust while newspaper reading, listening to the radio, and digital news use do not predict confidence in political actors. Moreover, political performance and perceived corruption significantly moderate this relationship while subjective economic evaluations do not moderate the hypothesized relationship.

Keywords: media effects, political trust, Kenya, news media, public opinion

The news media's impact on political attitudes and behaviors has been the focus of much political communication research. This research has led to some of the most baffling contradictions where, on the one hand, some studies contend that news media foster positive democratic attitudes and behaviors including promoting political learning (Kim, Cooks, & Kim, 2021), enhancing political efficacy (Ardèvol-Abreu, Diehl, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019), increasing trust in government (Cheng, 2020; Norris, 2000), and thus encouraging political participation (Lee & Xenos, 2022). On the other hand, some argue that news media foster political alienation by activating cynical attitudes toward the political process (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) while fueling affective polarization (Beam, Hutchens, & Hmielowski, 2018). The virtuous circle theory encapsulates the optimistic view (Norris, 2000), while the media malaise theory describes the malign media effects (Cheng, 2020).

The two theories have spawned one of the most productive lines of research within the political communication discipline, leading to mounting empirical evidence supporting both sides of the debate. Scholars continue to test and reexamine media effects across media channels, content types, and programs (see Aarts, Fladmoe, & Strömbäck, 2012; Akinola, Omar, & Mustapha, 2022; Brosius, van Elsas, & de Vreese, 2019; Cheng, 2020). Moreover, there is a growing appreciation of the conditionality of these effects (Avery, 2009; Schuck, 2017). Although the literature hitherto has and continues to document evidence supporting the virtuous circle and the media malaise theories, much of this research

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comes from the United States, Europe, and Asia. We still do not know much about the nature of this relationship in the Global South.

Given that political communication culture differs across continents and countries (Hallin & Mancini, 2012) and that citizens' experiences with news media are shaped by their political, social, economic, and media systems (Blumler, 2015), and considering the calls for more research from the relatively under-researched contexts that is necessary to avoid naïve universalism (Esser & Hanitzsch, 2012), this study examines patterns of news consumption and its effects on political trust in a thriving African democracy and thus foregrounds the experiences of the African people in empirical scholarship. Willems and Mano (2017) state that "researching African media audiences and users is urgent now more than ever because of the rapidly changing media landscape on the continent in the last few decades . . . there is a need to foreground the voices of Africans" (pp. 1–2). Kenya offers a unique context for such an empirical investigation because of its innovative and robust media ecology (Amutabi, 2013) and its relatively young yet strong democratic system (Mueller, 2020). Theoretically, this study draws from media effects theories and literature. Empirically, the study draws from the Round 8 Afrobarometer survey conducted in 2019 in Kenya.

Public Trust and Confidence in Government

Political trust—"a central indicator of the underlying feeling of the public about their political system" (Newton & Norris, 2000, p. 53)—is essential for the stability of a democratic system (Almond & Verba, 1963; Cheng, 2020). Public trust gives the governing a sense of legitimacy (Blind, 2007). Although a moderate amount of distrust can be healthy, heightened skepticism leads to disaffection and political alienation (Hetherington, 1998). Van der Meer (2010) sums up the significance of political trust: "It functions as the glue that keeps the system together and as the oil that lubricates the policy machine" (p. 518).

Although research shows that the decline in political actors and institutions is hardly new given that the downward spirals started decades ago (Citrin & Stoker, 2018), there have been heightened concerns about the precipitous downturn particularly in Western democracies (Brosius et al., 2019; Cheng, 2020). Citizens are increasingly manifesting their deteriorating confidence in political actors and institutions through discontent with the established political structures and processes, embracing populist attitudes, and overall democratic malaise (Geurkink, Zaslove, Sluiter, & Jacobs, 2020; Schraff, 2020). As a result, scholars investigated the causes leading to various conclusions (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Echeverría & Mani, 2020).

From the 1960s to the 1980s, social protests, the divisive and costly Vietnam war, economic recession, and unprecedented corruption and dishonesty by government elites fueled public cynicism in the United States (Dalton, 1999). Despite the initial efforts to document the driving forces behind the rising public cynicism, the period after this, however, saw very little research on this topic. Indeed, Nye and Zelikow (1997) contend that political trust came back on the research agenda in the 1990s, following global evidence that public trust in political elites and institutions was falling precipitously. Nye and Zelikow (1997) posit that Americans grew increasingly skeptical of their government, with public opinion polls revealing that the share of American voters who trusted the government in Washington to do the right thing had plunged

from three-quarters in 1958 to one-quarter in 1994 (Orren, 1997). Similarly, public trust in political actors and institutions plummeted across Europe.

A cross-national analysis involving 14 European nations revealed heightened public skepticism of political elites and institutions (Dalton, 1999). Building on Dalton's (1999) framework, Klingemann (1999) argued that this cynical public was a mass of dissatisfied democrats: "Citizens of established and fledgling democracies who express considerable dissatisfaction with the performance of their regimes" (p. 5). Dalton (1999) called this outcome a crisis of Western democracy. More recent studies reveal similar trends, that is, high levels of public distrust in the governments in Europe (Aarts et al., 2012; Brosius et al., 2019; Goubin & Hooghe, 2020) and the United States (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2017).

Across the Pacific, evidence from Confucian Asia shows mixed levels of public confidence in political institutions. Citizens of South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore exhibit decreasing levels of political trust than in the recent past (Porumbescu, 2013). Contrary to other Confucian states, there is a high sense of public confidence in the government in China (Ai & Zhang, 2021) and Taiwan (Fung, Liu, & Chung, 2021). Some scholars have argued that political trust tends to be relatively high in authoritarian regimes such as China than in democratic Asian nations (Ma & Yang, 2014).

In sub-Saharan Africa, an extensive scanning of existing literature reveals that the studies on this political outcome—trust in government institutions—are few and far between to give a clear picture. However, there are a few notable exceptions. Hutchison and Johnson (2011) found that citizens in democratic countries tend to have higher political trust relative to those in authoritarian countries in Africa. In South Africa, political trust has precipitously declined due to poor economic performance (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006) and partisanship (Carlin & Love, 2013). In Ghana, trust is high due to perceived government performance in matters of the economy (Godefroidt, Langer, & Meuleman, 2016). In Nigeria, widespread corruption has led to great distrust in political actors (Uslaner, 2017).

Literature Review

Political Trust and the Role of the Media

The crisis of Western democracy discussed above, characterized by plummeting trust in political actors and institutions provoked considerable concern about the possible consequences of this precipitous decline in political trust, as well as the potential explanations for this phenomenon. Whereas some scholars attributed the heightened political cynicism to social and political forces (Dalton, 1999; Klingemann, 1999), others argued that there was more to this democratic ill. Indeed, some scholars suggested that the media could be one of the culprits (Nye & Zelikow, 1997; Robinson, 1976). This group of researchers argued that the sharp global decline in political trust seemingly correlated with the exponential rise of more assertive and negative news media (Ceron & Memoli, 2015; Nye & Zelikow, 1997; Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2016). However, going back to the 1970s reveals important early work on this topic.

The pioneering work of Robinson (1976) on the effects of political television journalism provides a useful starting point in this center-stage scholarly research. Robinson (1976), using methodological triangulation including experiments and survey data, found that those who had come to depend on television for their political information would, as a result, exhibit a greater sense of cynicism and distrust. He argued that the format of television news fosters "at best detachment or at worst cynical rejection toward the political institutions of the nation" (Robinson, 1976, p. 418). Robinson (1976) suggested that "television has been . . . at the core of the growing political malaise" (p. 425). Consequently, Robinson (1976) coined the term "video malaise" to epitomize the narcotizing and corrosive effect of reliance on television for news.

Robinson's (1976) video malaise thesis spawned various studies (see Avery, 2009; Curran et al., 2014; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020) and generated intense interest among political communication scholars on how television news engendered political cynicism. For example, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) experimentally illustrated that increased media focus on strategic framing that is, who is winning versus who is losing, activates political distrust or cynicism. They argued that strategic framing invites "interpretations of politicians' motivations as self-interested and hence not worthy of trust" (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 145). European experimental studies validated this initial evidence (de Vreese, 2004; Jackson, 2010). Laboratory experiments found that exposure to incivility during television debates activated political cynicism in the United States (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Additionally, increased negative-campaign advertisements and heightened coverage of them in the mass media have cultivated political distrust (Geer, 2012). Boukes and Boomgaarden (2015) contended that the paradigm shift from hard news to soft news fueled cynical attitudes.

Despite vast evidence demonstrating the malign effects of news media use, some scholars hold a divergent view. This group argues that exposure to news media nurtures greater political interest, enhances political knowledge, increases trust in the political system, and encourages political participation (Aarts et al., 2012; Boulianne, 2011; Cheng, 2020). Newton (1999), for instance, found positive associations between news media use and political interest, knowledge, and trust in Britain. Similarly, Norris (2000) found positive relationships between news media use and political trust in Britain during the 1997 elections, while Norris (2011) established that watching television news is associated with higher levels of political knowledge, trust, participation, and efficacy. Elevated and positive news media coverage of the European Union (EU) correlated with higher trust in the EU (Brosius et al., 2019), and consumption of news through news websites was positively linked with increased trust (Ceron, 2015). Others have not found any significant statistical relationships between media exposure and political trust (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012). Considering this body of research, and in light of the video-malaise hypothesis, I pose the first hypothesis:

H1: Television news viewing will be negatively associated with political trust.

In contrast, there is reason to believe newspaper reading may foster greater political trust. Boukes and Boomgaarden (2015) found that frequent readers of hard news in the newspapers were less cynical about politics. A content analysis of various media sources in Wisconsin linked with survey data found that the print media promoted greater trust in the government relative to television news (Moy & Scheufele, 2000). Readers

of broadsheet newspapers in Britain were found to be more trusting than nonreaders (Newton, 1999). Newspapers carry hard news, which is mostly on the societal relevance of an issue, and its style is best described as thematically framed, in-depth, unemotional, impersonal, and rational coverage of politics with attention for experts (Baum, 2003). Indeed, reputable newspapers are less engaged in game-frame news coverage, which increases cynicism, and focused more on issue-framed news, which has mobilizing effects relative to tabloids (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). Moreover, the established non-tabloid newspapers are free of sensationalized, personality-centered, incident-based, and emotional content, which often engenders political cynicism and malaise (Newton, 1999; Strömbäck et al., 2016). Looking at Kenya, where there is a marginal tabloid newspaper market and a thriving mainstream newspaper industry (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021), I pose the following hypothesis:

H2: Newspaper reading will be positively associated with political trust.

The relationship between consuming political news via the radio and political trust has not been well documented in previous literature. Although traditional news media outlets, such as radio, provide hard news, that is, issue-based substantive content, they can also deviate from this pattern by focusing more unevenly on sensationalized content (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). Exposure to sensationalized news may induce cynicism, while issue-framing may produce mobilizing effects (Strömbäck et al., 2016). Given these possible divergent outcomes, I pose the following research question:

RQ1: What is the relationship between listening to the news on the radio and political trust in Kenya?

Looking at the research on the effects of digital media use on political trust, we see a pattern of inconsistent findings. Some scholars have found positive associations between the consumption of online news and higher political trust (Ceron, 2015) whereas others have found negative associations (Tang, Zhang, & Martin, 2017) or mixed effects (Cheng, 2020). Implicit in this strand of research is the assumption that the use of the Internet and social media for news leads to information acquisition that influences public disposition (trust) toward political institutions (Ceron, 2015). Importantly, online news websites and social media have become news dissemination mechanisms that bypass traditional gatekeepers including journalists and the government (Im, Cho, Porumbescu, & Park, 2014). As such, the information we are exposed to online, especially in the social media era, may be laden with opinion-based, emotionalized, sometimes biased, and pro-negative content that spreads fast (Cheng, 2020). Consequently, exposure to such negative political information may encourage political cynicism. At the same time, the lack of editorial filtering means alternative opinions are no longer suppressed, thus encouraging critical evaluation of the political system (Bailard, 2012). At the same time, online news websites may provide mobilizing information that promotes political trust (Ceron, 2015). Given such transformations in news consumption, understanding the influences of these digital platforms on political attitudes is essential. As such, the following research questions are posed:

RQ2: What is the relationship between online news use and political trust in Kenya?

RQ3: What is the nature of the relationship between social media news use and political trust in Kenya?

Conditional Effects of the News Media

One of the most robust findings in media effects literature is the conditionality of media effects. Avery (2009) states that "media exposure discourages political trust under some conditions but promotes trust under other conditions" (p. 424). However, there are a few studies that have tested the moderating factors of media use on political trust. We know that individuals are not passive consumers of media messages. Rather, people have preexisting political predispositions that they bring to the media messages that they consume (Zaller, 1992). These core political attitudes, knowledge, and frames influence how such individuals interpret media messages.

Although most of the previous research has not looked at the individual predispositions that could moderate the impact of media use on political trust, there are a few exceptions. Norris (2000) examined an individual's prior levels of political trust and found that individuals who are initially more politically trusting and engaged are more likely to seek greater media exposure, which, in turn, reinforces their trust in the government. This is consistent with the argument that "the cynic's first response is one of distrust . . . the cynic begins with mistrust and must be persuaded to the opposite view" (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 141). Valentino, Beckmannn, and Buhr (2001) examined the moderating effect of political partisanship and found that individuals who do not identify with the leading political parties (Democrats or Republicans) were less trusting of the government when exposed to strategic frames relative to those who are exposed to issue frames. Mutz and Reeves (2005) examined the moderating effect of conflict avoidance on the influence of exposure to uncivil political debates via television on political trust. They found that those with a greater propensity for conflict avoidance were less trusting after exposure to uncivil political discourse.

The present study extends this line of research by examining other potential factors that heightens or diminishes the magnitude of the relationship between news media exposure and political trust. To begin with, one of the strongest predictors of trust in government is the prevailing economic conditions (Chen, 2017). Although it does not matter whether the economic evaluations are based on subjective attitudes or objective economic indicators (Citrin & Stoker, 2018), confidence in the government and its institutions tends to be high when citizens positively evaluate the government and low when the evaluation is negative (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; van der Meer, 2010; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016). It follows that when the economy deteriorates, it drives down public confidence in the competence of those given the mandate to run the economy and solve economic challenges. At the same time, economic growth can elevate public confidence in (i) the political competence of the political actors and (ii) the government as a whole. To this end, one would expect the following:

H3: The relationship between news media use on political trust will be moderated by subjective economic evaluations.

Another question that has not been fully explored is the effect of government performance on the political and social fronts. In other words, government performance cannot just be evaluated based on its handling of the economy but equally, on its handling of political rights, civil liberties, and provision of social services. Here, one should be concerned about how satisfied the respondents might be with how the government ensures the provision of public services including access to education, water, security,

protection of freedoms, expanding political participation, and governing openly. Applied to the Kenyan case, it is plausible for the Kenyan people to evaluate the government on the aforementioned issues. Accordingly, one would expect the following in Kenya:

H4: The relationship between news media use on political trust will be moderated by public evaluations of political performance.

The third potential moderator is perceived corruption among elected officials. Indeed, Chang and Chu (2006) posits that media coverage of corruption scandals influences trust in government, while Carreras and Vera (2018) found that exposure to credible information about the corrupt behavior of public officials increased public distrust toward the officials and demobilized voters. In China, perceived corruption predicted less trust in the government (Chen, 2017) while in Nigeria, perceived government corruption mediated the link between news media use and political trust (Akinola et al., 2022). Corruption, real or perceived, can erode the legitimacy of the government because it leads to disappointment in public officials (Jiang & Zhang, 2021). Given this discussion, I hypothesize that:

H5: The relationship between news media use and political trust will be moderated by perceived corruption in public service.

The Context of the Present Study: Kenya

Kenya provides a novel context to explore the nature of these relationships outside the Western political and media systems for several reasons. First, the story of media system development in Kenya is one of truly remarkable transformation when mapped against the political, social, and economic forces that have shaped Kenya's media ecology over time. Kenya's media changed from a situation of relative paucity of choice due to strict colonial control up to the 1980s to a media boom characterized by vibrant and exuberant programming in the continent starting in the 1990s (Amutabi, 2013; Nyabola, 2018; Tully, 2022). The Kenyan media, and in particular commercial television channels and newspapers, grew in popularity by unearthing government excesses (Wasserman & Mbatha, 2017). Political satire, comic sketches, and parodies ridiculed public figures while interrogating power (Nyamnjoh, 2005; Tully & Ekdale, 2014).

Over time, Kenya's media systems have grown exponentially, become vibrant and open (Freedom House, 2020), and received accolades as some of "the most respected, thriving, sophisticated, and innovative in Africa" (BBC, 2008, para. 1). The transformations in the media ecology unfolded alongside democratic values, norms, and institutions (Mueller, 2020). This brevity of democratic experience characterized by "high electoral volatility, very high party system instability, and persistent weakness of civic associations" makes such a young democracy an ideal context for "the manifestations of media effects" (Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012, p. 157). At the same time, citizens in a young democracy such as Kenya may not have "the benefit of a lifetime personal experience that would make it less susceptible to being swayed by media messages" (Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012, p. 157). This is why, in my view, a budding and thriving democracy provides a treasure trove of opportunities to conduct media effects research.

It is noteworthy that despite the constitutional protections that guarantee media freedom, the Kenyan news media are by no means truly independent. This is because the news media are still engaged in political patronage (Ogola, 2011). Indeed, "politicians exercise a great deal of influence over both state-and-privately-owned media, which censor themselves" (Reporters Without Borders, 2021, n.p.). The *Digital News Report* by the Reuters Institute of Journalism (2021) reported similar concerns: "Media ownership is concentrated among the political elite, reinforcing the perception that the media are captured by political and corporate interests to the detriment of their public interest" (para. 3). It is such ownership dynamics that have led some scholars to suggest that the Kenyan news media are politically compromised and biased (Cheeseman, Maweu, & Ouma, 2018). Along this line, Kenyan news lacks the journalistic practice of detachment, that is, the lack of autonomy in news coverage (Cheeseman et al., 2018) relative to the news media in the West or the democratic Asian states that may exercise great autonomy in their journalistic routines.

Methods

The data used in this study come from Round 8 of the Afrobarometer survey conducted in Kenya in 2019 (for a copy of the data, visit Afrobaromter.org). Afrobarometer is a nonpartisan, pan-African research institution that conducts public attitude surveys on social, economic, and political atmospheres in more than 30 African countries. Afrobarometer is the leading source of survey data on what Africans "are thinking." The sample design is a clustered, stratified, multi-stage, area probability sample implemented by stratifying the country by region, county, and province. Interviewers randomly select households. Next, interviewers randomly select an adult within the household for a face-to-face interview in a language most comfortable for the interviewee.

Measures

The dependent variable in this study is *political trust.* The variable was measured by the question: "How much trust do you have in each of the following?"; six items were given: The president, the parliament, the electoral commission of Kenya, the elected local representatives, the ruling party, and the courts of law. The response options ranged from 0 (not at all) to 3 (a lot). The six items were combined into an index of political trust, C. α = .83, (M = 7.72, SD = 4.05).

The main independent variables were the different measures of *news media use.* Respondents were asked, "How often do you get news from the following sources?" Radio (M = 3.34, SD = 1.23*),* TV (M=2.44, SD =1.75), newspapers (M = 1.13, SD = 1.44), the Internet (M = 1.59, SD = 1.81), and social media (M = 1.63, SD = 1.82). The response alternatives ranged from 0 (never) to 4 (every day).

Control Variables

Demographics and political orientation variables were controlled for. The sample (N = 2, 400) consisted of participants who were adults (≥ 18 years old) with the mean age being 36.34 years. In this sample, 50% were male, (0 = female, 1 = male), 62% had completed high-school education/less (0 = high school/less, 1= associates degree, 2 = bachelor's degree, 3 = postgraduate degree), 52% were employed,

64% were living in rural areas (urban = 1, rural =0), and 55% identified with the ruling Jubilee coalition party (Jubilee = 1, National Super Alliance = 0). The frequency of engaging in political discussion was measured by the question, "When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters?" with response alternatives ranging from 0 (never) to 2 (frequently). This variable was dummy coded so that 0 = never and 1 = occasionally or frequently.

Government performance was measured in two ways. First, *subjective evaluations of economic conditions* were measured by tapping into the national economy and the respondent's present economic conditions. These two items were averaged, C. α = .65, (*M* =2.19, *SD* = 1.66). Second, *political performance* was measured using 12 items tapping into how the respondents rated the government's handling of crime, provision of health facilities, fighting corruption, protecting rights and civil liberties, addressing educational needs, providing water and sanitation, keeping inflation stable, improving the standards of living and other such issues. The items were combined into an index, C. α = .65, (*M* = 24.45, *SD* = 7.15).

Perceived Corruption

This was measured with the question: "How many of the following do you think are involved in corruption?: The president and officials in his office, members of parliament, civil servants, local representatives, judges and magistrates, tax officials, the police, religious, and traditional leaders." The nine-item measure was reliable, C. α = .83, (*M* = 11.89, *SD* = 4.37).

Results

This study employed ordinary least squares hierarchical regression analyses to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions. The variables were entered into the model in three different blocks based on an assumed theoretical order (see Model 1). Demographics were entered into the first block. The second block consisted of political orientation variables. The third block consisted of news media variables. In Model 2, interaction terms were entered into block 4 to test for moderation effects.

H1 predicted that television news use would be negatively associated with political trust. As shown in Table 1 (Model 2), the results supported this expectation. Specifically, television news uses negatively predicted political trust ($\beta = -.53$, $p < .01$). As such, H1 is supported.

H2 predicted that newspaper reading would be positively associated with political trust. In contrast, the coefficients for newspaper reading fell short of statistical significance. Newspaper reading did not significantly predict the political trust net of all other variables in the study. As such, H2 is not supported.

The first, second, and third research questions asked about the relationships between political trust and listening to political news on the radio, reading political news on news websites and social media. As shown in Table 1, there were no statistically significant relationships between these exposures to political news on the radio, news websites, and social media net of other variables in the models.

Table 1. Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Political Trust in Kenya.

	Political Trust	
	Model 1	Model 2
Demographics		
Age	.02	.01
Male	−.04	−.04
Education	−.06*	−.07
Employment (1 = employed)	.05	.04
Residence (1 = urban)	−.02	−.02
Adjusted R^2 (%)	3.1***	3.6***
Political orientation		
Political ID (1 = jubilee)	.32***	.32***
Political discussion	−.02	−.02
Political efficacy	.08*	.08**
Subjective economic evaluations	.04	.04
Political performance	.13***	.12***
Perceived corruption	−.24***	−.44***
Incremental R^2 (%)	26.2***	26.2***
Media use variables		
Television news	−.08**	−.53**
Radio	−.01	−.03
Newspaper	.02	−.22
Online news	−.06	.13
Social media news	.04	−.01
Incremental R^2 (%)	0.7*	0.7*
Interaction terms		
Television news × economic evaluations		.48
Television news × perceived corruption		.13
Television news × political performance		.35**
Radio news × economic evaluations		.04
Radio news × perceived corruption		.18
Radio news × political performance		−.13
Newspaper × economic evaluations		.01
Newspaper × perceived corruption		.01
Newspaper × political performance		.23
Online news × economic evaluations		.18
Online news × perceived corruption		.60**
Online news × political performance		.01
Social media news × economic evaluations		−.24

Social media news × perceived corruption		−.44
Social media news × political performance		−.22
Incremental R^2 (%)		2.4**
Total R^2 (%)	29.2	30.5**

Note. *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$. The weights are standardized regression coefficients.

H3 predicted that perceived economic evaluations would significantly moderate the influence of media exposure on political trust. However, results showed that subjective evaluations of economic conditions did not significantly moderate the hypothesized relationship. As such, H3 is not supported.

H4 predicted that evaluations of political performance would moderate the relationship between media exposure and political trust. The results from the regression analysis (Table 1) were consistent with these expectations. Specifically, the interaction terms in Model 2 revealed that the effect of television exposure on political trust was dependent on the respondent's perceived government political performance. Greater exposure to television led to greater trust among those who were more satisfied with the government's political performance. As such, H4 is partially supported.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that political trust would significantly moderate the effect of perceived corruption on political trust. The interaction terms in Table 1 (Model 2) showed that the effect of exposure to political news online on political trust was dependent on the respondent's perceived levels of corruption in government. Specifically, greater exposure to political news via news websites led to greater trust among those who perceived that government officials were engaged in corruption. As such, H5 is partially supported.

Discussion

To date, research on the relationship between media use and trust in political institutions endorses either Robinson's (1976) video malaise theory or Norris' (2000) virtuous circle theory. And although this study does not provide any causal evidence, the findings add to the robust debate on the nature of this relationship with the results implying that the video malaise hypothesis is not invalid. Specifically, the results show that television news use is negatively associated with political trust in Kenya. As such, the results are consistent with previous studies from the West showing that television news is linked with decreased political trust (Aarts et al., 2012; Avery, 2009; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; de Vreese, 2004; Robinson, 1976). As illustrated by previous survey research (e.g., Avery, 2009; Schuck, 2017), these results may suggest that the Kenyan television news might be encouraging political cynicism among Kenyans and thus, promoting distrust toward political institutions in Kenya.

Television has been identified as the key scapegoat in the declining democratic attitudes and behaviors (see Putnam, 2000) due to the nature of the content in this medium whether it be the prevalence of uncivil discourse on television (Mutz & Reeves, 2005), sensationalized and strategic news coverage (Ariely, 2015) coupled with the valence of news coverage, that is, negative news coverage (Brosius et al., 2019) that tends to activate political cynicism and discontent toward political actors and institutions. Plausibly, these features of news media coverage could be prevalent in Kenyan television coverage and

thus, may explain the observed negative relationship between television news use and political trust. However, through a content analysis of the Kenyan television news content and robust experimental designs, future studies could examine the actual TV content and whether it fosters cynical attitudes.

The nonsignificant findings between newspaper reading, listening to the radio, and political trust are particularly interesting in light of the numerous studies from the West that have found that these traditional news outlets tend to foster political trust (Avery, 2009; Ceron & Memoli, 2015; Newton, 1999; Norris, 2011). These results are even more surprising given that previous studies in Kenya have shown that Kenyans generally agree that the indigenous Kenyan newspapers and radio stations are reliable and trustworthy even though they do not rely on them regularly for news compared with television (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021; Tully, 2022). One would therefore expect that as these traditional outlets unearth government excesses, corruption, and poor governance or transmit sound socioeconomic and political policies by the government, such content would influence the participant's levels of confidence in the government. What could explain this pattern of findings?

First, the reliance on single-item measures dealing with the frequency of exposure to the news in the newspaper and radio may have an effect. Scholars have called for the need to use a general news media use measure that captures both exposure and attention to media or media content (Eveland & Scheufele, 2000). Chaffee and Schleuder (1986) noted that exposure refers to the use of different media and media content, while attention refers to increased mental effort and thus, it is possible to be exposed without paying any particular attention to the content. Chaffee and Schleuder (1986) further suggest that simple media exposure measures might underestimate the impact of news media on outcome variables. Thus, the two concepts, that is, exposure and attention, should be used together. Second, preliminary analyses revealed that the majority of Kenyans depend on television for their news diet and rely less on radio and newspapers. Thus, the results could reflect this differential exposure to news media.

Although one would expect that the Internet and unmediated social media sites might provide a free flow of alternative information by "facilitating communication and information activities that provide citizens with more information, in terms of quantity and diversity, regarding how one's government is performing the task of governance" (Bailard, 2012, p. 188), the use of digital news sources does not predict political trust in Kenya. As such, the result is not consistent with those of previous studies that have found either positive (Echeverría & Mani, 2020) or negative effects of digital media use on trust (Camaj, 2014; Chen, 2017). In light of this, it is plausible that the news being broadcast and consumed online could be of low quality and thus, may not have any meaningful effect on political attitudes.

The overall explanation for the nonsignificant effect of newspaper reading, listening to the radio, or digital news use could also lie in the virtuous circle thesis. Norris (2000) claimed that media effects on political trust vary depending on an individual's prior levels of trust and engagement such that those who are initially and chronically cynical of politics and political actors and politically disinterested will not be influenced by a news medium because they do not trust it nor its content. Conversely, those who are initially trusting will seek political news, and this greater exposure reinforces their trust in politicians. Thus, the nonsignificant relationships observed within the Kenyan sample might reflect a sense of high distrust in the

media and hence, a null effect on political trust. Future studies should control for the levels of public trust toward the media, the key conduit of political information.

Most significantly, political performance positively predicted public confidence in the government and significantly moderated the influence of media exposure on political trust. Kenyans seem to evaluate the government positively on its handling of political rights, civil liberties, and the provision of social services. And they seem to be rewarding the government with high levels of confidence because of the government's strong performance in respecting and protecting their fundamental political rights and attending to their overall living standards. It behooves the Kenyan government to continue with this trend for it to enjoy public support and receive much-needed public legitimacy.

That perceived corruption negatively predicted trust in the government aligns with extant literature showing that political trust is generally hindered by corruption permissiveness (Akinola et al., 2022; Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Chen, 2017; Wang, 2016). The Kenyan government seems to be falling short of expectations in dealing with corruption. Given that "corruption lies at the heart of distrust in government" (Uslaner, 2017, p. 303), the Kenyan public appears to be penalizing the government with low trust when they perceive high corruption in government circles. Overall, one might argue that Kenyans expect their government to be both competent in handling their political and civil liberties and equally ethical in this pursuit.

The findings reveal an interesting picture. Media use has very limited influence relative to political variables, particularly perceived corruption. This perception may stem from the pervasive corruption that is almost everywhere in the Kenyan society. Kaltum Guyo (2022), a columnist for the Kenyan newspaper the *Daily Nation,* succinctly writes, "Corruption has become our religion. Despite Kenyans thronging houses of worship, corruption thrives" (p. 3). The corruption scourge is reflected in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (2021), which ranked Kenya at 128 of 180 countries in terms of how corrupt Kenya's public sector is perceived to be. It, therefore, follows that Kenyans witness corruption and perhaps participate in it every day. The perception may stem from its ubiquity, its unavoidability, and the inability of society to eradicate it.

Perceived corruption and economic evaluations did not moderate the hypothesized relationships. The potential explanation for this finding could lie in the idea that these two variables may play a mediating role rather than a moderating role in Kenya, contrary to findings in the studies in the Global North. Akinola and colleagues (2022) found that perceived corruption was a significant mediator of the effect of news media use on political trust. Perceived corruption negatively mediated the relationship between traditional news media use and political trust, but it did not have any significant mediation effect on the association between social media news use and political trust.

This study has its share of limitations. First, the reliance on secondary data somewhat constrains this study. However, this was the best survey data available to explore these relationships. In addition, this study infers media effects from survey findings that could be better captured by experimental or panel designs. Moreover, even though this study found a negative association between television news use and political trust, future research should distinguish between commercial and public service television consumption as extensively argued by Cushion (2012). Indeed, previous studies have shown that public

service television positively predicts political trust (Strömbäck et al., 2016) because it provides hard news characterized by issues rather than strategies (Curran et al., 2014). Similarly, mainstream and tabloid newspapers have differential effects, and thus a distinction should be made between them (Strömbäck et al., 2016). Furthermore, this study examined only exposure to news through various media. However, media content matters for the effects of news media exposure on political trust. Previous research shows that exposure to valanced political information primes people's political trust differently (Brosius et al., 2019).

In conclusion, political trust matters and more so for a growing democracy to maintain its political legitimacy. It is crucial to the extent that lack of it may lead to devastating consequences including political alienation and democratic malaise, lack of compliance with government directions, the rule of law, and ultimately, anarchy. Thus, shedding light on the objects of political trust could help in identifying both the locus of trust in the Kenyan context and how to potentially mitigate these malign effects on budding democracies for them to thrive.

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