Framing of FeeMustFall students' protest by Daily Dispatch Newspaper and the effect on readers' perceptions

Monisola B. Ayodeji-Falade *, Oluyinka O. Osunkunle

Department of Communication, University of Fort Hare, P. Bag X1314, Alice, 5700, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
- Content analysis
- Focus group
- Framing
- Thematic analysis
- Press

ABSTRACT

This article sought to examine the framing of FeeMustFall protest by Daily Dispatch Newspaper (DDN) and its effect on readers' perceptions. This study adopted a mixed method of research, wherein a quantitative content analysis was used to explicate the frames of FeeMustFall stories reported by DDN while a focus group discussion, a qualitative method, was used to assess the effect of framing of FeeMustFall students' protest stories on readers' perceptions. Quantitative data were collected and analyzed through content analysis of the DDN while qualitative data collected through focus group discussions were analyzed thematically. Content analysis of 31 FeeMustFall stories reported by DDN showed that 45.16 per cent (14) of the stories were categorized as conflict frame (CF), 29 per cent (9) as attribution of responsibility frame (ARF), 16 per cent (5) as human interest frame (HIF) while 6.45 per cent (2) and 3.23 per cent (1) were categorized as economic consequence frame (ECF) and morality frame (MF), respectively. Thematic analysis of the focus group discussions revealed that the type of news frame used for the presentation of FeeMustFall protest stories influenced the thoughts and perceptions of readers on the issue as the news frames generated similar audience frames.

1. Introduction

South Africa has a long history of students' protests, with the first occurrence recorded in April 1965 at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) and University of Cape Town (UCT) by conservative Afrikaans students (McCleland, 2015). The protest was a peaceful demonstration on the importance of mother-tongue education and the removal of liberal lecturers (McCleland, 2015). Another notable protest was the Soweto student uprising of 1976, which claimed the lives of two students. In the first two decades after the advent of democracy in 1994, there has been an increased rate of students' protests across universities in South Africa, largely on campuses of historically black universities (Hardy, 2016). Students demanded for different needs such as quality accommodation, transportation for students, low accommodation and tuition fees (Hardy, 2016). The origin of students’ protests differs from one university to another. The study of Alimba (2005: 170) on “lecturer-students' perception of the causes, effects and management patterns of students' unrest in tertiary institutions” has identified the following as some of the factors responsible for students' protest in tertiary institutions: “increase in tuition fees; inadequate facilities for teaching and learning; communication break down between school authorities and students' representatives; poor leadership style of school authority; rustication and expulsion of union leaders; accommodation problem; and security problem on campus.”

Some of the recorded protests in South African Universities in recent times include the ones at the University of Limpopo in 2009, 2011, 2012; Mangosuthu University of Technology, Durban in 2009; Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) in 2012; Vaal University of Technology (VUT) in 2014 (Mokoena, 2014); Walter Sisulu University of Technology in the Eastern Cape Province, where a student was reported dead (Timeslive, 2012); and two Western Cape FET Colleges: False Bay College and the College of Cape Town in 2012, where students protested on accommodation and National Student Financial Aid schemes (NSFAS) support (Nkosi, 2012; Hardy, 2016). In 2014, South African Universities experienced a mass protest that involved virtually all higher institutions of learning. This occurred when the South African Student Congress (SASCO) President organized a mass protest by South African University Students regarding their disagreement on the action of South African Government Financial Aid Scheme (SAGFAS) and the refusal of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to pay up student's unsettled fees in order to register for 2014 academic session. The protest involved students from the following institutions: Durban University of...
Technology (DUT), Vaal University of Technology (VUT), Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), University of Johannesburg (UJ), University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN) and Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). The protest later resulted in the arrest of seven students from (UKZN) and twenty students from (UJ) for their violent conducts (Beaver, 2014; Mail and Guardian, 2014).

The recent students’ protest tagged “FeeMustFall”, which commenced in 2015, was historic as it cuts across all the universities in South Africa. It has since attracted the attention of scholars and stakeholders including the press, which is saddled with the responsibility of relaying accurate information to the public. The press also performs a helpful role in our society today as Chowdhury (2014) noted that they increase public consciousness and gather opinions, information and attitudes of people toward a particular matter. However, the press must be careful about how they frame their news stories as this determines what the public think about. Hence, the significance of news framing.

Generally, framing is used to group information, shape it and process it skillfully or professionally. Chong and Druckman (2007: 106) defined framing as a process of conceptualizing issues or manipulating thoughts about an issue towards a new meaning. Also, Tankard (2001: 95) defined a frame as the important element related to the news story that presents a situation and interprets the issue by choice, exclusion, emphasis and elaboration.

Goffman (1974) and Tuchman (1978) were the first set of researchers to identify the integral role framing plays in gathering and processing news by audiences. Framing has been extensively used in the coverage of dispute and protest (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993; Hertog and McLeod, 1995; Baylor, 1996; Nelson et al., 1997; McLeod and Detenber, 1998). Nevertheless, researchers have identified that framing does not only reduce some content of news stories, it also affects the interpretation, thought and perception of people as well as influence public opinion (Lecheler et al., 2009). Dunwoody (1992: 75) stated that “even though framing is not unique to journalism, it is the core of journalistic work and is used as a ‘mental map’ that can be activated quickly and can reduce journalist’s efforts”. Furthermore, framing reduces and explains the message’s meaning by shaping the inferences that a person makes from the message. More so, framing reveals the conclusion made by the message creator or frame. Framing is a form of message or communication that suggests reality and reveals different perceptions of truth (Tuchman, 1978). Framing also lays emphasis on some elements of truth and makes others seem irrelevant (Lecheler and De Vreeze, 2013).

News stories can be framed using different types of frame including: (i) conflict frame, which emphasizes conflict between parties or individual; (ii) human interest frame, this focuses on an individual as an example or emphasizes emotions; (iii) responsibility frame, this attributes responsibility, credits or blames certain political institutions or individuals; (iv) economic consequences frame, which focuses on the economic consequences of an issue for the audience; and (v) morality frame, which emphasizes morality and offer social instructions (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2006; Valkenburg et al., 1999). Therefore, this study sought to examine the framing of FeeMustFall protest by Daily Dispatch Newspaper (DDN) and its effect on readers’ perception.

1.1. Significance of the study

During recent years, various South African Universities have fallen victim to students’ protests. The degree of violence involved, as well as the frequency and duration of such protest action have varied from university to university. Before the FeeMustFall students’ protests, which started in October 2015 and cut across almost all the universities in South Africa, students’ protest has become a recurring decimal in South African Universities, to an extent that is now becoming a norm and also an annual occurrence in some universities.

Moreover, most of the recorded students’ protests have been largely marked with violence which had negative impact on the students and the affected universities. Furthermore, students’ protests have the tendency of hampering the transformation of higher education, one of the critical economic thrusts of South African Government. Hence, the need for urgent intervention of stakeholders at all levels in preventing recurrence of students’ protests in South African Universities. The press, as a major stakeholder should play a significant role in relaying accurate information on the FeeMustFall students’ protests in South African Universities. Therefore, this study sought to check if DDN is indeed playing its role ethically by the way it framed the news on the protests.

Research questions

- How does DDN frame FeeMustFall students’ protest news?
- How does the framing of FeeMustFall students’ protest through news presentation by DDN influence readers’ perceptions?

1.2. Theoretical framework

This study is based on the framing theory. Framing theory was first put forth by Goffman (1974). The theory suggests that how a piece of information is presented to an audience (called “the frame”) influences the choices they make on how the information is processed (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996). Menashe and Siegel (1998: 307) described a frame as “a way of packaging and positioning an issue so that it conveys a certain meaning”. The concept of framing is related to the agenda setting theory. While the agenda setting theory focuses on press selection of stories, events and issues (what), framing theory focuses on press representation, treatment and production of stories, events and issues (Fourie, 2007: 245). Therefore, framing theory does not only tell the audience what to think about as in the agenda setting theory, but also tells the audience how to think about that issue, which is regarded as a second level agenda setting.

Framing theory is most applicable to news and media stories. It suggests how journalists report an occurrence i.e. the contextualization of news reports within a specific ideological framework (Fourie, 2007). Entman (1993: 55) described the core of framing theory thus:

“Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Frames, then, define problems: determine what a causal agent is doing and costs and benefits usually measured in terms of cultural values, diagnose causes: identify the forces creating the problem, make moral judgments: evaluate causal agents and their effects, and suggest remedies: offer and justify treatments for the problem and predict their likely effects”.

(Entman, 1993: 55).

In relation to this study, we examined how the frames with which 2016 FeesMustFall protest stories were presented by DDN has affected the perceptions of readers on the issue.

1.3. Framing of protests

In a review by D’Angelo (2002), three news-framing paradigms including “cognitive, constructionist and critical” paradigms were identified. While the research conducted using cognitive paradigm tries to comprehend how frames modify people’s opinions, it is assumed that there is a relationship between the frame and a person’s previous knowledge (Brasted, 2005: 4). Scholars have argued that previous knowledge on a particular issue is assumed to facilitate the influence of frames in making a decision (McLeod and Detenber, 1999; Brasted, 2005). On the other hand, constructionist paradigm sees the media as “information processors, who create interpretative packages of the positions of politically invested sponsors in order to both reflect and add to the issue culture of the topic” (McLeod and Detenber, 1999: 877). More
so, constructionists assume that media “limit the range of information about a topic because journalists judge that there are few credible sources about the topic” (Brasted, 2005: 4). However, in critical paradigm, source selection is viewed as a process of media control (Brasted, 2005). It is assumed that frames are the effect of news-gathering procedures.

Several scholars have given different perspectives about the concept of framing as it relates to coverage of social movements and protests. Some studies indicated that the media can “delegitimize” or “marginalize” protest groups that contest the “status quo” (Gitlin, 1980; McLeod and Detenber, 1999). It has also been argued that news reports on protests tend to focus on the “protesters’ appearances rather than their issues” by accentuating their “violent actions” instead of their “social criticizm” (McLeod and Detenber, 1999: 3). This media practice may therefore, restrict the efficacy of the protest. This type of reportage constitutes what Chan and Lee (1984) referred to as the “protest paradigm”, which results in reportage of news that supports the status quo. The characteristics of protest paradigm was reported by Glasgow University Media Group (1985), where the theme of the coverage of a peace movement was violence. According to the authors, the protesting groups were framed as being violent whereas the police were framed as victims of the violence. More so, the coverage of the movement was silent about the protesters brutalized by the police.

Contrary to the violent frame adopted by the media in the coverage of protests, the protesters always seek positive representation by highlighting the legality of their goals and emphasizing their issues but they (the protesters) are always at a dilemma because their preferred frames are not usually adopted (Gottlieb, 2015). The reason for this challenge was expressed by Boyle et al. (2012: 130) as follows:

“News coverage is important to achieving protest goals, yet such coverage may not be forthcoming unless protesters engage in dramatic and even violent action. However, those very actions that attract media attention are often central features of stories that delegitimize the protesters”.

Considering the above dilemma, it is important to assess the framing of FeeMustFall protest by DDN and the effect on readers’ perceptions.

1.4. Daily dispatch newspaper

DDN started publication in East London (Eastern Cape Province) on the 10th of September, 1872. The newspaper was formerly known as East London Dispatch with Massey Hicks as the first editor (www.marklives.com). East London Dispatch was in tabloid form, carrying advertisement on its front page with a total number of four pages. It was sold then at the rate of three-pence. On the 1st of November, 1955, the newspaper for the first time in history published news story on the problem in Morocco during the French reign (www.marklives.com). Daily dispatch price grew from two and a half cents to three cents on the 1st of April 1963. Following this development, on the 12th of November that same year, the company bought its own building at the Caxton streets which was occupied by its advertisements, circulation and account staff. In 1966, it became the first South African newspaper to use leader page, having a mixture of feature articles, entertainment and advertisement among others (www.abc.org.za). DDN acquired a Rolls Royce offset machine at the rate of R587, 501 and was commissioned in the year 1977, the centenary year to enable them offer full colour facilities to both advertisers and readers. DDN became the second most profitable newspaper in South Africa as its distribution increased from 18,000 to 33,000 in 1977 (Williams, 2017). This feat cannot be separated from the hard work of Donald Woods, the editor between 1965 and 1977 whose efforts also gave the newspaper an international fame (Williams, 2017).

Daily dispatch sales went through tough times when the government banned the readership of all government workers. The newspaper faced several challenging periods than any other South African newspapers. This was noted by the then Cape Times editor, Tony Heard when he wrote “The Daily Dispatch has always been between rocks and a hard place”. The difficulties reduced on the release of Nelson Mandela and the removal of ban from the political parties in February 1990 (Williams, Ibid). Daily Dispatch Newspaper faced many other challenges again in the year 1992, like the hijack of van full of newspapers to be delivered, Bisho massacre in that same year, burning down of van at Iliitha and Ciskei among other problems. Throughout these challenging times, the staff showed their persistent support even at the face of risky occurrence and the newspaper continues to flourish. Towards the end of that year, precisely 19th of November, 1992, a survey carried out by All Media and Product Survey (AMPS) showed that Daily Dispatch Newspaper was the most widely read newspaper in the whole of Eastern Cape. At that time, the readership was about 172, 000, while the profit in half a year was R2.56 million (www.saarf.co.za/amps-presentations).

In 1996, the DDN had everything in place to kick off into the 21st century. It was up-to-date with the cutting-edge technology by procuring an electronic picture desk in its editorial room, having its photographic section computerized and also using computer to plan its pages’ layout with Quark system. It as well started the online (electronic) version of Dispatch Newspaper on the 10th of September, 1997 (Williams, Ibid). It is published in English language covering the following areas: sports, community occurrence, business, politics, local news and job vacancies (www.abc.org.za).

The newspaper is still in circulation till date and in early 2015, it had about 26, 147 copies (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2015), making it the most prominent daily newspaper in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa (Audit Bureau of Circulations, Ibid). Therefore, its choice for this study was motivated by its wide geographical spread and circulation as well as its long-aged operation in the print media.

2. Methods

This study employed a mixed method of research, wherein a quantitative content analysis was used to explicate the frames of FeeMustFall stories reported by DDN while a focus group discussion, a qualitative method, was used to assess the effect of framing of FeeMustFall students' protest stories on readers’ perceptions. This study was approved by the University of Fort Hare Research Ethics Committee before commencement.

Quantitative data collected from DDN were analyzed using content analysis while qualitative data collected from focus group discussions were analyzed thematically. DDN was selected using purposive sampling because is the most prominent regional newspaper in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa (Audit Bureau of Circulations, Ibid). The study population included DDN editions published throughout the period of the FeeMustFall students’ protest: October 2015 to December 2016 and since it was not possible to select all DDN for analysis, a sample of 31 editions that reported news on the FeeMustFall students’ protests were selected for analysis (Ayodeji-Falade and Osunkunle, 2019). For the quantitative content analysis, the 31 FeeMustFall stories reported by DDN during the period of the protest (Ayodeji-Falade and Osunkunle, Ibid), were analyzed and categorized into five (5) different frames (conflict, attribution of responsibility, human-interest, economic consequences, and morality frames) by using a deductive approach as described by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) in which a series of 20 questions to which the coder had to answer “yes” or “no” was developed.

The focus group comprised a total of 12 participants who were University of Fort Hare students. The participants were purposively selected based on their readership of DDN and eye witness of the protest. Prior to the focus group discussion, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Two different focus groups consisting of 6 participants each were used. Discussions were held in Iona 1 at University of Fort Hare, Alice Campus. Each focus group was exposed to three FeeMustFall stories, selected from the three prominent frames (Attribution of responsibility, conflict and human-interest frames) used in the reportage of the protest by DDN as determined through content analysis. Members of each group were asked to read each story succinctly and write out their thoughts about FeeMustFall. Thereafter, each focus group was engaged in

M.B. Ayodeji-Falade, O.O. Osunkunle Heliyon 7 (2021) e07782
a discussion, which centered on their perceptions on the FeeMustFall stories they had read. Thereafter, the discussion was analyzed thematically.

3. Results

3.1. Framing of FeeMustFall stories by DDN

Figure 1 showed the result of framing analysis of 2016 FeeMustFall protest stories covered by DDN. Out of 31 stories analyzed, majority, 45.16 per cent (14) were categorized as conflict frame (CF), 29 per cent (9) as attribution of responsibility frame (ARF), 16 per cent (5) as human-interest frame (HIF), 6.45 per cent (2) as economic consequences frame (ECF) while only 3.23 per cent (1) was under morality frame (MF).

3.2. Readers’ perceptions

This section presents the findings from the thematic analysis of the thoughts of participants of the two focus groups in this study. The findings are discussed under the news frames to which the participants were exposed (attribution of responsibility, conflict and human-interest).

3.2.1. Attribution of responsibility

The first story exposed to the participants was reported on 24 November 2016 by DDN (Savides, 2016: 6) and it was titled ‘No free ride for SA students still, double current R60bn needed’. In this story, government was blamed for not providing affordable higher education system for all and also the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) was condemned for their inefficiency in retrieving the debts from graduated students. Excerpts from the story are as follow:

The Commission for Inquiry into Higher Education and Training calls that free education should go beyond fees, factoring in transport, accommodation, learning materials and living expenses. It also called on the state to find substantially more money to fund higher education.

In another part of the story the President was quoted to have mentioned that ‘government is committed to ensure affordable higher education for all and support poor and working-class student to access higher education and training’.

Most of the participants blamed the government on its attitude towards the issue of FeeMustFall stating that the government promised all access to higher education but failed to provide the means. One of the participants stated that ‘the government’s promise to reduce fee for poor and working-class students is unjust’. Another participant noted that ‘the president was shying away from coming clean when he promised affordable higher education for all and support for the poor and could not provide clue on how this would be financed’.

The participants also dwelt on the recommendations of the commission of inquiry into higher education and training in South Africa as reported in the story they read. Some of the participants mentioned inadequate funding of the higher education system in South Africa as a major challenge. Pointing out that the government needs to double the amount it spends on higher education, which is R60bn currently. A participant said ‘R60bn is used for loan at the moment, which they said is not even enough that they need double of the money, which shows that the money will continue to increase’. Another participant stated that ‘government is having a kind of fear about continuity because double of the amount that is currently being used will be required in the future to continue the process’. More so, the commission also recommended that free education should be all encompassing to include transport, learning materials, accommodation and living expenses. Another important point from the readers’ thoughts under attribution of responsibility frame story is free education.

It is clear from these findings and arguments of the participants that government is faced with the challenge of funding and skeptical about the sustainability of free education in South Africa. These concerns are, unarguably, genuine as the challenge of higher education funding is not limited to South Africa alone. It, is therefore, appropriate for the government to count the cost of free higher education in the country so as to ascertain its sustainability before taking a decision. This implies that government would need to find a sustainable way of funding higher education in the country. More so, financial analysis of “fee-free higher education in South Africa” by Jacobs et al. (2019: 129–130) concluded that “free higher education is not sustainable for South Africa” because substantial funds would have to be reallocated from other sectors of the economy that also need to be funded, or by collecting from tax payers, who are currently overburdened. This is corroborated by Shai and Molapo (2017: 2), who opined that a decision to meet the demand of free education in South Africa “might not be economically sound in respect of the immediate future. However, Jacobs et al. (2019) proposed a continuation of subsidized higher education as applicable in Australia and Norway.

Some of the participants were of the opinion that government should provide free education for them rather than yearly increasing fee. A participant noted that ‘the government not giving free education is a violation of the promise they made to South Africans’. Explaining that free education is their basic right that is why the students are clamoring. According to South African constitution (1996), however, government is obliged to provide free basic education (Arendse (2011)), which by UNESCO’s standard comprises primary education (first stage) and lower secondary education (second stage) (UNESCO, 2021). In other words, free tertiary education seems not to be a right.

Another participant said ‘the fee increase affects the poor students more as it can put an end to their dreams of higher education’. He further stated that ‘if the government cannot give free education, they can at least make it affordable to all’. The view of above participant is in agreement with Norrie (2017: 50) who noted that “poverty is a major constrain on education in South Africa”.

A participant mentioned that ‘if government does not provide a permanent solution, the FeeMustFall protest will be a yearly occurrence’. Another major issue raised by the participants is the ineffectiveness of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

The participants blamed NSFAS for their inability to coordinate the disbursement of fund to students. As stated by one of the participants, ‘NSFAS does not do proper investigation before giving out fund, and end up not giving brilliant and qualified students’. Another participant was of the opinion that ‘the NSFAS is used by the government to extort money; he said rather than giving free education, the government provided funds which will be paid back by students after graduation’. One of the participants lamented that:

Students are confused in deciding which debt to pay first between NSFAS and the university. As the tuition increases every year and NSFAS fund has
not been increased, so, students end up owing NSFAS and the university at the same time. For the scheme to be more effective, I feel NSFAS should first look at the way students apply for the fund. Firstly, deserving students don’t get NSFAS fund and secondly, even if they get funding, sometimes the amount given is not enough to cover the whole debt.

Furthermore, according to the story provided, the commission of inquiry into higher education and training observed that the NSFAS has not be effective in collecting debt from graduated students and recommended that they should hand the responsibility over. Most of the participants believed that rather than running after graduated students to pay their debts, government should provide employment opportunities for the graduates so that the refund would be easy for them. One of the participants said:

I feel there should be a way of empowering the students after they leave school, so that they can be able to pay back the money. Going by the unemployment rate in South Africa at the moment, most of the graduates are not employed, how are they going to pay back the money they got as loan? Unemployment should be solved.

Another participant also stated ‘I think that the Government should provide jobs because it is difficult for students to pay back the money, they finish their degrees and they do not get jobs, how are they supposed to pay the money?’.

The perceptions of readers here indicate government insincerity to the South African students as it promised to make education affordable for all but kept increasing fees annually. More so, the decision of government to support only the poor students indicates partiality. We believe most of the responsibilities are on government as it needs to increase the funds giving to students as loan to cover all their expenses and also has an obligation to provide good jobs for their graduates that will enable them pay up their debts after leaving school.

3.2.2. Conflict

The second story exposed to the focus groups was reported on 19 October 2016 by DDN with the title: “E Cape campuses on knife-edge of tension running battles, more arrests”. (MacGregor et al., 2016: 1). In the story, two players (group and individuals) were in battle against each other. In this case, the group included the FeeMustFall protestors, University management, and the police officers, who were invited to calm the situation. Unfortunately, the police ended up fueling the protests. The reflection of conflict frame was noticed from the first paragraph of the story which stated thus, ‘Eastern cape universities were balanced on a knife edge yesterday as FeeMustFall protests erupted and students clashed with riot police’. The protests escalated into students damaging properties, overturning cars and throwing stones at police officers while the police also responded by firing stun grenades, teargas and pepper spray at the students. The protests later resulted into police arrest of ten protesting students. In this story, DDN framed students as being violent, and the police were framed as victims of the violence. However, there was no mention of protesters injured by the police (Glasgow University Media Group, 1985).

The participants were able to easily identify conflict from the beginning of the story to the end. Most of the participants were not in agreement with violent action of protesting students, stating that students could rather make their intentions known to the authorities in a peaceful protest without intimidation as was reported by this story. Explaining further, violent protest can endanger the lives of students as well as staff and at the same time it could cause delay in academic activities. Some participants even recommended punishment for violent students. On the contrary, some participants believed that violent protest is the only language the government and the university management understand. Consequently, the students used violence to nail home their points. A participant stated that ‘All Universities in Eastern Cape are in support of FeeMustFall and the method they used in driving home their points was outright violence’. Another participant suggested that ‘such protest as FeeMustFall should be coordinated by the students’ leadership in order to maintain orderliness and prevent the protest from being hijacked by hooligans’.

Apart from the violence that erupted from FeeMustFall protest, poor handling of the protest by the police officers was seriously condemned by the participants. Some pointed out that the intervention of the police eventually escalated the protest. According to the story, the reporter wrote that ‘the police allegedly ordered the students off the streets at gun point and fired stun grenades, teargas and pepper spray when they were slow’. Participants also said the police were very aggressive to students, and as well cruel, to have used force and dangerous objects, which can harm or even endanger the lives of students. Although the national police’s spokesperson, Brigadier Sally de Beer denied police using heavy hand, instead claimed they had used minimum force to restore order. Majority of the participants condemned police’s action, claiming that the police were shooting rather than calming the situation. A participant stated that ‘the protest was hot at Rhodes University as a result of the way the crisis was managed on the part of the police who were supposed to maintain law and order in the country’. The participant stated further that ‘students were troubled because of the way the police handled the protest’.

Likewise, another participant stated ‘some individuals condemned the intervention of the security agency because the way they handled the issue was as if it increased the tension in the community’. One of the participants suggested that ‘the police should protect the public and ensure there is safety during the process’. Furthermore, ‘police should monitor the process, not influence it’. It is clear that there was conflict between the police and the protesting students. Police are supposed to maintain law and order. At the same time, they are obliged to protect lives and properties.

According to the police’s spokesperson, ten students, who were arrested out of hundreds of protesting students, who were accused to have damaged properties would appear in court. She added that students had broken windows, overturned cars and thrown rocks at police officers. Protesting students were also reported to be in conflict with the police. All the above listed resulted in police arresting the students, but some of the focus group participants condemned police’s action. In their opinion, students arrest did not solve the problem but rather escalated it. A participant stated that ‘arrest of students actually escalated the protests’. On the other hand, another participant thought that ‘protests put the lives of students in danger and the risk of them getting criminal records as they are arrested for several acts’.

Clash among students is another conflict-related issue raised by the participants. The participants described the clash between the students as undesirable. According to the story, the reporter wrote that ‘At NMNU, a group of protesting students clashed with another group who wanted to return to classes’. A participant said ‘students needed to agree with one voice during protest as no student should be in class while others are protesting’ He referred to this as ‘division of opinion’. Likewise, another participant stated that ‘disparity among students would frustrate the effort of protesters and would never allow the protest to achieve its aim’. More so, one of the participants opined that ‘somebody is using divide and rule to cause trouble among the students’.

The findings from the story and perceptions of readers indicate that the protest was largely marked with conflicts.

Furthermore, FeeMustFall was marked with vandalism as the story recorded several instances where protesting students have destroyed properties. According to the story, ‘public ordered police move in after students allegedly smashed windows and damaged university property’, another instance was when police’s spokesperson said ‘students had broken windows, overturned cars and thrown rocks at police’. Participants were of the opinion that public display of dissatisfaction by students should be monitored so as to prevent vandalism of property, looting and disruption of peace in the host communities. One of the participants stated that ‘protests put the lives of students in danger as the
general thing is to damage properties and intimidate other students. Another participant stated ‘it was never peaceful at the University of Fort Hare, the protest was actually very violent here: there were lots of lootings, destruction and buildings were burnt down’. A participant, who was against the act of vandalism by protesting students, stated that ‘the government does not suffer the loss, it is the students that suffer the loss, and therefore, they do not have any reason to vandalize or destroy government properties’. Moreover, a participant thought that ‘the arrested students should be prosecuted and convicted for vandalism and disturb of public peace but not for protesting for their rights’.

3.2.3. Human-interest

The third story considered for focus group discussion represented a human-interest frame. The story was reported by DDN on 12 October 2016 with the title: ‘Rhodes students out on warning’ (MacGregor, 2016: 2). It narrated the ordeal of five students arrested and charged to court for public violence, intimidation and other offenses. According to the story, the reporter wrote that ‘one woman wiped away tears when she spotted her father as she made her way up from the holding cell into the dock and was comforted by her fellow accused. She hugged her father and cried after her release’ (MacGregor, 2016: 2).

The participants said the emotional break-down of the female student on sighting her father in the court room was touching. A participant said ‘the lady kept crying even after her release on warning might suggest she had never been involved in any police case or violent occurrence before the FeeMustFall protest and as a result felt embarrassed’. This was corroborated by another participant who said ‘the tears showed her innocence and she may not know what she was arrested for’. The participants’ perceptions are emotional. This is a clear indication of human-interest frame.

Another issue that may be of human-interest, and as well arouse readers’ emotion is harassment of staff and students. The story reads that ‘according to the university campus statement, fire alarms were set off and staff were intimidated and harassed’. It was also reported that both students and staff were traumatized by the protest that occurred between students who wanted to resume classes and those who did not. One of the participants stated that ‘If you are protesting you should not hinder those who want to learn’. Moreover, the participants condemned the violent action of the protesting students who refused to attend classes and sympathized with the diligent students who were fought because they wanted classes to resume. Participants also condemned the protesting students' act of spraying insecticide into the lecture rooms where serious students were receiving lectures, saying it is a sign of disrespect for the lecturers as well. One of the participants who condemned the act of intimidation displayed by the protesters stated that ‘You do not intimidate people because you have a goal or a mission to achieve, so if you do not want to be intimidated, you should not intimidate others by driving them away’.

Students’ imprisonment was another major issue raised by the participants from the human-interest frame story. It was stated in the story that the five students arrested (two men and three female) spent a night in the prison before going to court where the magistrate released them on warning. The court room was said to be full of friends and families of the accused who were there to support them. Some of the focus group participants noted that releasing students who were accused of public violence, intimidation and other charges freely is not right unless they were not guilty or they were wrongly accused as suspected by a participant who said that ‘the cry of one of the female students showed her innocence’. Another participant was of the opinion that ‘the police just grabbed the five students as scape goats may be to serve a deterrent to others. This is a sign of the ineffective service of the police because they should be able to monitor the protest and know those who wanted to perpetrate evil rather than arresting innocent students’.

On the other hand, a participant noted that ‘the arrest of students actually brought the whole process to a halt’. Furthermore, the five students arrested were relieved when the magistrate said they would be released on warning after spending a night in the prison. Although, some participants believed that the students were released without any charges because they were innocent, other participants were of the opinion that the arrested students should not have been released freely without any punishment as it may encourage the violent students to go on protesting. One of the participants opined that ‘If there were evidences against them that they were violent and intimidating faculty members and staff, they should not have been set free; they should have been made to face the wrath of the law’. Another participant observed that ‘out of the five students arrested, three were female, which shows that the female gender is also sensitive about the issue of educating themselves’.

4. Discussion

4.1. Framing of the FeeMustFall protest stories by DDN

Framing is used to group information, shape it and process it skillfully or professionally. The concept of framing is related to the agenda setting. Unlike the agenda setting which focuses on press selection of stories, events and issues (what), framing focuses on press representation, treatment and production of stories, events and issues (Fournie, 2007: 245). In other words, framing does not only tell the audience what to think about, but also tells the audience how to think about the issue.

In this study, we found out that five different frames (conflict frame, attribution of responsibility frame, human interest frame, economic consequences frame and morality frame) were used in the presentation of the FeeMustFall protest stories by the DDN. However, conflict frame (45 per cent) was the most prominent followed by attribution of responsibility (29 per cent) and human interest (16 per cent) frames (Figure 1). This finding is in accordance with previous related study by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), where the prevalence of the aforementioned news frames (conflict frame, attribution of responsibility frame, human interest frame, economic frame and morality frame) was reported. Adapting the model of Valkenburg et al. (1999) for this study, conflict frame emphasized conflict between the protesting students and South African government; police and university management. The conflict, as framed by DDN, was characterized by violence of students and their acts of vandalism, with less emphasis on violence of the police. This finding corroborates the view of Patel (2016) that traditional (mainstream) media framed students as aggressive hooligans by focusing on destruction of university property by students. Likewise, the framing of students as being violent by DDN agrees with McLeod and Detenber (1999: 3), who argued that ‘news reports on protests tend to focus on the protesters’ appearances rather than their issues’.

Moreover, some of the stories with attribution of responsibility frame attributed responsibility of free education to South African government. For the human-interest frame, it focused on an individual (arrested students and intimidated staff) as an example; emphasized emotions or issues that arouse the emotion of readers while the economic consequences frame focused on the economic consequences or cost implications of free education and FeeMustFall protests. For the morality frame, it emphasized morality, offered social instructions and intervention of religious leaders on the protest.

The high level in the conflict frame observed in this study shows a wider range of violent issues in South Africa. Some of these issues include, but not limited to, murder, loss of properties, vandalism, looting, rape, assault, harassment and intimidation. The high rate of conflict frame may, perhaps, encourage the use of violence as a means of making demands from government while the low level of morality frame in the stories (3.23 per cent) as presented in Figure 1 indicates that the there was limited or no moral instruction that may discourage subsequent occurrence of violent protest in the future. This shows that the press focused more on the conflict aspect of the protest rather than emphasizing issues that may discourage the use of violent protest as the first
resort by students. This suggests that the press may not provide complete information on every issue, thereby supporting the view of Herman and Chomsky (1988: 2), who argued that ‘the raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print’.

### 4.2. Effect of framing of FeeMustFall protest stories on readers’ perceptions

The findings from this study showed that the different frames used in the news presentation significantly affected the readers’ perceptions. Attribution of responsibility news frame resulted in perceptions that attributed responsibilities to government on various free education related issues; conflict news frame generated conflict-related perceptions in the readers while the human-interest news frame generated perceptions that are emotional and provided human face. These findings are in agreement with the work of Price et al. (1997), where the effects of three different news frames were investigated by given some students false story to read about the funding of their institution by the state. The students were randomly chosen and given varied version of the story to read. The story had single information but was introduced differently and ended based on the type of frame used which included conflict, personal consequences, or human interest. The students were later asked to pen down what their thought was towards what they read. The findings revealed that the different news frame used greatly affected their perceptions to the news. Likewise, Valkenburg et al. (1999) studied the effects of news frames on readers’ thoughts and recall by sampling two groups of readers who were both given two different stories; one was on crime while the other was on the introduction of euro. The two stories were framed in form of human-interest, economic consequences, conflict and attribution of responsibility. The results of the study showed that the framing in each story affected the thought of each reader. It is, therefore, clear that framing plays a significant role in readers’ perception and as well, define the way information is presented by readers.

### 4.3. Placing FeeMustFall protest stories with framing theory

The framing theory suggests that the presentation or the frame of a story, an event or issue informs the audience on how to think about the issue (Fourie, 2007). The theory further suggests that how a piece of information is presented to an audience by the press determines the choices they make on how the information is processed (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996). By applying framing theory in terms of the FeeMustFall protest stories reported by DDN, it is rational to conclude that the frames with which the writers presented the three stories on the protest were able to influence the perceptions of participants (readers) on the issue. The findings clearly indicated that the various news frames used in the presentation of the FeeMustFall protest stories given to participants (attribution of responsibility, conflict and human-interest frames) generated similar frames in the audience (readers). For instance, the thematic analysis of the readers’ perceptions on the attribution of responsibility frame story showed that the frame generated attribution of responsibility related issues among the participants as they blamed the protest largely on government insincerity and also emphasized the ineffectiveness of NSFAS. Moreover, the participants believed that government has the responsibility of providing free education and creating jobs for graduates. Likewise, the conflict frame story resulted in conflict-related issues such as violence eruption, conflict between police and students, clashes among students and vandalism raised by the participants. Also, the human-interest frame story stimulated emotions in the audience. This is evident in the following issues raised while analyzing the participants’ perceptions: emotional breakdown of an arrested female student, students’ imprisonment and harassment of staff and students.

### 6. Limitation

This study was limited by study sample, which seemed to be very small. However, authors did not have control over this as only 31 editions of DDN that reported on FeeMustFall protest during the study period were selected for framing analysis.

### 7. Future research direction

This current study focused on framing of FeeMustFall protest by a single national newspaper, DDN focusing only on one region (Eastern Cape), future study will consider comparative framing analyses of the protests as reported by various national newspapers across the different provinces in South Africa. Moreover, social media is one of the fastest means of communication globally, especially among the youths including students. Consequently, its role in all human endeavours cannot be overemphasized. It is therefore important to investigate the role of social media in FeeMustFall students’ protest in South African Universities.

### Declarations

**Author contribution statement**

Monisola B. Ayodeji-Falade: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiment; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Wrote the paper.

Oluyinka O. Osunkunle: Conceived and designed the experiments; Wrote the paper.

**Funding statement**

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Data availability statement**

Data included in article.

**Declaration of interests statement**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Additional information**

No additional information is available for this paper.

### References

Alimba, C.N., 2005. Lecturer-students’ perception of the causes, effects and management patterns of students’ unrest in tertiary institutions. Afr. J. Educat. Manag. 2 (1), 170–171.

Arendse, L., 2011. The obligation to provide free basic education in South Africa: an international law perspective. Pothesfrroom Electron. Law J. 14 (6), 97–127.

Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2015. ABC Analysis Q1: the Biggest-Circulating Newspapers in South Africa. Retrieved from MarkLives.com on 27 June, p. 2020.
Ayodeji-Falade, M., & Osunkunle, O., 2019. Newspaper coverage of FeesMustFall students’ protests in eastern cape universities: a content analysis of daily dispatch. J. Hum. Educ. 68 (1-3), 108–117.

Baylor, T., 2014. UKZN Students Arrested, as Protest Turns Violent. The Witness. http://www.witness.co.za/index.php?showcontent=camp;global%20ids=5D–1140777. (Accessed 8 December 2017).

Beaver, T., 2014. UKZN Students Arrested, as Protest Turns Violent. The Witness. http://www.witness.co.za/index.php?showcontent=camp;global%20ids=5D–1140777. (Accessed 8 December 2017).

Boyle, M.P., McLeod, D.M., Armstrong, C.L., 2012. Adherence to the protest paradigm: the influence of protest goals and tactics on news coverage in U.S. and international newspapers. Int. J. Press/Polit. 17 (2), 127–144.

Brasted, M., 2005. Framing protest: the Chicago tribune and the New York times during the 1968 democratic convention. Atl. J. Commun. 13, 1–25.

Cammaerts, B., 2013. The mediation of insurrectionary symbolic damage: the 2010 U. K. Student protests. Int. J. Press/Polit. XX (X), 1–24.

Chan, J.M., Lee, C.C., 1984. The journalistic paradigm on civil protests: a case study of Hong Kong. In: Arno, A., Dishanyake, W. (Eds.), The News Media in National and International Conflict. Boulder, CO: Westview, pp. 183–202.

Chong, D., Druckman, J.N., 2007. Framing theory. Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci. 10, 103–126.

Chowdhury, V., 2014. The role of media in Indian society. In: International Conference on Systems of Governance.