

The Discursive Construction of Loss, Resistance, and Resilience in Climate Change Discourse in Sub-Saharan African Newspaper Headlines

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Abstract

Climate change is a pressing global issue, yet the way it is framed in media discourse significantly influences public perception and policy responses. This study examines the discursive construction of climate change in Sub-Saharan African newspaper headlines, with a particular focus on media framing strategies. Using a dataset of 384 climate change-related headlines from major newspapers across West, East, and Southern Africa, this research applies Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis and Entman's Framing Theory to explore how climate narratives are constructed. The study reveals that media framing predominantly emphasizes solutions (49.4%) and problem identification (28.1%), while causal responsibility (11.3%) and moral evaluation (11.3%) receive less attention. Regional variations indicate that West African newspapers prioritize problem definition, while Southern African media balance environmental impact narratives with policy responses. East African coverage, though less voluminous, reflects growing engagement with climate discourse. The findings suggest that Sub-Saharan African newspapers construct climate change discourse in ways that foster awareness and action but may lack strong accountability narratives. This study contributes to the broader understanding of media influence on climate change perception in the Global South.

Keywords: Climate change in sub-Saharan Africa, discourse construction, resistance, newspaper headlines, resilience discourse

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Introduction

Climate change is one of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century, with far-reaching consequences for ecosystems, economies, and societies worldwide. While its effects are global, certain regions, particularly in the Global South, bear a disproportionate burden due to pre-existing vulnerabilities. Nowhere is this disparity more evident than in Africa, where rising temperatures, erratic rainfall patterns, and extreme weather events exacerbate food insecurity, displacement, and socio-political instability. According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), 2023 was projected to be the warmest year globally in recorded history, with the period from 2015 to 2023 comprising the nine hottest years on record (WMO, 2023a, p.2). The continent faces increasing water scarcity, declining agricultural productivity, and heightened risks of floods and droughts, all of which compound existing challenges such as poverty, rapid urbanization, gender inequality, health pandemics, and governance instability (WMO, 2023b, p. 2). Within this complex and evolving crisis, media coverage plays a crucial role in shaping public engagement and policy responses. The way climate change is framed in news discourse influences how societies understand, prioritize, and respond to environmental challenges. Media narratives can highlight urgency, assign responsibility, and propose solutions, thereby affecting both public perception and policy decision-making. This is particularly significant in Sub-Saharan Africa, where climate change intersects with socio-political and economic challenges, creating a unique discursive landscape.

This study examines how climate change is framed in Sub-Saharan African newspaper headlines, focusing on discursive strategies that shape public perception. Newspaper headlines serve as a critical entry point for news consumers, often encapsulating dominant narratives and ideological positions. Drawing on Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Entman's Framing Theory, this research interrogates the linguistic, structural, and contextual elements of climate discourse in regional media. The study is driven by two key research questions: (1) How do Sub-Saharan African newspapers construct climate change discourse? (2) What dominant framing strategies emerge in different regions? Addressing these questions, this research provides valuable insights into the role of African media in constructing climate change narratives.

Literature Review

As scientific consensus continues to affirm the reality of climate change and its profound consequences for ecosystems and human societies worldwide, the necessity for detailed examinations within specific geographic regions has become increasingly critical. One such region, which has attracted significant scholarly and policy attention due to its unique vulnerabilities, is Sub-Saharan Africa. This region faces distinct climate-related challenges, including rising temperatures, shifting precipitation patterns, prolonged droughts, and extreme weather events, which threaten livelihoods and economic stability (IPCC, 2021). Consequently, understanding the localized dimensions of climate change, particularly in terms of public perception, policy responses, and media framing, is essential for developing effective adaptation and mitigation strategies (Williams et al., 2019).

Sub-Saharan Africa presents a complex socio-cultural landscape that influences how climate change is perceived and addressed. The diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds within the region shape attitudes toward climate adaptation and mitigation efforts (Nicholson-Cole, 2009). The success of environmental policies, disaster preparedness initiatives, and sustainability programs is heavily contingent on these varying perspectives. Societal norms and values play a significant role in shaping people's understanding of climate change, affecting their willingness to adopt adaptive behaviors. In this context, media discourse serves as a crucial

conduit for framing climate change narratives, influencing public engagement and policy responses (Boykoff, 2011).

Empirical studies provide substantial evidence supporting the reality of climate change in Africa. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in its Sixth Assessment Report (2021), presents extensive data confirming the rapid rise in temperatures and altered precipitation patterns across the continent, with Sub-Saharan Africa being one of the most affected regions. Increased temperatures and erratic rainfall demonstrate the accelerating pace of climate change in the region (IPCC, 2021). Williams et al. (2019) further emphasise that temperature increases in Africa are occurring at a rate higher than the global average, posing severe risks to agriculture, water security, and biodiversity. These climatic shifts have direct implications for food security and economic stability, as many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa depend on rain-fed agriculture, a sector highly vulnerable to climatic variability (Gitz et al., 2016).

The socio-economic vulnerabilities of Sub-Saharan Africa make it particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of climate change. A significant portion of the population relies on natural resource-dependent livelihoods, meaning that any disruption in climate patterns has far-reaching consequences for income, health, and food security (Troni et al., 2014). Adaptation strategies, therefore, become essential in mitigating the short-term impacts of climate variability. However, mitigation and adaptation should not be viewed as separate or competing strategies but as complementary approaches that must be integrated into policy frameworks. While mitigation efforts focus on long-term sustainability, adaptation strategies are necessary for addressing the immediate risks posed by climate change, ensuring that communities can withstand and recover from climate-related shocks (IPCC, 2021).

The role of media in shaping climate change discourse has been widely explored in global research, with scholars emphasizing the power of framing in influencing public opinion and policy decisions. (Boykoff, 2011; Nisbet, 2009). Media frames determine how an issue is defined, who is responsible, and what solutions are proposed (Entman, 1993). Given the critical role that newspapers play in shaping public discourse and influencing policy, it is imperative to analyze how climate change is presented in news media within Sub-Saharan Africa. Media framing determines whether climate change is portrayed as an urgent crisis, a distant threat, or a manageable challenge, ultimately affecting policy formulation and public engagement. This study is therefore crucial in understanding how climate change is framed in Sub-Saharan African newspapers, contributing to a broader discourse on media influence in climate communication and policy development.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Entman's Framing Theory as complementary analytical approaches to understanding media representations of climate change in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough's CDA provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing discourse by examining language as a social practice that reflects and shapes power dynamics (Fairclough, 1995). CDA consists of three interrelated dimensions:

1. **Textual Analysis** – Focuses on the linguistic features of texts, including lexical choices, metaphors, syntactic structures, intertextuality, and rhetorical strategies. This level examines how language choices construct meaning and reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies.
2. **Discursive Practice** – Analyzes how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed. This involves studying how media institutions influence climate change discourse and how audiences interpret climate narratives.
3. **Social Practice** – Investigates the broader socio-political and ideological contexts that shape and are shaped by discourse. This includes analyzing how media discourse reflects power relations and contributes to shaping public perceptions of climate change.

Entman's Framing Theory

Entman's Framing Theory provides a structured approach to understanding how media narratives shape public interpretation. According to Entman (1993), framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality to promote a particular interpretation. This theory identifies four key framing functions:

1. **Problem Definition** – Determines how an issue is constructed, what aspects are emphasized, and which elements are omitted. This helps shape public perception by highlighting certain aspects of climate change (e.g., environmental disaster, economic threat, or scientific debate).
2. **Causal Interpretation** – Identifies the agents responsible for the issue. It examines whether climate change is framed as a result of natural phenomena, governmental negligence, industrial activity, or global inequalities.
3. **Moral Evaluation** – Assesses the ethical stance conveyed through media discourse. It examines whether climate change is presented as a moral imperative requiring immediate action or as a neutral phenomenon.
4. **Treatment Recommendation** – Focuses on the solutions proposed by media discourse. This includes policy measures, technological innovations, and behavioral changes suggested to mitigate climate change.

Methods

Data for this study were retrieved from LexisNexis, resulting in a dataset of 384 climate change-related headlines published between January 1, 2019 and October 7, 2024. A random sampling procedure was employed to ensure that the sample accurately represents the broader media landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa. To achieve comprehensive regional representation, 10 prominent newspapers were selected from each of the three regions: West, East, and Southern Africa. For West Africa, the dataset includes headlines from *The Nation (Nigeria)*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *Daily Independent (Nigeria)*, *The Punch*, *News Chronicle*, *Naija 247*, *Vanguard*, *This Day*, *Daily Trust*, and *Weekly Trust*, totaling 188 headlines. In East Africa, the selected sources are *Daily Monitor*, *Daily Nation*, *Kenya News Agency*, *The New Times*, *FarmKenya*, *The Citizen*, *The Standard*, *Sunday Nation*, and *The East Africa*, which together contribute 91 headlines. Southern African coverage comes from *Cape Times*, *The Mercury*, *Daily Maverick*, *Mail & Guardian*, *Pretoria News (and Pretoria News Weekend)*, *Daily Dispatch*, *The Chronicle*, *NewsDay*, *Sunday World*, and *Business Day*, totaling 105 headlines. This careful selection reflects the diverse media landscape across Sub-Saharan Africa and provides a balanced view of climate change discourses within the region. To analyze the climate change discourse in these

headlines, the study integrates two complementary theoretical frameworks: Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Entman's Framing Theory. Fairclough's CDA is employed. Specifically, the analysis focuses on textual strategies that help construct climate-related narratives. Additionally, the study considers discursive practices and it situates the discourse within its broader socio-political context. Complementing this, Entman's Framing Theory provides a systematic structure for understanding how media frames shape public perceptions. This approach involves analyzing the headlines according to four key functions: (1) Problem Definition, which examines how the issue of climate change is presented; (2) Causal Interpretation, which identifies who or what is attributed with responsibility; (3) Moral Evaluation, which uncovers the implicit value judgments and ethical stances conveyed; and (4) Treatment Recommendation, which evaluates the proposed solutions or actions to address climate challenges.

Results

This section presents the findings through a detailed analysis of regional patterns and framing functions in Sub-Saharan African newspaper coverage of climate change. The analysis draws on Entman's framing theory and the Critical Discourse Analysis to uncover how the media discursively construct climate change as a socio-political and environmental issue across different regions.

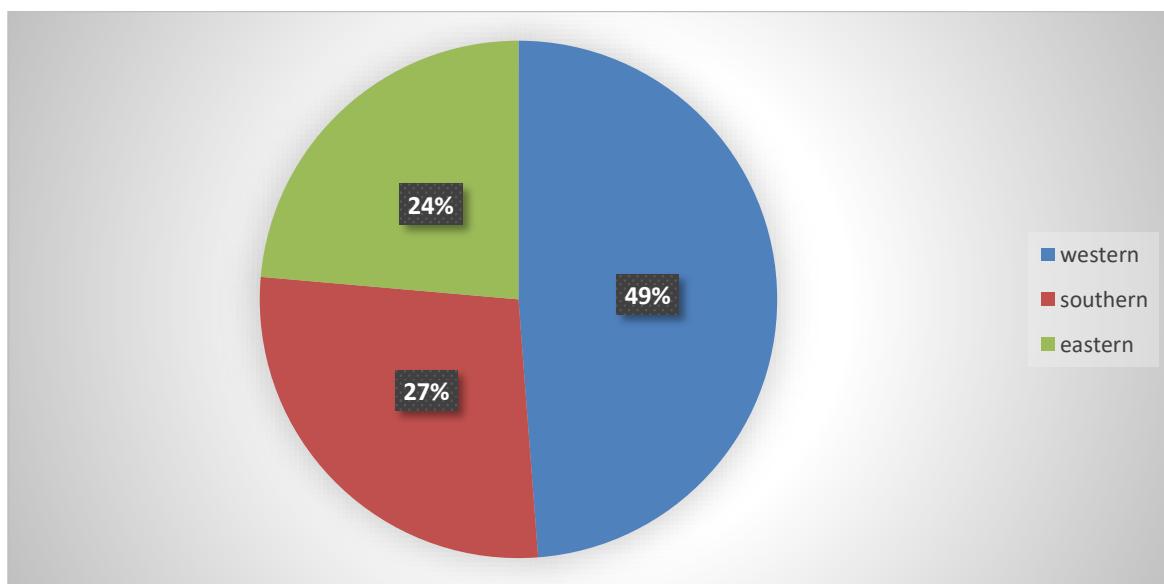


Figure 1. Regional distribution of climate change headlines in the selected Sub-Saharan African Newspaper

In West Africa, our dataset includes 188 headlines, accounting for 48.95% of the total. This high concentration suggests that West African media are exceptionally vigorous in covering climate change issues. The extensive coverage likely reflects the region's acute vulnerability to environmental challenges as well as the dynamic political and economic debates regarding climate adaptation and mitigation. East African media contribute 91 headlines (23.69% of the total). Although the volume is lower compared to West Africa, the engagement from East African newspapers indicates a significant focus on climate issues. This coverage consistently reflects the growing concern over climate impacts in countries like Kenya and Uganda. Southern Africa accounts for 105 headlines, representing 27.34% of the total. Southern African media present a balanced discourse by not only reporting on environmental disasters but also emphasizing policy

responses and technological interventions. This diversified approach highlights the region's nuanced engagement with climate change, addressing both the immediate impacts and the long-term policy challenges faced by countries.

Table 1. *Distribution of framing functions in the selected climate change newspaper reportage*

S/n	Framing functions	%
1	Problem Definition	28.1
2	Causal Interpretation	11.3
3	Moral Evaluation	11.3
4	Treatment Recommendation	49.4

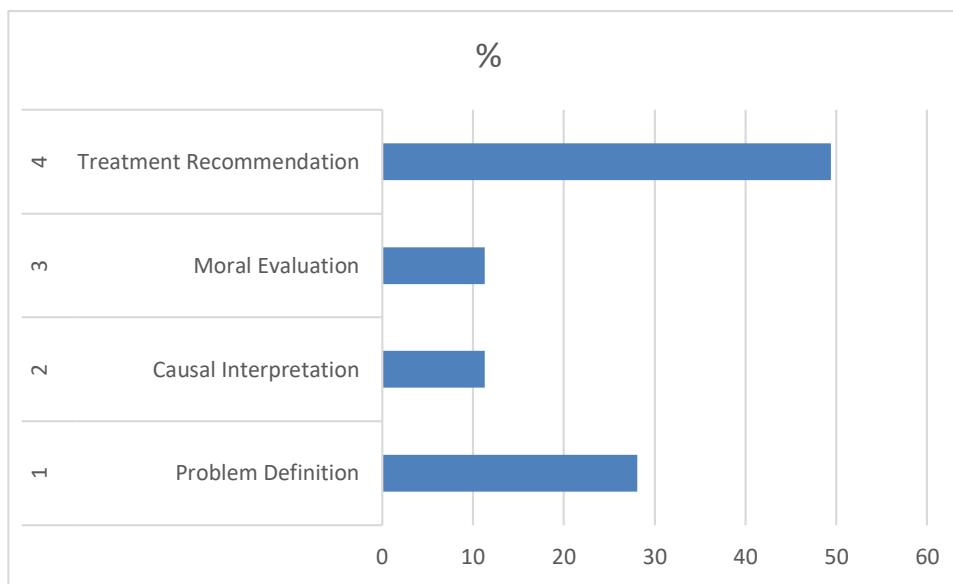


Figure 2. Framing functions in climate change newspaper reportage

The table and chart above provide an analytical breakdown of climate change discourse in Sub-Saharan African newspapers based on Entman's Framing Functions—Problem Definition, Causal Interpretation, Moral Evaluation, and Treatment Recommendation. These categories reveal the ways in which climate change is framed in media narratives, highlighting dominant themes and underlying patterns in regional reporting. Notably, the distribution of percentages across these categories indicates a strong focus on solutions (49.4%) and problem identification (28.1%), with significantly less emphasis on causal responsibility (11.3%) and moral judgment (11.3%). The prominence of Treatment Recommendation (49.4%) suggests that climate change reporting in Sub-Saharan Africa is heavily solution-oriented. This indicates an emphasis on policy responses, technological innovations, and community-driven strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate change impacts. The practical focus on solutions implies that media discourse aims to mobilize action and provide a roadmap for addressing climate challenges rather than merely describing the problem. However, the risk is that without strong causal narratives, audiences may lack a clear understanding of who holds responsibility for driving or addressing climate change.

Problem Definition (28.1%) is the second most prevalent category, indicating that a substantial portion of media coverage is dedicated to defining climate change and its impacts. This category includes crisis language, economic consequences, and descriptions of environmental degradation, which help establish the urgency of the issue. While defining the problem is crucial for awareness, an overemphasis on this category without a proportional focus

on accountability could lead to passive engagement, where the public recognizes the problem but does not actively seek solutions.

In contrast, Causal Interpretation (11.3%) is underrepresented, suggesting that newspapers in the region are less inclined to explicitly assign blame or explore the deeper structural and political causes of climate change. This could be due to editorial constraints, political sensitivities, or an intentional focus on constructive discourse rather than conflict-driven narratives. However, the lack of a strong causal framing might weaken the push for accountability, making it harder for governments and corporations to be held responsible for their role in environmental degradation.

Similarly, Moral Evaluation (11.3%) is not a dominant feature of climate discourse in the analyzed newspapers. While this framing function typically conveys stances and values, the low percentage suggests that newspapers are not actively engaging in moral persuasion. This could limit the emotional and ethical appeal of climate narratives, potentially reducing the urgency for action among the public and policymakers. However, it also suggests that media reporting in the region is more pragmatic than ideological, focusing on tangible issues rather than moral arguments.

These findings imply that climate change discourse in Sub-Saharan African media is largely constructive and forward-looking, prioritizing problem-solving over blame. While this practical approach is beneficial for fostering engagement and action, the relative lack of causal and moral framing could limit deeper discussions on structural accountability and ethical imperatives. Strengthening the balance between defining problems, assigning responsibility, making moral appeals, and proposing solutions could lead to a more comprehensive and impactful climate discourse.

Table 2. *Regional distribution of climate change framing in the selected Sub-Saharan newspapers*

Framing Function	West Africa (W)	Southern Africa (S)	East Africa (E)
Problem Definition	56.9%	34.7%	8.3%
Causal Interpretation	69.2%	7.7%	23.1%
Moral Evaluation	48.4%	25.8%	25.8%
Treatment Recommendation	58.9%	27.1%	14.0%

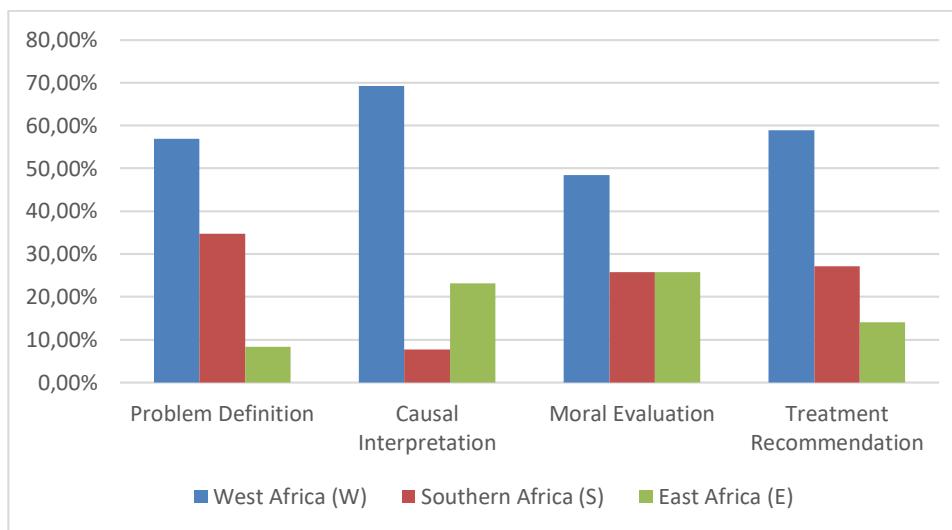


Figure 3. Comparative distribution of climate change framing functions in Sub-Saharan Africa

The analysis of climate change discourse across Sub-Saharan African newspaper headlines reveals significant regional variations in how climate issues are framed. Problem Definition is most prominent in West African media (56.9%), followed by Southern Africa (34.7%) and East Africa (8.3%). This suggests that West African newspapers focus heavily on defining climate change issues, possibly due to the region's acute vulnerability to environmental crises such as desertification and flooding. The relatively lower emphasis in East Africa could indicate that climate change discourse in the region is more implicit, with less focus on explicitly framing the problem in media narratives.

Causal Interpretation, which assigns responsibility for climate change, is overwhelmingly dominant in West Africa (69.2%), while Southern Africa (7.7%) shows minimal emphasis, and East Africa (23.1%) adopts a more moderate approach. The strong West African focus on causal attribution suggests a heightened awareness of accountability, possibly reflecting regional debates on government policies, industrial activities, and international responsibilities. In contrast, Southern Africa's limited focus on causation may imply a more neutral or depoliticized discourse, potentially shifting attention away from blame and toward solutions.

Moral Evaluation, which conveys ethical judgments and stances on climate change, shows a more balanced distribution, with West Africa leading (48.4%), while Southern and East Africa both account for 25.8%. This indicates that West African media engage in stronger moral positioning, possibly critiquing inaction or advocating for urgent responses. The relative parity between Southern and East African media suggests that moral evaluations in these regions may be more embedded within broader discussions rather than explicitly emphasized as a distinct narrative element.

Treatment Recommendation, which focuses on proposed solutions and responses to climate change, is again most pronounced in West Africa (58.9%), followed by Southern Africa (27.1%) and East Africa (14.0%). This implies that West African media not only highlight the problem and assign responsibility but also actively advocate for interventions. Southern Africa's moderate focus on solutions suggests a balanced discourse between problems and policy responses, while East Africa's lower percentage may indicate fewer concrete policy discussions or limited engagement with mitigation strategies in media reporting.

The regional disparities in framing functions have important implications for climate change communication and policy engagement. West Africa's dominance across all categories highlights an intense climate discourse, likely driven by both media activism and public concern. However, the strong emphasis on causal attribution and moral judgment suggests a potential risk of politicizing climate change narratives, which may shape public perceptions in ways that either mobilize action or deepen divisions. In contrast, Southern African media adopt a more policy-oriented approach, which could facilitate pragmatic discussions on solutions but might also downplay the urgency of responsibility and moral imperatives. East Africa's lower engagement in most categories signals a need for stronger media emphasis on climate change, as limited framing of problems and solutions could reduce public awareness and policy urgency.

Textual Strategies in the Construction of Climate Change as a Problem

The way climate change is framed in media discourse significantly influences public perception, policy engagement, and societal responses. One of the fundamental aspects of this framing is the construction of climate change as a problem, which is achieved through specific textual and linguistic strategies in news reporting. The following headlines illustrate how climate change is discursively constructed as a pressing problem in Sub-Saharan African media.

Examples:

- i. "We **lost** in the **floods**."
- ii. "World has **lost** 14% of its coral reefs to bleaching from **global warming**."

- iii. "How **global warming** is **disrupting** life on Earth!"
- iv. "Climate change **threatens** Sphinx and Giza pyramids."
- v. "Nigeria facing **burden** of allergic diseases - Society."
- vi. "Southern Africa regarded as 'climate-change hot spot region'."
- vii. "Climate change **scares** farmers."

The discursive construction of loss is a key theme in Sub-Saharan African newspaper headlines, particularly in the way climate change is framed as a force of irreparable destruction. The headline in (i) encapsulates the narrative of loss, where the verb "lost" conveys permanence and devastation, while "floods" evoke the physical and economic destruction caused by extreme weather events. This theme reinforces the idea that climate change is a direct cause of human suffering and environmental degradation. Similarly, the headline in example (ii) reinforces quantifiable loss, making the crisis appear more tangible and scientifically validated. The inclusion of numerical evidence (14%) strengthens the sense of urgency and highlights the irreversibility of environmental damage, while the phrase "global warming" directly ties this loss to climate change, reinforcing the causal relationship between human-induced temperature rise and ecological destruction. Beyond loss, climate change discourse in the selected headlines also constructs a sense of crisis and disruption. In example (iii), the lexical choice of "disrupting" frames climate change as an ongoing crisis that interrupts the stability of daily life. Unlike "loss," which implies a completed action, "disrupting" suggests continuous and worsening effects, reinforcing the idea that climate change is a persistent and escalating problem. Furthermore, climate change is also framed as a threat to cultural heritage and economic security. The headline in example (iv) constructs climate change as a force that endangers history and civilization itself. The verb "threatens" suggests imminent danger, reinforcing anxiety and urgency in public discourse. Similarly, in (v), the word "burden" frames climate change as a public health crisis, linking environmental changes to human vulnerability and disease outbreaks. Another critical aspect of climate discourse in Sub-Saharan African media is the regional and geopolitical framing of climate vulnerability. The headline in (vi) discursively constructs the region as one of the worst affected by climate change, emphasizing geographic loss and disproportionate impact. The term "hot spot" functions both literally and metaphorically, reinforcing the physical heat increases due to climate change while also signaling a zone of crisis and heightened risk. Finally, in the last example, while fear is emphasized through "scares," the framing also highlights the agency of affected individuals, indirectly positioning farmers as both victims and potential responders in the climate crisis.

Collocations in the Selected Headlines and Their Role in Problem Definition

Framing theory, particularly Entman's problem definition, highlights how media discourse defines issues, identifies causes, and suggests solutions. In climate change discourse, collocations (words that frequently appear together) play a crucial role in shaping the narrative. These collocations establish climate change as a crisis, a governance challenge, an economic issue, and a humanitarian concern, influencing how the public and policymakers perceive the problem.

Examples:

- i. Unprecedented climate risks
- ii. Looming crisis
- iii. Early warnings and early actions
- iv. Climate-centric innovation
- v. Low-carbon economy
- vi. Reverse gains

- vii. Malaria prevention
- viii. Climate change misfortunes
- ix. Tackle hydrocarbon emissions
- x. Paradoxical impact
- xi. Avert climate catastrophe
- xii. Loss, damage fund
- xiii. Fuelling the climate crisis
- xiv. Climate shocks
- xv. Desertification and drought
- xvi. Climate change affects
- xvii. Disaster response landscape
- xviii. Climate misery

The selected collocations construct climate change as a crisis, a policy and economic challenge, a health and environmental threat, and an ongoing, escalating problem. These word pairings shape the urgency, responsibility, and solutions proposed in climate discourse. Several collocations frame climate change as an imminent crisis that demands immediate action. The phrase “unprecedented climate risks” suggests that climate threats are intensifying in unpredictable ways, portraying the issue as an evolving crisis with uncertain but severe consequences. Similarly, “looming crisis” evokes a sense of an impending disaster, reinforcing a sense of urgency and imminent threat. These constructions align with Entman’s problem definition by positioning climate change as an unavoidable crisis that requires immediate intervention. The collocation “avert climate catastrophe” further reinforces this framing, suggesting that while disaster is possible, decisive action can prevent worst-case scenarios.

Other collocations highlight the necessity of preparedness and governance reforms. The phrase “early warnings and early actions” emphasizes the need for proactive responses, framing climate change as a governance issue. Similarly, “disaster response landscape” frames climate change as a challenge that requires effective crisis management strategies. These constructions shift the focus to policy failures, suggesting that climate change is not just a natural phenomenon but a problem requiring institutional accountability and strategic planning. Additionally, the economic dimensions of climate change are evident in phrases like “low-carbon economy” and “loss, damage fund.” The former highlights the need for a transition away from fossil fuels, framing climate action as an economic necessity rather than just an environmental concern. The latter suggests that financial compensation is required to address the losses suffered by vulnerable nations, reinforcing the climate justice narrative. Similarly, “tackle hydrocarbon emissions” assigns responsibility to fossil fuel industries and policymakers, defining climate change as a problem of emissions regulation and corporate accountability. Climate change is also framed as a health and environmental threat through collocations like “malaria prevention” and “climate change affects.” Linking climate change to disease prevention defines the issue as a public health crisis rather than merely an environmental one. Likewise, “reverse gains” suggests that previous progress in development, health, and economic stability is being undone by climate change, constructing the crisis as a force of regression. The phrase “climate-centric innovation” presents climate action as a forward-thinking endeavor, suggesting that the problem can be addressed through scientific and technological advancements. The ongoing and escalating nature of climate change is reflected in collocations like “fuelling the climate crisis” and “paradoxical impact.” The former implies that certain actions or policies are actively making the crisis worse, reinforcing the notion of culpability. The latter acknowledges the complexity of climate change, where some interventions might lead to unintended consequences. Additionally, “desertification and drought” defines the problem in terms of long-term environmental degradation, emphasizing the slow but devastating impacts of climate change on land and water resources. Finally, collocations like “climate misery” and “climate change misfortunes” evoke strong emotional responses, portraying climate change as a source of widespread human suffering. These word

pairings reinforce the victimhood of affected populations, framing the crisis as one that disproportionately harms the most vulnerable.

Causal Framing in Climate Discourse: Responsibility and Agency

According to Entman's framing theory, causal interpretation refers to how media and discourse assign responsibility for an issue by identifying who or what is to blame and how events are linked. This framing influences public perception by either clarifying or obscuring agency, thereby shaping attitudes toward solutions and policy responses.

Active Constructions in Climate Discourse

Active constructions explicitly assign responsibility to specific actors, making the agents and their actions clear. In climate discourse, this linguistic strategy ensures that responsibility is not obscured, allowing readers to see who is accountable for climate-related actions or consequences. Headlines using active structures often feature transitive sentence patterns (Actor + Process + Goal), where a clear agent is performing an action that leads to an outcome.

Examples:

- i. FG wants developing countries to increase transparency in climate financing.
- ii. FG demands accountability, transparency in global climate funding.
- iii. Group blames Nigerian Govt for loss of lives, calls for sanction of officials.
- iv. Stakeholders say mining, coal burning cause global warming, climate change.
- v. CAPPA talks tough, says no hiding place for Shell, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Agip, Others.
- vi. Fact-checkers verify: emissions drive warming.
- vii. Social Action blames FG for loss of lives, calls for sanction of officials.

Many headlines use active voice to explicitly assign responsibility to specific actors. These transitive sentence structures make it clear who is responsible for a climate-related action or consequence. The presence of clear agent markers ensures that responsibility is not obscured. In example I and ii, the Federal Government (FG) is explicitly framed as the actor, while "developing countries" and "climate funding" serve as the affected entities. The use of the verbs "wants" and "demands" reinforces a directive role, portraying the government as an authoritative force pushing for action. Similarly, in (iii), the noun phrase "Group" acts as the agent actively placing responsibility on the Nigerian Government. The verb "blames" marks an explicit assignment of fault, while the demand for sanctioning officials further strengthens accountability discourse. A comparable structure appears in example (v). Here, CAPPA (a climate advocacy group) is framed as the actor enforcing accountability, while the oil companies are the affected entities. The phrase "talks tough" serves as an evaluative marker, positioning CAPPA as assertive in holding corporations responsible for climate-related harms. This type of linguistic framing ensures that the corporate sector is directly implicated in climate issues. Returning to example (iv), the headline employs the noun 'stakeholders' to denote a clearly identified group, while the verb 'cause' constructs an explicit causal link between mining, coal burning, and global warming. This structure strengthens certainty in climate attribution, making industrial activities the clear agents of climate damage. In the last example, the verb "verify" signals certainty, reinforcing a strong causal link between emissions and global warming. This leaves no room for ambiguity, suggesting that this relationship is scientifically confirmed rather than debatable.

Intertextuality in Climate Discourse

Intertextuality in climate change discourse refers to how media texts draw upon other discourses, events, and narratives to construct meaning. Instead of presenting issues in isolation, headlines often incorporate external references such as global agreements, international organizations, expert voices, and societal debates, which in turn shape how responsibility, causality, and solutions are understood. Through this, newspapers situate climate change as part of a wider network of discourses, connecting local realities in Sub-Saharan Africa with global environmental politics. Through references to broader societal discussions, historical events, or international policies, intertextual structures perform several functions. They can introduce ambiguity about responsibility, challenge simplistic attributions of blame, or reinforce dominant narratives through validation from external authorities. Intertextuality therefore highlights how climate change is discursively constructed as a multi-scalar issue, both local and global, personal and collective.

Examples:

- i. Are farmers to blame for climate change misfortunes?
- ii. Why Global Coalition is lobbying Rwanda to endorse 'End of Fossil Fuels' call.
- iii. Fact-checkers challenge claim that US is solely responsible for climate change.
- iv. Paris Agreement: Are we on the right track?

Some headlines do not make outright attributions but instead employ intertextuality, drawing on external references, to shape how responsibility is perceived. In example (i), the question format introduces ambiguity about responsibility. Rather than directly asserting that farmers are responsible, the headline invites debate through a wider societal narrative that connects agriculture to climate change. This construction shifts attention away from governments and industries, often the main emitters, towards a more contested arena of responsibility, thus complicating attribution. In example (ii), the key intertextual element is the reference to a global coalition, which represents external international actors exerting influence. The verb "lobbying" foregrounds pressure from outside Rwanda, suggesting that climate decisions are not purely domestic but shaped through global geopolitical dynamics. This situates Sub-Saharan Africa within a broader international struggle over energy transition, highlighting the power relations between global North advocacy coalitions and African states. Similarly, example (iii) references the fact-checking discourse, which itself functions as a meta-narrative validating or disputing climate claims. Here, intertextuality works through engagement with an existing global debate about US accountability. The headline contests oversimplified causal interpretations and reframes climate responsibility as shared rather than singular. This move complicates the narrative through recognition that while the US plays a significant role in emissions, other nations and actors are also implicated. Finally, in example (iv), the reference to the Paris Agreement, a major international climate treaty, is a direct form of intertextuality. The headline does not stand on its own but derives meaning through global climate governance frameworks. The question format introduces skepticism and uncertainty, suggesting that despite the symbolic importance of the Agreement, its practical effectiveness remains contested. This invites readers to reflect on the gaps between global commitments and actual progress, situating African climate discourse within the broader shortcomings of international policy regimes. Through these intertextual references, newspaper headlines in Sub-Saharan Africa do more than simply report facts: they connect local climate narratives to global discourses, highlight geopolitical influences, and reflect contested debates about responsibility and solutions. Invocations of external authorities (global coalitions, fact-checkers, international agreements) construct climate change not as an isolated African problem but as part of a global struggle involving power, morality, and policy effectiveness.

Moral Evaluation and ideologies in Climate Change Discourse

Moral evaluation in climate change discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public perception by attributing responsibility, obligation, and ethical considerations to climate action. It assesses the moral dimensions of climate change by determining who is responsible, what ought to be done, and the consequences of inaction. A key linguistic tool in this evaluation is modality, which frames the level of obligation, necessity, or uncertainty surrounding climate change interventions. Such linguistic and evaluative choices are not neutral; they carry embedded assumptions and values that shape how climate action is legitimized, resisted, or contested. This section examines how these modal choices influence public perception and policy discussions in Sub-Saharan African newspaper headlines.

Examples:

- i. Missing grasshoppers **must** be taken seriously.
- ii. SA **must** prepare for unprecedented climate risks, says climatology scientist.
- iii. NEW: Climate change report - what we **must** do to avert the looming crisis.
- iv. Early warnings **must** be matched with early actions.
- v. Why doctors **should** embrace climate-centric innovation - Dr. Salako"
- vi. SA's shift to a low-carbon economy **should** not leave coal mining workers behind."
- vii. Climate change **may** reverse gains in malaria prevention - WHO."

The modal verb "must" conveys necessity, obligation, and urgency in climate change discourse. Akinseye and Awoke (2021) confirm that must functions as a strong marker of necessity and obligation, reinforcing the sense that certain actions are unavoidable. It constructs climate change as an issue that demands immediate action, rather than something optional or debatable. This linguistic choice strengthens the framing of climate change as a crisis requiring intervention at various levels, scientific, political, and societal. This reflects an urgency ideology, where climate change is framed as non-negotiable and requiring instant intervention. In the headline "Missing grasshoppers must be taken seriously," the use of "must" signals an imperative response to an environmental issue, possibly biodiversity loss linked to climate change. Similarly, in "SA must prepare for unprecedented climate risks, says climatology scientist," "must" reinforces the necessity of proactive adaptation to climate change. The phrase "unprecedented climate risks" suggests escalating environmental threats, positioning climate change as an urgent, evolving danger. This construction aligns with the discourse of resilience, implying that preparation is essential to withstand the increasing severity of climate-related disasters. Here, a crisis ideology also appears, dramatizing climate change as an existential danger to legitimize urgent action. In example 3, "NEW: Climate change report - what we must do to avert the looming crisis," "must" emphasizes the compulsory nature of climate action to prevent disaster. The phrase "looming crisis" heightens the sense of impending catastrophe, reinforcing the narrative that inaction will lead to irreversible damage. This headline aligns with the construction of resistance, framing climate action as an urgent measure to combat environmental threats. This highlights a technocratic reliance ideology, where expert-led reports and scientific forecasts are positioned as authoritative guides for climate action. Example (iv) "Early warnings must be matched with early actions" reinforces the strong obligation to act based on scientific predictions. This framing of climate change highlights the necessity of preparedness, a key theme in the discourse of resilience, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where early warning systems are crucial in mitigating disasters. On the other hand, the modal verb "should"

expresses obligation and strong recommendation, positioning climate-related actions as morally or logically necessary rather than optional. Unlike "must," which signals absolute necessity, "should" suggests an expectation or advisable course of action, leaving some room for alternative perspectives. In example v above, "Why doctors should embrace climate-centric innovation - Dr. Salako," the headline frames medical professionals as crucial actors in addressing climate change. The verb "should" implies that embracing innovation is a professional and ethical duty, rather than a strict requirement. This aligns with the discourse of resistance, positioning adaptation and innovation as necessary responses to environmental challenges. Similarly in vi, "SA's shift to a low-carbon economy should not leave coal mining workers behind" presents a call for a just transition in climate policy. The modal "should" suggests an obligation to balance economic transformation with social responsibility, reflecting an equity ideology, where fairness and justice are central to climate discourse. Finally, the modal verb "may" expresses possibility and uncertainty, introducing a level of caution in climate change discourse. Unlike "must" or "should," which imply obligation, "may" signals a potential but uncertain outcome, often reflecting scientific caution and the need for further investigation. In the example, "Climate change may reverse gains in malaria prevention - WHO," the verb "may" acknowledges the potential negative impact of climate change on health progress without asserting it as a definite outcome. This cautious framing aligns with the discourse of loss, warning of potential setbacks while leaving room for debate and further research. Here, a scientific uncertainty ideology is visible, where caution and probability dominate discourse, legitimizing ongoing research while delaying firm attribution of blame.

Treatment Recommendation in Climate Change Discourse

In climate change discourse, treatment recommendations shape how solutions to environmental challenges are framed. These recommendations use directive language, quantification, clear agency attribution, and future-oriented expressions to prescribe actionable steps. This section analyzes how treatment recommendations are constructed through linguistic choices that emphasize policy measures, technological innovations, and community-driven initiatives.

- i. Emir Sanusi Urges Kano People to Plant Trees
- ii. 'Afforestation Vital to Tackling Heat Wave'
- iii. DBN Gets GCF Accreditation to Boost Fight Against Climate Change
- iv. NNPC, TotalEnergies Partner to Tackle Hydrocarbon Emissions
- v. Kwale Launches Tree Planting Campaign to Mitigate Climate Change
- vi. Climate Response Fund Should Significantly Affect Disaster Response Landscape in SA
- vii. 'To Save Our Planet We Have to Speak Loudly, Act Boldly at COP-27'
- viii. Mwanza Emphasizes on Tree Planting to Address Climate Change

The example headlines employ various linguistic strategies to frame climate change as an urgent issue requiring immediate action. These strategies include emphasizing moral obligation, institutional and corporate responsibility, community engagement, and activist mobilization. Through the use of necessity framing, directive language, and causal links, the headlines shape public perception of climate change solutions and highlight the power held by institutions, authorities, and activists in driving action. In example i, the headline presents a respected traditional leader lending credibility to the climate action message. The use of "urges" signals strong encouragement, positioning tree planting as a social responsibility rather than a mere

suggestion. This reflects power exerted by traditional authority to influence local behavior. Similarly, in example ii, the headline employs necessity framing with "vital," establishing afforestation as an essential solution to extreme weather conditions. The phrase "tackling heat wave" draws a causal link between afforestation and climate mitigation, reinforcing urgency and the power of messaging to direct collective action. Also, institutional responsibility is a recurring theme. Example iii highlights financial institutions' role in climate action. "Boost fight against climate change" constructs environmental action as an ongoing battle, reinforcing urgency. The mention of accreditation suggests growing commitment and the power of institutions in controlling resources and legitimizing climate action. Furthermore, corporate accountability appears in example (iv). Explicitly naming oil companies underscores responsibility in emissions reduction. "Partner to tackle" implies collaboration, demonstrating the power of corporate actors in implementing solutions. Also, localized climate initiatives are evident in (v). Mentioning "Kwale" as agent reinforces local authority engagement. "Launches" suggests ongoing initiative, signaling sustained commitment. The causal link "to mitigate climate change" frames tree planting as tangible and necessary. Policy intervention is highlighted in example (vi). The modal "should" signals strong expectation, framing the fund's impact as necessity rather than option. The phrase "significantly affect" implies large-scale transformation, reinforcing the power of government and policy actors in shaping outcomes. Additionally, climate action is framed as a moral imperative in example (vii). The phrase "Have to" signals obligation, making inaction irresponsible. The mention of COP-27 links action to global governance, highlighting the power of international platforms in directing national and local initiatives. Lastly, community-level engagement is reinforced in the last example. The mention of "Mwanza" suggests local leadership, and "emphasizes on" signals advocacy. This reflects the power dynamics in who directs action and whose voices are amplified.

Discussion

The findings point to a climate discourse in Sub-Saharan African newspapers that is simultaneously constructive and uneven across regions. The strong emphasis on problem definition and treatment recommendation highlights the media's role in raising awareness and advocating solutions, which aligns with Entman's framing functions that prioritize mobilization and problem-solving. However, the relative neglect of causal interpretation and moral evaluation reveals a discursive gap: without assigning responsibility or making ethical appeals, reporting risks diluting the accountability of governments, corporations, and global actors. From a critical discourse perspective, this imbalance suggests that while newspapers actively position climate change as urgent and actionable, they may inadvertently depoliticize the issue, shifting attention away from the deeper power structures that perpetuate environmental crises. Regional differences also carry important ideological implications. West African media appear to engage in a more activist mode of reporting, simultaneously defining problems, attributing causes, and advocating for solutions, a pattern that underscores the region's acute vulnerability to climate impacts. In contrast, Southern Africa's focus on balanced reporting and policy responses suggests a technocratic orientation, while East Africa's limited engagement across categories may point to weaker institutional or media prioritization of climate narratives. These disparities not only reflect different media cultures but also reveal how climate change is discursively constructed in relation to local contexts of vulnerability, governance, and political debate. A more comprehensive discourse that integrates problem definition, accountability, moral evaluation, and solution-building could foster both public awareness and policy innovation, ensuring that media narratives do not merely describe climate change but also challenge structures of power and responsibility that sustain the crisis.

The textual strategies and collocations identified in Sub-Saharan African newspaper headlines demonstrate how climate change is discursively constructed as an urgent, multifaceted

problem. Headlines foreground themes of loss, crisis, and disruption, which define the severity of the issue while framing it as a lived experience with tangible social, economic, and cultural consequences. Collocational patterns evoke immediacy and human vulnerability, signaling that climate change is not an abstract phenomenon but a force that reverses progress and deepens inequalities. These framings reinforce Entman's notion of problem definition, where climate change is portrayed as a pressing threat that cuts across domains including health, economy, and heritage. The language of fear, urgency, and irreversible damage amplifies the sense of crisis, encouraging public engagement while simultaneously creating discursive spaces that promote adaptation and resilience as necessary responses.

Causal framing reveals a deliberate effort to assign responsibility and foreground agency in climate discourse. Active constructions consistently remove ambiguity through the clear identification of governments, corporations, and institutions as accountable actors. This approach contrasts with passive framings that obscure responsibility and shift attention away from structures of power. The emphasis on responsibility and accountability positions climate change not merely as an environmental challenge but as a socio-political issue deeply connected to governance, justice, and equity. This orientation resonates with wider global climate justice debates, where responsibility for mitigation, adaptation, and financing remains contested. Through the combined force of crisis-oriented narratives and responsibility-driven framings, Sub-Saharan African media construct climate change as both an existential threat and a political struggle over fairness, accountability, and survival.

Intertextuality in climate change discourse demonstrates how media texts draw upon broader narratives, international agreements, expert voices, and societal debates to construct meaning. As noted by Akinseye (2005), such textual references enhance the credibility of reports by lending authority to the information presented. Both quotations enhance the credibility of the reports, lending authority to the presented information. Therefore, rather than isolating climate issues, headlines situate them within global frameworks, connecting local realities in Sub-Saharan Africa with international environmental politics. This strategy functions to validate, complicate, or challenge dominant narratives of responsibility and causality. Intertextual structures may reinforce authority through references to external institutions, create ambiguity by shifting attention across multiple actors, or expose tensions between local experiences and global commitments. In doing so, climate change is discursively framed as a multi-scalar issue that operates simultaneously at local, national, and global levels. Through these discursive linkages, newspapers portray climate change not only as an environmental crisis but also as a contested political and moral struggle, embedded within power relations and competing visions of justice.

Moral evaluation in climate change discourse operates through linguistic resources such as modality, which construct varying degrees of obligation, necessity, and possibility in responding to the crisis. These evaluative choices reveal ideological orientations, including urgency, resilience, justice, and scientific caution, thereby shaping how publics and policymakers perceive responsibility and appropriate action. Treatment recommendations extend this evaluative framing into prescriptive discourse, using directive language, causal linkages, and future-oriented expressions to position climate action as both necessary and achievable. Through these strategies, newspapers emphasize institutional authority, expert knowledge, corporate accountability, and community engagement as central to climate responses, framing climate change not merely as an environmental challenge but as a moral and political imperative.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Sub-Saharan African newspaper discourse on climate change is not simply descriptive but constitutive, shaping how the crisis is understood, contested, and acted upon. Through framing choices and linguistic strategies, newspapers participate in broader struggles over power, responsibility, and justice, embedding climate change within both local vulnerabilities and global debates. The analysis highlights how discourse not only reflects environmental realities but also produces ideological orientations that legitimize particular

solutions while sidelining others. A critical implication is that media language functions as a site where competing visions of climate governance, whether technocratic, justice-oriented, or resilience-focused, are negotiated and normalised. This suggests that climate change communication in the region involves shaping political and moral imaginaries as much as conveying information. In foregrounding accountability, amplifying ethical imperatives, and linking local narratives with global frameworks, newspaper discourse holds the potential to foster more inclusive and transformative climate action. However, for this potential to be realized, future media practices must move beyond fragmented framings toward integrative narratives that connect urgency with justice, solutions with responsibility, and local experiences with global power structures.

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AI Statement

This document has been enhanced through the use of Grammarly which was employed to refine its linguistic style and correct grammar and spelling. While the incorporation of these technologies may introduce some AI-generated linguistic patterns, it is important to note that the core intellectual content, data interpretation, and conclusions presented are entirely the work of the author.

Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

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