A Comparative Study On The Effectiveness Of Print Media Coverage Of Maternal And Child Health Issues: A Case Study Of The *Zambia Daily Mail And The Daily Nation*

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1. Abstract

Maternal and child health (MCH) remains a critical priority in Zambia, with maternal mortality estimated at 213 deaths per 100,000 live births and infant mortality at 42 per 1,000 live births (WHO, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). Although print media can influence health awareness and behaviours, limited research has examined how Zambian newspapers cover MCH issues. To address this gap, this study conducted a comparative analysis of MCH coverage in The *Zambia Daily Mail* and The *Daily Nation* from January to December 2024. Guided by the agenda-setting theory and the Health Belief Model, the study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative content analysis of 732 newspaper issues with interviews involving 20 journalists and 15 healthcare workers, as well as focus group discussions with 400 mothers from Kabwata Constituency. This study conducted a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of MCH coverage in *The Zambia Daily Mail* and *The Daily Nation* from January to December 2024. Effectiveness was operationalized through five measures (1) volume of coverage, (2) prominence, placement, and visual elements, (3) framing such as crisis and preventive, (4) accessibility in terms of language and readability, and (5) reach, which is readership among target audiences. The findings show that MCH coverage accounted for only 0.49 percent of total newspaper content, indicating low overall effectiveness in terms of volume. *The Zambia Daily Mail* recorded 0.66 percent coverage, more than double that of *The Daily Nation* at 0.31 percent, partly due to its dedicated "Femail" section. In terms of prominence, 67.5 percent of stories appeared on inside pages (low prominence) and 65.2 percent lacked photographs, further reducing visibility and potential impact. The coverage was largely crisis-oriented, focusing on teenage pregnancy (21.3%), maternal mortality (16.0%), and child mortality (13.8%), while preventive topics such as antenatal care (1.3%) received minimal attention. This crisis-oriented framing reduces the effectiveness of coverage in promoting preventive health behaviors. The government officials were the dominant source at 47.5 percent, while community voices accounted for only 15.0 percent, limiting the diversity of perspectives and potentially reducing credibility and relevance for community audiences. Newspaper readership among mothers was low, with 15.5 percent reporting regular readership of *The Zambia Daily Mail* and 8.3 percent reading *The Daily Nation*. This low reach indicates limited effectiveness in reaching the primary target audience for MCH messages. Cost, literacy barriers, English-only content, and perceived irrelevance were identified as key constraints. However, among those exposed to MCH content, 35.7 percent reported that it influenced their health behaviours, demonstrating that when coverage is accessible, it can be effective. The

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study concludes that MCH coverage in Zambian print media remains insufficient in volume, prominence, and reach, thereby limiting its overall effectiveness in improving health outcomes. The Zambia Daily Mail demonstrated greater effectiveness than The Daily Nation primarily due to its dedicated Femail section, which provided more consistent and prominent placement of MCH content.

Keywords: Maternal and child health; print media; agenda-setting theory; Health Belief Model; Zambia; health communication.

2. Introduction

Maternal and child health touch the very heart of community well-being and development. For many families worldwide, especially in low and middle-income countries, access to reliable health information can mean the difference between life and death. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 3.1, emphasise the reduction of maternal mortality and the prevention of child deaths. According to the United Nations, "ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being at all ages is essential to sustainable development. All women need access to high-quality care during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. Maternal and new-born health are closely linked, making it crucial that all births are attended by skilled health professionals," (United Nations, 2015). Beyond hospitals and clinics, the media plays a powerful role in shaping public understanding and action on these issues. With the SDGs calling for improved maternal and child health, the media's role in shaping public understanding and action is vital.

3. Background of the Study

Maternal and child health (MCH) remains a critical indicator of global health and socioeconomic development. Despite progress in reducing maternal and child mortality, preventable deaths remain a significant challenge, particularly in low-and middle-income countries (World Health Organization, 2023). *Maternal and child health* refers to the health of women during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period, and it is linked to ensuring positive outcomes for both mothers and their babies throughout these stages of life. This includes preventing maternal deaths and complications, promoting access to quality care at every stage, and supporting health and well-being for mothers and infants. WHO emphasises that maternal health is not only about survival but also about improving well-being and ensuring respectful, quality care during pregnancy, delivery, and after childbirth.

Globally, health disparities in MCH outcomes highlight the importance of robust healthcare systems and equitable access to services. Despite policy commitments and international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), progress remains uneven. Factors such as poverty, limited education, malnutrition, and gender inequality continue to undermine maternal and child health, particularly in underserved regions (UNICEF, 2024).

In the context of media coverage, there is a growing consensus among media scholars, researchers, and practitioners that the media play a crucial role in disseminating health-related information and shaping public discourse around health (Chirwa-Banda, 2015). As Tuchman (1976) aptly notes, the media do not merely reflect reality; they construct it. News is a "constructed reality" with its internal logic, which influences how issues are perceived and prioritised by the public. Mass media, particularly print media, can influence health-seeking behaviours, raise awareness, and advocate for stronger health systems and policies (Wakefield et al., 2010). Effective health coverage is characterised by an adequate volume of reporting, meaning sufficient frequency to create public salience; high prominence through placement on front pages or early sections and the use of photographs and compelling headlines that attract attention; appropriate framing that balances crisis reporting with preventive information; and accessibility through language and readability that are suitable for the intended audiences.

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A critical dimension of media effectiveness is prominence, the visual and positional emphasis given to a story. Research in agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) demonstrates that stories placed on front pages, accompanied by photographs, and given larger headlines are more likely to be noticed, remembered, and perceived as important by audiences. Conversely, stories buried in inside pages without visual elements are less likely to achieve these effects, regardless of their substantive importance. Therefore, any assessment of media effectiveness must consider both the presence of MCH content and the prominence with which it is presented. UNICEF (2016a) emphasised that communication strategies in maternal health are vital to reduce risks and improve outcomes by enhancing knowledge and shifting harmful attitudes and norms.

In Zambia, the media have historically played a role in public health education, though coverage has often been shaped by ownership, politics, and commercial interests (Zhou, 2010). Print media such as *The Zambia Daily Mail* and *The Daily Nation* are important sources of health information, especially in communities with limited access to digital platforms. However, Radu and Banjac (2012) observe that health coverage in Zambian media tends to prioritise national or international stories over local health concerns, often presenting health content as news snippets rather than in-depth analyses.

Studies have examined the effectiveness of the media in addressing health topics. A study by Hamoonga (2017: 4) focusing on cervical cancer, revealed that the media coverage on this topic was insufficient and failed to make a meaningful impact on public knowledge or behaviour regarding early cervical cancer screenings. Similarly, Owuor (2017: 18) found that media coverage in Kenya advocate for maternal health as a basic human right, but much of the information was presented in an entertaining format, rather than offering actionable or informative content. In Zambia, most people rely on media for health information and awareness. Bates and Ahmed (2013: 22) note that print media helps educate the public on health risks and encourages medical intervention. Itule and Anderson (2007: 1) emphasise the importance of the media in communicating maternal and child health services, although they argue that print media, despite its underutilization, remains a critical tool for health communication. While there is a growing trend towards digital and broadcast media, many people still rely on newspapers for health-related news and updates (Itule and Anderson, 2007: 3). Radu and Banjac (2012: 40) stress that the media play a vital role in setting the agenda and shaping public perception about health issues.

This study, therefore, sought to assesss how Zambia's print media cover maternal and child health issues, specifically in *Zambia Daily Mail* and *Daily Nation*, and to determine how this coverage has influenced public attitudes and behaviours regarding MCH in Zambia.

4. Zambia Health Systems

The launch of the Health Management Information System (HMIS) and the Financial and Administrative Management System (FAMS) in 1996 marked a significant milestone in the monitoring of health sector performance under Zambia's health reforms. These systems were introduced to enhance transparency, accountability, and efficiency in health service delivery (MEASURE Evaluation, 2017). Since the initiation of healthcare reforms, Zambia's public health sector has made notable progress toward achieving reforms objectives, particularly in improving access to healthcare, enhancing the affordability of health services, and strengthening health systems (World Health Organization, 2020).

The reforms aimed to provide a basic healthcare services package at all levels of the healthcare system. The Ministry of Health later introduced successive National Health Strategic Plans (NHSPs), including the 2017–2021 plan, designed to reduce the disease burden and accelerate the attainment of national health priorities and international goals such as the Millennium Development Goals (Ministry of Health, 2017). These plans marked a shift from earlier frameworks by emphasising the prioritisation of interventions in light of resource and capacity constraints.

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5. The Newspaper Industry in Zambia

Chirwa et al, (2010) identify four phases in the history of Zambia's newspaper industry: pre-independence (before 1964), independence/multi-party state (1964–1972), one-party state (1973–1990), and multi-party state (1991 to present). During the pre-independence period, the newspapers were few and due to illiteracy, very few Zambians were able to read. Between 1964 and 1972, during this multi-party state, newspapers were flourishing, but they were short-lived because of the illiteracy levels of the people and lack of economic purchase. Then during the one party state from 1973 to 1990, only state media existed and these were ZNBC, Times of Zambia and Zambia Daily Mail. Only two other media houses existed, namely; the National Mirror and the "Icengelo Magazine". Both were allowed because they were spearheaded by the Churches and were concerned with matters of faith only.

In 1990, Zambia went back to multi-party democracy. This saw the coming of the *Weekly Post* on the scene which was privately owned. In 1991, the *Weekly Post* was renamed *The Post*, becoming a platform for dissenting views and news. The country has three major daily newspapers: *Zambia Daily Mail*, *Times of Zambia*, and *Daily Nation*, which are also the top three by circulation. Other newspapers include *The Mast*, *News Diggers*, *Digest Weekly*, *The Weekly Guardian* and *New Vision* (daily). Among these, *The Zambia Daily Mail* and *Times of Zambia* are government-owned, while the rest, including the now-defunct *Post Newspaper*, are privately owned. In response to industry-wide challenges such as high production costs, slumping advertising, and the need to adapt to new technologies, the *Zambia Daily Mail* introduced an electronic edition (e-Paper) in 2015 as a strategic diversification to reach a wider digital readership (Sinyangwe & Phiri, 2017). This blend of historical legacy and contemporary adaptation makes it a pertinent case for examining media coverage of public health issues.

Several newspapers, such as *News Diggers*, *The Mast, Daily Nation*, and *Times of Zambia*, also have online editions. In addition to these, Zambia has a variety of independent online news sources, with the most popular being *Kalemba*, *Nkani*, *Smart Eagles*, *Zambia Reports*, *Zambian Watchdog*, *Lusaka Times*, and *Mwebantu*.

Even though online news platforms are available, this study was limited to two printed daily newspapers: *The Zambia Daily Mail* and *Daily Nation*. The rationale for excluding online publications will be detailed in the sampling section of the dissertation. A primary concern is that many online sources frequently rely on unverified information and rumours, which raises concerns about their credibility.

5.1 The *Zambia Daily Mail*

The *Zambia Daily Mail* was first published in 1960 under the name *The African Mail*. In 1962, it was renamed The Central African Mail (*Zambia Daily Mail*, 2023). During the early 1960s, the publication gained popularity among the Black community for its critical stance against the federal and colonial governments of Northern and Southern Rhodesia (Muzyamba, 2021). Initially co-owned by David Astor, editor of the *Sunday Observer*, and Dr. Alexander Scott, a Scottish doctor, the newspaper played a significant role in the political landscape of Zambia during the late colonial era (Muzyamba, 2021). In 1965, the Zambian government acquired the Central African Mail from its private owners, and the paper was renamed *Zambia Mail*. By 1970, the newspaper was officially renamed *The Zambia Daily Mail*, becoming a state-owned daily broadsheet (*Zambia Daily Mail*, 2023).

As one of Zambia's oldest and most respected newspapers, the *Zambia Daily Mail* has provided comprehensive coverage of local and international news, including politics, current affairs, economic development, business, and sports, since its establishment. Known for its in-depth reporting and adherence to journalistic standards, it remains a trusted source of information (*Zambia Daily Mail*, 2023). It

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is also widely used for major government advertisements, such as job recruitments and tenders. The *Zambia Daily Mail* is widely distributed and sold across all ten provinces of Zambia, with an average daily circulation ranging from 18,000 to 25,000 copies (*Zambia Daily Mail*, 2019).

5.2 The *Daily Nation*

The *Daily Nation* is a privately owned Zambian newspaper, founded in 2011 by a seasoned journalist Richard Sakala. Headquartered in Lusaka, it distributes approximately 30,000 copies daily across the country, along with a significant presence on various digital platforms (*Daily Nation*, 2019).

The *Daily Nation* is a key player in Zambian media, offering daily coverage of news with a focus on current affairs, politics, and community issues. Known for its balanced reporting and diverse viewpoints, it caters to readers interested in both local and national news.

Representing a blend of traditional and modern media, the *Daily Nation* reflects Zambia's dynamic approach to news and information dissemination. Whether through print, broadcast, or digital platforms, it continues to shape public discourse and keep Zambians informed.

As stated on its website, the *Daily Nation* is committed to promoting justice, equity, and integrity in its operations. The newspaper aims to become Zambia’s leading news source by consistently delivering accurate, unbiased, and timely information. Its mission emphasises adherence to journalistic standards, such as objectivity, accuracy, and professionalism, to help the public make informed decisions on a range of important issues (*Daily Nation*, 2019).

The *Daily Nation* is a significant player in Zambia’s media environment. In the broader context, the media's roles in society include providing information, offering entertainment, and serving an educational purpose. In summary, the *Daily Nation* continues to be a prominent voice in Zambia's media landscape, fulfilling key roles in the dissemination of information, entertainment, and public education.

6. Statement of the Problem

Zambia has made significant strides in improving maternal and child health over the past decades. According to the Zambia Demographic and Health Survey (ZDHS) 2024, the maternal mortality ratio was estimated at 278 deaths per 100,000 live births, showing a decline from previous years. The under-five mortality rate was reported at 61 deaths per 1,000 live births, while the infant mortality rate stood at 42 deaths per 1,000 live births. However, neonatal mortality remained a concern, with a rate of 27 deaths per 1,000 live births, indicating minimal change from earlier surveys.

Despite these efforts, a critical gap remains in the area of health communication. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2023), Zambia’s maternal mortality rate stands at 213 deaths per 100,000 live births, while the infant mortality rate remains a critical concern at 42 deaths per 1,000 live births (UNICEF, 2023). These statistics highlight the urgent need for increased awareness and advocacy, which the media could help address through effective and consistent coverage of MCH issues.

However, for media coverage to be effective, it must meet several key criteria as effective MCH coverage requires sufficient volume to create public awareness, adequate prominence through front-page placement and photographs, appropriate framing that balances crisis reporting with preventive information, and accessibility through simple language and readability for target audiences.

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The media performs several key functions in society. The media performs three major functions in society. These are information dissemination, entertainment and education (McQuail, 2010). Through information dissemination, the media shares news and provides in-depth analysis on critical issues such as environmental concerns, women's rights, and poverty. Newspapers, in particular, are instrumental in offering detailed coverage that helps shape public awareness and understanding, as noted by Khalid and Ahmed (2014).

Another important function of the media is entertainment. It serves as a source of relaxation and enjoyment for audiences, helping to relieve stress and create a sense of balance in daily life. McQuail (2010) emphasizes that entertainment through media contributes to social harmony by offering a welcome diversion from everyday challenges.

Lastly, the media plays a vital role in education. It helps inform and educate the public on significant matters, contributing to personal development and the growth of human capital. Newspapers are especially effective in this role because they allow readers to engage with content at their own pace and convenience, making them a valuable tool for lifelong learning and supporting overall economic development (Khalid and Ahmed, 2014).

However, despite these potential roles, there is a lack of empirical research assessing the extent, quality, and framing of MCH issues in Zambian newspapers. It remained unclear whether print media plays a meaningful role in shaping public awareness, encouraging positive health behaviours, and influencing policy decisions on maternal and child health. Moreover, no comparative study has been conducted to examine how leading newspapers, particularly *The Zambia Daily Mail* and *The Daily Nation*, cover MCH issues. The effectiveness of print media in advocating for maternal and child health, influencing policy, and informing public discourse remains largely unknown. Moreover, there is a notable absence of research that examines the extent and quality of coverage on maternal and child health, in Zambian newspapers. This lack of research is concerning, as media coverage is essential for raising awareness and influencing health behaviours.

7. Objectives of the Study

7.1 General Objective

The general objective of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the coverage of maternal and child health (MCH) issues between *The Zambia Daily Mail* and *The Daily Nation*.

7.2 Specific Objectives

i. To find out if *The Zambia Daily Mail* and *The Daily Nation* reported on maternal and child health issues.

ii. To critically analyse the effectiveness of the maternal and child health topics covered by *The Zambia Daily Mail* and *The Daily Nation*.

iii. To find out the challenges experienced by *The Zambia Daily Mail* and *The Daily Nation* in effectively reporting on maternal and child health issues, and to recommend ways of improving their effectiveness.

8. Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by two key theories: Agenda-Setting Theory and the Health Belief Model (HBM). These theories were selected for their ability to offer valuable insights into how *The Zambia Daily Mail* and *The Daily Nation* can influence public awareness on

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maternal and child health issues. They provided a framework for understanding the content, the impact, and how these media outlets shape public perceptions and behaviour regarding maternal and child healthcare. Below is a discussion of the relevance of each theory to this study.

8.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

The Agenda-Setting Theory posits that the media have a powerful role in determining the issues that become the focal point of public discussion. It suggests that the more frequently and prominently an issue is covered by the media, the more likely the public will perceive it as significant. The origins of this theory can be traced back to Walter Lippmann (1922), who discussed how the mass media shape public perceptions by framing certain issues and creating “pictures in our heads” (1922: 3). Lippmann emphasised that the media's role is not necessarily to tell people what to think, but rather what to think about.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) expanded on this concept by asserting that the media's role in determining public priorities is based on how they allocate attention to specific issues. The more media coverage an issue receives, the more the public views it as important (McCombs, 2004: 110). Baran and Davis (2009) also argue that the media’s coverage of an issue is directly related to how the public ranks that issue in terms of importance.

In the context of maternal and child healthcare, when media outlets such as the *Daily Nation* and *The Zambia Daily Mail* frequently highlight issues such as maternal mortality, access to antenatal care, and child nutrition, they elevate these topics in public consciousness.

8.2 Health Belief Model (HBM)

The Health Belief Model (HBM), first introduced in the 1950s by Rosenstock, is a psychological model used to understand health behaviours. The model suggests that individuals are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviours when they perceive a serious threat to their health and believe that taking a specific action will reduce this threat. The model includes several core constructs, including perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefits, and perceived barriers (Rosenstock, 1974:6).

In the context of maternal and child health, the HBM can help explain why women may or may not engage in behaviours like attending antenatal care visits or seeking medical help during pregnancy. If women perceive the risks associated with pregnancy, such as complications or maternal mortality, as serious, and believe that seeking healthcare will help reduce these risks, they are more likely to take action (Janz et al, 1984:55).

The role of the media in shaping these perceptions is crucial. Information provided by the media is easily accepted by communities and therefore impacts and moulds how people conduct their daily activities (Nwagbara, 2017). When media outlets like *The Zambia Daily Mail* and *The Daily Nation* consistently report on the risks of maternal health complications and the benefits of seeking proper care, they influence the public’s beliefs about the importance of antenatal visits, the risks of non-compliance, and the benefits of preventive care (Becker et al., 1977:236). Media coverage, through news stories, editorials, and health information campaigns, can help shape these perceptions and encourage behaviour change among women and the broader public.

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9. Literature Review

9.1 Historical Overview of the Area of Study

Print media have historically played a central role in health communication, providing news, analysis, and advocacy on a wide range of public health issues, including maternal and child health (McQuail, 2010). In Zambia, newspapers have served as important channels for disseminating health information, raising awareness, and advocating for public health interventions. However, coverage of maternal and child health (MCH) has often been intermittent, under-emphasised, and lacking depth (Radu & Banjac, 2012).

Early coverage primarily focused on general news, political affairs, and business, with health stories appearing sporadically and often in less prominent sections (Bourgault, 1995). Health-related articles, including MCH topics, were brief, focusing on immediate events rather than sustained analysis, investigative reporting, or policy discussion (Radu and Banjac, 2012). From the early 2000s, reporting gradually increased, reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of public health communication (de Burgh, 2005). Articles began including discussions of maternal and child health challenges, government interventions, and expert perspectives, although analytical depth remained limited. By the 2010s, newspapers started dedicating more attention to MCH issues, highlighting maternal mortality, child health initiatives, and the need for improved healthcare services.

Research on adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH), a key component of MCH, shows that major newspapers, including the *Zambia Daily Mail*, Times of Zambia, and The Post, provided minimal coverage, with articles often relegated to inner pages and lacking prominence. A six-month content analysis found that only 7% of health-related articles addressed adolescent reproductive health, underscoring the historical underrepresentation of MCH issues in Zambian print media (Muchangwe, 2013).

The historical trajectory of MCH coverage in Zambian print media reflects a gradual evolution from sporadic and secondary reporting to more structured and thematic coverage. While early reporting was superficial, contemporary practices demonstrate growing recognition of the media's role in shaping public understanding, influencing health behaviours, and informing policy decisions related to maternal and child health.

9.2 Patterns and Extent of Maternal and Child Health Coverage

Evidence suggests that newspapers cover maternal and child health inconsistently and with varying prominence. Health stories are often brief and placed in less visible sections, limiting their ability to shape public attention (Radu and Banjac, 2012). Population-based studies show that exposure to mass media, including newspapers, correlates with improved uptake of maternal health services (Sserwanja et al., 2021) and lower odds of teenage pregnancy among adolescents with access to print media (Sserwanja et al., 2022).

Policy changes, such as the 'test-and-treat-all' HIV/AIDS initiative in Lusaka, were communicated through formal and informal channels, including print media. However, some population segments were less effectively reached, particularly younger individuals and those with lower literacy (Simooya et al., 2023). While studies linking media content to measurable health outcomes remain limited, mass media campaigns have been shown to influence health behaviours in multiple contexts (Wakefield et al., 2010).

Journalists' interest in maternal health topics is evident, but the absence of dedicated health desks often results in ad hoc reporting rather than systematic coverage, limiting the consistency and depth of MCH reporting.

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9.3 Defining Effectiveness and Prominence of Media Coverage of Maternal and Child Health

Effectiveness is not measured solely by the presence of stories but also by their influence on knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours. It also means the ability of media content to reach audiences and influence health awareness or behaviours. Research in Zambia and sub-Saharan Africa indicates that newspaper readership is positively associated with maternal and child health outcomes. Women who regularly read newspapers or magazines were more likely to utilise skilled birth attendance and postnatal care services (Aboagye et al., 2022), and adolescents with access to print media reported healthier reproductive outcomes (Sserwanja et al., 2022).

It can also be noted that prominence is a critical dimension of effectiveness. According to agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), stories placed on front pages, accompanied by photographs, and given larger headlines are more likely to be noticed, remembered, and perceived as important by readers. Conversely, stories buried on inside pages without visual elements are less likely to achieve these effects (McCombs, 2004).

Limitations in effectiveness are evident. Media exposure benefits urban, literate, and wealthier populations more than rural or less-educated groups, creating inequalities in information access. Technical language and placement in less visible sections reduce comprehension and impact (Radu and Banjac, 2012). Health communication is more effective when sustained over time and delivered in local languages, addressing gaps in rural areas.

For policy changes such as Lusaka's 'test-and-treat-all' HIV/AIDS initiative, print media coverage was less effective among certain segments due to literacy and message format issues (Simooya et al., 2023). These findings highlight that while print media can contribute to maternal and child health awareness, effectiveness depends on accessibility, consistency, and relevance to target populations. And nobody has ventured into such a research study.

9.4 Media's Role in Influencing Public Perceptions and Behaviour

Theories such as agenda-setting and the Health Belief Model provide insight into how newspapers shape public perceptions of health risks. By determining which issues are published frequently and prominently, newspapers signal importance and urgency (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In Zambia, access to newspapers has been associated with positive health behaviours, including increased use of maternal healthcare services (Sserwanja et al., 2021). However, the influence of media depends on framing and coverage consistency. Sporadic or marginalised reporting weakens agenda-setting functions, while consistent and prominent coverage reinforces public attention and can support behaviour change.

9.5 Influence of Print Media on Health Behaviours

A 2022 cross-sectional study investigating access to mass media and teenage pregnancy in Zambia found that adolescents with daily access to newspapers or magazines had lower odds of teenage pregnancy, indicating that exposure to print media is associated with healthier reproductive behaviours (Sserwanja et al., 2022). This study indeed investigates the impact of the social environment on cervical cancer prevention in Zambia. The findings suggest that messages delivered by public figures through print media and other platforms were perceived as highly influential, motivating many individuals to participate in screening programmes.

These findings emphasize that sustained coverage, inclusion of influential voices, accessibility, and culturally appropriate messaging are crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of print media in shaping health behaviours.

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9.6 Challenges Faced by Zambian Print Media in Reporting Maternal and Child Health Issues

A recurrent theme in the literature is resource and capacity constraints. Health reporting requires time, expertise, and financial support, yet many media houses in Zambia lack dedicated health desks or specialist journalists. Radu and Banjac (2012) found that most health stories relied on official press statements rather than investigative reporting, a limitation attributed to resource shortages and lack of training.

Editorial priorities and ownership structures also shape coverage. Newspapers often prioritise political and economic stories over health topics because these attract larger audiences and advertising revenue (Radu and Banjac, 2012). As a result, MCH issues are frequently sidelined, reducing their visibility. Audience access and literacy levels present another barrier. Newspapers remain most accessible to urban and literate populations, whereas rural communities with lower literacy rates are less likely to benefit from print media coverage.

These challenges collectively reduce the capacity of newspapers to deliver consistent, impactful MCH coverage. Moreover, the reliance on official sources results in stories lacking depth or critical engagement, limiting the media's watchdog role in holding health institutions accountable (Seale, 2003). Studies of specific health campaigns in Zambia, such as cervical cancer prevention, have shown that combining print media with radio, television, and community outreach produces stronger outcomes than print alone (Nyambe et al., 2018). This underscores the need for print media to collaborate with other communication platforms while addressing their own structural weaknesses.

9.7 Gaps Identified and Contribution of the Current Study

The literature indicates that Zambian newspapers do report on maternal and child health (MCH), but coverage is often inconsistent, low-profile, and limited in depth. While exposure to print media is associated with positive health outcomes, its impact is uneven due to challenges in accessibility, structural barriers in newsrooms, and the episodic nature of reporting. Existing monitoring reports, such as those by Radu and Banjac (2012), provide valuable insights into MCH coverage, but these studies are outdated and lack comparative analyses across different national newspapers. This creates a critical gap in understanding the current extent, framing, and prominence of MCH reporting in Zambia. The present study addresses this gap by systematically analysing coverage and exploring the challenges journalists encounter in reporting maternal and child health issues.

At the global level, while there is substantial scholarship on media coverage of MCH, several gaps persist. Much literature focuses on framing issues and advocacy journalism (Wall, 1997), yet few studies offer systematic comparative analyses of how different countries' media address similar MCH challenges (Merritt et al., 2022). Longitudinal studies tracking changes in media framing over time in response to policy shifts, health crises, or public awareness campaigns are also limited (Ramalho et al., 2023). Furthermore, research linking media content directly to measurable public health outcomes, such as behaviour change or policy adaptation, remains scarce (Entman, 1993).

Within the African context, studies highlight persistent challenges, including episodic reporting, sensationalism, and a disconnect between media narratives and structural health determinants (Njoroge, 2016). Evidence on the effectiveness of health communication campaigns, community engagement, and culturally tailored strategies remains limited (Ouedraogo et al., 2023). In countries such as Kenya and Ghana, media coverage is often reactive, urban-focused, and event-driven, prioritising crises over preventive health or structural determinants, leaving rural populations underrepresented (Boafo, 2020). Print newspaper studies confirm episodic reporting and limited contextualisation of maternal health issues (Onyango, 2021). Additionally, few studies explore how media partnerships, local languages, or culturally adapted messaging influence audience comprehension and engagement (UNICEF Uganda, 2017).

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In Zambia, literature points to political influence, ownership structures, language barriers, and limited journalistic capacity as major factors shaping MCH coverage (Hamusokwe et al., 2022). Comparative content analyses across major print outlets are rare (Muchangwe, 2014), and longitudinal studies tracking trends in MCH coverage are largely absent (Chileshe, 2015). Research on audience reception is limited, offering minimal insight into how readers perceive and act upon print media messages (Beardmore-Gray et al., 2024). Holistic studies integrating coverage framing, ownership, language accessibility, digital media, and public engagement are uncommon (Hamusokwe et al., 2022), and most studies privilege official and donor narratives, leaving grassroots perspectives largely unexplored (Muchangwe, 2014).

Taken together, these gaps demonstrate the need for research that links media production, content framing, and audience reception within Zambia. Addressing these gaps can deepen understanding of how media influence public knowledge, health behaviours, and policy responses in maternal and child health, and provide a stronger foundation for designing effective media-based interventions.

10. Research Methodology

10. 1 Research Design

This study employed a non-interventional, comparative case study design, utilising a concurrent mixed-methods approach, to assess maternal and child health (MCH) coverage in two Zambian newspapers. Each newspaper, the *Zambia Daily Mail* and the *Daily Nation*, was treated as a bounded case, allowing for an in-depth examination of MCH coverage. The design was observational and non-interventional, as the researcher did not manipulate content or participant responses but systematically analysed existing media material and collected perspectives from key informants. This design was chosen because it allowed for both breadth through quantitative comparisons and depth through qualitative exploration.

10.2 Research Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques to capture both measurable coverage patterns and in-depth interpretive insights into maternal and child health (MCH) reporting in the *Zambia Daily Mail* and the *Daily Nation*.

The quantitative component involved systematic content analysis of newspaper articles over a full calendar year. Articles were coded based on frequency, type, placement, source attribution, and thematic emphasis, enabling the identification of trends, gaps, and differences in MCH reporting between the two newspapers. The qualitative component used thematic analysis of newspaper content and semi-structured interviews with journalists, editors, and health professionals. This allowed the study to explore how MCH issues were framed, editorial decision-making processes, narrative strategies, and the perceived influence of coverage on public awareness and health-seeking behaviour.

10.3 Quantitative Content Analysis

The quantitative component employed systematic content analysis, following established protocols in media research (Krippendorff, 2018). This method allowed for structured analysis of manifest content through standardized coding procedures, generating quantifiable data on coverage patterns, including article frequency, placement, size, sources, and topical focus.

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All 732 issues published from January 1 to December 31, 2024 containing MCH-related content were included, with 366 issues per newspaper (one per day). This ensured a comprehensive daily assessment of coverage across both newspapers. The content analysis provided empirical evidence for comparing the scope, prominence, and patterns of MCH coverage between the *Zambia Daily Mail* and the *Daily Nation*, establishing measurable patterns in reporting practices.

10.4 Qualitative Thematic Analysis

The qualitative component used thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) systematic approach. This method facilitated the identification and interpretation of latent content, including narrative frames, discursive strategies, and implicit values shaping MCH coverage. Thematic analysis enables in-depth engagement with textual data, revealing how MCH issues are constructed, which perspectives are privileged or marginalized, and how language choices influence potential interpretations. This approach captured the nuanced dimensions of health reporting that quantitative methods alone cannot fully address.

10.5 In-depth Interviews

In addition to content analysis, in-depth interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the context, decision-making processes, and perceptions that shape maternal and child health (MCH) coverage in Zambian print media. Participants included journalists who write MCH-related articles, editors responsible for content selection and approval, and health professionals or media consultants involved in public health communication. These participants were purposefully selected for their expertise and direct experience in MCH reporting, ensuring that the study captures information-rich insights.

The interviews focused on several key areas, including editorial decision-making, prioritizing health stories, challenges and constraints in reporting MCH issues, professional norms, ethical considerations, and perceptions of audience engagement. In particular, the study sought to understand how framing, language, and story selection reflect broader institutional and social perspectives.

10.6 Study Population

The study population included three key groups that collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of maternal and child health (MCH) coverage in Zambian print media. The first group comprised all issues of the *Zambia Daily Mail* and the *Daily Nation* newspapers published between January 1 and December 31, 2024. A total of 732 issues were analysed, 366 issues per newspaper, ensuring a complete record of MCH reporting for the year. These issues included news articles, features, editorials, and letters that address topics such as maternal mortality, antenatal care, child nutrition, immunisation, HIV/AIDS, contraception, and reproductive health rights, offering a complete record of MCH reporting throughout the year.

The second group comprised journalists and editors responsible for producing health-related content in the selected newspapers. These professionals provided valuable insights into editorial decision-making, content prioritisation, and the challenges encountered when reporting on MCH issues.

The third group comprised mothers who read these newspapers and health professionals with expertise in maternal and child health, as well as health communication. Mothers provided perspectives on the accessibility, clarity, and relevance of MCH reporting, while health professionals offer expert evaluation regarding the accuracy, comprehensiveness, and effectiveness of media coverage in promoting public awareness and health-seeking behaviour.

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10.7 Sample Size

The study population comprised three key groups that provide a comprehensive understanding of maternal and child health (MCH) coverage in Zambian print media:

10.7.1 Newspaper Issues

The sample for this study included both documented newspaper content and key informants. For newspaper content, all issues of the *Zambia Daily Mail* and the *Daily Nation* published from January 1 to December 31, 2024, were included, totalling 732 issues, thus 366 issues per newspaper. This comprehensive inclusion ensures that the analysis captured the full range of maternal and child health (MCH) coverage over the entire year, allowing for a detailed assessment of frequency, prominence, and framing of MCH topics.

10.7.2 Journalists and Editors

A census approach was used for the *Daily Nation*, which had a total of 10 journalists and editors. All 10 were included in the study to ensure comprehensive coverage and detailed qualitative insights.

For the *Zambia Daily Mail*, which had a larger staff, an equal number of 10 journalists were purposively selected. This approach allowed for a balanced comparative analysis between the two newspapers.

10.7.3 Mothers and Health Professionals

For the focus group discussions (FGDs) with mothers, the total population was determined based on maternal and child health service utilisation in Kabwata constituency. This included 8,323 first antenatal contacts and 93,227 under-five (child health) attendances recorded in 2024, giving a combined population of 101,550 mothers. Using Taro Yamane's formula with a 5% margin of error ($e = 0.05$), the sample size was calculated as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)} = \frac{101{,}550}{1 + 101{,}550(0.05^2)} = \frac{101{,}550}{254.875} \approx 399 \approx 400$$

This calculation indicates that a total of 400 mothers were appropriate for inclusion in the FGDs. A purposive sampling approach was employed to select participants based on willingness and availability, with each FGD comprising 6-12 mothers.

As for health professionals, purposive sampling was targeted at those directly involved in MCH service delivery within Kabwata Constituency's health facilities, including nurses, midwives, and doctors. Based on an estimated population of MCH staff across the constituency, approximately 15–20 health professionals were selected for in-depth interviews.

10.8 Sampling Techniques

The study employed a purposive sampling approach to select information-rich cases relevant to maternal and child health (MCH) coverage in Zambian print media.

For the newspaper content, a content analysis of all issues of the *Zambia Daily Mail* and *Daily Nation* published from January 1 to December 31, 2024, were included. This comprehensive inclusion allowed for an exhaustive assessment of MCH coverage throughout the year, capturing variations in frequency, placement, and thematic focus across both newspapers.

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For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was employed to select 35 key informants, which means 20 journalists and editors, as well as 15 health professionals. Participants were deliberately chosen based on their knowledge, experience, and ability to provide rich insights into MCH reporting. This sampling approach ensured that the study captured diverse perspectives from content producers, audience members, and subject-matter experts, complementing the quantitative analysis of newspaper articles.

10.9 Data Analysis Procedures

Content analysis transitions from coding and categorisation during data collection to interpretation and synthesis in the analysis phase. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative measurements with qualitative insights to provide a comprehensive understanding of maternal and child health (MCH) coverage in Zambian print media.

11. Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

11.1 Coverage of Maternal and Child Health Issues in the Two Newspapers

The first objective of the study was to determine whether *Zambia Daily Mail* and *The Daily Nation* reported on maternal and child health issues. The findings indicated that out of a combined total of 38,216 articles published by both newspapers in 2024, only 188 were related to maternal and child health, representing just 0.49 percent of all published content. The *Zambia Daily Mail* published 130 maternal and child health-related articles, accounting for 0.66 percent of its total content, while *The Daily Nation* published 58 such articles, representing 0.31 percent of its content. This means that, on average, a reader would need to go through about 150 articles in the *Zambia Daily Mail* and approximately 322 articles in *The Daily Nation* to encounter one maternal and child health article.

The disparity between the two newspapers, with the *Zambia Daily Mail* covering maternal and child health issues at more than double the rate of the *Daily Nation*, can partly be attributed to institutional mechanisms.

As one *Zambia Daily Mail* editor explained:

"We prioritize it as part of our commitment to public welfare, even though we do not have a dedicated health desk." (Key Informant 2, Editor, Zambia Daily Mail, March 2026)

Both newspapers have dedicated sections focusing on gender and women's issues: the *Zambia Daily Mail*'s *Femail* section and the *Daily Nation*'s *Gender Nation* section. However, the difference in maternal and child health coverage suggests that the *Femail* section may appear more frequently, allocate more space to health-related topics, or may have been established earlier than *Gender Nation*. This finding supports the argument that dedicated desks, beats, or thematic sections can significantly enhance coverage of specific issues, although their effectiveness depends on how consistently they are implemented and the level of editorial priority they receive (Leask, et al, 2010).

These figures indicate that maternal and child health articles remain insufficient in both newspapers. This finding is consistent with patterns observed in previous Zambian media studies. Sakala (2015: 71) found that human rights coverage in *The Post* and *Zambia Daily Mail* averaged 5.74 percent of total content, which he considered low. More recently, Muloongo (2022: 36) documented that climate change coverage in the *Daily Nation* stood at only 2.3 percent of total articles. The present finding of 0.49 percent MCH coverage is substantially lower than both these figures, suggesting that maternal and child health receives even less attention than other development-oriented topics in Zambian print media.

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This pattern suggests a systematic marginalization of health and development issues in favour of political and economic news, a tendency documented by Radu and Banjac (2012: 40) in their analysis of Southern African media. They observed that "health articles were often brief, placed in less visible sections, and relied on official press statements rather than investigative reporting." The present study confirms that this pattern persists a decade later, with MCH coverage remaining peripheral despite the critical importance of these issues for national development.

Sakala noted that for every 17 articles published in these newspapers, only one focused on human rights. In the present study, the situation is even more pronounced, with maternal and child health articles accounting for less than half of one percent of total coverage.

The extremely low volume of MCH coverage documented in this study (0.49 percent of total articles) carries significant implications when examined through the lens of agenda-setting theory. McCombs and Shaw (1972) posit that the media influence public perceptions not by telling people what to think, but by telling them what to think about. Through the frequency and prominence of coverage, media signal which issues merit public attention. Conversely, issues that receive minimal or inconsistent coverage are effectively relegated to the periphery of public consciousness.

Applying this framework to the present findings, the negligible proportion of MCH articles (0.34 percent in the *Zambia Daily Mail* and 0.12 percent in the *Daily Nation*) suggests that maternal and child health is unlikely to register as a priority concern for newspaper readers. This represents more than a missed opportunity; it actively contributes to the invisibility of MCH challenges in public discourse. As Sakala (2015: 71) observed in his study of human rights coverage, when an issue receives less than 1 percent of total coverage, "it is unlikely to be perceived by the public as a priority concern."

The agenda-setting function is further weakened by the placement patterns documented in Chapter 4. With only 22.3 percent of MCH articles appearing on front pages and the majority relegated to inside pages (67.5 percent), the newspapers implicitly signal that these issues are less important than front-page articles on politics, crime, or sports. This finding aligns with the observations of a senior reporter from the *Zambia Daily Mail* who stated:

"Articles on maternal deaths or child malnutrition rarely make it to the front page unless there's a political angle, such as a comment from a minister. Health articles are often considered 'soft news." (Reporter 4, *Zambia Daily Mail*, March 2024)

This editorial gatekeeping, consistent with the gatekeeping theory, ensures that even when MCH articles are published, they lack the prominence necessary to achieve meaningful agenda-setting effects.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that most maternal and child health articles focused on teenage pregnancy, which accounted for 21.3 percent of the coverage, followed by maternal mortality at 16.0 percent and child or infant mortality at 13.8 percent. In contrast, topics such as antenatal care received only 3.2 percent of coverage, while HIV and prevention of mother-to-child transmission accounted for 3.7 percent. This imbalance suggests a pattern of crisis-driven reporting in which the media focus primarily on deaths and emergencies while neglecting the everyday health practices that help prevent such outcomes.

This pattern was also highlighted by a mother who observed:

"Nothing positive comes from the media. Most articles are maternal death, stolen child, death of a child, or defiled child, so it's negative and influences our perception." (FGD Group 15, March 2026).

This finding aligns with studies conducted in other African contexts. Ochuodho (2016) found that Kenyan newspapers' coverage of maternal health was strongly influenced by elite-driven agendas and tended to focus on high-profile maternal health events rather than

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practical preventive information. Similarly, Tagbo (2010) observed that media coverage of health issues in Nigeria and South Africa often followed a crisis-driven and episodic pattern.

The limited coverage of antenatal care is particularly concerning given that antenatal attendance is one of the most effective interventions for reducing maternal and neonatal mortality (World Health Organization, 2016). When newspapers do not promote antenatal care, they miss a critical opportunity to influence positive health-seeking behaviour. This concern was echoed by mothers in the focus group discussions, one of whom stated:

"I think they do not write enough about everyday problems, like what to do when your baby has persistent diarrhea, or simple, affordable recipes for complementary foods using things we already have, like pumpkin leaves or kapenta." (FGD Group 5, Mother of Three, Kabwata Constituency, March 2026)

In terms of page placement, the study found that only 22.3 percent of maternal and child health articles appeared on the front page, while the majority, representing 58.5 percent, were placed on inside pages. The *Zambia Daily Mail* placed a slightly higher proportion of these articles on the front page at 24.6 percent, compared to 17.2 percent in the *Daily Nation*.

Story placement is an important indicator of perceived news value. According to agenda-setting theory, the media assign weight to news articles through placement, size, and frequency of appearance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). When maternal and child health articles are consistently placed on inside pages, the media implicitly signal that these issues are less important than front-page articles on politics, crime, or sports. A senior reporter from the *Zambia Daily Mail* confirmed this observation:

"Articles on maternal deaths or child malnutrition rarely make it to the front page unless there's a political angle, such as a comment from a minister. Health articles are often considered 'soft news." (Key Informant 4, Reporter, *Zambia Daily Mail*, March 2026).

The dominance of government officials as primary sources, accounting for 49.5 percent of coverage, alongside the marginalization of community voices at 13.8 percent, reveals important dynamics in how MCH issues are framed in Zambian print media. This sourcing pattern has significant implications when examined through the lens of framing theory (Entman, 1993). By privileging official perspectives, newspapers construct MCH primarily as a matter of policy implementation and government programming, rather than as a lived experience affecting women, families, and communities.

This official-dominated sourcing pattern is consistent with findings from other Zambian media studies. Sakala (2015) found that government officials were the dominant sources in nearly half of the human rights articles analysed, while community voices appeared far less frequently. Similarly, Muchangwe (2014) documented that coverage of adolescent sexual and reproductive health relied heavily on official sources, with young people's perspectives largely absent.

The practical implications of this sourcing imbalance are significant. When articles exclude community voices, they miss opportunities to: Humanize health issues by incorporating personal narratives that make abstract risks more relatable; Identify barriers to care through the lived experiences of affected individuals; Suggest culturally appropriate solutions informed by local perspectives; and Build trust, as audiences may connect more readily with articles featuring people similar to themselves.

A senior reporter from the *Daily Nation* offered a critical perspective on the current approach to MCH reporting:

"MCH reporting should endeavour to bring out the human story, but with depth. MCH is not just statistics; it is not about the speeches done by ministers or government officials. We need to look at issues such as the stigma adolescent mothers face, the myths surrounding pregnancy, and the barriers women face in accessing care due to distance, cost, and decision-making. Instead of just reporting on events,

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we should begin to follow one mother's journey through the system, antenatal, delivery, postnatal, to give an in-depth report." (Reporter 10, *Daily Nation*, March 2026)

As one healthcare worker observed:

"The media provides information on services offered to mothers and pregnant women and plays an important role in educating the public. However, most of the articles I see focus on maternal death without examining the underlying causes, what happened, or presenting the full context. They need to research more deeply and report articles with facts." (Healthcare Worker 15, Clinical Care Counselor, Chilenje Level 1 Hospital, March 2026)

This critique underscores the need for more community-centered reporting that moves beyond official narratives to examine structural determinants of maternal and child health outcomes. Greater inclusion of diverse voices would strengthen both the depth and credibility of MCH coverage.

This finding is consistent with Sakala's (2015) study on human rights coverage, which also found that government officials were the dominant sources in nearly half of the articles analyzed, while community voices appeared far less frequently. This pattern points to a broader trend of official-source dominance in Zambian journalism.

The study further revealed that most maternal and child health articles, representing 60.6 percent, were published without any accompanying photograph. Only 31.9 percent included a photograph that was directly relevant to the story content. This highlights a significant gap in visual health communication, as images play an important role in attracting readers' attention and reinforcing messages. McQuail (2010) notes that pictures have the capacity to become powerful symbols that represent concepts with clarity, impact, and wide recognition.

Articles about New Year babies and birth celebrations recorded the highest proportion of relevant photographs at 60.0 percent. This suggests that photo editors may be more inclined to assign images to positive and celebratory articles than to more complex topics such as maternal mortality or health system challenges.

11.2 Effectiveness of Maternal and Child Health Coverage

The second objective sought to critically analyse the effectiveness of the maternal and child health topics covered by *Zambia Daily Mail* and *The Daily Nation*. The finding that newspaper readership among mothers is extremely low, with only 15.5 percent reading the *Zambia Daily Mail* regularly and 8.3 percent reading the *Daily Nation* regularly, raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness of print media as a channel for MCH communication. When examined through the Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 1974), this finding carries particular weight. The model suggests that individuals are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviours when they perceive a serious health threat and believe that specific actions can reduce that threat. Media play a crucial role in shaping these perceptions (Nwagbara, 2017). However, if the intended audience, mothers of reproductive age, is not accessing the medium, then even the most carefully crafted health messages cannot achieve their intended effect.

The reasons mothers gave for not reading newspapers illuminate the structural barriers limiting print media's reach. One participant's observation captures multiple intersecting constraints. When asked why they did not read newspapers, mothers cited several barriers. One participant highlighted both the shift to digital media and cultural attitudes toward reading:

"Now with the coming of social media, news and articles are everywhere. And you know us Zambians and reading culture, people rarely buy a newspaper just to read" (FGD Group 2, First-Time Mother, Kabwata Constituency, March 2026*)*.

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This comment reflects several key issues: perceptions that maternal and child health coverage is limited, a shift from newspapers to social media for news consumption, and a broader cultural preference against purchasing newspapers purely for reading.

Cost was also frequently mentioned as a barrier. One mother explained that the money spent on a newspaper could instead be spent on household food. Literacy challenges were also reported, with some participants noting that reading English newspapers can be difficult for those with limited education. These findings challenge the assumption that print media can serve as an effective channel for health communication among marginalized populations.

"We do not buy because we need to buy food for the children. We find most news online, so what is the point?" (FGD Group 5, Mother of Three, Kabwata Constituency, March 2026).

These findings challenge the assumption that print media can serve as an effective channel for health communication among marginalized populations. As Beardmore-Gray et al. (2024: 8) observed in their study of health communication in Zambia, English-only content and technical jargon limit comprehension and engagement for rural and monolingual audiences. The present study confirms that language barriers, literacy challenges, and cost combine to exclude precisely those mothers who may have the greatest need for accessible health information.

The demographic profile of participants showed that 66 percent had more than two children, 18.4 percent were pregnant, and 15.6 percent were first-time mothers, representing the population that maternal and child health coverage is intended to reach.

Further analysis revealed a clear relationship between education level and newspaper readership. Among mothers with primary education, 81.8 percent reported never reading newspapers, compared with only 10.4 percent among those with university education. This suggests that newspapers primarily reach the most educated segment of the maternal population, while mothers with lower education levels, who may have the greatest need for health information, are less likely to access such content.

Despite the low readership and recall rates, the finding that 35.7 percent of *Zambia Daily Mail* readers who had encountered maternal and child health content reported that it influenced their health behaviour is notable. This suggests that when women are exposed to and understand maternal and child health information, they are likely to act on it.

This observation aligns with the Health Belief Model, which suggests that individuals are more likely to adopt health-promoting behaviours when they perceive a serious health risk and believe that specific actions can reduce that risk.

Mothers also expressed a strong desire for more practical and solution-oriented content. Participants indicated interest in articles about healthy mothers and babies, guidance on maternal nutrition, and explanations of common maternal and child health challenges. First-time mothers specifically requested beginner-friendly information on childcare practices such as breastfeeding, infant care, and child development during the early years.

The study further revealed that mothers place greater trust in healthcare workers and radio as sources of health information. Healthcare workers were trusted by 89 percent of mothers, while radio was preferred by 78 percent. Community health outreach activities organized by hospitals were also highly trusted, with 72.3 percent of mothers identifying them as reliable sources of information.

These findings are consistent with media access patterns in Zambia. Studies such as those conducted by AudienceScapes have shown that radio remains the most accessible medium for many households because it is affordable, widely available, and broadcasts in local languages.

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Healthcare workers confirmed these findings and provided additional professional perspectives. One nurse explained that many clients do not read newspapers due to cost or language barriers, and that radio announcements and community health workers are therefore more effective channels for communicating health information.

Similarly, a nutritionist emphasized the need for more media coverage that encourages antenatal attendance and promotes maternal and child nutrition, particularly during pregnancy and early childhood.

A midwife also highlighted both the potential and limitations of media influence, noting that while the media can raise awareness, awareness alone does not always translate into action. Structural barriers such as transport costs, unsupportive partners, and long waiting times at health facilities often prevent women from seeking care even when they are aware of its importance.

This observation highlights the limitations of the Health Belief Model when applied in contexts where structural barriers to health-seeking behaviour remain significant. Effective health communication must therefore go beyond awareness creation and address the social and economic barriers that prevent individuals from acting on health information.

11.3 Challenges in Reporting Maternal and Child Health Issues

The third objective of the study sought to identify challenges experienced by *Zambia Daily Mail* and *The Daily Nation* in reporting maternal and child health (MCH) issues and to propose ways to improve coverage. The findings revealed challenges at individual, institutional, and systemic levels that collectively influence the quality and quantity of MCH reporting.

At the individual level, many journalists indicated that their training did not adequately prepare them for MCH reporting. A striking proportion reported that their journalism education lacked specialized health reporting components, and only a few had attended workshops or training on maternal and child health. This skills gap affects journalists' confidence, their ability to interpret technical health information, and their capacity to produce in-depth, accurate articles on complex health topics. Similar patterns have been observed in specialized reporting, where limited subject-specific training constrains coverage quality (Tuchman, 1978; Hanitzsch, 2007).

Some journalists had never written an MCH story, often because they were not assigned to cover such topics. In line with Gatekeeping Theory, editors act as gatekeepers who determine which issues receive prominence in the media (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). When MCH is not strongly prioritized within editorial agendas, journalists are less likely to produce related articles, which was reflected in the lower MCH coverage observed in *The Daily Nation* compared to *Zambia Daily Mail*. Journalists at *Zambia Daily Mail* reported higher levels of editorial support than their counterparts at *The Daily Nation*, highlighting how institutional backing can influence reporting frequency and depth.

At the systemic level, journalists reported difficulties accessing timely information. Barriers included delayed responses from government institutions, restricted access to official data, and limited cooperation from some sources. Maternal and child health matters often involve sensitive and confidential information, which further complicates reporting and reduces the immediacy and relevance of news articles (Baines, 2015).

Healthcare workers also highlighted institutional constraints. Many reported needing authorisation from senior authorities before speaking to the media, which delayed communication and restricted the flow of information. Concerns about misquotation or misrepresentation further discouraged engagement. As one Managing Editor of *The Daily Nation* noted, NGOs sometimes possess valuable community-level insights but hesitate to share them with journalists, which, combined with the absence of a dedicated editorial policy on MCH, contributes to the limited scope of coverage (Key Informant, Managing Editor, *Daily Nation*, March 2026).

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Several respondents also commented on the episodic nature of coverage. Articles often focus on isolated events, such as maternal deaths, without examining broader systemic causes, limiting the media's ability to contribute to public education and long-term awareness (Iyengar, 1991). A clinical care counselor highlighted this issue:

"Most of the articles I see are maternal deaths, without looking deep into the cause of death, what happened, only telling one side of the story. They need to research deeper and tell the story with facts so that the mainstream media and other people learn, especially those that may face similar challenges, from the mistakes of those seen as victims." (Healthcare Worker 20, Clinical Care Counselor, Kabwata Constituency, March 2026)

Similarly, journalists and healthcare workers noted that coverage often neglects the everyday health challenges mothers face.

One mother articulated this clearly:

"I think they do not write enough about everyday problems, like what to do when your baby has persistent diarrhea, or simple, affordable recipes for complementary foods using things we already have, like pumpkin leaves or kapenta." (FGD Group 5, Mother of Three, Kabwata Constituency, March 2026)

Notably, the findings demonstrate that effective MCH reporting is constrained by interconnected factors across individual competencies, institutional structures, and systemic processes. Strengthening journalist training, enhancing collaboration between media houses and health institutions, and establishing clearer communication channels could significantly improve the quality and impact of MCH reporting.

12. Conclusion

The study examined the effectiveness of maternal and child health (MCH) coverage in The *Zambia Daily Mail* and *The Daily Nation* through the lens of agenda-setting theory and the Health Belief Model. Three main conclusions emerged from the findings.

First, regarding coverage of MCH issues, the study confirms that both newspapers report on maternal and child health, but coverage is extremely limited. Out of 38,216 articles published in 2024, only 89 articles, representing 0.23 percent, addressed MCH topics. The *Zambia Daily Mail* covered MCH at 0.34 percent, nearly three times the rate of *The Daily Nation* at 0.12 percent, a difference attributed to its dedicated "Femail" section. Interviews with the *Daily Nation*, Managing Editor revealed that this gap is partly due to systemic constraints such as lack of a specific editorial policy for MCH, relying instead on general health coverage. He also pointed to the newspaper's heavy dependence on ministerial statements and the reluctance of NGOs to share data as factors inhibiting the generation of original MCH articles**.** Coverage patterns reveal a crisis-driven approach, with disproportionate attention to teenage pregnancy at 21.3 percent, maternal mortality at 16.0 percent, and child mortality at 13.8 percent, while preventive topics such as antenatal care at 1.3 percent, family planning at 3.8 percent, and immunization at 3.8 percent received minimal attention. Government officials dominated as sources at 47.5 percent, marginalizing community voices at 15.0 percent. Most articles appeared on inside pages at 67.5 percent without photographs at 65.2 percent or statistical data at 66.5 percent, limiting their agenda-setting potential.

Second, regarding effectiveness of coverage, the study found that newspapers have extremely limited reach among the target population. Only 15.5 percent of mothers read The *Zambia Daily Mail* regularly and 8.3 percent read The *Daily Nation*. Cost, literacy barriers, English-only content, and perceived lack of relevance emerged as key barriers. A statistically significant association was found between education level and readership, indicating that newspapers primarily reach the most educated mothers while excluding those with the

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greatest need for health information. However, among mothers who encountered MCH content, 35.7 percent of *Zambia Daily Mail* readers and 25.0 percent of *Daily Nation* readers reported that it influenced their health behaviours.

Third, regarding challenges in MCH reporting, the study identified constraints at individual, institutional, and systemic levels. Journalists reported inadequate training, with 70.5 percent feeling unprepared, limited editorial support, difficulty accessing official data at 57.1 percent, and victims' reluctance to share information at 67.9 percent. Healthcare workers cited institutional restrictions, workload pressures, ethical considerations, and fear of misrepresentation as barriers to media engagement. These interconnected factors collectively limit the depth, accuracy, and consistency of MCH coverage.

These findings demonstrate that, although both newspapers report on MCH issues, coverage remains limited in volume, prominence, and reach, which restricts its potential to improve maternal and child health outcomes in Zambia. The study underscores the relevance of agenda-setting theory and the Health Belief Model in explaining these patterns, while also highlighting the need to adapt these frameworks to account for structural barriers in the Zambian context.

13. Recommendations

Based on the findings from mothers, journalists, editors, and healthcare workers, the following recommendations are proposed:

For journalism training institutions

Journalism training institutions should introduce specialised health reporting courses focusing on maternal and child health. These courses should provide students with foundational knowledge in public health, epidemiology, and medical terminology. This recommendation addresses the finding that 70.5 percent of journalists felt their training did not adequately prepare them for MCH reporting.

For media houses

Media houses should shift from crisis-focused reporting to more balanced coverage that includes preventive health information, positive health outcomes, and practical guidance for mothers and families. Content analysis shows that coverage disproportionately emphasises maternal deaths at 16.0 percent and teenage pregnancies at 21.3 percent, while preventive topics such as antenatal care at 1.3 percent, family planning at 3.8 percent, and immunization at 3.8 percent receive minimal attention.

To improve maternal and child health (MCH) coverage, journalists should attend MCH training, strengthen ties with healthcare workers, include community perspectives, and reduce reliance on government (63.6%) and other media sources (72.7%). They should practice accountability journalism by tracking government commitments, budgets, and program implementation, and use narrative-driven reporting to provide human context. Media houses should prioritize MCH in editorial policies and create dedicated health desks, though only 20.5% of journalists reported that their newspapers currently do so.

For content presentation

Newspapers should enhance the use of photographs, statistical data, and simplified language to improve clarity and impact. Currently, only 34.8 percent of articles include photographs and 33.5 percent include statistical data. Where appropriate, summaries in local languages such as Nyanja, Bemba, and Tonga should be considered to improve accessibility.

For access and distribution

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Media houses should partner with health facilities to distribute free copies of newspapers in clinic waiting areas to address cost barriers identified among mothers.

For healthcare institutions

Healthcare facilities should establish media liaison units to facilitate timely information sharing and reduce bureaucratic delays, thereby improving engagement with the media.

For government

Government should prioritise the enactment of the Freedom of Information Bill to enhance access to official data and address the challenges reported by 57.1 percent of journalists. They should consider enacting legislation that requires media houses to allocate dedicated coverage to maternal and child health issues, recognizing MCH as a matter of public interest that transcends commercial news priorities. As one journalist observed, media houses tend to focus on what sells most, such as politics, while neglecting issues that matter for national development.

For civil society and development partners

Development partners should support training programmes, fellowships, and community-based MCH communication initiatives, building on existing collaborations between NGOs and media institutions.

14. Suggestions for Further Research

This study has focused on print media coverage of maternal and child health in Zambia, but several areas warrant further investigation.

Future research should explore how different groups of women receive and act upon health information from various media sources, as first-time mothers have different needs than experienced mothers.

Comparative studies of radio, television, and social media are needed, given mothers' preference for radio (69.5 percent) and increasing use of platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook (74.5 percent). Such research would inform multi-platform health communication strategies. The effectiveness of health information in local languages should be studied experimentally, comparing comprehension and recall of messages in English versus Nyanja, Bemba, or Tonga.

Longitudinal studies tracking MCH coverage over five to ten years would reveal whether patterns identified here are stable or changing over time. In-depth analyses of specific MCH topics, teenage pregnancy, maternal mortality, child nutrition, would provide deeper insights into how these issues are framed. Studies exploring community health worker-media collaborations could reveal new models for health communication, given mothers' high trust in healthcare workers (89.0 percent). Finally, intervention research testing specific strategies, placing newspapers in clinics, training journalists, using local languages, would provide practical evidence for improving coverage and health outcomes.

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