

Gendered Consumption of Political Talk Shows: Media Malaise and Women's Political Engagement in Ghana

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<https://doi.org/10.63711/ijdr.aubg.gca-ewca2026.02>

ABSTRACT

Political talk shows have become a dominant platform for political discussions and citizen engagement within Ghana's democratic media landscape. While these programs are often celebrated for enhancing political awareness and deliberation, increasing concerns about media malaise, marked by sensationalism, incivility, negativity, and partisan framing, raise critical questions about their democratic consequences. This study examines the gendered consumption of political talk shows in Ghana and explores how media malaise shapes women's political engagement. Grounded in Media Malaise Theory, Deliberative Democracy Theory, and Agenda-Setting Theory, the article interrogates whether prevailing media practices contribute to political cynicism, disengagement, and gendered inequalities in political participation. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study combines a content analysis of selected Ghanaian political talk shows with survey data from audiences, alongside in-depth interviews with female viewers/listeners and media practitioners. The content analysis assesses dominant formats, tone, representation, and interactional styles, while the audience data illuminate patterns of exposure, participation, and perception across gender lines. The qualitative interviews provide deeper insights into women's lived experiences of political talk shows and their implications for political efficacy and engagement. Findings reveal pronounced gender disparities in the consumption and experience of political talk shows. Women report lower levels of exposure and participation compared to men and express heightened sensitivity to hostile, confrontational, and male-dominated discursive environments. Sensationalist and adversarial formats, often characterized by 'shouting matches', personal attacks, and partisan bias, were found to disproportionately alienate female audiences, fostering political cynicism and discouraging active engagement in political discussions. Although women acknowledge the informational value of

political talk shows, many perceive these programs as exclusionary spaces that marginalize women’s voices and inadequately address issues of concern to women and other marginalized groups. The study argues that media malaise in Ghanaian political talk shows not only undermines the quality of democratic deliberation but also reinforces gendered inequalities in political communication and participation. By privileging combative styles of discourse, political talk shows risk reproducing exclusionary norms that deter women from meaningful political engagement. The article concludes by calling for gender-responsive media practices, more inclusive programming formats, and stronger regulatory and professional standards to promote civility, diversity, and equitable participation in Ghana’s political media environment.

Keywords: *Political talk shows, Media malaise, Gender and media, Women’s political engagement, Political communication, Ghana.*

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INTRODUCTION

The landscape of political communication in Ghana has undergone a seismic shift over the last three decades, transitioning from a state-controlled apparatus to one of the most vibrant and pluralistic media environments in Africa (Boafo-Arthur, 2008). Central to this evolution are political talk shows, which now serve as the primary arena for national deliberation and citizen engagement. These political talk shows serve as the ‘town square’ of the digital age for political discourses. Broadcast primarily via radio and television, these platforms are central to citizen engagement and political awareness. However, the quality of this discourse is increasingly under scrutiny. As the quantity of platforms has increased, concerns regarding the quality of the discourse and its inclusivity have intensified. While these shows aim to foster deliberation, they are often characterized by sensationalism and partisan hostility, a phenomenon known as media malaise (Osei-Appiah, 2020; Dzisah, 2020).

This paper investigates the intersection of gender and media consumption, specifically examining how the combative nature of Ghanaian political talk shows affects women’s political efficacy and participation.

Background: The Evolution of Ghanaian Media (Post-1992)

The promulgation of the 1992 Constitution marked a watershed moment for Ghana, ushering in the Fourth Republic and providing the legal bedrock for a free and independent press. Chapter 12 of the Constitution explicitly guarantees the Freedom and Independence of the Media, which effectively catalyzed the liberalization of the airwaves. This led to a proliferation of private radio and television stations across the country, fundamentally democratizing access to information (Nyamnjoh, 2005). Within this democratic media landscape, political talk shows emerged as the dominant platform for public discourse. These programs were initially celebrated for their potential to enhance political awareness among the citizenry, provide a space for accountability where public officials could be questioned, and foster a culture of deliberation and democratic debate (Dzisah, 2020).

Yet, this expansion has been a double-edged sword. As competition for ratings increased, many media houses pivoted toward a commercialized and adversarial model of journalism. The result is a media environment where political discourse is often synonymous with partisan framing and



sensationalism, moving away from the deliberative ideals envisioned at the dawn of the Fourth Republic (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Dzisah, 2020).

Problem Statement: The "Watchdog" vs. Media Malaise

While the media is theoretically tasked with being the "watchdog" of democracy, a growing phenomenon known as media malaise is undermining this role in Ghana (Schudson, 2002; Patterson, 1993). A toxic convergence of sensationalism, incivility, and pervasive negativity defines the core of media malaise in the Ghanaian political landscape (Osei-Appiah, 2020; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). This phenomenon manifests as a prioritization of scandalous or shocking headlines over substantive policy analysis, which effectively strips the discourse of its democratic utility and shifts the focus away from critical governance issues (Patterson, 2000; Iyengar & Kinder, 2010).

Such sensationalism is often accompanied by a rise in incivility, particularly through "shouting matches" in which panelists abandon rational debate in favor of personal attacks and hostile interactional styles (Mutz, 2015; Norris, 2000). Furthermore, the persistent focus on conflict and partisan bickering ensures that the media environment remains inherently negative, creating a malaise that fosters political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Norris, 2011) and disproportionately alienates female audiences who find these male-dominated, confrontational spaces exclusionary (Adjin-Tettey et al., 2025; Zoonen, 2005).

This hostile environment raises critical questions about democratic consequences, particularly regarding gendered participation. Evidence suggests that these male-dominated, confrontational discursive environments act as a deterrent for women (Childs, 2004; Krook, 2010). Instead of empowering the female electorate, this deliberative style may be fostering political cynicism and a sense of alienation among women (Norris, 2000; Sanbonmatsu, 2006).

The problem, therefore, is that the current style of political talk shows may be reproducing exclusionary norms. By privileging combative styles of discourse, the media risks marginalizing women's voices and failing to address the specific issues and concerns of women and other marginalized groups, thereby reinforcing gendered inequalities in political engagement.

Research Objectives

This study seeks to interrogate the intersection of gender, media consumption, and political efficacy within the Ghanaian context. Grounded in Media Malaise Theory, Deliberative Democracy Theory, and Agenda-Setting Theory, the research pursues the following objectives:

1. To analyze the differences in how men and women consume political talk shows, focusing on exposure levels, participation, and frequency.
2. To explore how sensationalism, incivility, and partisan framing shape women's perceptions of the political process and their willingness to engage.
3. To understand the "lived experiences" of female audiences and how they perceive these talk shows.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study of gendered consumption of political talk shows in Ghana is situated at the intersection of political communication, gender studies, and democratic theory. To understand how media practices influence women's political engagement, this research



synthesizes three primary theoretical frameworks: Media Malaise Theory, Deliberative Democracy Theory, and Agenda-Setting Theory.

Media Malaise Theory

Media Malaise Theory suggests that the ways in which news and political information are packaged, emphasizing conflict, negativity, and sensationalism, can lead to widespread citizen distrust and political cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993). In the context of Ghana, this "malaise" is increasingly evident in the dominant format of political talk shows (Osei-Appiah, 2020). The pervasive presence of media malaise in the Ghanaian political landscape is not a neutral phenomenon; rather, it is a toxic convergence of sensationalism, incivility, and partisan framing that fundamentally reshapes democratic engagement (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014).

At the heart of this malaise is a "news as entertainment" model that prioritizes sensationalism, elevating scandalous or shocking headlines over substantive policy analysis (Patterson, 2000; Bennett, 2016). In this environment, the democratic utility of political talk shows is stripped away as media outlets chase ratings through the production of "shouting matches" (Mutz, 2015). These adversarial formats are characterized by a profound lack of decorum, where panelists frequently abandon rational, evidence-based debate in favor of personal attacks and hostile interactional styles (Norris, 2000). This culture of incivility does not merely offend the audience; it actively alienates them, leading viewers and listeners to perceive the entire political system as a dysfunctional arena disconnected from their lived realities and governance needs (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

Furthermore, this media environment is sustained by heavy partisan bias, which frames national political life as a rigid, zero-sum game (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). Ghanaian political talk shows are often criticized for acting as echo chambers for dominant political parties, reinforcing binary narratives that leave little room for nuanced or non-partisan perspectives (Osei-Appiah, 2020; Benkler et al., 2018). This framing suggests that every public issue is a battleground where one side must be entirely discredited for the other to succeed, narrowing the public's understanding of complex policy challenges (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). For many citizens, particularly those who do not identify with aggressive partisan labels, this creates a sense of exclusion (Norris, 2011). The "town square" of political discussion is thus transformed into an exclusionary space where the loudest, most partisan voices are privileged, while substantive dialogue is marginalized.

The most critical consequence of this malaise is its gendered impact on political efficacy and engagement. This study indicates that these adversarial and male-dominated discursive environments disproportionately alienate female audiences (Adjin-Tettey et al., 2025; van Zoonen, 2005). While some segments of the population may view political bickering as a standard, even entertaining, feature of democracy, women report heightened sensitivity to the hostility and negativity inherent in these programs (Norris, 2000). This continuous exposure to media malaise fosters a deep-seated sense of political cynicism, leading many women to conclude that the political arena is inherently unwelcoming or "dirty" (Krook, 2010). Consequently, their internal belief in their ability to influence the political process, their political efficacy, is eroded (Craig et al., 1990). Rather than being mobilized by the media to participate in the democratic process, women are often discouraged by it, leading to a retreat from active engagement and reinforcing long-standing gendered inequalities in Ghana's political communication landscape (Childs, 2004).

Deliberative Democracy Theory

Deliberative Democracy Theory emphasizes that the health of a democracy depends on the quality of public discussion, which must be inclusive, rational, and respectful (Habermas, 1989;



Dryzek, 2000). The disconnect between the democratic promise of media and its practical execution creates a profound tension between the ideal of deliberation and the reality of the Ghanaian airwaves. Ideally, political talk shows serve as vital instruments for enhancing political awareness and providing a forum for civic education; however, their current interactional styles frequently fail the fundamental deliberative test (Habermas, 2006). Rather than fostering the rational, respectful, and inclusive dialogue required for a healthy democracy, these programs often descend into theatrical conflict (Mutz, 2015). This failure transforms what should be a public square into exclusionary environments where combative discourse silences more moderate or inclusive voices (Dryzek, 2000).

For female audiences specifically, these shows are not perceived as neutral platforms for information but as exclusionary spaces that prioritize aggression over constructive conversation (Adjin-Tettey et al., 2025). Furthermore, these platforms function as structural barriers to participation by entrenching a male-dominated and hostile discursive style (van Zoonen, 2005). By privileging this "shouting match" format, media houses inadvertently reproduce exclusionary social norms that suggest political engagement is a masculine endeavor reserved for those willing to participate in verbal combat (Butler, 1990). Consequently, these platforms shape the boundaries of the national conversation, deterring women from meaningful participation and reinforcing the perception that political deliberation in Ghana is fundamentally closed to them.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory argues that the media does not just tell the public what to think, but what to think about (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The priorities of media practitioners directly influence the topics that gain national prominence (McCombs, 2004). The marginalization of women's issues within Ghana's political media is a critical systemic failure that impacts the inclusivity of the democratic process. This study identifies a significant gap in content, finding that political talk shows frequently neglect issues concerning women and other marginalized groups in favor of narrow partisan conflicts (Adjin-Tettey et al., 2025). This lack of topical diversity is inherently linked to representation, as the national agenda is predominantly set by a narrow group of male panelists and media practitioners (van Zoonen, 2005). This homogeneity reinforces gendered inequalities in political communication, ensuring that the perspectives of women are rarely elevated to national discourse.

This lack of representation creates a destructive feedback loop that sustains long-term political disengagement among women. When women do not see their concerns reflected in the media agenda, they perceive the programming as irrelevant and exclusionary (Norris, 2000). Over time, this leads to a self-perpetuating cycle of disengagement, where women's withdrawal is used to justify continued male-dominated content, ultimately cementing their marginalization in Ghana's political media environment (Krook, 2010).

Relevance of the Theories to the Study

The unique contribution of media malaise to this study lies in its diagnostic capacity. It identifies how the tone and framing of political communication may foster disaffection rather than engagement. Neither deliberative democracy nor agenda-setting theory captures this disillusionment effect with the same clarity. In contrast, Deliberative Democracy Theory provides a normative framework for evaluating the quality of media discourse. Rooted in Habermas's (1984) notion of the public sphere, the theory posits that democracy thrives when citizens and political actors engage in rational, respectful, and inclusive dialogue. Applied to Ghanaian political talk shows such as Good Morning Ghana and Newsfile, this perspective highlights their potential to function as spaces for meaningful deliberation. Yet, as Osei-Appiah (2020) notes, these platforms often privilege partisan voices,



dramatize issues, and exclude ordinary citizens, thereby falling short of deliberative ideals. Deliberative democracy, therefore, brings something distinct to the research: it sets a standard against which the communicative practices of Ghanaian talk shows can be judged, focusing not only on outcomes like cynicism or engagement but also on the processes through which discourse is produced.

Agenda-Setting and Framing Theory complements these perspectives by explaining the mechanisms through which media shape political perceptions (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019). In the Ghanaian context, political talk shows are critical agenda-setters, selecting which issues, such as corruption, unemployment, or electoral reform, gain prominence in national discourse. At the same time, the way issues are framed shapes how citizens understand and evaluate them. This explanatory power distinguishes agenda-setting and framing from the other two theories, as it reveals the specific processes by which media influence occurs.

Taken together, these theories form a layered analytical framework, with agenda-setting and framing providing insight into how media influence occurs; media malaise explaining why these patterns matter for public trust and engagement; and deliberative democracy establishing a normative yardstick for assessing the quality of discourse. In Ghana, where the media system is vibrant but highly politicized, this theoretical triangulation is especially valuable. It allows for an analysis that recognizes both the democratic potential and the risks of political talk shows, situating them as double-edged platforms that can either foster engagement or exacerbate malaise depending on how media logic intersects with Ghana’s political culture.

Applicability to and Implication for Ghana

These theories are especially relevant to Ghana’s media and political environment. Since liberalization in the 1990s, Ghana’s media landscape has become one of the most vibrant in Africa (Dzisah, 2020; Hasty, 2005). Political talk shows have emerged as central forums for political communication, shaping public opinion and holding leaders accountable. The expansion of agenda-setting and framing theories is essential for analyzing Ghana’s media-politics relationship. Political talk shows are among the most influential agenda-setters in the country, shaping which issues dominate public attention. Yet their framing practices often limit their potential to function as inclusive platforms for deliberation. Integrating insights from Boydstun (2013), Lecheler and de Vreese (2019), Al-Mamori and Rahman (2017), and Coffie and Medie (2021) strengthens the theoretical grounding of this research by showing both the explanatory power and the democratic risks of agenda-setting and framing in African contexts.

Deliberative Democracy Theory is rooted in the idea that democratic legitimacy is derived not only from electoral processes but also from the quality of public discourse (Habermas, 1984; Rawls, 1993). Unlike minimalist conceptions of democracy that emphasize voting as the primary form of participation, deliberative democracy stresses the importance of rational, inclusive, and respectful dialogue in shaping collective decision-making. At its core, the theory emphasizes four tenets: inclusivity, equality, reason-giving, and consensus-building (Dryzek, 2000; Fishkin, 1991). Within this framework, the media is expected to function as a critical public sphere, facilitating spaces where citizens and political actors can deliberate on issues of common concern (Habermas, 1989). Political talk shows, therefore, can be conceptualized as modern forums for deliberation, offering opportunities for exposure to competing views, public reasoning, and collective reflection.

However, the realities of Ghana’s media environment complicate these ideals. Research shows that Ghanaian political talk shows often fall short of inclusivity and equality (Nyarko, 2019). Instead of incorporating diverse citizen voices, they tend to feature political elites, analysts, and party representatives (Osei-Appiah, 2020). This elite dominance narrows the scope of deliberation and



excludes marginalized groups from participating in national discourse. The commercial nature of many stations further undermines deliberative potential, as sensationalism and drama often take precedence over reasoned debate in the pursuit of ratings and advertising revenue (Osei-Appiah, 2020).

While talk shows in Ghana sometimes host evidence-based discussions, they more often amplify adversarial exchanges between partisan actors, reinforcing polarization rather than fostering understanding. Instead of consensus-building, these formats frequently intensify divisions, leaving citizens more entrenched in partisan identities. This raises questions about whether such programs truly serve deliberative democratic functions or merely reproduce partisan talking points in a public forum. In the Ghanaian case, the theory illuminates both the shortcomings of political talk shows, elite dominance, sensationalism, polarization, and their unrealized potential as genuine platforms of democratic deliberation.

Media Malaise Theory captures the risk of cynicism that arises when political talk shows recycle partisan disputes. Deliberative Democracy Theory highlights how these shows fall short of inclusivity and rational debate, but also suggests how they might be reformed. Agenda-Setting and Framing Theory explains how the prominence and framing of issues influence public attitudes and behavior, making it especially pertinent during election cycles. Together, these theories illuminate both the promise and the pitfalls of political talk shows in Ghana, showing that they are simultaneously spaces of democratic engagement and potential sources of malaise.

Synthesizing the Gendered Dimension

The literature on media in sub-Saharan Africa has long noted a "participation gap" between men and women (Adjin-Tettey et al., 2025; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). This study builds upon that by arguing that this gap is not merely a result of personal choice, but a direct consequence of a media environment suffering from malaise (Putnam, 2000; Fallows, 1996).

The intersection of media malaise and gendered participation is perhaps most clearly visible in the heightened sensitivity women exhibit toward the hostile and confrontational environments of Ghanaian talk shows (Adjin-Tettey et al., 2025; Osei-Appiah, 2020). Research indicates that this sensitivity is not merely a preference but a significant factor in consumption patterns, as women report consistently lower levels of exposure to these programs compared to men (Okigbo & Eribo, 2004; Adjin-Tettey et al., 2025). While the adversarial nature of these shows may be viewed by some as a standard element of political theater, for many women, the shouting and personal attacks create a psychological barrier (Herbst, 2010). This environment fosters an atmosphere where the primary "town square" of national deliberation feels fundamentally unwelcoming, leading to a calculated withdrawal from these spaces to avoid the toxicity of the discourse (Young, 2000; Fraser, 1992).

Ultimately, the study argues that the current state of Ghanaian political media does not merely reflect existing social inequalities; it actively reinforces them (Tamale, 2020). By maintaining a discursive style that is coded as aggressive and masculine, these platforms effectively gatekeep the national conversation (Connell, 2005; Tuchman, 1978). When the most prominent arena for political discussion feels hostile to half the population, it cements the marginalization of women in the public sphere (Tripp, 2001). This structural exclusion ensures that the media remains a tool for reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies, as it continues to privilege combative interactional styles that deter women from meaningful engagement and representation in Ghana's democratic life (Adjin-Tettey et al., 2025; Adjin-Tettey et al., 2025).



Through the lenses of Media Malaise, Deliberative Democracy, and Agenda-Setting, it becomes clear that the quality of Ghanaian political media is inextricably linked to the inclusivity of its democracy (Entman, 2007; Dahlgren, 2009; Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). Addressing the "malaise" is therefore essential for fostering equitable gendered engagement (Voltmer, 2013; Couldry, 2012).

Political Efficacy and Gender

Political efficacy refers to individuals' belief in their ability to understand political processes and influence political outcomes (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). It is typically conceptualized as comprising two interrelated dimensions: internal political efficacy, which reflects confidence in one's own political competence, and external political efficacy, which captures perceptions of the responsiveness of political institutions and actors. Together, these dimensions shape the extent to which individuals feel empowered to participate in political life.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the role of the media environment in shaping both dimensions of political efficacy. Media are not neutral conveyors of information; rather, they structure how politics is perceived, interpreted, and experienced (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021). Exposure to informative, issue-based, and inclusive political content has been shown to enhance political knowledge and strengthen internal efficacy, thereby encouraging participation (Boulianne, 2020). Conversely, media environments characterized by negativity, incivility, and strategic framing, features commonly associated with media malaise, can erode both internal and external efficacy by fostering distrust and disengagement (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

The effects of such media environments are particularly pronounced among marginalized groups, including women. Studies in both the global North and African contexts suggest that when political discourse is dominated by elite actors, adversarial rhetoric, and exclusionary norms, individuals who do not identify with these communicative styles are less likely to perceive themselves as legitimate political participants (Bosch, 2017; Osei-Appiah, 2019). This has direct implications for internal efficacy, as repeated exposure to male-dominated and confrontational discourse can undermine women's confidence in their ability to engage meaningfully in politics.

At the same time, external efficacy is shaped by perceptions of recognition and inclusion within the political system. When women's voices and issues are systematically marginalized in media coverage, it signals that the political system is unresponsive to their concerns. This aligns with recent findings that media visibility is closely linked to perceptions of political legitimacy and responsiveness (Ross & Carter, 2011; Harmer & Wring, 2013). In contexts where women are underrepresented in political talk shows or portrayed through limiting frames, the media contribute to a broader sense of political alienation.

Furthermore, the prevalence of hostile and exclusionary discourse introduces both psychological and structural barriers to participation. Psychologically, exposure to incivility and conflict can generate negative emotional responses, such as anxiety, frustration, and withdrawal, which reduce motivation to engage (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). Structurally, the normalization of aggressive communicative styles establishes implicit "rules of engagement" that privilege certain forms of expression while marginalizing others. Women who do not conform to these norms may be discouraged from participating not because of a lack of interest or competence, but because the communicative environment is perceived as inhospitable.

In this sense, political efficacy is not merely an individual-level attribute but is socially constructed through media practices and communicative norms. The interaction between media malaise, gendered representation, and discursive style creates a feedback loop in which reduced



efficacy leads to lower participation, which in turn reinforces patterns of exclusion. For emerging democracies such as Ghana, this dynamic poses a significant challenge, as the marginalization of women's voices undermines both the inclusivity and the legitimacy of democratic processes.

METHODOLOGY

To capture the multifaceted nature of media malaise and its impact on gendered political engagement, this study employs a mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). This approach enables a comprehensive analysis that bridges the gap between objective media content and the audience's subjective lived experiences (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the study provides a robust framework for interrogating how prevailing media practices contribute to political cynicism and gendered inequalities (Bryman, 2012).

Data were collected from three complementary sources: an audience survey of 93 women, 25 episodes of five selected political talk shows, and semi-structured interviews with five media practitioners. The three sources were designed to provide complementary perspectives on women's consumption and participation in political talk-show discourse and the institutional and programme-level factors shaping such experiences.

Content Analysis: The study analyzed 25 episodes drawn from five Ghanaian political talk shows: *Big Issue*, *Good Morning Ghana*, *Newsfile*, *Ekosiisen*, and *Kokrokoo*. Five episodes were analyzed from each programme. The programmes were purposively selected because they were identified as prominent political talk-show platforms representing radio and television political discussion in Ghana (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017). The episodes were sampled over a three-month period, from October to December 2025. This period was selected to provide a sufficiently broad temporal window for capturing variations in political discourse and audience engagement across the selected programmes, while maintaining a manageable and consistent sample for analysis. The three-month period also allowed the study to capture recurring patterns in the framing, tone, and gender representation of political discussions, which were topical at the time, rather than relying on episodes from a single point in time. The coding process also considered partisan orientation, including the ratio of male to female panelist appearances, the prominence of partisan conflict relative to substantive policy discussion, and the extent to which audience participation was encouraged (Riffe et al., 2019).

Episodes were selected using a stratified purposive sampling procedure, with each programme constituting a separate stratum. Within each stratum, five episodes were selected from the available episodes during the study period. The selected episodes were obtained from programme archives and official online platforms. Episodes were eligible for inclusion if they were broadcast within the specified study period, belonged to one of the five selected programmes, and were available in a sufficiently complete form for analysis. The final corpus therefore consisted of 25 episodes, with equal representation from each programme. The analysis was based on the 25 episodes actually selected for the study; therefore, findings from the episode sample are not presented as estimates of all Ghanaian political talk shows.

Audience Survey: The audience component comprised 93 female respondents. The survey was designed to document women's own exposure to, participation in, and perceptions of political talk shows rather than to measure male audience behaviour directly (Fowler, 2014; Dillman et al., 2014). A purposive criterion sampling approach was used to recruit women who met the study's eligibility



requirements. Participants were required to be 18 years or older, identify as women, reside in Ghana, and have watched or listened to at least one of the five selected political talk shows. The criterion of prior exposure to at least one of the programmes ensured that respondents had sufficient experience of political talk-show content to provide informed responses to questions concerning consumption, participation, representation and perceived barriers to engagement. Because no comprehensive national sampling frame of female consumers of political talk shows was available, a study-specific sampling frame was constructed from women who met the eligibility criteria and could be reached through relevant institutional, community and online networks.

Recruitment was conducted through workplaces, community organisations, women's groups, and social-media platforms. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire. The survey sought to capture variation in women's experiences of political talk-show consumption rather than to produce a statistically representative estimate of all female political talk-show audiences in Ghana (Babbie, 2016). The geographical coverage of the survey was Accra and Kumasi, and where online recruitment was used, respondents from outside the primary study location were also eligible to participate, provided they satisfied the study criteria.

Media-Practitioners Interviews: The qualitative component consisted of five semi-structured interviews with media practitioners, comprising one host or producer associated with each of the five selected programmes. Participants were selected through purposive key-informant sampling because of their direct knowledge of programme production, editorial decision-making, political discussions and audience engagement. Purposive sampling is appropriate where participants are deliberately selected because their experience or knowledge can provide rich insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Eligible interview participants were required to be hosts, producers or senior editorial personnel directly involved in one of the selected programmes during the study period.

Potential participants were identified through the respective media organisations and programme teams and were contacted through telephone and email. One practitioner was selected from each programme to ensure representation across all five programmes. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide covering programme production practices, topic and guest selection, perceptions of audience participation, gender representation, political discussion, conflict and incivility, and factors that may facilitate or constrain women's participation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews offer insight into the 'supply side' dynamics of political broadcasting, examining how competition, audience demand, and organizational culture inform the production of sensationalist or adversarial content (Gans, 2004; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). This perspective is essential for identifying barriers to more balanced and inclusive programming. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and by telephone, and lasted approximately 40 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and taken as detailed notes.

Data Integration and Rationale

The decision to use a mixed-methods design is grounded in the complexity of Media Malaise Theory, which is the bedrock of this study. Relying solely on content analysis would ignore the psychological impact on the audience, while relying solely on surveys might miss the nuances of the male-dominated discursive environments that women report. By combining these methods, the study argues convincingly that media malaise not only undermines the quality of democratic deliberation but also actively reinforces the marginalization of women in the Ghanaian political media environment. This triangulated



approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how media practices shape gendered political engagement (Creswell, 2014; Denzin, 2012).

Research Ethics and Informed Consent

The human-participant components of the study comprised the survey of 93 female respondents and interviews with five media practitioners. Before data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to decline or withdraw, and how the information would be used and protected. The consent procedure used was first verbal, followed by written consent. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of South Africa (UNISA), College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee. The study was registered under NHREC Registration No. Rec-240816-052, Reference No. 4226. The ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection and covered the audience survey, interviews with media practitioners, and analysis of the selected political talk-show episodes.

FINDINGS

Gender Disparities in Exposure and Participation

The survey data document women’s reported patterns of exposure and participation. Sixty-eight percent of female respondents reported low or irregular exposure, and approximately 54% reported avoiding political talk shows at least once a week. Seventeen percent reported ever calling into a political talk show, while 21% reported engaging through social media. The study also records respondents’ perceptions that men consume and participate more frequently; however, these male figures were not generated from a male respondent sample and should therefore be interpreted as female respondents’ perceptions rather than direct measurements of male behaviour. Accordingly, the evidence supports claims about women’s reported consumption and participation and about women’s perceptions of gender differences, but it does not establish the actual prevalence of male consumption or participation in the wider population.

The data also reveal a stark divergence in how genders navigate political media. While men exhibit habitual and high-frequency consumption, women’s engagement is largely sporadic (61%) and selective (73%). Men dominate active participation (panel appearances, call-ins, texting, and social media engagement), whereas women remain largely passive consumers. Notably, 64% of respondents cited the “emotional tax” of aggressive discourse as a primary deterrent. This indicates that the gender gap is not simply a lack of interest but a rational response to a broadcasting style that prioritizes volume over value.

Sensitivity to Hostile and Confrontational Environments

One of the most critical findings concerns female respondents’ perceptions of hostile and confrontational discursive environments. Seventy-two percent of respondents described political talk shows as “highly confrontational,” while 67% indicated discomfort with shouting and personal attacks. Seventy-four percent reported that such interactions discourage continued viewership, and 59% indicated that they had stopped listening to or watching a programme midway because of incivility. While some audiences interpret political sparring as “edutainment,” nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents described these interactions as “toxic.”

This perception significantly suppresses participation, as the psychological and social cost of engagement is deemed too high.



Media Malaise and the Alienation of Female Audiences

The prevalence of media malaise, manifested through sensationalism, incivility, and partisan bias, was associated in the women’s responses with perceptions of alienation and reduced usefulness. Content analysis shows that approximately 70% of analyzed episodes were dominated by partisan conflict, while only 28% focused primarily on substantive policy discussion. This imbalance directly affects audience perceptions. 69% of respondents reported that political talk shows rarely address issues relevant to their daily lives, particularly those affecting households and communities.

Furthermore, 62% indicated that the focus on scandal and political conflict reduces the informational value of these programs. Women’s lived experiences reinforce this trend: respondents frequently described these shows as “combative arenas” rather than deliberative forums. Seventy-one percent reported a preference for utility-based information, and 66% agreed that political discussions in the media make politics appear “dirty” or exclusionary. These results document women’s perceptions and the characteristics of the sampled programmes.

Perception of Exclusionary Spaces

Women in this study overwhelmingly perceive political talk shows as exclusionary. A significant 76% of respondents agreed that these programs are dominated by male voices, while 68% felt that women’s issues are rarely prioritized. Content analysis supports this perception: across the sampled episodes, male panelists constituted approximately 78% of total appearances, with women making up only 22%. Additionally, only 18% of discussions explicitly addressed gender-related or women-centered issues. This creates a feedback loop of exclusion.

While media practitioners often attribute low female participation to a lack of interest, the data suggest otherwise. 61% of respondents indicated they would participate more if discussions were more respectful and inclusive, highlighting that disengagement is a response to structural barriers rather than apathy. Many respondents described political talk shows as “echo chambers for elites,” where priorities such as healthcare, education, and economic stability are overshadowed by partisan point-scoring. This reinforces the perception that these platforms are designed by men, for men.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the current trajectory of Ghanaian political talk shows is counterproductive to gender equality in political participation. By privileging combative discourse, these programs risk reproducing exclusionary norms that prevent the media from fulfilling its democratic “watchdog” role for the entire population.

Table 1: Summary Table: Findings vs. Objectives

Objective	Key Finding	Primary Barrier identified
1. Consumption Patterns	Women are Selective/Passive; Men are Habitual/Active consumers.	Emotional tax & repetitive content.
2. Media Malaise Impact	Incivility and partisan framing act as gatekeepers.	Perception of politics as toxic/dirty.
3. Lived Experiences	Women feel systemically sidelined by political elite interests.	The Feedback Loop of Exclusion.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine the communicative character of political talk shows in Ghana and their implications for democratic participation, particularly among women. The findings reveal a significant divergence between the normative expectations of democratic media and the empirical realities of contemporary political broadcasting. Drawing on **Media Malaise Theory**, **Deliberative Democracy Theory**, and **Agenda-Setting Theory**, this discussion argues that Ghanaian political talk shows are not merely declining in deliberative quality but are actively structured in ways that reproduce exclusionary political norms. In particular, the dominance of adversarial, sensationalist, and male-coded communicative practices contributes to a media environment that undermines inclusive participation and weakens women’s political efficacy.

The Erosion of Democratic Deliberation

The findings reveal a clear gendered divide in both exposure to and participation in political talk shows. Women’s engagement is largely selective and intermittent, in contrast to the habitual and high-frequency consumption patterns attributed to men. This divergence is not merely behavioural but structural. Rather than indicating apathy, women’s lower exposure reflects a rational disengagement from media environments perceived as unproductive and emotionally taxing. This supports broader arguments in political communication that media consumption is shaped by perceived relevance and accessibility, rather than simply availability.

Importantly, participation disparities, particularly in call-ins, panel representation, and social media engagement, highlight how political talk shows function less as open deliberative spaces and more as stratified arenas of access. The underrepresentation of women’s voices suggests that these platforms do not simply mirror existing inequalities but actively reproduce them. This finding complicates dominant narratives that attribute women’s lower political participation to a lack of interest. Instead, it positions disengagement as a strategic response to exclusionary communicative



norms, thereby reframing the “participation gap” as structurally induced rather than individually determined. This position is independently supported by the content analysis, which found substantially more male than female panelist appearances. Taken together, the findings point to a gendered experience of political talk shows without claiming that the study directly measured the behaviour of male audiences.

At the core of democratic deliberative theory lies the expectation that the media function as a deliberative space in which citizens can engage with diverse viewpoints, evaluate arguments, and form reasoned opinions. Deliberative Democracy Theory (Habermas, 1989; Dryzek, 2000) conceptualizes the media as a central component of the public sphere, where discourse is guided by norms of rationality, inclusivity, and mutual respect. However, the findings of this study indicate that Ghanaian political talk shows increasingly deviate from these principles. Rather than fostering reasoned debate, these programmes are dominated by confrontation, interruptions, and performative antagonism. This shift can be understood through Media Malaise Theory, which posits that sustained exposure to conflict-driven and strategically framed political communication contributes to public cynicism and disengagement (Robinson, 1976; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). The prevalence of what Cappella and Jamieson (1997) term the “strategy frame”, where political actors are depicted as self-interested competitors, transforms political discourse into a spectacle of contestation rather than a forum for problem-solving. The implications of this shift are twofold. First, the informational quality of political communication is diminished. Policy issues, governance challenges, and developmental concerns are often subordinated to partisan point-scoring and sensational exchanges. Second, the communicative environment becomes less conducive to inclusive participation. When discourse is structured around dominance and verbal aggression, it privileges certain communicative styles while marginalizing others.

From an Agenda-Setting perspective (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), the persistent emphasis on conflict and controversy signals to audiences that these are the most important dimensions of politics. Over time, this narrows the perceived scope of political engagement, reinforcing a view of politics as inherently adversarial. Moreover, through second-level agenda-setting (McCombs, 2004), the attributes associated with political actors, such as aggressiveness and combative skill, become markers of credibility and competence. This redefinition of political legitimacy has profound implications for who is perceived as a legitimate participant in political discourse.

Reinforcing Gendered Inequalities in Political Communication

One of the most significant contributions of this study lies in identifying incivility as a structural gatekeeping mechanism. The prevalence of shouting, interruptions, and personal attacks transforms political discussion from a deliberative exercise into a performative contest of dominance. While some audiences interpret this as political “edutainment,” for many women it signals that meaningful participation requires adopting an aggressive communicative style.

Consequently, while the erosion of deliberative quality affects all citizens, this study demonstrates that its costs are unevenly distributed along gender lines. The male-dominated composition of political talk show panels, combined with an aggressive communicative style, produces a media environment that is structurally biased against women. This dynamic can be interpreted through Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), which highlights how media representations shape perceptions of social reality. In the context of Ghanaian political talk shows, the framing of political engagement as combative and confrontational implicitly associates political competence with traditionally masculine traits. Women who do not conform to these expectations may be perceived as less authoritative or less capable, regardless of their expertise.



The findings also resonate with Cultivation Theory (Gerbner et al., 2002), which suggests that repeated exposure to consistent media patterns shapes audience perceptions over time. The persistent visibility of male voices and the relative absence of women contribute to the normalization of politics as a male domain. This symbolic marginalization reinforces broader societal inequalities, limiting women's visibility and influence within the public sphere.

In addition, Agenda-Setting Theory provides insight into how the marginalization of women operates not only through absence but also through selective emphasis. By prioritizing male perspectives and excluding or minimizing women's contributions, the media shape public perceptions of whose voices matter. Importantly, the findings suggest that the issue is not merely one of representation but also of communicative norms. The dominance of aggressive discourse creates a form of discursive gatekeeping, where participation is contingent upon adopting a particular style of engagement. For many women, this style is not only unappealing but also incompatible with their preferred modes of communication, which may emphasize dialogue, consensus-building, and respect. As a result, the media environment functions as a structural barrier to participation, reinforcing gendered inequalities in political communication.

The Reproduction of Exclusionary Norms

Taken together, the findings suggest that Ghanaian political talk shows function less as inclusive public spheres and more as exclusionary communicative spaces. The combination of male dominance, adversarial discourse, and limited issue diversity creates an environment where participation is implicitly restricted to those willing to engage in combative interaction. This aligns with broader feminist critiques of the public sphere, which argue that seemingly open spaces often operate according to unspoken norms that privilege particular groups.

A key contribution of this study lies in its argument that Ghanaian political talk shows do not simply reflect existing inequalities but actively reproduce them. By privileging certain communicative practices over others, the media define the rules of engagement within the political sphere. This process can be understood through Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, which emphasizes how dominant groups shape social norms in ways that legitimize their authority. In this case, the normalization of confrontation and incivility as markers of political seriousness serves to entrench male dominance within political discourse. Those who do not conform to these norms, particularly women, are implicitly positioned as outsiders.

From a deliberative democracy perspective, this represents a fundamental distortion of the public sphere. As Habermas (1989) argues, democratic legitimacy depends on the inclusion of diverse voices under conditions of equality and mutual respect. When these conditions are absent, the public sphere becomes exclusionary rather than participatory. The interaction between media malaise and framing processes further reinforces this exclusion. By consistently presenting politics as a hostile and combative arena, the media creates a psychological environment that discourages participation. Women who are unwilling to engage in such discourse may self-exclude, not because they lack interest or competence, but because the communicative environment is perceived as inhospitable. This dynamic highlights the role of the media as an active agent in the construction of political culture. Rather than serving as neutral platforms, political talk shows shape the norms, expectations, and boundaries of participation. In doing so, they contribute to the reproduction of structural inequalities within the democratic process.



Implications for Political Efficacy

The implications of these findings for political efficacy are particularly significant. Political efficacy, defined as individuals’ belief in their ability to understand and influence political processes (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991), is a critical determinant of democratic participation. This study suggests that the current media environment in Ghana undermines both internal and external efficacy among women.

Consistent with Media Malaise Theory, exposure to negative and conflict-oriented political content fosters cynicism and disengagement (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). For women, this effect is intensified by their marginalization within the discourse. The absence of relatable role models and the dominance of hostile communicative styles contribute to a perception that politics is inaccessible and unresponsive.

From an Agenda-Setting perspective, the marginalization of women’s issues further diminishes their sense of political relevance. When media coverage fails to prioritize concerns that affect women, it signals that these issues are of lesser importance. This contributes to a decline in external efficacy, as women may perceive the political system as unresponsive to their needs.

Insights from Affective Intelligence Theory (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000) also help explain the emotional dimensions of this disengagement. Repeated exposure to hostile and sensationalist discourse can generate feelings of anxiety, frustration, and disillusionment. Rather than motivating political engagement, these emotions may lead to withdrawal from the public sphere. The cumulative effect of these processes is a cycle of disengagement. As women withdraw from political discourse, their absence reinforces the perception that politics is a male domain, further entrenching existing inequalities. This has broader implications for democratic representation, as the exclusion of women’s voices limits the diversity and inclusivity of public debate.

Implications for Democratic Practice and Media Reform

Taken together, the findings of this study highlight a critical tension between the normative ideals of democratic communication and the realities of contemporary media practice in Ghana. While Deliberative Democracy Theory provides a framework for understanding what the media should achieve, the prevalence of media malaise and adversarial discourse reveals a significant gap between theory and practice.

Addressing this gap requires a rethinking of media practices and professional norms. First, there is a need to shift from conflict-driven formats to more issue-based and policy-oriented discussions. This would enhance the informational value of political communication and support more meaningful public engagement.

Second, media institutions must prioritize inclusive representation, ensuring that women and other marginalized groups are adequately represented in political discourse. This is not merely a matter of fairness but a prerequisite for democratic legitimacy.

Third, there is a need to cultivate alternative communicative norms that value respect, dialogue, and consensus-building. Such norms would align more closely with deliberative democratic ideals and create a more inclusive environment for participation.

Ultimately, the study underscores the central role of the media in shaping democratic culture. The current “shouting match” paradigm is not a neutral reflection of political reality but a constructed environment that privileges certain voices while excluding others. If left unaddressed, it poses a significant threat to the inclusivity and sustainability of Ghana’s democracy.



CONCLUSION

The research concludes that the prevailing media malaise in Ghanaian political talk shows does not merely reflect a decline in professional standards; it actively undermines the quality of democratic deliberation and reinforces existing gendered inequalities in political communication. By privileging adversarial and combative styles of discourse, these programs create exclusionary spaces that alienate female audiences and foster deep-seated political cynicism. When the primary arena for national dialogue is perceived as hostile and male-dominated, it discourages women from active engagement, thereby silencing essential voices in the democratic process. For Ghana to achieve a truly inclusive and deliberative democracy, the media must transition away from formats that reproduce exclusionary norms and instead embrace practices that facilitate equitable participation for all citizens.

Recommendations

To address these challenges, the study proposes a multi-stakeholder approach involving media houses, regulatory bodies, and civil society:

- **Implementation of Gender-Responsive Media Practices:** Media houses should actively strive for gender balance in their panels and ensure that women are included not just as observers, but as expert contributors and lead discussants.
- **Adoption of Inclusive Programming Formats:** Producers should move away from the "shouting match" model toward more deliberative, issue-based formats that prioritize rational debate and policy analysis over personal attacks and partisan bickering.
- **Strengthening Regulatory and Professional Standards:** The National Media Commission (NMC) and the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) should enforce stronger codes of conduct regarding civility and diversity, holding hosts and media houses accountable for content that fosters a toxic or exclusionary environment.
- **Diverse Agenda-Setting:** Media practitioners should broaden the national agenda to include substantive discussions on issues specifically affecting women and other marginalized groups, ensuring that the content reflects the concerns of the entire population.
- **Civil Society Advocacy:** Organizations focused on gender and media should continue to monitor and publicize gender disparities in media representation, creating external pressure for more inclusive broadcasting

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How to cite this article:

Ayimbire, A. (2026). Gendered consumption of political talk shows: Media malaise and women’s political engagement in Ghana. *International Journal of Digital Research*, 2(3), 114–134. <https://doi.org/10.63711/ijdr.aubg.gca-ewca2026.02>

