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Voiceless Citizens: Symbolic Annihilation, Media Distrust, and the Search for Belonging Among Palestinian Citizens of Israel

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This article examines the relationship between media representation and media trust among a national minority in a conflict-ridden democracy. Focusing on Palestinian citizens of Israel, this qualitative study explores how perceptions of symbolic annihilation—persistent underrepresentation and negative stereotyping in mainstream media—shape affective and cognitive distrust. Based on 30 in-depth interviews conducted against the backdrop of the 2023–2024 Israel-Gaza war, the study shows that participants experience Israeli media not as neutral information sources, but as hostile institutions that reinforce structural marginalization. Findings reveal a spectrum of distrust, ranging from pragmatic skepticism to deep-seated cynicism, a fractured sense of national belonging, and counter-hegemonic media practices that affirm identity and agency. The study contributes theoretically by reconceptualizing minority media distrust as an identity-based, socially and structurally embedded phenomenon, expanding understanding of the affective and cognitive dimensions of media engagement by comparing these dynamics to other marginalized groups globally (e.g., communities of color in the United States). Implications extend to social cohesion, democratic participation, and the role of media in divided societies navigating active national conflicts.

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In the architecture of modern democracy, the news media are cast as a foundational pillar, essential for nurturing an informed citizenry, facilitating a shared public sphere, and ensuring accountability (McQuail, 2010). This idealized function, however, faces its most severe test in ethnically and nationally divided societies, where the media often become less of a unifying force and more of a battleground for competing narratives, identities, and claims to legitimacy (Miladi, 2022). The State of Israel, a self-defined Jewish democracy with a large Indigenous Palestinian Arab minority constituting more than 21.1% of its population (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2026), provides a case study of this tension. The Palestinian citizens of Israel, alternatively referred to as Arab Israelis or the '48 Arabs, occupy a paradoxical space.

They are citizens by law, yet they belong to a national, ethnic, and linguistic minority that is inextricably linked to the state's primary adversary in its defining national conflict (Ghanem, 2001; Jamal, 2011). This position is shaped and reinforced daily by state institutions, public discourse, and the mainstream Hebrew-language media. For decades, these media outlets have played a central role in constructing and maintaining the boundaries of the Israeli national collective, a process that has consistently marginalized its non-Jewish citizens (Harb, 2017; Miladi, 2022). This marginalization was acutely exacerbated during the Israel-Gaza war that began in late 2023. This major national crisis trapped Palestinian citizens of Israel in a fraught position—caught between concern for their families, friends, and fellow Palestinians in Gaza and their status as citizens within an Israeli state at war. The Hebrew-speaking mainstream media during this period intensified its nationalistic framing, further complicating the representation of the Arab minority and heightening the stakes of media consumption for these citizens (Miladi, 2022).

This marginalization (Jamal, 2011) is encapsulated by the concept of symbolic annihilation (Aldamen, 2023; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Tuchman, 1978), which describes the systematic erasure and vilification of specific groups in the media. In the Israeli context, this is a well-documented condition. It manifests as a quantitative absence—Palestinian faces, voices, and experts are conspicuously rare in news broadcasts, expert panels, and entertainment programming—and a problematic qualitative presence. When Palestinian citizens do appear, they are overwhelmingly framed within a narrow set of negative contexts: as a source of crime and violence, a demographic threat to the Jewish character of the state, a disloyal fifth column, or, in an Orientalist gaze, as a primitive and patriarchal "other" (Avraham et al., 2000; First & Kama, 2015; Jamal & Masalha, 2011).

Recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted these representation and perception gaps, demonstrating how the minority group interprets its mediated visibility through a critical lens. Katz (2023b) notes that the framing of events involving the Palestinian minority is often viewed by the audience from a postcolonial perspective, wherein the mainstream media is seen as maintaining strict binary oppositions of "us" versus "them" (Katz, 2023b). Furthermore, significant national crises serve to illuminate these disparities. Studies show that during the global COVID-19 pandemic, Palestinian citizens perceived a distinct disconnect between their community's reality and the media's portrayal, feeling that the state and media deflected systemic failures onto the minority group itself (Katz, 2023a). This persistent misrepresentation

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has been exacerbated by political developments, most notably the 2018 "Nation Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People," which constitutionally downgraded the status of the Arabic language and affirmed the state's character in exclusively Jewish terms, further institutionalizing the minority's peripheral status. Scholars argue that this legislation not only formalizes inequality but also signals a significant weakening of Israeli democracy by prioritizing the state's Jewish character over its democratic commitments (Waxman & Peleg, 2020).

In such a climate, the media do not just reflect social cleavages but they also actively produce and deepen them. While a significant body of research has analyzed the content of these representations and their effects on the Jewish majority's attitudes, a critical gap remains in understanding the experience from the other side. How do members of a marginalized minority perceive, process, and react to a media environment that so consistently devalues them? How does this lived experience of symbolic exclusion shape their trust, or, more accurately, their distrust, in the very institutions tasked with the democratic function of informing them? This study confronts this gap directly, shifting the analytical lens from the media text to the minority audience. It seeks to provide a textured understanding of the intricate relationship between the perceived symbolic annihilation of Palestinian citizens in Israeli media and their level of trust in those same media outlets.

The erosion of media trust is a global crisis, often attributed to political polarization, commercialization, and the digital proliferation of misinformation (Fawzi et al., 2021). However, for national minorities like the Palestinians in Israel, this study posits that distrust is rooted in a more fundamental, long-term experience of symbolic exclusion and hostility. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How do Palestinian citizens of Israel perceive their representation in the country's mainstream media, and how do these perceptions shape their trust in and engagement with these media? This study argues that for Palestinian citizens, media distrust is not a dispassionate political calculation, but a personal, affective, and cognitive response to a sustained challenge to their identity and social standing. Drawing on an integrated framework of symbolic annihilation, social identity theory, and intergroup threat theory, we contend that negative and exclusionary media portrayals trigger defensive in-group identification, framing the mainstream media as a hostile out-group institution. This, in turn, fosters a complex spectrum of negative perceptions, ranging from calculated skepticism to pervasive cynicism, and fuels a strategic search for alternative, counter-hegemonic media spheres where their identity and narrative find validation.

By employing a qualitative methodology of in-depth interviews, this research centers the voices and lived experiences of Palestinian citizens, offering a crucial and often overlooked perspective. It moves beyond simply stating that they distrust the media to explore the textures of that distrust, the emotional toll it takes, and the agentic strategies they develop in response. In doing so, this study contributes to understanding the role of media in shaping citizenship, identity, and social cohesion in deeply divided societies worldwide.

Theoretical Framework: From Symbolic Violence to Institutional Distrust

To unravel the complex relationship between media representation and minority distrust, a multilayered theoretical framework is required. This framework integrates four key conceptual pillars: (1)

The role of media in divided societies and the practice of symbolic annihilation; (2) Intergroup threat theory and social identity theory (SIT) as the psychological mechanisms mediating the audience response; (3) The multidimensional nature of media trust and distrust, particularly the distinction between skepticism and cynicism; and (4) The concept of interconnected institutional trust.

Media as a Site of Conflict: Symbolic Annihilation in a Divided Society

In ethnically homogeneous nations, the media can more easily function as agents of social integration, weaving a "national story" that reinforces a shared identity (Anderson, 1983; Anholt, 2009; Calhoun, 2021; González & Torres, 2011). In divided societies, this function becomes fraught with conflict. The media often align with the dominant ethnic or national group, becoming a primary site for producing and disseminating hegemonic ideologies that legitimize the existing social order and the subordinate position of minorities (Ferrer & Retis, 2019; Hall, 1997). A significant tool in this process is symbolic annihilation. First articulated by Tuchman (1978), the concept describes a three-pronged process of media misrepresentation: omission, trivialization, and condemnation (Tuchman, 1978).

Omission is the simple absence of a group from the media landscape, rendering them invisible and implying their irrelevance to national life. Trivialization occurs when a group is represented, but only in simplistic, clownish, or stereotypically limited roles. Condemnation involves consistently framing a group as a source of societal problems or threats. The Israeli case is a useful example of all three facets. The quantitative underrepresentation of Palestinian citizens is a clear form of omission (Panievsky et al., 2025; Persico, 2024). Their near-total absence from entertainment, advertising, and expert panels erases their presence as integral, "normal" members of society. When represented, they are often trivialized through Orientalist frames that portray their culture as exotic, traditional, or backward. Most consequentially, they are subjected to consistent condemnation. The "problem frame" dominates, associating them with national disloyalty, crime waves, terrorism, and unregulated construction, effectively criminalizing and securitizing their very existence (Jamal & Masalha, 2011).

This pattern of symbolic erasure is not unique to the Middle East; similar dynamics of omission and condemnation have been documented about the Roma in European news cycles (Arshad & D'Agostini, 2016) and the systematic trivialization of Indigenous voices in Canadian and Australian mainstream media (Meadows, 2021), suggesting that symbolic annihilation is a global tool for maintaining dominant ethnic hierarchies. This pattern is not an occasional bias, but a structural feature of the Israeli media system, rooted in journalistic routines, market incentives catering to the majority, and a close nexus between the media and the security establishment (Avraham, 2003). This sustained symbolic violence constitutes a direct threat to the minority group's social and psychological well-being.

The Psychology of Reception: Intergroup Threat and Social Identity

How do individuals respond when faced with such a hostile media environment? Intergroup threat theory (ITT; Stephan & Stephan, 2000) provides a crucial starting point. It posits that prejudice and intergroup hostility arise when one group perceives another as a threat. These threats can be realistic (e.g., to physical safety, economic resources, or political power) or symbolic. Symbolic threats are perceived

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challenges to the in-group's worldview, values, beliefs, and, critically, its sense of group esteem and legitimacy (Avraham, 2003). The media's negative portrayal of a minority group is a potent form of symbolic threat. It attacks the group's social value and its members' ability to maintain a positive social identity (Van Dijk, 1991).

This is where social identity theory (SIT) becomes the core explanatory mechanism (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). SIT argues that a significant part of an individual's self-concept is derived from their group memberships. To maintain self-esteem, individuals are motivated to see their own group (the in-group) as distinct from and superior to other groups (out-groups). When an influential out-group institution, like the mainstream media, launches a sustained symbolic attack on the in-group, SIT predicts a series of defensive reactions: (1) Increased in-group identification: The shared experience of external threat strengthens group cohesion and makes the threatened social identity more salient, causing individuals to feel a stronger sense of "we-ness." (2) Out-group derogation and hostility: The source of the threat, the media, is devalued, rejected, and framed as inherently biased and malicious. It is seen not as a professional body, but as the voice of the hostile out-group. (3) In-group favoritism: There is an increased preference for in-group sources of information and cultural products, which serve to affirm and repair the threatened social identity.

Thus, SIT provides a psychological model for understanding why symbolic annihilation leads directly to media distrust. The process is not a cold, cognitive evaluation of journalistic standards; it is an affective defense of one's identity. The feeling is not simply "this report is unfair," but "they are attacking us." This reality underscores that, regardless of symbolic annihilation, media consumption is driven by complex identity-related factors. For marginalized communities, this transforms media consumption from a simple act of information-seeking into a complex act of identity negotiation and defense (Tsfati, 2007).

Deconstructing Distrust: From Healthy Skepticism to Cynicism

The outcome of this identity-based process is a multidimensional distrust in the media. Media trust is not a simple binary. It encompasses several dimensions, including trust in the media's selectivity (that they cover the right issues), accuracy (that they get the facts right), and fairness (that they represent different groups equitably; Strömbäck et al., 2020). For Palestinian citizens, the perceived failure on all three dimensions is total. They perceive the media as selecting topics harmful to them, reporting decontextualized facts, and offering manifestly unfair portrayals. Crucially, however, this distrust is not monolithic. It is essential to adopt the distinction between media skepticism and media cynicism (Cappella & Tsfati, 2005; Quiring et al., 2021; Tsfati & Barnoy, 2025).

Media skepticism is a critical but engaged stance. The skeptic doubts the veracity and motives of media messages but believes that truth can be approximated through careful evaluation and cross-referencing of sources. It is associated with higher political knowledge and continued, albeit critical, consumption of news (Cappella & Tsfati, 2005; Tsfati & Barnoy, 2025). For a marginalized group, skepticism can be a vital civic skill, a tool for navigating a biased information environment. Media cynicism, in contrast, is a detached, disengaged state. The cynic believes the entire media system is

fundamentally corrupt, that journalists are driven by malicious intent, and that no mainstream source is credible (Markov & Min, 2022). This can lead to a complete withdrawal from the shared public sphere and a retreat into insulated echo chambers. It is a form of learned helplessness in the face of perceived institutional failure.

This spectrum of distrust mirrors the experiences of other marginalized communities globally. For instance, literature examining people of color (POC) in the United States demonstrates that historic underrepresentation and stereotyping foster high levels of media cynicism. In these contexts, Black and Hispanic audiences frequently view mainstream news institutions not merely as flawed, but as actively upholding racial hierarchies and structural inequality, leading to a deliberate withdrawal into alternative community media networks (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2023; Robinson & Culver, 2016). This study will explore how Palestinian citizens navigate this spectrum. We hypothesize that while the chronic nature of misrepresentation fosters deep cynicism, the practical need for information, especially in a high-conflict society, forces a form of pragmatic skepticism.

Interconnected Distrust: The Media as an Arm of the State

Finally, media distrust rarely exists in isolation. It is often part of a larger syndrome of institutional distrust, especially for marginalized populations (Arguedas et al., 2023; Hudson, 2006). When a minority group experiences systematic discrimination from various arms of the state—the police, the legal system, and the educational system—they are likely to perceive the mainstream media as just another part of that same oppressive structure. The media's failure to report fairly on their community is seen not as an isolated journalistic failing, but as part of a coherent system of marginalization (Livio & Cohen, 2018). This perspective suggests that the media's credibility is inextricably tied to the perceived legitimacy of the state itself. Restoring media trust, therefore, may be impossible without addressing the deeper structural inequalities that fuel the broader sense of alienation.

Methodology

To capture the subjective meanings, nuanced perceptions, and emotional textures central to this research, a qualitative methodology was essential. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the "how" and "why" behind the statistics of media representation, providing insight into the lived experience of symbolic annihilation.

Research Design and Sampling

The study is based on 30 in-depth, semistructured interviews with Palestinian citizens of Israel. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure a diverse cross-section of the community, maximizing the variation in experiences. Participants were selected based on a range of criteria: gender (16 women and 14 men); age (ranging from 22 to 47, capturing both younger, digitally native perspectives and the experiences of participants who had witnessed the evolution of Israeli media over several decades); geography (participants were drawn from the Galilee, the "Triangle" region, and mixed Jewish-Arab cities like Haifa and Jaffa, reflecting the different social contexts in which the community lives); and socioeconomic

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status (a mix of students, professionals like engineers, teachers, and nurses, business owners, and activists was included).

For transparency, it is critical to note two specific limitations of this sample design upfront. First, the study lacks participants from Southern Israel (such as the Bedouin communities in the Negev), who tend to differ from northern and central communities on several sociopolitical, geographic, and infrastructural variables (Adva Center, 2020), such as higher rates of poverty and widespread residency in unrecognized villages. Specifically, Bedouin communities in the southern region encounter distinct historical land disputes, profound state infrastructural neglect, lower access to digital telecommunications, and separate sociopolitical dynamics compared with their northern and central counterparts (Abu-Asbah, 2011; Adva Center, 2020).

Second, regarding the socioeconomic aspect, the purposive sample of professionals, students, and business owners resulted in a participant pool that appeared to be wealthier and more highly educated than the average Palestinian citizen of Israel. This socioeconomic advantage likely influenced their media literacy, access to alternative digital media, and ability to articulate political frameworks (Abu-Asbah, 2011). As noted previously, this study deliberately focused on Muslim and Christian participants. This decision was made to maintain analytical coherence by concentrating on the segment of the Palestinian minority that more uniformly shares a common national identity and a relationship with the state unmediated by unique arrangements like the Druze community's mandatory military service.

Ethics Approval and Informed Consent

Before data collection, the research protocol was thoroughly reviewed and received full ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (Approval No. ETHICS/03/2023-4). Strict adherence to academic ethical standards was maintained throughout the study. Explicit informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews commenced. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, assured of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and guaranteed anonymity. To protect confidentiality, all names and identifying details have been altered, and pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted by the authors and research assistants between November 2023 and January 2024. Because these interviews took place during the height of the Israel-Gaza war, the backdrop of this exceptional context heavily influenced the discussions. The wartime environment not only heightened national tensions but also placed many Palestinian citizens of Israel in an agonizing position, trapped between concern for their families or fellow Palestinians in Gaza and the heightened securitization of the Israeli state. All interviews were conducted in Hebrew and Arabic, the participants' native languages, to ensure they could express their complex thoughts and feelings with precision and comfort.

The semistructured interview guide (see Appendix) was designed to be flexible, ensuring key topics were covered while allowing for emergent themes to be explored. The guide was structured around four main areas: (1) Media consumption patterns: Initial questions mapped out their daily media diet, including the balance between Hebrew, Arabic, and international media, and the platforms used (TV, radio, social media). (2) Perceptions of representation: This section delved into their core perceptions, asking how they saw their community portrayed, requesting specific examples of both positive and negative coverage, and probing their feelings about the frequency and quality of representation. (3) Nature of media trust: Questions directly addressed their level of trust in various Israeli media outlets, their beliefs about the motivations of journalists and editors, and whether they perceived all channels as being the same. (4) Identity and affective impact: This final section explored the personal impact of media coverage, asking how it made them feel (e.g., angry, indifferent, alienated) and how it influenced their sense of identity and belonging to the Israeli state.

Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes. With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To protect confidentiality, all participant names and identifying details have been anonymized, and pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

Data Analysis

Previous scholarship (Katz, 2023a, 2023b) has frequently used quantitative and qualitative content analysis to objectively establish the baseline of media omission and stereotyping of minorities. As scholars note, content analysis serves as a fundamental methodology for systematically evaluating media messages and identifying structural biases (Krippendorff, 2018; Riffe et al., 2023; Stemler, 2000). While those methodological approaches are vital for analyzing texts, our study shifts the methodological focus to the audience's subjective reception of those texts. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021, 2022). Following their updated guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis, we adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of our participants.

We explicitly reject a positivist framework; thus, instead of employing multiple coders to calculate statistical inter-rater reliability, the coding process was treated as an organic, nonlinear, and deeply reflexive engagement with the text, where the researcher actively co-constitutes meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). This systematic process involved familiarization (immersing in the data by reading and re-reading the full transcripts); initial coding (systematically coding the entire data set, identifying segments of text relevant to the research question with descriptive labels like "invisibility," "crime frame," "checking sources"); theme generation (collating the initial codes into potential overarching themes and subthemes that captured significant patterns across the data set); theme review (scrutinizing the themes against both the coded extracts and the full transcripts to ensure they were coherent, distinct, and accurately represented the data); theme definition and naming (finalizing the specific scope and essence of each theme and assigning a concise, evocative name); and report writing (weaving the final themes into a compelling analytical narrative, richly supported by illustrative quotes). The quotes were carefully translated from Arabic to English, prioritizing the preservation of the original meaning, tone, and emotional

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weight. This meticulous process ensured the findings were robustly grounded in the participants' own words and experiences.

Findings

The interviews yielded a coherent set of narratives that painted a picture of the lived experience of being a Palestinian citizen in the Israeli media landscape. The analysis revealed five interconnected themes that collectively answer the research question, moving from the perception of misrepresentation to its affective consequences and the agentic responses it provokes.

Theme 1: "A Kingdom of Crime or a Ghost Town": The Experience of Symbolic Annihilation

A recurring and prominent theme was the perception of a dual-pronged symbolic annihilation: a state of being either completely invisible or hyper-visible only in the most negative of contexts. Participants felt their community's multifaceted reality was systematically erased from the national consciousness. Samir (34, engineer) captured this feeling of erasure with frustration:

> Look at any primetime show, any commercial break, any panel of experts. We are ghosts. It's as if two million people don't exist in this country. We don't buy products? We don't have opinions on the economy? We don't create art? This isn't an accident; it's a policy of making us invisible. They want to present a purely Jewish public sphere.

This invisibility was sharply contrasted with moments when their community was given media attention. Participants described this visibility as confined to a "ghetto of negativity," a constant association with social ills and security threats. Imad (41, business owner) used a metaphor:

> In the Israeli media, the Arab sector is either a kingdom of crime or a ghost town. There is no in-between. If there's a murder, every camera in the country descends on us. They interview the "experts," always Jewish, to talk about our violent culture. The rest of the time? Silence. It's a deliberate narrative: we are only newsworthy when we are a problem.

This "problem frame" was seen as dehumanizing. Nora (32, teacher) elaborated on how this framing perpetuates stereotypes:

> The media loves stories of honor killings or feuding families because it fits their Orientalist image of us as primitive. They will never show a story about a tech startup in Nazareth or a successful female doctor from my village. Why? Because that complicates the narrative. That would make us seem. . . well, normal. And they can't have that. The 'Arab as a problem' is a much more useful story for them.

This consistent experience of being either ignored or vilified forms the bedrock of their relationship with the media, establishing a baseline of perceived hostility.

Theme 2: The Spectrum of Distrust: From Pragmatic Skepticism to Cynicism

Flowing directly from the experience of symbolic annihilation is a pervasive distrust. This distrust, however, was not monolithic. The interviews revealed a clear spectrum, with participants positioning themselves at different points between calculated, engaged skepticism and detached, all-encompassing cynicism. Pragmatic skepticism was the dominant mode for many, especially those who felt a professional or civic need to stay informed. These participants consumed Hebrew media, but as an act of intelligence-gathering rather than trustful engagement.

Nasser (30, social worker) detailed his critical process:

> Of course I watch the Hebrew news. You have to know what the other side is thinking and planning. It's a strategic necessity. But I watch with a "translator" in my head. When they say "security operation," I hear "military raid." When they say "rioters," I know they mean "protesters." I deconstruct their language in real-time. Then, I immediately go to Al Jazeera and our local news sites to get the other parts of the story. I never, ever take their version as the full truth.

This pragmatic approach became particularly acute during security crises, creating a paradox of forced reliance on a distrusted source. Saad (33, pharmacist) described this dilemma during the 2023 war context:

> During a war, the Home Front Command's instructions are broadcast on their channels. For my family's physical safety, I have to tune in. So I'm sitting there, listening to the very same anchor who just spent ten minutes demonizing my people, to find out where the nearest bomb shelter is. It's a humiliating dependence. You are forced to trust your enemy for your survival.

For many other participants, particularly younger ones, this long-term exposure to bias had evolved into deeper cynicism. This was not a critical engagement, but a rejection of the institution's legitimacy. Haneen (22, university student) articulated this dismissal:

> Why would I watch them? It's a waste of my time and an insult to my intelligence. It's pure state propaganda. There is no "news." It's a machine for manufacturing consent among Jews and fear of Arabs. I have zero trust. Not 1%, zero. They are all the same, Channel 12, 13, Kan11—they are just different flavors of the same poison. My news comes from people I trust, from my community, from international sources that aren't part of the Zionist project.

This cynical stance represents a complete rupture of the social contract between the citizen and the media, a declaration that the public sphere is not shared, but is, in fact, an ideological weapon.

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Theme 3: "A Constant Reminder You Don't Belong": The Emotional Toll and Fractured Citizenship

The impact of media representation was consistently described in personal and emotional terms. It was not an abstract political critique, but a source of daily pain, anger, and alienation that actively eroded their sense of belonging to the state. Suha (36, graphic designer) connected media portrayals to her identity as a citizen:

> Every news broadcast is a constant reminder that you don't belong. It's a drip-drip-drip of poison that seeps into your soul. You see yourself and your family portrayed as the enemy within, and you start to internalize it, or you build a wall around yourself. It makes it impossible to feel a genuine sense of shared citizenship. How can you feel patriotic about a country whose media tells its people to fear you?

This sense of alienation was acutely sharpened by the perceived "empathy gap" in coverage. Participants felt that the media humanized Jewish suffering while rendering Arab suffering invisible or statistical. Manal (28, nurse), who works in a mixed hospital, felt this disparity keenly:

> In my work, pain is pain. A car crash victim is a victim. But on the news? If a Jewish family is in a crash, it's a national tragedy. We see interviews with neighbors, tearful family members, stories about their lives. If it's an Arab family, we get a 10-second report: "Three killed on Route 65." No names, no faces, no stories. This isn't just biased reporting; it's a statement about whose lives matter. And it tells you, every day, that yours matters less.

This emotional toll was a critical finding, demonstrating that the "effect" of media is not just cognitive, but deeply affective, shaping the emotional fabric of one's citizenship and belonging.

Theme 4: Discursive Resistance: Building Counter-Hegemonic Media Worlds

Faced with this hostile environment, participants were not passive. A theme of agency and resistance emerged, centered on the active construction of alternative media ecosystems where their narratives and identities could be affirmed. The first layer of this resistance was the continued reliance on transnational pan-Arab media. For many, channels like Al Jazeera serve as a vital political and cultural counterweight. Youssef (47, historian) explained its role:

> Watching Al Jazeera is about more than just getting a different opinion. It's about situating myself within my broader Arab identity. It connects me to the Arab world from which Israel has tried to sever us. It provides a historical and political context for our struggle that is completely absent from the Hebrew media. It's an act of cultural and political re-connection.

The second layer was the turn to hyper-local, community-driven social media. This was especially true for younger participants, who saw these platforms as tools for self-representation. Nadeem (24, activist), who helps run a popular news page for his town, described its function:

> The mainstream media ignores our successes and amplifies our problems. So we built our own media. Our Facebook page celebrates local students who get high marks, it promotes new businesses, it organizes community clean-up days. It also reports on crime, but we do it from a perspective of finding solutions, not just pointing fingers. We are taking back control of our own story. If we don't write it, they will, and we know how they'll write it.

These alternative spaces are more than just news sources; they are vital sites for identity work, community building, and political mobilization, a direct and creative response to the symbolic violence of the mainstream.

Theme 5: Interconnected Institutional Distrust: "The Media, the Police, the Courts. . . It's All One System"

Finally, the findings unequivocally demonstrated that media distrust does not exist in a silo. It is interwoven with a broader distrust of all major state institutions, which are perceived as working in concert to maintain the marginalization of the Palestinian minority. Rania (38, lawyer) articulated this holistic view of institutional discrimination:

> My clients see it every day. The police officer who investigates their case with suspicion, the judge who gives them a harsher sentence, the municipal clerk who denies their building permit. The journalist who writes the biased story is just another employee in the same system. How can I trust the media to be fair when the entire state structure is built on a foundation of inequality? It's naive to separate them.

This perception was often grounded in direct personal experience. Imad (41, business owner) made the connection explicit:

> Last year, my cousin was shot in a family feud. We called the police for an hour. No one came. The next day, Channel 12 is there with a big report on "Arab violence." They didn't ask why the police weren't there. They just filmed the blood and talked about our culture. So tell me, why should I see the police and the media as different? They are two sides of the same coin of neglect and demonization.

This theme is critical because it contextualizes media distrust within a larger crisis of state legitimacy. It suggests that the media's credibility problem is a symptom of a deeper structural disease of inequality and discrimination.

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Discussion

This study examined how Palestinian citizens of Israel interpret their representation in mainstream media and how these interpretations shape media trust. The findings demonstrate that media distrust among this minority is not reducible to dissatisfaction with journalistic quality or balance. Rather, it is a cumulative response to long-term symbolic annihilation that is experienced as a systematic challenge to identity, dignity, and belonging. Participants' accounts closely mirror existing scholarship documenting the systematic underrepresentation and negative framing of Palestinian citizens in Israeli media (Avraham et al., 2000; Jamal & Masalha, 2011). However, by foregrounding audience perspectives, this study extends that literature by showing how symbolic annihilation is received, internalized, and emotionally processed. These findings align closely with Katz's (2023b, 2024) argument that ethnic minorities in Israel decode media through a postcolonial lens, interpreting mainstream coverage as an intentional maintenance of societal binary oppositions.

As Katz and Nossek (2020) demonstrated, these representation and perception gaps mean that minority audiences are acutely, consciously aware of their mediated "othering." In our study, omission from routine, nonproblematic coverage was interpreted as deliberate exclusion from the imagined national collective, while hyper-visibility through crime and security frames marked participants as a permanent internal threat. Together, these representational practices were experienced as constitutive of fractured and conditional citizenship. It is important to acknowledge that overall trust in the Israeli media has declined across all sectors of society. Notably, recent studies indicate that the overall trust levels of Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel are currently surprisingly similar. However, the underlying drivers for this distrust differ profoundly. While the Jewish majority's distrust is often fueled by partisan polarization and political attacks on the press, the Palestinian minority's distrust is deeply rooted in structural erasure and historical marginalization (Panievsky et al., 2025). An unexpected finding of this study is that extreme distrust did not always result in media avoidance. In contrast to most Western models where high cynicism leads to a complete withdrawal from mainstream sources, our participants demonstrated a "paradox of forced engagement." The wartime context created a situation where the very individuals who viewed the media as a "machine for manufacturing consent" were simultaneously forced to rely on it for physical survival instructions (Katz, 2023a). This suggests that in high-conflict zones, the relationship between trust and consumption is decoupled by necessity.

The findings strongly support the relevance of the SIT and intergroup threat theory in explaining minority media distrust. Media portrayals were perceived as symbolic threats to group esteem, triggering defensive identity processes. Mainstream Hebrew-language media were framed as an out-group institution aligned with state power, rather than as an independent civic actor. Consequently, media consumption was not approached as neutral information-seeking, but as a site of identity negotiation, surveillance, and, in some cases, withdrawal. Importantly, the study refines existing understandings of media distrust by empirically distinguishing between pragmatic skepticism and absolute cynicism (Tsfati & Barnoy, 2025). While skepticism involved strategic and critical engagement with mainstream media—often driven by necessity—cynicism reflected a complete delegitimation of the media system. This distinction closely mirrors the experiences of other underserved and distrustful communities globally.

For instance, POC in the United States display similar patterns of deep media cynicism as a protective measure against historically White-dominated newsrooms that perpetuate racial stereotyping (Peterson-Salahuddin, 2023; Robinson & Culver, 2016). This distinction adds nuance to prior work on media trust by showing how distrust operates along a spectrum shaped by structural exclusion rather than individual disposition. Cynicism, in this context, emerges not as apathy, but as a rational response to repeated symbolic harm. Beyond cognitive evaluations, participants emphasized the emotional consequences of media exposure. Feelings of anger, humiliation, and alienation were central to their narratives, highlighting the affective dimensions of media power. Differential expressions of empathy—where Jewish suffering was personalized and Palestinian suffering anonymized—were particularly damaging, reinforcing hierarchies of moral worth and further undermining the possibility of shared citizenship.

At the same time, the findings underscore minority agency. Participants actively constructed counter-hegemonic media spaces through transnational Arab media and community-based digital platforms. These spaces functioned not only as alternative information sources but also as sites of recognition, narrative repair, and collective identity work. Such practices complicate deficit-based models of minority media use by revealing high levels of media literacy and strategic engagement within fragmented public spheres. Finally, media distrust was consistently embedded within broader patterns of institutional distrust. Participants perceived the media, police, and legal system as interconnected components of a single structure of inequality. This holistic view of institutional discrimination becomes particularly salient during periods of national crisis. Just as Katz (2023a) found that Israeli Arabs perceived the government and media as complicit in marginalizing them during the COVID-19 pandemic, our participants viewed the media and the state security apparatus as operating in seamless tandem during the 2023–2024 war. This perception suggests that restoring media trust cannot be achieved through representational reform alone but must rely on wider transformations in state–minority relations.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes theoretically by reconceptualizing minority media distrust as an identity-based and affective response to structural symbolic exclusion, rather than as a narrow evaluation of journalistic performance. We reframe the literature's understanding of this dynamic in two critical ways. Most significantly, our findings introduce a "relational-situational" dimension to media trust. We argue that for Indigenous minorities during active warfare, media trust is not a static sentiment but a fluctuating survival strategy. By theorizing the "humiliating dependence" on a hostile out-group institution for life-saving information, this study moves beyond the traditional skepticism/cynicism binary to offer a new model of "coerced trust" in divided societies.

First, by connecting our findings to international scholarship (e.g., Peterson-Salahuddin, 2023; Robinson & Culver, 2016), we establish that the media cynicism observed among the Palestinian minority in Israel shares deep theoretical parallels with the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in other Western democracies. Second, we simultaneously emphasize the distinctive nature of the Palestinian minority within Israeli society. Unlike many other marginalized immigrant or minority groups globally, this community is indigenous and trapped in the middle of an ongoing national conflict—a reality that reached a devastating peak during the 2023–2024 war. This context creates a distinctive theoretical environment

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where media consumption is not merely a matter of civic participation or cultural representation, but of physical survival and psychological defense in an active wartime context.

By integrating symbolic annihilation with social identity and intergroup threat perspectives, the analysis demonstrates how chronic misrepresentation produces a spectrum of distrust—ranging from pragmatic skepticism to absolute cynicism—each with distinct implications for media engagement and democratic participation. Crucially, by centering the lived experiences of a marginalized minority audience, the study shifts the analytical focus from media texts to processes of meaning-making, emotional injury, and agentic resistance. In doing so, it advances media trust scholarship by showing how distrust is socially produced within unequal power relations and highlights the limits of normative models of the media as a shared civic institution in deeply divided societies.

Conclusions

This study has explored how Palestinian citizens of Israel perceive their representation in mainstream media and how these perceptions shape media trust, engagement, and a sense of belonging. By centering the voices of the minority audience, it has highlighted how long-term symbolic annihilation is experienced not merely as biased reporting, but as an affective and cognitive challenge to identity and civic standing. Participants' narratives reveal a complex spectrum of distrust—from pragmatic skepticism to absolute cynicism—interwoven with broader institutional distrust, emotional alienation, and strategic counter-hegemonic practices.

The findings carry important implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, the study advances understandings of media trust by demonstrating that distrust is socially produced, identity-inflected, and emotionally grounded, rather than simply a matter of evaluating journalistic quality. It also emphasizes the critical role of affect and lived experience in shaping how marginalized groups navigate media environments, offering a framework for integrating symbolic annihilation, social identity, and intergroup threat into analyses of audience responses. Practically, the study underscores the limitations of conventional approaches to improving media trust. Efforts focused solely on journalistic ethics or representational fairness may fall short unless accompanied by broader structural reforms that address systemic inequalities and institutional marginalization. At the same time, the findings highlight the resilience and agency of marginalized audiences, who actively create alternative media spaces that foster recognition, community building, and narrative autonomy.

In sum, this research illuminates the intertwined dynamics of media representation, distrust, and identity in a deeply divided society, offering a nuanced understanding of minority experiences that is relevant to scholars of media, democracy, and social cohesion. By foregrounding audience perspectives, it challenges conventional models of the media as a neutral civic institution and demonstrates that, for marginalized populations, media trust is inseparable from broader struggles for recognition, justice, and belonging. This study set out to listen to the voices of Palestinian citizens of Israel and understand their relationship with the country's mainstream media. The narratives indicate a significant disconnection. Participants described mainstream representations as either excluding their community or portraying it through stereotypical

frames. The findings suggest that experiences of symbolic annihilation constitute an important factor associated with distrust.

A key contribution of this research lies in its qualitative depth, which moves beyond content analysis to illuminate the human experience of media reception in a conflict-ridden society. It demonstrates that for this minority, media distrust is not an abstract opinion, but a lived reality, an emotionally significant experience, and a rational response to a system they perceive as fundamentally hostile. By detailing the spectrum from pragmatic skepticism to absolute cynicism and highlighting the agentic creation of alternative media worlds, this study provides a nuanced picture of both oppression and resistance in the contemporary media landscape.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that suggest avenues for future research. The qualitative design, based on 30 interviews, provides rich insights but limits generalizability; larger and more representative samples could test whether these patterns of distrust extend across the broader Palestinian minority. As explicitly noted in the methodology, the lack of participants from Southern Israel (e.g., Bedouin communities) and the generally high socioeconomic status of our purposive sample limit the scope of the findings. The focus on textual media and self-reported experiences highlights perception, but not behavioral or unconscious responses; mixed-methods or experimental approaches could address this gap. The sample included Muslim and Christian Palestinians, excluding other subgroups such as Druze or Bedouin, whose experiences may differ. Finally, the study is situated in Israel, a highly polarized and ethnically divided democracy; comparative research in other divided societies could assess the broader applicability of the frameworks of symbolic annihilation, social identity, and intergroup threat. Addressing these limitations would deepen our understanding of minority media distrust and agency.

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Appendix

Semistructured Interview Guide

Opening

1. Introduction of the researcher and the study's purpose (anonymity and confidentiality assured).
2. Can you please introduce yourself in a sentence or two (e.g., age, profession, where you live)?

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Media Consumption Habits

3. Generally speaking, how do you keep up with the news and current events?
4. Do you follow mainstream news in Hebrew (e.g., Channels 12, 13, Kan)? If so, how often?
5. What about news in Arabic (e.g., local media, pan-Arab channels like Al Jazeera)?
6. Do you use one main source for news, or do you consult several? Why is it important for you to do so (or not)?
7. What roles do social media (Facebook, TikTok, Instagram) play in how you get your news?

Perceptions of Representation

8. When you think about the Israeli media in Hebrew, what is the first image that comes to your mind when you think about how it portrays Arab citizens?
9. In your opinion, how does the mainstream Hebrew media generally treat or relate to the Palestinian citizens of Israel?
10. Can you give me an example of a specific news story or report that made you feel your community was represented unfairly or negatively? What was it about?
11. Can you think of an example where you felt the representation was fair or positive? How rare is that?
12. Do you feel there are enough voices from the Arab community (journalists, experts, ordinary people) on Israeli television?
13. When the media does cover the Arab community, what topics do you think it tends to focus on? What topics does it ignore?

Trust and Affective Impact

14. In general, how much do you trust the information you get from Israeli news media (a lot, some, very little, not at all)? Why?
15. Do you believe that journalists in the Hebrew media are trying to be objective, or do you think they have other motives?
16. How does watching or reading this type of coverage make you feel personally (e.g., angry, sad, frustrated, indifferent)?
17. Does the way the media portrays your community affect your feeling of belonging to the State of Israel? If so, how?
18. Do you think this coverage influences how Jewish Israelis see you and your community? Can you give an example?

Closing

19. Is there anything else you would like to add about your relationship with the media that we haven't discussed?
20. Thank you for your time.