

***Kamala Harris in Ghana and the LGBT Agenda:  
An Analysis of Media Coverages of the Issue***

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**Abstract**

During Kamala Harris' recent visit to Ghana, the issue of the rights of people who identify as LGBT in Ghana was raised at a joint press conference with the President of Ghana. At the conference, Kamala Harris commented on protecting the rights of people who identify as LGBT in Ghana. Her comments, which caught a lot of attention, were widely reported in the media. Thus, the current study investigates how the media framed and reported this issue as a way of analyzing the media's framing of LGBT-related issues in Ghana. Using framing and critical discourse analysis, the study revealed that three issues surrounding the joint-press conference attracted the most media attention. These included Kamala Harris' comments themselves, the response of the President of Ghana on the issue, and the reactions of some members of parliament, particularly the Speaker of Ghana's parliament. Three frames were found to be the main means through which the stories were reported. These included 1) the portrayal of Kamala Harris as an LGBT advocate 2) the labeling of Kamala Harris' comments as undemocratic, 3) the president's response as unsatisfactory. The findings of this study have implications for media and sexuality studies in Ghana.

Keywords: Kamala Harris, LGBT, Media Framing, Critical Discourse Analysis, Ghana

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## Introduction

In most Western countries where the rights of people who identify as lesbians, gays, transgender and queer (LGBT) are protected, studies on media representation of the LGBT community has received a lot of attention over the years (Holzhacker, 2014; Jacobs and Meeusen, 2021; Kian et al., 2015) yet the situation is not the same in conservative cultures like Ghana where the rights of people who identify as gays and lesbians are still controversial (Baisley, 2015; Nartey, 2022; Tettey, 2016).

Recent studies on this issue in the West have found that media frames about people who identify as members of the LBGT community are more positive. For instance, Kian et al., (2015) mentioned earlier conducted a study on media news reports on Jason Collins, an NBA player who came out as being gay while playing in the NBA and found that most media houses who covered this story portrayed the NBA player as a 'hero'. Jacobs and Meeusen (2021) also found that media frames have shifted in terms of visibility and tone with gay people being given more visibility in the media. Negatives tones surrounding gay people in the media have shifted for a more positive ones according to their study.

The case in Ghana is, however, different. As mentioned earlier studies on media representations of people who identify as LGBT in the Ghanaian media are limited. Yet, the few current studies have concluded that media frames of people who identify as LGBT in Ghana are mostly negative. For instance, Baisley (2015) argued that the dominant frames used by opponents of LGBT in Ghana are those of decolonization frame arguing that the promotion of LGBT is a form of cultural imperialism that renders pro-LGBT human rights frames useless. Nartey (2022) also found that media frames in Ghana about LGBT people are usually biased and inflammatory portraying LGBT people as deviants and immoral. Tettey (2016) also argues that in Ghana, the media often offer their platforms to politicians and religious leaders who often promote homophobic ideas.

Though the current literature on the issue in Ghana has established that media frames about the rights of LGBT people in Ghana are predominantly negative, the extant literature has focused their studies on media representations of LGBT people in Ghana over the last decade (Baisley, 2015; Nartey, 2022) with few studies discussing the contemporary situation in Ghana. Given this, the current study, seeks to fill that gap by analyzing recent media reports concerning LGBT people in Ghana using Kamala Harris recent visit to Ghana and the LGBT related issues that came up during her visit as a case study.

On March 26, 2023, The US Vice President (VP) Kamala Harris visited Ghana as part of a week-long trip to three African countries namely: Tanzania, Ghana, and Zambia with the aim of recasting the US as a vital partner of the African continent. The US Vice President's first stop on her tour to Africa was Ghana. She met with the president of the Republic of Ghana on Monday, March 27, 2023, at a joint news conference where the topic of LGBT rights in Ghana was discussed. The US VP's response to the matter included a statement in which she expressed her strong feelings in favor of defending LGBT rights in Ghana. Her comments which came at a time when an anti-LGBT bill is before the parliament of Ghana received massive backlash from the media and the people of Ghana. Given this, the current study analyzed the media coverages of the issues concerning LGBT rights in Ghana as stated by Kamala Harris and identify the frames used by the Ghanaian media to report their stories on this issue. To this end, the study seeks to achieve the following objectives: 1) to highlight the

dominant LGBT related issues surrounding the event that attracted the most media attention 2) to unearth how these issues were framed in the major online news outlets.

This study is significant because it adds to the pool of knowledge on media framing of minority groups such as LGBT people in conservative cultures like Ghana and could serve as a source of reference for future researchers interested in this topic. It also adds to the discourse of sexuality and media within the Ghanaian context.

### **Framing of LGBT Issues in Western Media**

As earlier indicated, studies on media framing of LGBT related issues have seen an increase in recent times. However, most of these studies have been based on Western media representation of people who identify as gay or lesbians and the impacts of such representations on society's perception of the LGBT society (Jacobs and Meeusen, 2021; Kian et al., 2015; Kerrigan and Pramaggoire, 2021).

For instance, Jacobs and Meeusen (2021) earlier mentioned conducted a longitudinal content analytical study on television framing of LGBT people from 1986-2017 in Flanders Belgium. The study which was aimed at examining trends in the amount of LGBT news stories over time, the representations of LGBT people in the news and document the evolution of tone in media framing of LGBT related news found that patterns in media frames of LGBT people have shifted from deviance and abnormalities to equal rights and victim frames and that journalists have shifted from problematizing homosexuality to now problematizing homophobia.

On this same note Kian et al. (2015) conducted a study of media representation of LGBT people in the United States by investigating how the news media framed reports of NBA player, Jason Collins who came out as being gay and found that the media framed this story as a landmark in US sports history portraying the US sports industry as being accepting to people who identify as members of the LGBT.

The case in Ireland was quite similar. Kerrigan and Pramaggoire (2021) also conducted a study on the media's representation of an Irish gay politician, Leo Varadkar during his tenure of office from 2017-2020. The study which conducted a comparative analysis of local Irish media news content against that of international news media content about the politician found that while local Irish news media was largely homophobic portraying the politician as unfit for office due to his racial and sexual orientation, that of international news media was more positive portraying the politician as a hero.

In summary, it can be said that studies on media framing of LGBT related issues in western societies are extensive and have mostly found that the western media often use positive frames when reporting news stories about LGTB related issues. The case in most African countries is, however, not the same.

### **Framing of LGBT Issues in African Media**

The African situation is unique to its own socio-cultural context. Studies on media framing of LGBT related issues in Africa are limited because the issue of the rights of people who identify as gays and lesbians is still controversial in most African countries like Ghana. However, the few existing studies conducted on this subject, have found that media frames of

LGBT issues in most African countries are negative (Adamczyk et al., 2015; Amenaghawon and Ayatande, 2019; Nartey 2022; Tettey; 2016).

For instance, Adamczyk et al., (2015) conducted a cross national study on how media frames LGBT related issues in three different countries namely, the United States, Uganda and South Africa and found that the media in the United States are more likely to frame LGBT issues as civil right issues given their economic and democratic development. Whereas the media in countries such as Uganda and South Africa are more likely to frame LGBT related issues from religious perspectives. Amenaghawon and Ayatande (2019) also conducted a study on newspaper framing of LGBT related issues in Nigeria through a content analysis of articles related to homosexuality published by one of Nigeria's widely read online newspapers, *Punch*. Their study found that the newspaper mostly framed homosexuality and LGBT related activities in Nigeria as illegal and unacceptable.

In Ghana, Tettey (2016) conducted a study of media framing of LGBT issues and found that media in Ghana offer their platforms for politicians and moral entrepreneurs to promote ideas of homophobia and heterosexism and argue that this role played by the Ghanaian media often engendered anti-homosexuality sentiments among the general Ghanaian publics. On this same note, Nartey (2022) also found that the media in Ghana promote anti-homosexual sentiments among the Ghanaian public by framing homosexuals as social misfits or non-conforming individuals. Thus, it can be concluded that media framing of LGBT related issues in Ghana and other African countries in general are mostly negative as seen from the literature.

## **Framing Theory**

Framing theory is a concept closely related to the agenda setting power of the media that emphasizes the media's power to influence what issues people consider as important. However, diverging from the traditional agenda setting theory, framing theory not only explains how the media presents certain issues as more important than others but also how the media places these issues within a certain context of meaning. As Entman (1993, Pg. 52) posits "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment for the item described". In effect, framing theory argues that how certain information is presented to an audience influences how the audiences process the information. Framing theory is widely used in media studies to investigate how media selection and interpretation of news items influences audiences' comprehension of specific issues. It is an approach to analyzing news discourses which mainly deals with how public discourse about public policy issues is constructed and negotiated (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). The theory is employed in this study to identify how the media framed certain aspects of Kamala Harris' comments concerning LGBT rights in Ghana as more relevant than others and show how these media frames influences discourses about LGBT issues in Ghana.

## **Methods**

The data for this article was based on news articles on Kamala Harris' LGBT Comments in Ghana posted by major online news outlets in Ghana. To collect data, a Google search for news articles with the keywords "Kamala Harris in Ghana and LGBT Issues" was conducted. The search yielded over 800,000 results. However, the search was filtered by focusing only

on articles posted by news channels owned by Ghanaian media houses and targeted at Ghanaian audiences. After filtering the articles from various online news portals, and screening to eliminate news sources that do not directly speak to the topic under consideration an eventual sample size of 140 articles were realized. These included articles from Ghana Web, Myjoy online, Pulse GH, Myinfo GH, Adom online, Peace FM online among others. The news articles eventually sampled for the study spanned from March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2023 to April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Given the objective of the study, the collected data was then analyzed for recurring themes. The themes were then categorized to identify the most dominant issues addressed in the articles and the critical discourse analysis (CDA) was then used to analyze the findings.

According to Van Leeuwen (2009) CDA is based on the tenet that text and discourses play a major role in maintaining and legitimizing inequality, injustice and oppression in society and uses discourse analytic methods to show how this is done, Critical discourse analyst do not only rely on discourse analytics methods but also critical social theory. Fairclough (2013) also argues that CDA is the application of the traditional critical social analysis in language studies and contributes to the understanding of the relationships between discourses and other social elements such as power relations, ideologies and institutions. CDA has been widely used in studies that focuses on media representation of minority groups including people who identify as members of the LGBT society. In this study, CDA is used to analyze how these media frames might reinforce stereotypes and prejudices against people who identify as LGBT in Ghana.

## **Results and Discussions**

As earlier mentioned, the researcher purposefully sampled 140 articles for the study after engaging in a thorough Google search for news articles published about this event. The 140 news articles were from 19 news agencies out of which 2 were state owned and 17 were privately owned. The idea behind including state and privately-owned media was to investigate whether media ownership play a role in influencing media framing of LGBT related news. The 19 news sources were either fully online news portals such as Ghana Web, Pulse GH and Modern GH or traditional news agencies with an online presence such as GBC Online, Peace FM Online, and Metro TV Online.

### **Major Issues Surrounding the Event Reported by the News Media**

One of the objectives of the study was to investigate the major issues surrounding the event which attracted the most media attention. To this end, the headlines of the various news articles were analyzed. News headlines usually captures the main ideas of a news story and one can tell the content of a story simply by reading the headline (Van Dijk, 1998 cited in Bonyadi and Samuel 2013). Headlines are brief summaries of the news that aim to summarize, elicit thought, raise issues, and, frequently amuse the audience. The purpose of news headlines is to attempt to entice and engage news audiences by giving the readers or audiences a fair idea of what a news article might be about (Scacco and Muddiman, 2016). Given this, the headlines of the various stories were studied to get an idea about what the stories were about and see which angles of the issue caught the attention of the media. The results revealed that the stories were mainly reported from three angles. Below are some headline examples in support of these findings.

(i)LGBTQ+ is a human right issue-Kamala Harris- **Ghana Web 28.03.23**

(ii) *I feel very strongly about supporting freedom, equality for all people-Harris on anti-LGBTQ+ Law- GBC online-27.03.23*

(iii) *Anti-Gay Bill: Akufo-Addo goofed in his comment to Kamala Harris-Sam George-Modern Ghana 28.03.23*

(iv) *Foh-Amoaning “fires” Akufo-Addo over his recent response to the anti-LGBT bill question-Ghana Web 03.04.23*

(v) *Speaker Slams Kamala Harris’ take on LGBTQ+ in Ghana, calls out Akufo-Addo-MyJoyOnline 28.03.23*

(vi) *Your comments on anti-gay bill undemocratic. Babgin tells Kamala Harris-Modern Ghana 28.03.23*

The above are some examples of headlines from the various news portals that covered this issue. A critical study of these headlines reveal that the media houses reported stories about this event from three different angles. These included Kamala Harris’ comments themselves, the response of the president of Ghana on her comments and the reactions of members of parliament and other prominent members of society on the issue. As seen from the headlines above, the first two (I-II) headlines are examples of news stories that reported the issue from the perspective of Kamala Harris’ comments themselves. The middle (III-IV) headlines are examples of new stories that reported the issue from the perspective of the President’s comments and reactions of members of society on his comments and finally the last set of headlines (V-VI) reported their stories from the perspective of the reactions of members of parliament and other prominent members of society on Kamala Harris’ comments. Headlines of these nature are seen throughout all the sampled news stories for the study.

### **Media Frames Used in Reporting the Stories**

Another objective here was to identify the frames that were used by the news agencies in reporting the major issues surrounding the event. Based on Entman (1993) concept of framing, the focus here was to identify how the media highlighted certain aspects of the major issues surrounding the event as more important and how these media frames reflect the general representation of LGBT issues in the Ghanaian press. From the analysis, It was found that three major frames were predominant in the news articles sampled. This included; the portrayal of Kamala Harris as an LGBT advocate, the labeling of Kamala Harris’ comments as undemocratic and unwarranted, and the portrayal of the presidents’ response as unsatisfactory.

### **Kamala Harris as an LGBT Advocate**

One of the major frames which the news articles used in reporting the story was the portrayal of Kamala Harris as an LGBT advocate. This frame was used mainly in news articles that covered the story from the perspective of Kamala Harris’ comments themselves. By using this frame, the media portrayed Kamala Harris as advocating for a cause that is considered unacceptable in Ghana. Here, it was found that most news articles reported Kamala Harris’ visit to Ghana to strengthen Ghana-US relations as a false pretense to promote LGBT agenda in the country. Below are some extracts of news stories using this frame.

1. *The Executive Secretary of the National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values, Moses Foh-Amoaning has alleged that the main **purpose** of the visit of the Vice President of the United States of America, Kamala Harris to Ghana is to promote LGBTQI- Ghana Web, 29.03.23*

2. *Vice President of the United States of America, Kamala Harris, has added her **voice** to the debate over the passage of the Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill 2021 currently before Parliament to criminalize the activities of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) in Ghana- Pulse GH, 28.03.23*

3. *Eric Adjei contends that if Harris' coming to Ghana has anything to do with lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQI) **advocacy**, Ghanaians ought to be aware of it- Ghana Web, 28.03.23*

The above are extracts from some of the news articles that promoted this frame. As seen from the extracts the main *purpose* of the US Vice President's visit to Ghana was to promote LGBT rights. The use of words such as 'purpose', 'voice' and 'advocacy' in relation to Kamala Harris and LGBT rights in these extracts suggest that the reason for her visit is motivated by pro-LGBT agenda. Here, Kamala Harris is being portrayed as an advocate of LGBT whose main purpose in Ghana is to address LGBT issues and promote the rights of people who identify with this community in Ghana. A critical look at the news stories additionally reveal that the stories do not portray Kamala Harris as a "hero" who has come to fight for the rights of people who identify as LGBT in Ghana but as an advocate of moral corruption whose sole motive for visiting is to impose western values on Ghanaians. This is in-line with the findings of Baisley' (2015) who cited Thoreson (2008) as arguing that in Africa, homosexuality is seen as foreign. A misconception she traces back to the earlier works of African Anthropologist who made assumptions that Africans were largely heterosexuals and homosexuality was foreign to their culture.

### **Kamala Harris' Comments as Undemocratic and Unwarranted**

Another major frame which was found in most of the news articles analyzed was the portrayal of Kamala Harris' comments as undemocratic and unwarranted. These frames were especially dominant in news articles who covered the story from the perspective of members of Ghana's parliament including the Speaker of Parliament as well as some prominent members of society on the issue. From these stories, it was seen that Kamala Harris' comments were seen as an intrusion in the sovereignty and democratic dispensation of the country. Below are some extracts of news articles where this frame featured.

4. *The Speaker of Parliament described her comments as **undemocratic** and "should not be tolerated." "What is democracy? That someone should have to dictate to me what is good and what is bad? Unheard of because we have decided to devalue ourselves and go begging?..." Mr. Bagbin said on Tuesday- Myjoy Online, 28.03.23*

5. *Son of Ghana's first president Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, has asked the United States to desist from **foisting** its culture and beliefs relative to same-sex relationships on Ghana- Ghana Web, 10.04.2023*

6. *The phrase ‘sovereign nation’ is again back on the debate plate, thanks to US Vice President Kamala Harris’ “human rights” comments in relation to the LGBTQ situation in the country- Myjoy Online, 31.03.2023*

As seen from the extracts above, the news articles were this frame featured the most portrayed Kamala Harris’ comments as undemocratic, echoing the words of some prominent figures in Ghana. The news articles, through this frame, portray Kamala Harris as a form of western imperialist who is engaging in cultural imperialism by pushing for the rights of people who identify as LGBT in Ghana. The use of words such as ‘undemocratic’ and ‘foisting’ suggest that Kamala Harris’ comments are viewed as imposing and forceful. “Undemocratic” is used to refer to something not agreeing to democratic principles and “foisting”, on the other hand, means forcing another to accept an idea or a belief. The use of these words in relation to her comments suggests that by advocating for LGBT rights in Ghana, Kamala Harris violates the principles of democracy and disregards the sovereignty of Ghana as indicated in the news story reported by Myjoy online. Baisley (2015) argues that one frame often used by opponents of LGBT rights is the decolonization frame that assumes that LGBT rights is a form of colonialism and needs to be resisted. A situation she calls the myth of African exceptionalism which assumes that homosexuality was introduced to Africa by colonizers. This is also in harmony with the findings of Tettey (2016) who argued that in Ghana, the media often give their platform to politicians who often promote homophobic views which promote homophobic sentiments among the general public.

### **The Presidents’ Response as Unsatisfactory**

Another frame that was found to be predominant in most of the news stories was the framing of the response of the President of Ghana on the matter as unsatisfactory. Here, it was also found that news articles where this frame were used mostly reported their stories from the perspectives of the proponents and supporters of the anti-LGBT bill, such as from the perspective of Mr. Sam George, a member of Ghana’s parliament spearheading the anti-LGBT bill and from some religious leaders. Below are some extracts as support for this finding.

7. *Mr. Nartey, George also **slammed** President Akufo-Addo for **defying** the position of his government and **shying** away from telling Kamala Harris in the face the position of the country on homosexuality... - Citinews, 28.03.23*

8. *In the view of Bishop Mensah, the president could have used the occasion to make his **Christian religious** beliefs regarding same-sex marriage known, he chose to be a bit **diplomatic** in his response to a question on homosexuality- 3News, 29.03.23*

9. *The Catholic Bishop of Konongo-Mampong, Most Reverend Joseph Osei-Bonsu, has called on President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo to be **emphatic** on his stance on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+)- GH Times, 04.04.23*

10. *The President of the Catholic Bishop Conference, Most Revered Matthew Gyamfi has **criticized** President Nana Addo Danquah Akufo-Addo’s response to the question on LGBT in Ghana at a joint press conference with the Vice President of the US, Kamala Harris. According to him Akufo Addo should have spoken about the **culture** of Ghana and the stance of many Christians on the Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill- Ghana Web, 30.03.23*

As seen from the extracts above, certain members of the Ghanaian public were dissatisfied with the response of the President of Ghana, Akufo-Addo on Ghana's position on the promotion of LGBT rights in Ghana. For instance, in the story reported by Citinews, Mr. George Nartey, a member of Ghana's parliament is reported as saying that the President was shying away from defending the anti-LGBT bill, a bill that is a product of his government. Additionally, the stories reported by 3News, and the Ghanaian (GH) Times also revealed that some religious leaders were dissatisfied with the president's position on the matter and called on him to come back with a more emphatic response one that reflects his values as a Christian. By focusing on this aspect of the story, the news articles portray the President's response as unsatisfactory and not representative of the views of the ordinary Ghanaian on homosexuality. Thereby, calling on the President to come out with a much clearer response. These findings are in-line with the conclusions of Tettey (2016) who found that religious leaders and politicians play a major role in promoting homophobic sentiments in Ghana.

## **Conclusion**

This study sought to investigate the media framing of the events surrounding Kamala Harris comments on the rights of people who identify as LGBT in Ghana. To this end, the study had two objectives, to identify what major issues surrounding Kamala Harris' LGBT related comments that attracted the most media attention and identify the frames used by the media in reporting these issues.

The results of the study showed that the issues surrounding Kamala Harris's comments that caught the most media attention were the comments made by Kamala Harris themselves, the response of the president of Ghana on the matter and the reactions of certain members of parliament on Kamala Harris' comments such as the Speaker of Parliament. The study also found that three main frames were used by the media to report their stories on the issue. These frames included; Kamala Harris as an LGBT advocate, Kamala Harris comments as undemocratic and unwarranted and the President's response as unsatisfactory.

The findings further revealed that by using these frames, the media portrayed the aspects of the story in favor of proponents of the anti-LGBT campaign in Ghana. Nartey (2022) found that in Ghana the media often portrayed people who identify as LGBT as undesirable. Thus, by focusing on these frames, in their reportage, the media portrays the LGBT as undesirable within the Ghanaian context. Baisley (2015) also found that in Ghana media frames portray the promotion of LGBT as a form of cultural imperialism and often use the decolonization frame to counteract any pro-LGBT frames in the media. Her findings were supported by the study which found that the media portrayed Kamala Harris' comments as undemocratic labelling her as a cultural imperialist. The conclusion that religious leaders and politicians play a major role in promoting homophobic sentiments in Ghana are also supported by this study (Tettey, 2016).

The following recommendations are made to media practitioners and future researchers in this field. To offer people who identify as LGBT a fair representation in the Ghanaian media space, the media must make a conscious effort to report stories concerning LGBT people from both perspectives and not solely from the perspectives of anti-LGBT proponents as revealed in this study. By doing this, the media promotes the principle of balance and fairness when reporting issues affecting people who identify as LGBT in Ghana and avoid reinforcing any biases and stereotypes affecting them. Also, future research on a topic similar to the current study can investigate social-cultural factors that encourages negative frames of LGBT

people in the Ghanaian media space and how these can be addressed. This study has implications for media and sexuality studies in Ghana.

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