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Bridging Divides: Promoting Reconciliation through Peace Journalism in South African Media Coverage of Xenophobic Violence

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Peace journalism, Xenophobia, South African media, Reconciliation, Social cohesion

ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the application of peace journalism principles in South African newspaper coverage of xenophobic violence, focusing specifically on episodes from 2008 and 2015. Utilizing qualitative content analysis guided by Johan Galtung's peace journalism framework, the research evaluates the extent to which leading newspapers, Mail & Guardian, Sunday Times, The Star, and Daily Sun, contextualized conflicts, avoided binary narratives, amplified marginalized voices, and promoted solutions-oriented reconciliation. Findings indicate significant disparities in journalistic practices, with analytical newspapers such as Mail & Guardian consistently adhering to peace journalism principles through contextual reporting, inclusive representation, and solution-focused narratives. Conversely, tabloids like Daily Sun prioritized sensationalism, reinforcing stereotypes and neglecting comprehensive contextualization. These variations highlight the crucial influence media narratives have on societal perceptions and responses to xenophobic violence. The study emphasizes the transformative potential of peace journalism, arguing for its broader adoption within South African media as a critical strategy for fostering empathy, understanding, and social cohesion. Ultimately, the consistent application of peace journalism principles could substantially contribute to addressing the structural causes of xenophobia and to promoting sustainable peace and reconciliation.

Introduction

Media narratives significantly shape societal perceptions, particularly in contexts marked by persistent tensions and recurring conflicts. In South Africa, the complex interplay of historical injustices, economic disparities, and contemporary social challenges frequently manifests as xenophobic violence targeting foreign nationals (Harris, 2002; Crush, Ramachandran, & Pendleton, 2013). The recurrent episodes of xenophobia in 2008 and 2015 drew widespread national and international attention, prompting critical debates on the role media narratives play in either exacerbating tensions or fostering reconciliation and social cohesion (Rodny-Gumede, 2015). Given the media's influential role in shaping public understanding and societal responses to conflict, examining journalistic practices is crucial to addressing the root causes and reducing xenophobic hostility. Central to this inquiry is Johan Galtung's theory of peace journalism, which offers a valuable normative framework for evaluating media practices in conflict-sensitive contexts (Galtung, 2000, 2003). Unlike traditional war journalism that focuses predominantly on sensationalism, elite voices, and explicit acts of violence, peace journalism encourages reporters to provide comprehensive context, explore underlying structural causes, avoid binary framings, amplify marginalized voices, and actively propose solutions aimed at reconciliation and peaceful coexistence (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2012). By incorporating these

principles, journalists can significantly influence public understanding of conflicts, encouraging empathy and constructive dialogue rather than perpetuating divisive stereotypes or tensions (Youngblood, 2017; Masud-Un-Nabi, 2021).

Previous studies suggest that South African media have often failed to consistently adopt peace journalism approaches, frequently emphasizing sensationalized depictions of violence rather than in-depth analysis and reconciliation-focused reporting (Rodny-Gumede, 2015). For example, coverage of the tragic killing of Emmanuel Sithole in 2015, widely disseminated through graphic imagery, sparked international attention yet was criticized for not adequately exploring structural causes or proposing viable solutions to xenophobic tensions (Oatway, 2015). Such media practices can inadvertently entrench societal divisions, highlighting the necessity for deeper investigations into media reporting standards and their implications for reconciliation efforts. Thus, the current study addresses this critical gap by examining the extent to which selected South African newspapers—*Mail & Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, *The Star*, and *Daily Sun*—adhere to peace journalism principles in their coverage of xenophobic violence. By utilizing qualitative content analysis of 200 articles published during peak periods following xenophobic incidents in 2008 and 2015, this research provides a systematic evaluation of media reporting styles in relation to peace journalism

criteria. The study explores explicitly how newspapers contextualize conflicts, frame narratives, represent marginalized voices, and promote reconciliation and solution-oriented dialogues.

The significance of this research lies in its potential contribution to media studies and conflict-sensitive journalism in South Africa. It emphasizes how responsible reporting practices could fundamentally shift public perceptions about migrants and conflict, promoting societal healing and social cohesion. Moreover, it underscores the practical importance of media literacy, journalist training, and editorial policies in fostering peace journalism, thereby informing both media practitioners and policymakers committed to sustainable solutions to address xenophobia. To comprehensively guide this research, the following research questions have been formulated based on insights from the analysis of media coverage:

RQ1: How extensively do South African newspapers contextualize xenophobic violence by identifying its underlying socio-economic and historical causes?

RQ2: To what extent do newspapers avoid binary "us versus them" framings in their reporting of xenophobic violence?

RQ3: How consistently do South African newspapers represent the perspectives and voices of marginalized groups directly affected by xenophobic violence?

RQ4: How actively do South African newspapers promote solution-oriented narratives and reconciliation efforts aimed at addressing xenophobic violence?

By addressing these questions, the study seeks to critically evaluate current journalistic practices against peace journalism principles, highlighting strengths, deficiencies, and areas for improvement. This comprehensive analysis underscores the transformative role that peace journalism can play in mediating complex societal conflicts, fostering informed public discourse, and advancing reconciliation and social cohesion within the diverse and historically fragmented South African society.

Literature Review

The role of media in shaping societal perceptions and influencing conflict dynamics is profound. In contexts like South Africa, where historical and contemporary tensions coexist, the media's approach to reporting can either exacerbate conflicts or promote reconciliation. This literature review examines the principles of peace journalism, its application in media coverage of xenophobic violence in South Africa, and

its potential to foster reconciliation and social cohesion. Peace journalism, as conceptualized by Johan Galtung, advocates for reporting that emphasizes non-violent responses to conflict, highlights multiple perspectives, and addresses underlying causes of disputes (Galtung, 2000). This approach contrasts with traditional war journalism, which often focuses on violence, elite perspectives, and zero-sum narratives. By prioritizing solutions and giving voice to marginalized communities, peace journalism aims to create opportunities for society to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). South Africa has experienced recurrent episodes of xenophobic violence, notably in 2008 and 2015, targeting foreign nationals, particularly from other African countries. The media's portrayal of these events has been scrutinized for potentially reinforcing negative stereotypes and failing to contextualize the socio-economic factors contributing to such violence. For instance, the 2015 killing of Emmanuel Sithole, a Mozambican national, was captured in a series of photographs by South African photojournalist James Oatway. These images, published on the front page of the Sunday Times, sparked national outrage and brought international attention to the severity of the attacks (Oatway, 2015). While the graphic nature of the photographs highlighted the brutality of the violence, critics argue that such coverage can perpetuate fear and further entrench divisions if not accompanied by an in-depth analysis of root causes and potential solutions.

Implementing peace journalism in South Africa faces several challenges. Journalists often operate under tight deadlines, limiting the scope of their reporting. Economic pressures and competition can lead media outlets to prioritize sensational stories that attract immediate attention, often at the expense of nuanced analysis (Rodny-Gumede, 2015). Additionally, entrenched biases and a lack of training in conflict-sensitive reporting can result in coverage that inadvertently reinforces stereotypes and societal divisions. Media narratives significantly influence public perceptions and intergroup relations. Negative portrayals of certain communities can lead to their marginalization and justify discriminatory practices. Conversely, media that highlight stories of intergroup solidarity and successful integration can promote social cohesion. For example, the Post-Conflict Research Center (PCRC) in Bosnia-Herzegovina utilizes multimedia projects to foster tolerance and mutual understanding among divided communities (Post-Conflict Research Center, n.d.). Similar initiatives in South Africa could leverage storytelling to bridge divides and promote reconciliation.

Beyond social impacts, media representations have economic consequences. A report by Africa Practice and Africa No Filter revealed that negative stereotypes in international media cost Africa up to £3.2 billion annually in inflated interest payments on sovereign debt (Makura, 2024; Suryani, 2024). This "prejudice premium" underscores the tangible costs of biased reporting and highlights the need for balanced narratives that accurately reflect the continent's complexities and opportunities. The media wields significant power in shaping societal narratives and influencing conflict dynamics — a point strongly emphasized in peace journalism scholarship, which shows that conflict-sensitive reporting can reduce support for violence, foster empathy, and open space for non-violent solutions (Galtung, 2003; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; Shinar, 2007; Lee, 2010; Youngblood, 2017; Masud-Un-Nabi, 2021; Suryani, 2024; Mokoena & Nshimiyimana, 2025). In South Africa, adopting peace journalism principles in reporting xenophobic violence can therefore contribute to reconciliation and social cohesion by providing context, amplifying marginalized voices, and promoting non-violent solutions. However, challenges such as economic pressures, entrenched biases, and the need for specialized training must be addressed to realize the full potential of peace journalism. By doing so, the media can play a pivotal role in transforming conflict narratives and fostering a more inclusive society.

Theoretical Framework

Peace journalism, as articulated by Johan Galtung, provides the central theoretical underpinning of this research. Galtung (1998) conceptualized peace journalism as a normative approach that emphasizes solution-oriented reporting, seeking to uncover the structural and cultural roots of conflicts rather than merely describing violence. Galtung's theory challenges traditional media practices by promoting news coverage aimed explicitly at peace-building and conflict resolution rather than simply depicting conflict as an inevitable part of societal interactions. Galtung's theory draws a clear distinction between peace journalism and traditional war journalism. War journalism tends to focus on overt violence, elites, winners and losers, and often disregards the complex socio-economic conditions underpinning conflicts (Galtung, 2003). Conversely, peace journalism advocates a multidimensional reporting strategy that prioritizes context, constructive dialogue, and narratives that humanize all conflicting parties (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2012). It actively seeks alternatives to violence, highlights invisible effects on communities, and refrains from dehumanizing adversaries. Thus,

peace journalism provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing media practices concerning conflicts, particularly in contexts marked by intense societal fractures, such as South Africa.

In the South African context, peace journalism theory is particularly relevant given the nation's historical legacies and recurring internal tensions. Post-apartheid South Africa continues to grapple with profound socio-economic inequalities, racial tensions, and notably, xenophobic violence. These structural problems manifest as recurrent societal conflicts, frequently represented in simplistic or sensationalized ways by mainstream media (Harris, 2002; Crush, Ramachandran, & Pendleton, 2013). Applying the theoretical lens of peace journalism thus facilitates critical analysis of whether and how South African media coverage either contributes to reconciliation and cohesion or reinforces divisions and prejudices. Peace journalism operates through several core principles, all of which are particularly salient in addressing xenophobic violence in South Africa. The first principle is the avoidance of simplistic binary narratives, such as "us versus them," often employed in conventional reporting (Kempf, 2007). By highlighting the nuances within the conflicting groups and their interconnected histories, peace journalism reduces polarization and encourages empathy among different societal factions. According to Kempf (2007), binary framing in media coverage intensifies conflicts and entrenches antagonistic identities, making reconciliation considerably more challenging.

Another principle involves highlighting root causes and context behind conflicts rather than merely reporting on the violent outcomes (Masud-Un-Nabi, 2021; Lee, 2010). By exposing underlying factors such as economic deprivation, social exclusion, and structural injustice, peace journalism compels audiences and policymakers to address systemic problems that fuel violence rather than focusing solely on its immediate manifestations (Hackett, 2011). This contextual approach is critical in South Africa, where xenophobic violence has deep connections to poverty, unemployment, migration pressures, and institutional failures (Misago et al., 2015; Tewodros, 2024). Thus, applying peace journalism theory enables a deeper understanding and a more comprehensive media discourse on how xenophobic violence can be mitigated through targeted social interventions rather than temporary security measures. Furthermore, peace journalism advocates for inclusive reporting by amplifying marginalized voices, specifically those affected by violence, yet typically excluded from mainstream discourse (Shinar, 2007). By prioritizing the narratives of marginalized communities and affected

foreign nationals, peace journalism facilitates broader societal understanding, empathy, and dialogue across social divisions (Shaw et al., 2011). This principle is crucial in addressing xenophobia because it shifts media coverage from a singularly nationalistic perspective to a more humanistic narrative, fostering mutual understanding and social cohesion (Rodny-Gumede, 2015).

Additionally, peace journalism emphasizes solution-oriented journalism, promoting dialogue, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence as legitimate news values (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2012; Masud-Un-Nabi, 2021). Instead of simply reporting violent acts and their immediate consequences, journalists guided by peace journalism principles actively seek out and report on initiatives aimed at preventing conflict, mediating conflicts, and building peace. By spotlighting these efforts, the media can reinforce societal optimism and encourage constructive dialogue among conflicted communities (Youngblood, 2017). Critics, however, argue that peace journalism may unintentionally sacrifice objectivity by engaging in advocacy-oriented reporting. Loyn (2007), for example, suggests that peace journalism risks crossing ethical boundaries by taking on advocacy roles rather than simply informing audiences. Nonetheless, peace journalism theorists such as Lynch and McGoldrick (2012) counter that objectivity does not imply neutrality or detachment from ethical considerations. Instead, peace journalism explicitly recognizes the ethical responsibilities journalists bear when reporting conflict, advocating transparent, responsible journalism that actively reduces societal harm (Hackett & Schroeder, 2008).

Applying peace journalism theory to South Africa's xenophobic violence provides robust analytical utility and clear normative guidance. It facilitates the assessment of South African media practices, identifying gaps in current coverage, and highlighting the potential for more responsible, context-sensitive, and reconciliation-focused reporting (Rodny-Gumede, 2015). By emphasizing the structural drivers of xenophobia and foregrounding stories of reconciliation and unity, peace journalism can play a transformative role, shifting societal perceptions and enhancing social cohesion. Galtung's peace journalism framework provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how media coverage influences societal attitudes toward xenophobic violence in South Africa. By emphasizing context, promoting diverse voices, avoiding simplistic narratives, and prioritizing solutions over sensationalism, peace journalism offers an invaluable approach to foster reconciliation and social cohesion in a fractured society.

Materials and Methods

This study employed qualitative content analysis as its primary research method to investigate the application of peace journalism principles in media coverage of xenophobic violence in South Africa. Qualitative content analysis was selected for its strength in interpreting and critically evaluating textual content, enabling researchers to systematically identify patterns, themes, and underlying meanings in media reports (Schreier, 2012). Given the complexity of xenophobic conflicts and the nuances involved in assessing journalistic practices, a qualitative approach provided an appropriate framework to deeply analyze textual data and reveal subtle ways in which news coverage aligns with or deviates from peace journalism principles. The primary data for this research consisted of news reports published by major South African newspapers during key episodes of xenophobic violence, particularly those that occurred in 2008 and 2015. Newspapers were specifically chosen for their role as influential platforms that shape public discourse, perceptions, and attitudes about contentious issues such as migration, violence, and social cohesion (Rodny-Gumede, 2015). Four leading newspapers were purposively selected: *Mail & Guardian*, *The Star*, *Daily Sun*, and *Sunday Times*. These newspapers represent a cross-section of the South African media landscape, encompassing variations in audience reach, editorial stance, publication frequency, and ownership structures, thereby providing comprehensive insights into the overall journalistic landscape.

The sample period for content analysis covered the two months immediately following each xenophobic outbreak (May-June 2008 and April-May 2015). This timeframe was strategically chosen to capture media coverage during peak violence, the immediate societal responses, and subsequent policy discussions. Such periods offer the richest data for examining how media narratives evolve and reflect underlying journalistic practices in crisis situations. Although the xenophobic outbreaks examined in this study occurred in 2008 and 2015, they continue to be widely recognized as watershed moments in South Africa's post-apartheid history, shaping long-term public discourse, policy debates, and newsroom practices on migration and violence. Focusing on these high-salience periods allows the study to examine how foundational narrative patterns were established during acute crises — patterns that are still referenced in contemporary political and media discussions of xenophobia. The historical distance also offers analytical advantages, as it provides complete access to archival coverage and enables a more systematic assessment of how conflict narratives

crystallized over time and how they continue to inform present attitudes toward migrants and xenophobic violence. Data collection involved systematic searches of the newspapers' online archives using relevant keywords, including "xenophobia," "violence," "foreign nationals," "immigrants," "migrants," and "attacks." A comprehensive initial search yielded approximately 550 relevant articles. A further screening was performed based on relevance criteria, resulting in a refined final corpus of 200 articles that explicitly discussed xenophobic violence and related societal dynamics. This purposive and systematic approach ensured that the sample was both representative and manageable, facilitating deep qualitative analysis without compromising analytical rigor.

Qualitative content analysis proceeded through a structured and iterative coding process guided by Galtung's (1998) theoretical framework of peace journalism. An initial coding scheme was developed based on key peace journalism criteria, including contextual reporting, avoidance of binary opposition, emphasis on solutions and reconciliation, and amplification of marginalized voices. Articles were read thoroughly multiple times, with coding categories refined iteratively as new patterns and insights emerged, following procedures suggested by Schreier (2012). Coding reliability was strengthened through peer checking by an experienced independent researcher familiar with qualitative methodologies, ensuring objectivity and methodological rigor. Each article was systematically analyzed according to how clearly and consistently it aligned with or diverged from the peace journalism criteria established in the theoretical framework. Articles demonstrating consistent engagement with multiple peace journalism principles—such as highlighting underlying structural causes, providing perspectives from affected communities, and emphasizing solutions and reconciliatory narratives—were classified as strong exemplars of peace journalism. Conversely, articles primarily characterized by sensationalism, superficial reporting of violent events, reliance on elite perspectives, and binary framing were coded as aligning predominantly with traditional war journalism practices. This analytical approach provided clear, comparative insights into the extent and nature of peace journalism practices within South African media.

The qualitative content analysis method enabled the researcher to discern not only explicit content but also subtle, implicit meanings conveyed through linguistic choices, framing strategies, source representation, and narrative structures. Thus, it was possible to gain deeper insights into how journalistic choices influence societal understandings of xenophobic violence, potentially either contributing to or hindering social cohesion and reconciliation efforts. Finally, ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process. Given that the research utilized publicly available newspaper articles, formal ethical approval was not required. Nonetheless, the study adhered strictly to ethical guidelines regarding the accurate representation of media content, avoidance of misinterpretation, and transparent presentation of findings. The adoption of qualitative content analysis for this study provided a rigorous, systematic, and flexible methodological approach suitable for exploring the nuanced ways in which peace journalism principles manifest in the complex context of xenophobic violence in South Africa. Through careful selection of data sources, strategic sampling, structured coding, and detailed interpretative analysis, this method allowed the researcher to produce robust, credible, and insightful findings, significantly contributing to scholarly understandings of peace journalism practices within conflict-sensitive environments.

Results

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative content analysis conducted on newspaper coverage of xenophobic violence in South Africa. Guided by Galtung's peace journalism theory, the analysis explored the extent to which the selected newspapers (*Mail & Guardian*, *The Star*, *Daily Sun*, and *Sunday Times*) adhered to or diverged from the principles of peace journalism. The dataset comprised 200 articles published during critical periods following xenophobic incidents in May–June 2008 and April–May 2015. The findings are organized around four major themes central to peace journalism: contextual reporting, framing of narratives, representation of marginalized voices, and the promotion of solutions and reconciliation.

Contextual Reporting of Xenophobic Violence

Contextualizing conflicts by identifying structural and societal causes is a fundamental component of peace journalism. This analysis examined the extent to which selected South African newspapers adhered to this principle in their coverage of xenophobic violence. Significant disparities emerged across the newspapers studied (Table 1). Approximately 65% (n=130) of the articles provided meaningful context related to socio-economic factors, including poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, and competition over scarce resources. Notably, *Mail & Guardian* exhibited the highest adherence (82%), followed by *Sunday Times*

(70%), reflecting their preference for analytical and investigative reporting styles. In contrast, *Daily Sun* demonstrated minimal contextual depth, with only 38% of its articles explicitly addressing underlying socio-economic conditions. Instead, its coverage prioritized sensationalist depictions of violent events.

Table 1: Contextual Reporting across Newspapers

Newspaper	Articles Analyzed	Articles Providing Context (%)
Mail & Guardian	50	41 (82%)
Sunday Times	50	35 (70%)
The Star	50	30 (60%)
Daily Sun	50	19 (38%)
Total	**200**	**125 (62.5%)**

In-depth analysis revealed that *Mail & Guardian* often linked incidents of xenophobic violence directly to enduring inequalities rooted in apartheid-era injustices, systemic governance failures, and economic marginalization. For example, one particular article explicitly connected outbreaks of xenophobic violence to government failures in housing and public services delivery, thereby enhancing reader comprehension of the deeper societal dynamics at play. Such reporting aligns closely with Galtung's principles of peace journalism, shifting the focus from sensationalist descriptions of conflict to nuanced discussions of structural and institutional shortcomings that perpetuate societal divisions. In sharp contrast, the *Daily Sun* commonly depicted xenophobic violence as spontaneous, isolated incidents rather than outcomes driven by broader social inequalities. Articles in this publication frequently lacked in-depth socio-economic analysis and predominantly highlighted dramatic or violent aspects of conflicts. Such simplistic portrayals reinforce stereotypes about migrants and obscure the multifaceted nature of xenophobic tensions, thereby limiting the potential for informed public discourse.

The variations observed in contextual reporting reflect broader editorial policies and target audiences of the respective newspapers. Publications like *Mail & Guardian*, known for critical investigative journalism, adopted peace journalism principles consistently by emphasizing the broader social contexts that underpin conflict scenarios. In contrast, tabloids such as the

Daily Sun prioritize sensationalism, reflecting a market-driven approach designed to attract larger audiences through dramatic storytelling. The implications of these distinct approaches are considerable, as contextual reporting significantly influences public understanding, shaping policy responses and societal attitudes toward conflict and reconciliation. Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates that adherence to peace journalism principles can meaningfully contribute to public dialogue on xenophobia, fostering a more nuanced societal understanding that supports peaceful conflict resolution and social cohesion.

Framing of Narratives: Avoidance of Binary Oppositions

Avoiding simplistic binary narratives, particularly the "us versus them" framing, is central to peace journalism, as it prevents the reinforcement of divisions within societies experiencing conflict. In analyzing newspaper coverage of xenophobic violence in South Africa, substantial variations emerged in adherence to this principle (see Table 2). Among the 200 articles examined, exactly half (n=100; 50%) relied upon binary framing, portraying the issue primarily through a conflict between South Africans ("us") and foreign nationals ("them"). However, this framing was not uniformly employed, highlighting distinct editorial approaches among the selected newspapers. As illustrated in Table 2, newspapers varied significantly in their use of binary framing.

Table 2: Use of Binary Framing in Newspaper Coverage

Newspaper	Articles Analyzed	Articles with Binary Framing (%)
Daily Sun	50	35 (70%)
The Star	50	29 (58%)
Sunday Times	50	22 (44%)
Mail & Guardian	50	14 (28%)
Total	**200**	**100 (50%)**

The Daily Sun showed the highest reliance on binary narratives (70%), frequently depicting foreign nationals as economic competitors threatening local job opportunities and public resources. This portrayal implicitly justified hostility by reinforcing divisions

between citizens and foreigners, neglecting underlying complexities such as shared socioeconomic struggles. Similarly, The Star frequently utilized binary framing (58%), though slightly less overtly. Articles from this newspaper often highlighted violent confrontations without sufficiently exploring nuanced socio-political contexts, inadvertently promoting perceptions of inherent differences and antagonism. In contrast, Mail & Guardian used the fewest binary narratives (28%). Its coverage consistently emphasized interconnected socioeconomic struggles between local and immigrant communities, thus reframing the xenophobic violence as a shared consequence of systemic failures in governance, employment, and social policy. The newspaper highlighted migrant contributions to South Africa's economy, challenging the simplistic notion that foreign nationals pose an economic threat. By humanizing migrants and highlighting mutual vulnerabilities, the publication actively contributed to reducing hostility and facilitating empathy between divided groups.

The stark difference between newspapers like the Mail & Guardian and the Daily Sun underscores the critical role that editorial choices play in shaping public perceptions. Newspapers adopting peace journalism principles help construct narratives that recognize common human experiences, thereby promoting understanding rather than division. Conversely, reliance on simplistic binary framings by other publications risks reinforcing prejudice and conflict, potentially exacerbating societal tensions. These findings emphasize that responsible media practices, aligned with peace journalism, hold substantial potential for mitigating xenophobic violence by fostering inclusive narratives. Such an approach is essential in diverse societies like South Africa, where simplistic binary representations can significantly undermine efforts toward national cohesion and reconciliation.

Representation of Marginalized Voices

Amplifying marginalized voices, especially those directly impacted by violence, remains a critical aspect of peace journalism. Analysis revealed significant variations among newspapers in representing victims, migrants, and affected communities in their coverage of xenophobic violence. Overall, less than half of the analyzed articles (47%, n=94) featured direct accounts from marginalized individuals, community representatives, or humanitarian groups (Table 3). Notably, *Mail & Guardian* led in this aspect, with 68% of its articles incorporating firsthand narratives from migrants, local activists, and NGOs. The *Sunday Times* followed, albeit with a lower rate of 54%. Both newspapers consistently presented personal

stories, thus humanizing victims and encouraging empathy and deeper societal understanding. Conversely, *The Star* and *Daily Sun* demonstrated substantially weaker representation of marginalized voices, at 38% and 28%, respectively. Their articles typically prioritized narratives sourced from authorities such as police officials, government spokespeople, and political leaders. For example, the *Daily Sun* frequently published brief reports dominated by police statements describing the incidents superficially without integrating the perspectives of affected migrants or local communities. Consequently, their reporting appeared imbalanced, perpetuating exclusion and reinforcing perceptions of marginalized groups as passive victims rather than active participants in society.

The disparity in representation has implications for societal understanding of xenophobic violence. Articles that incorporate voices of affected individuals offer nuanced perspectives, fostering audience engagement and societal solidarity. For instance, *Mail & Guardian* often published detailed personal testimonies of migrants describing their experiences, challenges, and contributions to South African communities. Such accounts challenged negative stereotypes, highlighted migrants' vulnerabilities, and emphasized their humanity, facilitating public empathy and dialogue. In contrast, newspapers limiting themselves to elite sources indirectly marginalized affected communities, undermining principles of inclusivity and comprehensive storytelling central to peace journalism. Limited representation of marginalized voices in newspapers like *Daily Sun* not only diminished reader awareness of the complexities behind xenophobic violence but also potentially perpetuated prejudicial attitudes, presenting migrants as outsiders rather than integral members of the community.

Table 3: Representation of Marginalized Voices

Newspaper	Articles Analyzed	Articles Including Marginalized Voices (%)
Mail & Guardian	50	34 (68%)
Sunday Times	50	27 (54%)
The Star	50	19 (38%)
Daily Sun	50	14 (28%)
Total	**200**	**94 (47%)**

This analysis underscores the critical role media representation plays in shaping public perceptions. The

stark differences among newspapers illustrate varying adherence to peace journalism standards, significantly influencing public discourse and attitudes. Thus, the findings highlight a clear opportunity and urgent need for South African media outlets to enhance their coverage of marginalized voices, thereby promoting empathy, dialogue, and ultimately social cohesion amid ongoing tensions surrounding xenophobic violence.

Promoting Solutions and Reconciliation

Promoting solutions, reconciliation, and constructive dialogue constitutes a fundamental principle of peace journalism, crucial in reporting sensitive issues such as xenophobic violence. The analysis of newspaper coverage demonstrated considerable variation in adherence to this principle, with approximately 40.5% (n=81) of the total articles incorporating solution-oriented narratives (Table 4). Among the selected newspapers, the *Mail & Guardian* exhibited the highest commitment (62%), frequently highlighting community-driven initiatives, government interventions, and peace-building programs aimed at addressing root causes and promoting social cohesion. Similarly, the *Sunday Times* showed moderate engagement (46%), emphasizing policy discussions and community dialogues to facilitate reconciliation. In contrast, *The Star* (32%) and particularly the *Daily Sun* (22%) placed less emphasis on solutions or reconciliatory narratives. Coverage by these newspapers predominantly prioritized immediate security responses, such as police actions, law enforcement measures, and border control activities, which, while necessary, do little to foster long-term reconciliation or social integration. The limited portrayal of sustainable solutions contributes to a public discourse that predominantly views xenophobia as a security issue rather than a complex social problem requiring comprehensive and inclusive measures.

Table 4: Promotion of Solutions and Reconciliation

Newspaper	Articles Analyzed	Articles Promoting Solutions (%)
Mail & Guardian	50	31 (62%)
Sunday Times	50	23 (46%)
The Star	50	16 (32%)
Daily Sun	50	11 (22%)
Total	**200**	**81 (40.5%)**

Specifically, *Mail & Guardian* articles frequently featured narratives emphasizing grassroots efforts by civil society organizations and local communities, including workshops and community forums, to address underlying tensions and promote mutual understanding. These stories consistently sought to foster empathy among audiences by humanizing migrants and highlighting the shared socio-economic challenges faced by all residents, irrespective of nationality. Meanwhile, Daily Sun's limited engagement primarily focused on immediate security responses, perpetuating short-term, reactive solutions without more profound reflection on sustainable, community-based reconciliation efforts. This variation in media practices reveals an essential gap within South African journalism: while certain outlets actively pursue peace journalism strategies to support reconciliation, others continue to prioritize short-term, event-driven narratives. This inconsistency underscores a broader challenge in leveraging journalism as a tool for social healing in South Africa. Consequently, promoting a more uniform application of peace journalism practices could significantly enhance public discourse around xenophobic violence, ultimately fostering greater understanding, societal cohesion, and sustainable peace.

Discussion

This study explored the extent to which South African media adopted peace journalism principles in reporting on xenophobic violence, focusing particularly on how these narratives promoted reconciliation and social cohesion. Based on a qualitative content analysis guided by Galtung's (2000) framework, significant variations in the media's adherence to peace journalism principles were found across selected newspapers: *Mail & Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, *The Star*, and *Daily Sun*. The discussion addresses the implications of these findings, underscoring how adherence to or nonadherence to peace journalism principles affects societal understanding of xenophobia and subsequent reconciliation processes. It is important to acknowledge the historical nature of the sample. The articles analyzed were produced in response to the 2008 and 2015 outbreaks of xenophobic violence, and the South African media environment has continued to evolve, particularly with the growth of digital platforms and shifting political dynamics. However, these outbreaks represent formative episodes in the public conversation about xenophobia, and the frames identified in this study still underpin contemporary reporting and policy debates. The findings should therefore be read as an examination of how core media narratives and journalistic habits were consolidated during key crises — narratives that continue to shape how xenophobic violence is understood,

remembered, and responded to today. The findings revealed notable disparities in how South African newspapers contextualized xenophobic violence. Newspapers with higher analytical and investigative orientations, such as *Mail & Guardian* (82%) and *Sunday Times* (70%), consistently linked xenophobic violence to underlying socio-economic factors, including poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, and structural governance failures. This aligns closely with Galtung's (2003) assertion that effective peace journalism must address the root causes of conflict rather than merely report on violent events. Conversely, tabloids such as *Daily Sun* provided limited contextual analysis (38%), often portraying violence as spontaneous outbursts devoid of systemic antecedents. Such minimalistic reporting reinforces simplistic interpretations and stereotypes that obscure deeper issues, potentially perpetuating cycles of violence and misunderstanding (Harris, 2002; Crush, Ramachandran, & Pendleton, 2013). Consequently, newspapers adopting comprehensive contextualization foster richer public discourse capable of addressing xenophobic violence sustainably, aligning with the objectives of peace journalism to deepen societal comprehension and empathy (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005).

Significant variations also emerged in narrative framing, particularly in the use of binary ("us versus them") portrayals. While half of the articles analyzed adopted binary framing, this was most pronounced in *Daily Sun* (70%) and *The Star* (58%). Both papers frequently represented foreign nationals as threats or competitors for limited resources, inadvertently reinforcing xenophobic sentiments. Such coverage starkly contrasts with peace journalism principles outlined by Kempf (2007), who argued that simplistic binary framings exacerbate conflict dynamics and solidify antagonistic identities. Conversely, *Mail & Guardian* (28%) demonstrated substantial avoidance of binary narratives, consistently highlighting common challenges faced by migrants and South African nationals alike. This integrative approach aligns with peace journalism's goal of humanizing conflicting parties and promoting shared understanding (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2012). By avoiding divisive portrayals, *Mail & Guardian* effectively challenged xenophobic stereotypes and reduced societal polarization, contributing constructively to public perceptions around migration and coexistence. Regarding the representation of marginalized voices, the analysis highlighted critical deficiencies in South African media. Only 47% of articles across all newspapers

directly included perspectives from migrants or affected communities. This lack of representation is problematic, as peace journalism emphasizes inclusivity and amplification of marginalized groups to foster deeper societal understanding and empathy (Shinar, 2007). Newspapers such as *Mail & Guardian* (68%) and *Sunday Times* (54%) outperformed others by regularly presenting migrant experiences and testimonies, aligning with peace journalism's inclusive principles. Contrarily, *Daily Sun* (28%) and *The Star* (38%) predominantly featured elite narratives—government officials, police authorities, and political leaders—thereby marginalizing victims' voices and experiences. The absence of diverse perspectives can significantly diminish reader comprehension of migrants' lived realities, potentially perpetuating prejudiced attitudes and exclusionary practices (Rodny-Gumede, 2015). Thus, increasing the representation of marginalized voices remains crucial for strengthening peace journalism practices within South African media, promoting greater understanding and societal solidarity.

The promotion of reconciliation and solutions was similarly uneven among the newspapers studied. Only 40.5% of total articles advocated solution-oriented narratives, indicating an overarching media tendency toward reactive rather than proactive coverage. The *Mail & Guardian* notably exhibited the most substantial alignment with solution-focused journalism (62%), regularly highlighting grassroots initiatives, community dialogues, peace-building efforts, and policy responses. In contrast, publications like *Daily Sun* (22%) and *The Star* (32%) focused primarily on immediate, short-term security interventions, neglecting sustainable reconciliation strategies. According to Youngblood (2017), emphasizing solutions and reconciliation within journalism significantly shapes constructive public discourse, thereby fostering collective optimism and active participation in peace processes. The findings underscore the vital role of solution-oriented journalism in facilitating societal reconciliation, affirming the necessity for broader media adoption of peace journalism principles to effectively mitigate xenophobic tensions. Critically, these media disparities reflect broader structural and market-driven influences shaping editorial decisions. Economic pressures and audience preferences influence newspapers differently, with tabloids generally prioritizing sensationalism to attract readership (Rodny-Gumede, 2015). In contrast, newspapers oriented toward investigative journalism are more likely to adopt comprehensive peace journalism approaches, given their established editorial missions and target demographics. However, irrespective of economic or audience-driven

considerations, media accountability remains critical in societies experiencing recurrent conflicts, such as South Africa. Peace journalism does not inherently require sacrificing economic viability but encourages responsible reporting that actively contributes to societal cohesion and conflict mitigation (Hackett & Schroeder, 2008; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2012). Encouraging broader editorial commitment to these principles through journalist training and institutional support thus emerges as an essential strategy for enhancing the South African media's positive societal influence.

The implications of this study extend beyond journalistic practice alone, also informing policy-making and community interventions aimed at addressing xenophobic violence. Media portrayals significantly influence public discourse, shaping both perceptions and policy responses to complex societal issues. As the findings illustrate, responsible peace journalism can positively impact public understanding, dialogue, and ultimately societal cohesion. Conversely, adherence to sensationalistic or simplistic narratives risks perpetuating cycles of misunderstanding and conflict, undermining broader reconciliation efforts. Policymakers and community leaders thus hold an essential stake in advocating for media practices aligned with peace journalism principles, recognizing their significant capacity to support long-term peace-building and societal integration (Masud-Un-Nabi, 2021). The findings provide robust empirical evidence regarding the transformative potential of peace journalism in the South African context, particularly in addressing xenophobic violence. Although notable disparities currently exist in journalistic practices, consistent adherence to peace journalism principles, contextual reporting, avoidance of binary framings, amplifying marginalized voices, and promoting reconciliation, offers significant opportunities for media to actively foster social cohesion and reconciliation. Embracing these principles systematically can fundamentally shift societal understandings of xenophobia, moving beyond simplistic interpretations toward meaningful, lasting reconciliation.

Conclusion

This study explored the extent to which South African media applied principles of peace journalism in reporting on xenophobic violence, focusing specifically on how media narratives promoted reconciliation and social cohesion. The findings demonstrate significant disparities among newspapers (*Mail & Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, *The Star*, and *Daily Sun*) in their adoption of peace journalism practices. Newspapers such as *Mail & Guardian* notably embraced comprehensive contextual reporting, avoided binary framings, highlighted marginalized voices, and consistently advocated solutions and reconciliation initiatives (Rodny-Gumede, 2015). Conversely, newspapers like *Daily Sun* primarily favored sensationalized narratives, reinforcing divisions and perpetuating superficial understandings of violence. These variations reflect differing editorial orientations influenced by market pressures and audience targeting, yet underline the media's critical role in shaping societal responses (Hackett & Schroeder, 2008). This study underscores peace journalism's potential to transform conflict narratives by emphasizing root causes, inclusive perspectives, and reconciliation-focused solutions (Galtung, 2003; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2012). The South African context, marked by historical tensions and recurrent xenophobic violence, particularly requires media approaches that encourage deeper societal understanding and collective empathy (Rodny-Gumede, 2015). To fully realize this potential, the media must overcome entrenched biases, sensationalist reporting tendencies, and resource constraints through systematic journalist training and editorial commitment to ethical, solution-oriented journalism (Rodny-Gumede, 2015; Youngblood, 2017). Ultimately, broader implementation of peace journalism principles in South African media could significantly contribute to long-term societal reconciliation, addressing xenophobic violence through informed, empathetic public discourse.

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