

Adaptive Journalistic Growth Theory

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ABSTRACT This study aimed to formulate a theory explaining the transition of a student journalist to a professional journalist. A qualitative design using Constructivist Grounded Theory was employed. Twelve professional journalists were selected through purposive sampling and participated in in-depth interviews. Data were analysed using constant comparative procedures to generate categories that describe the process of journalistic development. Findings led to the formulation of the Adaptive Journalistic Growth Theory, which explains that the transition is not linear but cyclical and dynamic. The theory consists of six interconnected components of Weaving the Foundation, Refining Skills, Hindering Factors, Countermeasures, Triumphs in the Journey, and Encountered Setbacks. The results indicate that professional growth in journalism involves continuous adaptation shaped by experiences, challenges, and achievements. The theory provides a framework that may guide journalism education, training, and professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Journalism plays a critical role in democratic societies by ensuring the dissemination of accurate information and by holding institutions accountable. Because of this responsibility, the formation of journalists has become an important area of inquiry in educational and communication research. Recent studies emphasise that professional identity in journalism develops through a complex interaction of personal motivation, academic training, and socio-cultural influences rather than through a simple linear progression (Hanusch and Mellado 2021; Josephi 2022). The increasing demands of digital media, public scrutiny, and ethical challenges have further complicated the transition from student journalist to professional practitioner.

Recent literature in journalism education highlights that participation in campus journalism contributes to the development of writing competence, critical thinking, and professional values (Ferrer 2020; Reyes and Torres 2021). Studies also show that student publications serve as training grounds where learners acquire practical skills, discipline, and responsibility that are necessary in professional media work (Santos 2022). However, researchers note that the process by which student journalists gradually become professional journalists remains insufficiently explained, particularly in terms of the experiences, challenges, and adaptive strategies encountered during their development (Mensing 2021).

In addition, contemporary research stresses that the professional growth of journalists is influenced not only by formal instruction but also by mentorship, institutional culture, and exposure to real-world media environments (Couldry and Hepp 2020; Deuze 2021). The emergence of digital journalism, social media platforms, and citizen reporting has reshaped the competencies required from journalists, making professional development more dynamic and non-linear. Despite these developments, existing studies often describe journalistic training in terms of skills acquisition without providing a theoretical explanation of how individuals move from being student journalists to professional practitioners.

Few studies have used qualitative theory-building approaches to explain this transition. In particular, there is limited research employing Constructivist Grounded Theory to describe the lived experiences of journalists and to generate a model that explains their professional growth. The absence of a clear theoretical framework leaves a gap in understanding how motivations, educational experiences, institutional support, and challenges interact in shaping journalistic development.

In response to this gap, the present study aims to formulate a theory that explains the transition from being a student journalist to professional journalist by examining the experiences of practicing journalists. Through a constructivist grounded theory approach, the study seeks to identify the

processes, challenges, and adaptive mechanisms that characterize the evolution of journalistic competence and professional identity.

Objectives

The study aimed to:

1. Describe the experiences of professional journalists during their transition from student journalist to professional practitioner.
2. Identify the factors that facilitate or hinder journalistic development.
3. Examine the challenges encountered during the process of professional formation.
4. Formulate a grounded theory that explains the adaptive growth of journalists.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in Constructivist Grounded Theory Method (GTM). GTM served as both the philosophical and methodological foundation for this study, allowing for the systematic exploration of the transition from student journalist to professional journalist. Grounded in a constructivist paradigm, GTM assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge emerges through interactions between participants and researchers (Charmaz 2021). This perspective is particularly suitable for understanding complex processes, as it emphasises the subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations of individuals within their social context. By using GTM, this study aimed to generate a theory directly grounded in the data rather than testing pre-existing models.

Participants and Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling to select twelve professional journalists who had experience transitioning from student journalism to professional practice. Participants were chosen based on their ability to provide rich insights into the stages, challenges, and strategies involved in professional development. This approach ensured that the data collected were relevant and sufficiently detailed to construct a meaningful theoretical framework.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their personal experiences, motivations, and reflections on their development as journalists. The interviews focused on participants' educational backgrounds, campus journalism experiences, professional challenges, and adaptive strategies. To ensure data richness, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with observational notes and memos where relevant.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed iteratively using the constant comparative method, a hallmark of GTM. Open coding was first applied to identify initial categories from the raw data. These categories were then compared across interviews to detect patterns, similarities, and differences. Through axial coding, relationships among categories were established, highlighting the processes, facilitators, and hindrances in journalists' professional development. Finally, selective coding enabled the integration of categories into a coherent theoretical framework, resulting in the formulation of the Adaptive Journalistic Growth Theory.

Rigour and Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study employed triangulation of data sources, member checking with participants, and peer debriefing with colleagues familiar with journalism education. Reflexive memoing was used throughout the research process to account for researcher biases and to ensure transparency in the development of the grounded theory.

RESULTS

The analysis of the interview data using constant comparison produced six core categories derived from the initial and focused codes. These categories describe the process experienced by participants in their transition from student journalist to professional journalist. The six core categories identified were Weaving the Foundation, Refining Skills, Hindering Factors, Countermea-

tures, Triumphs in the Journey, and Encountered Setbacks.

Table 1 presents the six core categories and their corresponding sub-categories generated from the data. The categories summarise the recurring patterns observed in the narratives of the participants regarding their development in journalism.

The first core category, Weaving the Foundation, includes the sub-categories of interest in reading books, influence of parents, presence of role models, teacher involvement, and home environment. Participants reported that these factors contributed to their early interest in journalism.

The second core category, Refining Skills, consists of the sub-categories like attending seminars, utilising feedback, and participating in collaborative learning activities. Participants described these experiences as part of their formal and informal training.

The third core category, Hindering Factors, includes self-doubt, inadequate training, unfit mentorship, discouragement, and difficulty in time management. These factors were reported as conditions that slowed the development of journalistic skills.

The fourth core category, Countermeasures, refers to the actions taken by participants to overcome difficulties encountered during their development. These actions include seeking guidance, practicing writing, and participating in journalistic activities.

The fifth core category, Triumphs in the Journey, includes experiences of achievement such as

winning competitions, publication of articles, and recognition from mentors.

The sixth core category, Encountered Setbacks, includes experiences of rejection, criticism, academic difficulty, and personal challenges reported by the participants.

The relationship among the six categories forms the Adaptive Journalistic Growth Theory, which describes the sequence of experiences observed in the data collected from the participants.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealed that the transition from student journalist to professional journalist is a complex and evolving process shaped by early influences, formal training, challenges, and adaptive responses. The emergence of the category Weaving the Foundation indicates that journalistic development begins with early exposure to reading, writing, and mentorship within the family and school environment. Previous studies have shown that the formation of journalistic identity starts before formal professional practice, as individuals gradually internalise values, skills, and motivations through socialisation and educational experiences. Research on journalism education confirms that early engagement in writing activities, guidance from teachers, and participation in student publications contribute significantly to the development of professional orientation among aspiring journalists (Hanusch and Hanitzsch 2021; Deuze and Witschge 2022). Recent studies further

Table 1: Core categories

<i>Core category</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Sub-categories identified</i>
Weaving the Foundation	Early experiences that influenced the participants' interest in journalism	Interest in reading books; Influence of parents; Presence of role models; Teacher involvement; Home environment
Refining Skills	Activities that contributed to the development of journalistic competence	Attending seminars; Utilising feedback; Collaborative learning experiences
Hindering factors	Conditions that slowed or challenged the development of journalistic skills	Self-doubt; Inadequate training; Unfit mentorship; Discouragement; Difficulty in time management
Counter measures	Actions taken by participants to overcome difficulties during their development	Seeking guidance; Continuous writing practice; Participation in journalistic activities; Self-improvement strategies
Triumphs in the journey	Positive experiences that strengthened commitment to journalism	Awards received; Publication of articles; Recognition from teachers or mentors; Successful performances
Encountered setbacks	Negative experiences that affected progress in journalism	Rejection of articles; Criticism; Academic difficulties; Personal challenges

emphasize that foundational literacy practices and early media exposure play a critical role in shaping journalistic identity, particularly in digitally mediated learning environments where students engage with diverse forms of information and storytelling (Fleming 2024; Broersma 2024). Moreover, contemporary scholarship highlights that mentorship and early institutional support remain central in cultivating critical thinking, ethical awareness, and professional commitment among student journalists (Hanitzsch et al. 2025).

Participants described how early experiences influenced their decision to pursue journalism as, *"When I was young, I think around Grade 5, I already knew that I enjoyed reading. My grandmother loved to read to me; she was a retired teacher, so maybe that's what she missed doing. Until the time I got really into reading. I read books and newspapers; we always had newspapers at home back then."*

These observations support the view that professional identity is not formed at a single point in time but develops through continuous interaction between personal interest and institutional support.

The category Refining Skills demonstrates that the development of journalistic competence continues through training, feedback, and collaborative learning experiences. Participants reported that seminars, editorial guidance, and repeated writing tasks helped them improve their abilities. Recent research on journalism training emphasises that skill development requires continuous practice and adaptation to changing media environments. Studies on journalism students indicate that experiential learning, newsroom simulation, and mentor feedback significantly influence the acquisition of professional skills (Joseph 2022; Fleming 2023).

Participants described how training activities helped them improve their performance as, *"Attending seminars boosted my confidence. I got to mingle with other student-writers from various schools. There were also presentations... I mean, there were group activities that we were tasked to present. You know, when you get to present in front of the public, it adds confidence. And we need that as journalists. For me, seminars had a great impact. I didn't just learn about topics on journalism, but it also became an avenue for me to become more confident."*

These findings suggest that journalistic growth involves gradual refinement rather than immediate mastery.

The presence of the category Hindering Factors shows that the development of journalists is accompanied by difficulties such as self-doubt, lack of training, discouragement, and time constraints. Similar observations have been reported in recent qualitative studies of journalism students, where challenges related to academic pressure, mentorship issues, and professional expectations were found to influence motivation and persistence. Research on professional identity formation also indicates that beginners often experience uncertainty and role conflict as they adjust to the demands of journalistic work (Siegelbaum and Thomas 2022; Broersma 2023).

Participants described the difficulties they encountered during their development as, *"I used to think it was easy. I was encouraged by a classmate to join the student publication, and during the recruitment, I think it was like an audition, I submitted my article. They liked it, so I got in. But in my experience as a member of the school publication, there were times when I doubted if I could really write."*

These findings indicate that obstacles are part of the normal process of professional growth and may contribute to the strengthening of professional commitment.

The category Countermeasures reflects the adaptive strategies used by participants to overcome difficulties. Informants reported that they sought guidance from mentors, practiced writing regularly, and participated in journalistic activities to improve their skills. Studies in professional education have shown that learning occurs through continuous reflection, feedback, and active engagement in authentic tasks. Adaptive coping strategies enable learners to maintain motivation and gradually build confidence in their abilities (Ryan et al. 2021; Schmitz Weiss and Domingo 2022). Recent studies further emphasize that adaptive learning behaviors, particularly self-regulation and reflective practice, are critical in navigating the demands of contemporary journalism education, where students must respond to rapidly evolving media environments (Fleming 2024; Mensing 2025).

Participants explained how they responded to the challenges they faced as, *"When I lose confidence in myself, I mingle with my friends. They are the ones motivating me especially when I'm feeling down."* Another participant says, *"When I attend seminars, I make an effort to mingle with*

people. I know that we are all writers from different schools. When I talk to them, I gain confidence. We chat about how they work on their school publications.”

These responses demonstrate that development occurs through effort, reflection, and repeated practice.

The categories Triumphs in the Journey and Encountered Setbacks further illustrate that journalistic formation involves alternating experiences of success and difficulty. Participants reported achievements such as publication of articles, recognition from mentors, and competition awards, but they also described rejection, criticism, and personal struggles. Contemporary research in journalism studies suggests that professional growth follows a cyclical pattern in which individuals repeatedly encounter challenges, learn from them, and refine their skills. In modern media environments, journalists must continuously adapt to technological change, organisational pressure, and audience expectations, making development an ongoing process rather than a final stage (Eldridge and Franklin 2022; Hanitzsch et al. 2023).

Participants shared both positive and negative experiences during their development as, *“For me, success is when your work is recognised. Recognition in contests, of course, when you win, your work or piece is being recognised. I really didn’t expect that I would become part of the student publication. I just tried to join and then I got in.”*

Another participant shared, *“I started winning contests when I was in my 2nd year of college. In my first year, I was more like an observer, but eventually, I began to secure spots in contested activities. Actually, at first, I joined proofreading and editing competitions, and I didn’t place.”*

These observations support the idea that progress occurs through repeated cycles of effort, failure, and improvement.

The integration of the six categories led to the formulation of the Adaptive Journalistic Growth Theory, which explains that the transition from student journalist to professional journalist is an iterative and dynamic process. The theory proposes that early influences, skill refinement, challenges, coping strategies, achievements, and setbacks interact continuously throughout the individual’s development. Recent grounded theory and professional identity studies also describe career development as a socially constructed and evolving

process shaped by experience, reflection, and interaction with institutional environments (Charmaz 2021; Deuze and Witschge 2022). Additionally, contemporary studies emphasize that iterative learning processes, characterized by cycles of experience, evaluation, and adjustment, are central to the development of competence in journalism education and practice (Fleming 2024; Mensing 2025).

The present study extends existing literature by proposing a theoretical framework that integrates these elements into a single model of journalistic growth. The findings indicate that the formation of journalists is influenced by interconnected experiences that occur repeatedly across different stages of development, making the process adaptive, cyclical, and context-dependent.

Characterisation of the Adaptive Journalistic Growth Theory

The Adaptive Journalistic Growth Theory explains the developmental process through which student-journalists acquire professional identity, competence, and resilience. Generated through a systematic coding process guided by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2021), the theory advances four central propositions that describe how journalistic growth emerges from the interaction of personal influences, formal education, developmental challenges, and adaptive responses.

The first proposition asserts that the acquisition of journalistic competencies is shaped by facilitating factors such as interest in reading, parental influence, inspirational role models, teacher engagement, and a supportive home environment. These findings resonate with Critical Literacy Theory, which emphasises the role of reading and critical engagement with texts in shaping reflective and analytical capacities (Freire and Macedo 1987). Developmental perspectives further support the role of environmental stimulation in cognitive growth (Piaget 1972), while Social Learning Theory explains how observational learning from parents and role models contributes to skill and value formation (Bandura 1977). Together, these theoretical traditions affirm that journalistic inclination and foundational competencies are socially and cognitively nurtured rather than individually constructed in isolation.

The second proposition emphasises that competence in journalism is strengthened through for-

mal education, particularly through seminar participation, incorporation of feedback, and collaborative learning. This aligns with the Constructivist Learning Theory, which views knowledge as actively constructed through engagement and reflection (Bruner 1966). The Experiential Learning Theory further supports the importance of active participation and reflective practice in skill development (Kolb 1984). In journalism education contexts, collaborative activities and feedback mechanisms provide authentic environments where learners refine technical skills and professional judgment through guided interaction.

The third proposition recognises that aspiring journalists encounter developmental obstacles, including self-doubt, inadequate training, mismatched mentorship, and discouragement. These barriers reflect the situated nature of expertise development described in Cognitive Apprenticeship Theory, which highlights the gradual acquisition of competence through guided practice and exposure to real-world challenges (Collins et al. 1989). The Transition Theory similarly explains that movement across developmental stages is often accompanied by adjustment difficulties (Schlossberg 1981). These theoretical perspectives support the view that obstacles are integral to professional formation rather than deviations from it.

The fourth proposition states that the pathway toward professional journalism involves a continuous interplay of successes and setbacks. Career development models in journalism suggest that professional growth unfolds through progressive stages characterized by achievement, adaptation, and recalibration (Weaver 2003). The Resilience Theory further explains how individuals sustain motivation and recover from setbacks in demanding environments (Masten 2001). The cyclical pattern identified in this study reinforces the idea that growth occurs through iterative engagement with both accomplishment and adversity.

While each proposition finds support in established learning and developmental theories, the Adaptive Journalistic Growth Theory integrates these dimensions into a unified, process-oriented framework specific to student-journalists. Existing theories explain discrete aspects of learning, socialisation, and resilience. However, none synthesises these elements into a coherent model that captures the cyclical and adaptive nature of journalistic development within academic publication

contexts. The emerging theory therefore contributes a contextualised and integrative explanation of how student-journalists transition toward professional competence.

CONCLUSION

This study formulated the Adaptive Journalistic Growth Theory, illustrating that the development from student-journalist to professional is a dynamic, cyclical process. Early influences, formal training, environmental factors, and adaptive strategies interact continuously, producing both triumphs and setbacks. Findings indicate that skill development, mentorship, and resilience are central to journalistic growth. The study concludes that becoming a proficient journalist is shaped by interconnected personal, educational, and social factors, highlighting the iterative nature of professional formation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools should enhance campus journalism programs through structured training, mentorship, and writing activities that foster skill development and confidence. Selection processes should consider motivation and potential, not only current proficiency. Teachers and parents should support reading habits, provide guidance, and promote time management. Institutions should create opportunities for collaboration, seminars, and competitions to reinforce growth. Future research may test or expand the theory across larger populations or other educational contexts to assess long-term impacts on journalistic development.

NOTES

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