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The Africa–China Debt-Trap Narrative in Commonwealth Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Abstract
Chinese lending to African countries has generated extensive debate in international media and policy circles. Among the most prominent narratives is the notion of 'debt-trap diplomacy', which suggests that China deliberately extends loans to developing countries to increase political and economic influence. Although this narrative has gained considerable visibility, scholars remain divided over its empirical validity. This article examines how selected African and European Commonwealth online media outlets construct, legitimise, and contest the debt-trap narrative in reporting on Chinese lending in Africa. Drawing on a wider corpus of 116 China-related articles published between 2010 and 2022 across six Commonwealth outlets—The Standard, Nation Media Group, Mail & Guardian, PM News, The Guardian (UK), and BBC News—the study conducts a close Critical Discourse Analysis of ten outlet-authored articles that explicitly engage the debt-trap narrative. The analysis applies Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis model, operationalised through van Dijk's ideological square, van Leeuwen's legitimisation framework, and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. The findings reveal differences in evidentiary mode. The sampled articles from Nation Media Group and PM News predominantly construct the debate dialogically through direct quotations from Chinese and African officials who reject the debt-trap claim. By contrast, the sampled articles from The Guardian and BBC News rely more strongly on statistical and expert evidence, including quantified data attributed to research institutions. The single retained Mail & Guardian article adopts an expert-authority mode through its inclusion of named specialists. Within this exploratory corpus, variation therefore concerns not simply whether the debt-trap narrative is accepted or contested, but how competing claims are authorised and which forms of evidence are foregrounded as

legitimate grounds for adjudicating the controversy. The article contributes to China-Africa media scholarship by foregrounding evidentiary mode as an analytical dimension alongside media framing and demonstrating how officials, experts, statistics, and journalistic synthesis shape contested narratives about Chinese lending in Africa.

Keywords: China-Africa relations. Debt-trap diplomacy. Media discourse. Commonwealth media. Critical Discourse Analysis. Development finance**.**

Résumé

Les prêts accordés par la Chine aux pays africains ont suscité de nombreux débats dans les médias internationaux et les milieux politiques. Parmi les récits les plus répandus figure celui de la « diplomatie du piège de la dette », selon lequel la Chine accorderait délibérément des prêts aux pays en développement afin d'accroître son influence politique et économique. Bien que ce récit ait acquis une grande visibilité, les chercheurs demeurent divisés quant à sa validité empirique. Cet article examine la manière dont certains médias en ligne africains et européens du Commonwealth construisent, légitiment et contestent le récit du piège de la dette dans leur couverture des prêts chinois en Afrique. S'appuyant sur un corpus plus large de 116 articles consacrés à la Chine, publiés entre 2010 et 2022 dans six médias du Commonwealth — *The Standard*, *Nation Media Group*, *Mail & Guardian*, *PM News*, *The Guardian* (Royaume-Uni) et *BBC News* — l'étude procède à une analyse critique approfondie du discours portant sur dix articles rédigés par les médias eux-mêmes et abordant explicitement le récit du piège de la dette. L'analyse mobilise le modèle tridimensionnel d'analyse critique du discours de Fairclough, opérationnalisé à travers le carré idéologique de van Dijk, le cadre de légitimation de van Leeuwen et la linguistique systémique fonctionnelle de Halliday.

Les résultats révèlent des différences dans les modes de mobilisation des preuves. Les articles retenus de *Nation Media Group* et de *PM News*construisent principalement le débat de manière dialogique, au moyen de citations directes de responsables chinois et africains qui rejettent l'affirmation relative au piège de la dette. En revanche, les articles retenus de *The Guardian* et de *BBC News* s'appuient davantage sur des données statistiques et des avis d'experts, notamment sur des données quantitatives attribuées à des institutions de recherche. L'unique article retenu de *Mail & Guardian* adopte un mode fondé sur l'autorité experte, à travers la mobilisation de spécialistes nommément identifiés. Dans ce corpus exploratoire, les variations observées ne concernent donc pas uniquement l'acceptation ou la contestation du récit du piège de la dette, mais également la manière dont les affirmations concurrentes sont légitimées et les formes de preuve qui sont privilégiées comme fondements légitimes de l'arbitrage du débat. L'article contribue aux recherches sur les médias et les relations sino-africaines en mettant en évidence le mode de mobilisation des preuves comme dimension

analytique, aux côtés du cadrage médiatique, et en montrant comment les responsables officiels, les experts, les statistiques et la synthèse journalistique contribuent à façonner les récits contestés sur les prêts chinois en Afrique.

Mots-clés : Relations Chine-Afrique. Diplomatie du piège de la dette. Discours médiatique. Médias du Commonwealth. Analyse critique du discours. Financement du développement.

1. Introduction

China has become a significant economic partner for Africa in the twenty-first century. Through bilateral agreements, the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese institutions have financed infrastructure and development projects, including railways, ports, roads, airports, and energy facilities. Chinese development finance has also been distinguished from some forms of Western assistance by its comparatively limited emphasis on governance-related conditionalities [1].

This expanding engagement has generated competing interpretations of Chinese lending. Supportive accounts emphasise its potential to address infrastructure deficits and promote development,[2] while critical perspectives associate Chinese loans with debt vulnerability and increased Chinese political and economic influence. The most prominent formulation is the 'debt-trap diplomacy' narrative, which gained wider public visibility following Brahma Chellaney's use of the term in 2017[3]. Its empirical validity, however, remains contested. Brautigam[4] characterises it as a powerful but misleading narrative that insufficiently captures variations in Chinese lending, country-specific circumstances, and recipient agency. Jones and Hameiri[5] similarly stress the role of recipient governments in shaping BRI implementation and outcomes. These perspectives do not dismiss concerns about debt sustainability or political influence but indicate that Chinese finance, African agency, debt vulnerability, and political influence cannot be adequately explained through a simple debt-trap framework.

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[1] Deborah Brautigam, The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[2] Fantu Cheru & Cyril Obi, The Rise of China and India in Africa (London: Zed Books, 2010).

[3] Brahma Chellaney, "China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy," Project Syndicate, January 23, 2017.

[4] Deborah Brautigam, "A Critical Look at Chinese 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy': The Rise of a Meme," Area Development and Policy 5, no. 1 (2020): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.1080/23792949.2019.1689828.

[5] Lee Jones & Shahar Hameiri, Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy': How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative (London: Chatham House, Asia-Pacific Programme, 2020).

Although substantial scholarship has examined China–Africa economic relations and debt sustainability, less attention has been devoted to how media discourse constructs and negotiates the debt-trap narrative. Media organisations shape such debates through lexical choices, source selection, quotation, attribution, statistical evidence, and journalistic evaluation, thereby influencing which actors and forms of evidence receive discursive authority.

This study therefore uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how selected African and European Commonwealth online media outlets construct, legitimise, and contest the debt-trap narrative concerning Chinese lending in Africa. Particular attention is given to evidentiary mode—whether competing claims are presented through direct testimony, named expert authority, quantitative or institutional evidence, or journalistic synthesis. This approach complements media-framing perspectives by considering not only what aspects of the controversy are made salient, but also what forms of evidence are positioned as legitimate grounds for evaluating competing interpretations.

The study draws on a wider corpus of 116 China-related articles published between 2010 and 2022 across six Commonwealth outlets: *The Standard* and *Nation Media Group* in Kenya, *Mail & Guardian* in South Africa, *PM News* in Nigeria, and *The Guardian* and *BBC News* in the United Kingdom. From this corpus, ten outlet-authored articles explicitly engaging the debt-trap narrative constitute the close analytical sample. The findings are therefore presented as an exploratory qualitative analysis of the sampled outlets, rather than as representative of African or European media as a whole.

The article asks: How do the sampled Commonwealth online media construct, legitimise, and contest the debt-trap narrative concerning Chinese lending in Africa, and what evidentiary modes do they employ in authorising competing claims? By addressing this question, the study contributes to China–Africa media scholarship by bringing evidentiary mode into closer dialogue with CDA and media framing. It argues that understanding contested narratives about Chinese lending requires attention not only to whether media texts support, challenge, or qualify the debt-trap narrative, but also to whose testimony is centred, what forms of evidence are privileged, and how these forms of evidence authorise competing interpretations**.**

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This review situates the study within four interconnected bodies of scholarship: research on Chinese lending and African development; debates surrounding 'debt-trap diplomacy'; media framing and the construction of international economic narratives; and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It moves from the broader context of China–Africa economic engagement to the contested debt-trap narrative and then

establishes the analytical framework and research gap addressed by the study.

2.1 Chinese Lending and African Development

China's expanding economic engagement with Africa has generated extensive scholarship on infrastructure, development finance, trade, investment, and political relations. Brautigam [6] argues that Chinese engagement differs in important respects from conventional Western development assistance, particularly through its emphasis on infrastructure, investment, trade, and economic cooperation rather than governance-related conditionalities. Cheru and Obi[7] similarly identify China as an increasingly important source of infrastructure investment and economic opportunity while situating its involvement within broader transformations in Africa's international economic relations. Sun[8] further demonstrates that China's engagement combines economic, diplomatic, and strategic interests, making Africa an important component of its wider foreign-policy agenda.

This literature presents Chinese lending as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than simply a financial relationship. Infrastructure finance can create opportunities for development and connectivity while simultaneously raising questions concerning debt sustainability, project viability, bargaining power, and the political consequences of creditor–borrower relationships. These dimensions are important to the present study because media accounts may foreground different aspects of the same relationship and rely on different actors and forms of evidence when interpreting them.

2.2 The Debt-Trap Diplomacy Thesis

The concept of 'debt-trap diplomacy' gained substantial international visibility in discussions of Chinese lending, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the Hambantota Port case in Sri Lanka. Chellaney's formulation presented debt as a potential instrument through which China could expand strategic influence. The narrative subsequently became prominent in political and media discussions of Chinese financing in Africa.

Its empirical and analytical validity, however, remains contested. Brautigam characterises debt-trap diplomacy as a powerful but misleading narrative that insufficiently accounts for variations in Chinese lending practices, country-specific circumstances, and the agency of borrowing governments. Jones and Hameiri likewise emphasise that recipient countries actively shape the implementation and outcomes of BRI projects rather than functioning simply as passive objects of Chinese strategy. Brown's research on African debt further demonstrates the importance of

[6] Brautigam, The Dragon's Gift.
[7] Cheru & Obi, The Rise of China and India in Africa.
[8] Yun Sun, Africa in China's Foreign Policy (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2014).

examining the broader structures of debt and the visibility of Chinese lending rather than attributing African debt conditions exclusively to Chinese policy. Al-Fadhat and Prasetio, while examining Chinese lending in Zimbabwe, Cameroon, and Djibouti, contribute to the continuing debate over the relationship between lending practices, political influence, and debt-trap claims. Momoh similarly questions simplified interpretations of Chinese loans in Africa.

The debate is therefore not reducible to evidence confirming or disproving a single proposition. It encompasses competing interpretations of creditor motivations, debt sustainability, project outcomes, recipient-government agency, and the political significance of Chinese financing. Haderiansyah et al. additionally demonstrate the relevance of media discourse to the formation of public understandings of debt-trap diplomacy.[9] For the present study, the unresolved nature of this controversy makes the narrative particularly useful for examining how competing claims are selected, organised, attributed, and legitimised in media discourse.

2.3 Media Framing and International Economic Narratives

Media-framing scholarship provides an important connection between China–Africa research and the present discourse-analytical inquiry. Entman conceptualises framing as the selection and salience of particular aspects of perceived reality in ways that promote particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and possible treatments.[10] Applied to international economic relations, framing draws attention to how complex financial and geopolitical issues are organised for public audiences.

Research on China–Africa media discourse similarly indicates that reporting is shaped by source selection, terminology, narrative emphasis, representation, and broader political and historical contexts. Media texts do not simply reproduce economic or diplomatic events; they construct particular interpretations through decisions about which actors appear, what terminology is used, which claims are attributed, and which contextual explanations are supplied. Nguyen, Wang, and Mutsvairo's analysis of African news discourse concerning Chinese technology, for example, illustrates the importance of competing representations of

[9] Haderiansyah, Margareta Habibah, Andri Setiawan, & Muzahid Akbar Hayat, "Policy of China's Debt-Trap Diplomacy: The Influence of Media in Forming Community Political Opinions" (Proceedings, Islamic University of Kalimantan Master of Communication Studies Program, 2021), 170–178.

[10] Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," Journal of Communication 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58.

cooperation, progress, autonomy, and threat in African media narratives.[11]

Framing analysis, however, does not fully capture the evidentiary practices through which competing claims acquire authority. Two texts may address the same controversy while constructing credibility differently. One may foreground direct quotations from political actors; another may rely on named experts; a third may privilege statistics and institutional research; while another may depend primarily on journalistic synthesis. These distinctions are particularly significant in the debt-trap controversy because disagreement concerns not only interpretations but also which actors possess authoritative knowledge and what constitutes credible evidence.

The present study therefore develops evidentiary mode as a complementary analytical dimension. Evidentiary mode refers to the discursive means through which a media text establishes the grounds on which competing claims may be regarded as credible or authoritative. Four analytically distinguishable modes are relevant: dialogic evidentiary mode, based primarily on quoted voices; expert-authority mode, based on named specialists; statistical/quantitative mode, foregrounding numerical or institutional evidence; and authorial-adjudicative mode, in which journalists synthesise and evaluate competing claims. These categories are analytical rather than fixed properties of entire outlets, and individual texts may combine more than one mode.

2.4 Critical Discourse Analysis: Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis provides the principal theoretical orientation for examining how the debt-trap narrative is linguistically and socially constructed. Fairclough's three-dimensional model distinguishes among textual analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice.[12] This enables the study to connect linguistic choices with processes of production, circulation, interpretation, and wider relations of power and knowledge. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides tools for examining how grammatical choices represent processes, participants, and relationships.[13] Transitivity is particularly useful for analysing agency: who is represented as acting, who is affected, and who is backgrounded in accounts of Chinese lending and African debt. Lexical choice and modality further illuminate evaluation, certainty, obligation, and responsibility.

Van Dijk's ideological-square framework supports analysis of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, together with the inclusion, exclusion, foregrounding, and backgrounding of social

[11] Dan Nguyen, Bo Wang, & Bruce Mutsvairo, "(Pragmatic) Collaboration for Progress or Threat to Autonomy? African News Discourses about Chinese Technology in Nigeria and Ghana," Global Media and China (2024).
[12] Fairclough, Critical Discourse Analysis.
[13] M.A.K. Halliday, An Introduction to Functional Grammar, 2nd ed. (London: Edward Arnold, 1994).

actors.[14] It therefore helps examine how credibility and responsibility are distributed among Chinese officials, African governments, Western commentators, researchers, and other actors.

Van Leeuwen's legitimation framework is particularly relevant to evidentiary mode. His categories of authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis provide tools for analysing how discourse establishes the legitimacy of particular claims, speakers, actions, and interpretations.[15] Officials, experts, research institutions, statistics, and journalistic synthesis can consequently be examined as resources through which authority is constructed.

Finally, Wodak and Meyer emphasise the historical and intertextual dimensions of discourse.[16] This perspective is relevant because media accounts of Chinese lending may invoke earlier debt cases, political narratives, research reports, and recurring formulations when interpreting new developments in China–Africa relations.

Taken together, these approaches are complementary. Fairclough provides the overarching CDA model; Halliday facilitates analysis of linguistic representation and agency; van Dijk examines ideological positioning; van Leeuwen addresses legitimation; and Wodak and Meyer foreground intertextual and historical relationships. Their integration allows the study to examine not only what sampled media say about Chinese lending, but also how claims are linguistically constructed, whose voices are authorised, and what forms of evidence are foregrounded.

2.5 Research Gap and Analytical Positioning

Three related gaps emerge from the literature. First, scholarship on Chinese lending has extensively examined development, debt sustainability, creditor motivations, and recipient agency, but these debates do not by themselves explain how competing interpretations are constructed for media audiences. Second, scholarship on debt-trap diplomacy has concentrated substantially on its empirical validity, political uses, and geopolitical implications, leaving scope for closer examination of its discursive construction in Commonwealth online media. Third, while framing and CDA can identify salience, representation, agency, legitimation, and ideological positioning, comparatively less attention has been given to the evidentiary mode through which media texts establish what counts as credible grounds for adjudicating a contested international economic claim.

The present study addresses this gap through an exploratory qualitative analysis of ten outlet-authored articles selected from a wider corpus of 116 China-related articles published between 2010 and 2022

[14] van Dijk, Society and Discourse.
[15] Theo van Leeuwen, "Legitimation in Discourse and Communication," Discourse & Communication 1, no. 1 (2007): 91–112.
[16] Ruth Wodak & Michael Meyer, Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2009).

across six Commonwealth online outlets. Rather than treating these outlets as representative of African or European media generally, the study examines the selected texts as a purposive comparative corpus. Its analytical position is therefore that contested media narratives should be examined not only in terms of their thematic framing or evaluative direction, but also in terms of who is authorised to speak, what forms of evidence are privileged, and how those evidentiary resources construct competing claims as credible**.**

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative document-analysis approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Fairclough's three-dimensional model provided the overarching framework, complemented by Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), van Leeuwen's legitimisation framework, van Dijk's ideological square, and Wodak and Meyer's discourse-historical approach. The methodology examined both the linguistic construction of the debt-trap narrative and the ways competing claims were attributed, legitimised, and supported through different evidentiary modes.

The researcher served as the primary instrument of corpus organisation, coding, analysis, and interpretation. The selected texts were repeatedly read to identify relevant linguistic and discursive features, compare patterns across articles, and interpret them in relation to the wider China–Africa debt-trap debate.

3.1. Corpus Construction

Corpus construction proceeded in three stages. First, a wider corpus of 116 China-related articles was assembled from six Commonwealth online media outlets. Second, articles explicitly engaging with the debt-trap narrative were identified. Third, wire-syndicated material was excluded to ensure that close analysis focused on discourse attributable to the sampled outlets. This process produced a final analytical corpus of ten outlet-authored articles. The resulting comparison is therefore exploratory and text-specific rather than representative of African or European media generally.

Table 1. Wider China-Africa corpus by outlet (Stage 1)

Outlet	Country/Region	China articles (n)	Date range
The Standard	Kenya	14	2015–2022
Nation Media Group	Kenya	43	2010–2022
Mail & Guardian	South Africa	18	2010–2022
PM News	Nigeria	24	2018–2022
The Guardian	United Kingdom	6	2010–2019

BBC News	United Kingdom	11	2012–2021
Total	—	116	2010-2022

The wider corpus comprised 99 articles from African outlets and 17 from UK outlets. This imbalance reflects the corpus available for analysis and the different publication periods represented across outlets; it is not interpreted as evidence of differences in the overall volume of China–Africa reporting. Rather, the 116-article corpus served as the empirical pool from which the focused debt-trap subset was subsequently identified.

3.2 Identification of the Debt-Trap Analytical Corpus: Stages 2 and 3

The second stage involved identifying articles within the 116-article wider corpus that explicitly engaged with the debt-trap narrative. Selection focused on texts in which Chinese lending, African debt, or related infrastructure financing was substantively discussed in relation to claims or counterclaims concerning "debt-trap diplomacy." The purpose was not to assume the validity of the narrative, but to identify texts in which its meaning, credibility, or implications were explicitly discussed.

The third stage applied an outlet-authorship criterion. Wire-syndicated material was excluded because the study examines discursive choices attributable to the sampled outlets themselves. Syndicated reports may reproduce substantially similar wording across different organisations and therefore provide less direct evidence of outlet-specific choices concerning sourcing, framing, attribution, and evidentiary presentation.

These procedures produced a final analytical corpus of 10 outlet-authored articles, distributed across five of the six sampled outlets (Table 2). *PM News* contributed four articles, *Nation Media Group* and *The Guardian* two each, while *Mail & Guardian* and *BBC News* contributed one each. No outlet-authored debt-trap article was retained from *The Standard*.

Table 2. Outlet-authored debt-trap subset by outlet (Stages 2–3)

Outlet	Country/Region	Outlet-authored debt-trap articles (n)	Date range
The Standard	Kenya	0	—
Nation Media Group	Kenya	2	2018, 2022
Mail & Guardian	South Africa	1	2018
PM News	Nigeria	4	2018, 2021
The Guardian	United Kingdom	2	2018–2019
BBC News	United Kingdom	1	2018
Total	**—**	**10**	**2018 - 2022**

The uneven distribution means that the outlets cannot be treated as equally weighted cases. The findings are therefore interpreted as patterns within the specific texts selected rather than as evidence representative of African or European media generally. The ten articles comprise approximately 9,300 words**,** averaging about 930 words per article. Article length, which ranged from fewer than 300 to more than 1,000 words, was not treated as an analytical variable.

3.3 Sampling Technique and Selection Criteria

The study employed purposive sampling to select the six Commonwealth online media outlets constituting the wider corpus. The sampling strategy was intended to facilitate comparison between African and UK English-language media organisations operating within a shared Commonwealth institutional and linguistic context. The selection was not designed to produce a statistically representative sample of Commonwealth journalism. Rather, it provided a manageable and contextually comparable corpus for examining how selected media texts construct and negotiate the Africa–China debt-trap narrative.

Within each selected outlet, the wider corpus was assembled through systematic searches of the relevant online archives. The principal search terms were "China," "debt," "loan," and "Africa." These terms were used in combination and in different search configurations to identify articles addressing Chinese engagement with African countries. The initial search was deliberately broad because the study sought to establish a wider empirical pool before isolating texts specifically concerned with the debt-trap narrative.

Articles were included in the wider corpus when they met three principal criteria: they substantively addressed Chinese engagement with Africa; they were published within the 2010–2022 study period; and they constituted substantive journalistic material, including news reports, analytical articles, commentary, or related forms of online journalism. Articles were excluded when references to China or Africa were merely incidental, when substantially duplicated material had already been captured elsewhere in the corpus, or when publication fell outside the specified temporal boundaries.

Following construction of the wider corpus, a second purposive selection identified texts that explicitly engaged with the debt-trap narrative. An article qualified when Chinese lending, African debt, infrastructure financing, or related economic relations were discussed in connection with claims or counterclaims concerning "debt-trap diplomacy." This criterion allowed the study to include both texts that reproduced or entertained the narrative and those that challenged, qualified, or rejected it.

A further outlet-authorship criterion was then applied. Wire-syndicated articles were removed from the focused corpus because their wording and argumentative organisation could originate outside the sampled outlet. The exclusion therefore strengthened the study's focus on

outlet-specific discursive practices, particularly source selection, quotation, attribution, lexical choice, and evidentiary organisation.

Table 3. Sampling and Selection Criteria

Sampling stage	**Criterion/procedure**	**Purpose**
Outlet selection	Six Commonwealth English-language online media outlets	Enable African–UK comparative analysis
Initial retrieval	Archive searches using "China," "debt," "loan," and "Africa"	Establish the wider China–Africa corpus
Temporal criterion	Publication between 2010 and 2022	Maintain a consistent study period
Substantive-content criterion	Meaningful reporting, analysis, commentary, or related journalism on China–Africa engagement	Exclude incidental references
Debt-trap identification	Explicit discussion of Chinese lending, African debt, infrastructure financing, or "debt-trap diplomacy"	Establish the focused analytical subset
Authorship criterion	Outlet-authored material retained; wire-syndicated material excluded	Focus analysis on outlet-specific discourse
Duplication criterion	Duplicate material excluded	Avoid repeated textual evidence
Final selection	Ten outlet-authored debt-trap articles	Produce the final CDA corpus

The resulting corpus is therefore best understood as a purposive exploratory corpus. The unequal number of articles contributed by individual outlets prevents frequency-based comparisons from being interpreted as evidence of systematic differences between African and UK media systems. Instead, the sampling strategy supports close qualitative examination of how particular texts construct the debt-trap controversy and how different forms of evidentiary authority are mobilised within those texts. This approach is consistent with the study's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, which prioritises contextualised interpretation of discourse rather than statistical generalisation.

3.4 Coding and Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed a structured, iterative coding process linking observable textual features to the study's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. Each article was first read in full to establish its overall argument, source structure, and contextual orientation. Subsequent

readings identified recurring patterns of linguistic representation, agency, attribution, evidentiary practice, and intertextual framing.

Coding was organised around five interconnected dimensions: (1) linguistic representation, (2) actor and agency representation, (3) legitimation and source authority, (4) historical and intertextual framing, and (5) evidentiary mode. Linguistic representation covered lexical choice, transitivity, modality, evaluative language, and relevant metaphors. Actor and agency coding examined how China, African governments, Western institutions, researchers, and other actors were represented as agents, beneficiaries, affected parties, critics, or authorities. Legitimation coding captured the use of officials, experts, institutions, statistics, and documentary sources to support particular claims.

Intertextual coding identified references to previous events, established narratives, and external cases used to interpret contemporary Chinese lending, including references to Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port. Such references were examined according to their interpretive function rather than simply recorded as occurrences.

Evidentiary mode operated as a cross-cutting category, capturing how political statements, expert testimony, institutional reports, quantitative data, historical examples, and journalistic synthesis were selected, attributed, sequenced, and used to authorise interpretations. Coding moved between individual textual units and whole-article contexts. Headlines, leads, quotations, attributed statements, reporter narration, statistical claims, and concluding passages received particular attention, while no extract was interpreted independently of its context. Multiple codes were assigned where appropriate. Approximately twelve salient quotations were selected as illustrative evidence rather than as substitutes for the full corpus. The procedure therefore moved from textual observation to coding, contextual interpretation, cross-case comparison, and thematic synthesis.

3.5 Operationalisation of the Critical Discourse Analysis Framework

Fairclough's three-dimensional model provided the overarching framework, connecting textual features with discursive practices and wider sociocultural contexts. Halliday, van Leeuwen, van Dijk, and Wodak and Meyer were used complementarily to examine agency, authority, responsibility, credibility, actor positioning, and intertextuality. The framework was applied descriptively and inductively, allowing patterns to emerge from the corpus rather than imposing predetermined ideological positions.

3.5.1 Textual Analysis: Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) informed the analysis of lexical choice, transitivity, and modality. Transitivity analysis examined how participants were represented within processes and how agency was allocated,

foregrounded, or backgrounded. For example, the formulation **"**China is helping Africa develop, not stack up debt**"** represents China as the actor associated with "helping" and "develop," while "debt" appears without an equivalent explicit agent. The analysis therefore considered the representational effects of the grammatical construction rather than treating "helping" and "lending" as semantic equivalents.

Modality was examined through expressions such as **"**must," "may," and **"**could," which position propositions in relation to certainty, possibility, obligation, or advisability. Particular attention was given to headlines, leads, and evaluative passages where degrees of certainty and risk were constructed.

Table 4. SFL Analytical Categories

Analytical category	**Principal indicators**	**Analytical purpose**
Lexical choice	Verbs, nouns, evaluative expressions, metaphors	Examine how Chinese lending and its consequences are named and framed
Transitivity	Processes, participants, agency	Identify who is represented as acting, affected, responsible, or backgrounded
Modality	*Must, may, could* and related expressions	Examine certainty, possibility, obligation, and risk

3.5.2 Legitimation: van Leeuwen

Van Leeuwen's legitimation framework was used to examine how claims and social actors were authorised and legitimised. Attention was given to political officials, named experts, research institutions, statistical sources, and other recognised authorities. The analysis considered not simply whether a source was cited, but the argumentative function performed by that attribution and its contribution to the credibility of particular interpretations of Chinese lending.

3.5.3 Ideological Representation: van Dijk

Van Dijk's ideological-square framework was used to examine the representation of social actors and the distribution of agency, responsibility, and credibility**.** Chinese actors, African governments, Western commentators, researchers, and other relevant groups were examined in terms of foregrounding, backgrounding, and positive or negative representation. The framework was applied descriptively rather than assuming in advance that any particular group constituted an ideological in-group or out-group.

3.5.4 Intertextuality: Wodak and Meyer

Wodak and Meyer's discourse-historical perspective informed the analysis of intertextuality, historical references, and established narratives. Particular attention was given to references to earlier cases associated with Chinese lending, including Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port. Such references were examined

as discursive resources through which previously circulated narratives were incorporated into interpretations of contemporary Chinese lending in Africa. The analysis distinguished between the historical event itself and the interpretive function performed when it was invoked in a contemporary media text.

Table 5. Complementary CDA Lenses and Operationalisation

CDA lens	**Principal focus**	**Key indicators**	**Analytical function**
Fairclough	Text, discourse practice, social context	Linguistic choices, discourse organisation, contextualisation	Connect textual analysis with wider discourse
Halliday /SFL	Linguistic representation	Lexis, transitivity, modality	Examine agency, responsibility, certainty, and obligation
van Leeuwen	Legitimation	Authority, expertise, institutional attribution	Examine how claims acquire legitimacy
van Dijk	Ideological representation	Actor positioning, agency, positive/negative representation	Examine responsibility and credibility
Wodak & Meyer	Historical/intertextual discourse	Historical cases, prior narratives, external sources	Examine how earlier discourses shape current interpretation
Evidentiary mode	Organisation of evidence	Voices, experts, statistics, institutions, journalistic synthesis	Identify how competing claims are authorised

The framework was applied to headlines, leads, quoted and attributed speech, reporter narration, source identification, modality, statistical and documentary evidence, intertextual references, and concluding synthesis. These locations received particular attention because they frequently contain explicit framing and source selection; however, quotations and other textual features were interpreted within their complete article-level contexts.

Overall, the operationalisation links the theoretical framework directly to the empirical analysis: SFL addresses linguistic representation; van Leeuwen examines legitimation; van Dijk addresses ideological

positioning; and Wodak and Meyer illuminate historical and intertextual relationships. Evidentiary mode cuts across these categories by examining how political voices, expert testimony, quantitative evidence, institutional authority, and journalistic synthesis are mobilised to authorise competing interpretations of Chinese lending in Africa.

3.6 Coding Unit and Contextual Analysis

The initial coding concentrated on the headline, lead, quoted speech, source attribution, and relevant reporter-authored passages because these textual locations frequently contain explicit framing, source selection, evaluative language, and claims concerning authority. Nevertheless, the complete article was read and interpreted in context rather than treating individual quotations as independent analytical units.

The analysis consequently considered the headline and subheading where available; the opening framing; directly quoted and indirectly attributed speech; reporter-authored narration surrounding quotations; source identification and institutional affiliation; modality and evaluative language; statistical or documentary evidence; intertextual references; and concluding or synthesising passages.

Table 6. Coding Unit and Analytical Indicators

Coding unit	**Indicators examined**	**Analytical question**
Headline/subheading	Lexical choice, modality, framing	How is the controversy initially constructed?
Lead/opening	Topic selection, evaluation, attribution	What interpretation is foregrounded?
Quotation	Speaker identity, wording, attribution	Who is authorised to speak?
Reporter narration	Evaluation, modality, synthesis	How does the journalist organise competing claims?
Statistical/documentary evidence	Numbers, institutions, reports	What forms of evidence are presented as credible?
Intertextual references	Historical cases, prior narratives	How are earlier discourses imported into current interpretation?
Conclusion/synthesis	Evaluation, comparison, contextualisation	How are competing claims ultimately organised?

The operationalisation therefore connects the theoretical framework directly to the empirical analysis. Lexical choice, transitivity, and modality address textual representation; legitimation and source attribution examine the construction of authority; ideological analysis considers actor

positioning; and intertextuality examines the incorporation of earlier narratives. Evidentiary mode cuts across these categories, identifying how particular forms of evidence—political voices, expert testimony, quantitative information, institutional authority, or journalistic synthesis—are foregrounded in the construction and negotiation of the debt-trap controversy.

3.7 Illustrative Coding Matrix

To demonstrate how the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework was applied, an illustrative coding matrix was developed linking observable textual features to analytical categories, interpretive questions, and discursive functions. The matrix does not represent the complete dataset; rather, it illustrates how recurrent patterns were identified and examined across the sampled articles.

Coding was undertaken at the levels of the headline, lead, sentence, quotation, attribution, and relevant article-level context**.** Attention focused on lexical choice, transitivity and agency, modality, source attribution, evidentiary practices, actor representation, and intertextuality. Where an extract contained more than one relevant feature, multiple codes were assigned. This allowed linguistic form, source selection, legitimation, and broader discursive framing to be analysed together.

Table 7. Illustrative Coding Matrix

Illustrative textual feature	**Primary code**	**CDA lens**	**Analytical question**	**Discursive function**
"China is helping Africa develop, not stack up debt"	Lexical choice/ transitivity	Halliday/ SFL	Who is represented as acting, and how is the action named?	Constructs a development-oriented frame while backgrounding agency for debt accumulation
"China could be creating a debt problem"	Modality/ risk	Halliday/ SFL	What degree of certainty or possibility is constructed?	Presents indebtedness as possible rather than established
"African governments must reconsider their borrowing"	Modality/ obligation	Halliday/ SFL	Who is assigned responsibility or obligation?	Constructs African governments as responsible decision-makers

"According to government officials…"	Institutional authority	van Leeuwen	Whose voice is presented as authoritative?	Authorises an interpretation through official attribution
"Experts warn that…"	Expert legitimation	van Leeuwen	How is expertise used to support a claim?	Constructs a proposition as informed by specialised knowledge
"Critics argue that…"	Actor positioning	van Dijk	How are social actors and positions represented?	Identifies a critical position while potentially distancing the journalist from it
"Supporters say the loans are essential for infrastructure"	Actor positioning	van Dijk	How are competing groups and claims represented?	Makes an alternative interpretation visible
Reference to Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port	Historical intertextuality	Wodak & Meyer	Which earlier case is invoked to interpret the present?	Imports a recognised precedent into discussion of Chinese lending
Debt statistics or loan figures	Quantitative evidence	Evidentiary mode	What form of evidence is used to substantiate the claim?	Constructs numerical information as evidence of scale, risk, or significance
Quotation followed by journalist synthesis	Evidentiary sequencing	Fairclough/evidentiary mode	How are source and journalistic narration organised?	Places quoted evidence within a broader interpretive frame
Explicit actor omitted in a passive	Agency/backgrounding	Halliday/ SFL	Who is affected and who is absent as an	Backgrounds responsibility and

construction			agent?	foregrounds consequences
Contrasting "development" with "debt"	Framing/lexical opposition	Halliday/ SFL/van Dijk	Which competing meanings are foregrounded?	Constructs competing interpretations of Chinese lending

The coding process distinguished between what a source explicitly stated and how the article incorporated that statement into its wider discourse. For example, an article might attribute a debt-risk claim to an economist and subsequently qualify, reinforce, or juxtapose it with statements from Chinese or African officials. Attribution was therefore treated not merely as a source-identification device but as part of the discourse through which evidentiary authority was constructed.

The matrix served two related purposes. First, it established a systematic connection between the theoretical constructs operationalised in Section 3.5 and observable textual evidence. Second, it reduced the risk of treating isolated quotations as representative of an entire article or corpus. Each illustrative extract was therefore interpreted in relation to its source, article context, attributional structure, surrounding lexical choices, and relevant historical or intertextual references**.**

The coding was consequently both linguistically grounded and context-sensitive**.** Hallidayan categories identified lexical and grammatical patterning; van Leeuwen illuminated legitimation and authority; van Dijk guided analysis of actor representation and ideological positioning; Wodak and Meyer addressed historical and intertextual connections; and the evidentiary-mode category captured how different forms of evidence were selected, organised, attributed, and authorised. Together, these dimensions provided the analytical bridge between individual textual features and the broader findings concerning the discursive construction of Chinese lending in Africa.

3.8 Reflexivity and Analytical Credibility

Because CDA involves interpretive decisions concerning selection, categorisation, and contextualisation, reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis. Observable textual features were distinguished from broader interpretive claims, and coding decisions were grounded in identifiable linguistic and discursive evidence. Interpretations were checked against surrounding article context rather than isolated expressions. The complementary use of Fairclough, Halliday, van Leeuwen, van Dijk, and Wodak and Meyer provided analytical triangulation. The analysis did not assume that references to China, African governments, Western institutions, or other actors represented fixed ideological positions; positioning was identified through recurrent

textual patterns. Quotations were retained within article-level contexts to strengthen interpretive credibility.

3.9 Scope of Comparison

Comparison focused on discursive similarities and differences across the sampled texts**,** rather than on establishing the objective truth of competing claims concerning Chinese lending. Particular attention was given to agency, responsibility, risk, legitimacy, evidence, source attribution, modality, and historical precedent. Comparisons remained within the defined corpus and should not be interpreted as representative of all international, Chinese, African, or Western media. Nor are particular discursive patterns assumed to be exclusive to any national or institutional media category. Findings are therefore bounded by the study's temporal, textual, and sampling parameters.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

The study analysed publicly accessible media texts and involved no direct human participants. Ethical attention nevertheless remained important because the corpus addresses politically sensitive issues involving governments, financial institutions, development, and contested representations of debt. Sources were identified accurately, quotations were retained within their original contexts, and interpretations were distinguished from claims made by journalists or quoted sources. The analysis avoided attributing motives that could not be established from the texts and did not treat contested claims as independently verified facts. Competing interpretations were instead analysed as discursive positions in terms of their textual construction, attribution, and evidentiary framing.

4. Findings and Analysis: Constructing and Negotiating the Debt-Trap Narrative

Analysis of the ten outlet-authored articles shows that the Chinese debt-trap narrative is neither uniformly reproduced nor rejected. Instead, it is constructed and negotiated through interconnected linguistic and discursive resources, including lexical choice, nomination, transitivity, modality, source attribution, legitimation, actor positioning, and intertextuality. These resources also shape how claims acquire evidentiary authority. Four overlapping evidentiary modes are particularly visible: dialogic testimony, expert authority, statistical/quantitative evidence, and authorial-adjudicative synthesis. These are analytical tendencies within individual texts, not fixed characteristics of the sampled outlets.

4.1. Lexical Choices and Nomination

Lexical choice establishes the semantic and evaluative frameworks through which Chinese lending is presented. The Mail & Guardian headline, "Africa's debt to China is complicated," foregrounds complexity and discourages a simple interpretation of debt as either exploitation or development. By contrast, the PM News headline, **"**China is helping Africa develop, not stack up debt," represents China through the positive developmental verbs *helping* and *develop*, while *stack up debt* presents indebtedness as an accumulation without explicitly identifying an equivalent agent.

This orientation is reinforced by former Chinese special envoy Xu Jinghu's reference to "the international economic situation" and declining commodity prices, which situates African debt difficulties within wider economic conditions rather than exclusively within Chinese lending. BBC News's "Reality Check: Is China burdening Africa with debt?" similarly uses genre nomination to frame the article as an assessment of a disputed proposition. The Guardian's "win-win development, or a new colonialism?" juxtaposes contrasting interpretive frames. Lexicalisation and nomination therefore organise the conceptual alternatives through which readers encounter the controversy.

4.2. Transitivity, Agency and Responsibility

Transitivity reveals how responsibility is grammatically distributed among actors, actions, and circumstances. In **"**China is helping Africa develop, not stack up debt," China is explicitly represented as the actor of *helping* and *develop*, while responsibility for *stacking up debt* is comparatively backgrounded. This does not establish that PM News denies Chinese responsibility; rather, it demonstrates how grammatical structure makes some relationships more visible than others.

Xu Jinghu's attribution of debt difficulties to the international economic situation and commodity prices further introduces structural circumstances as explanatory factors. Agency also operates through reported speech. PM News gives Chinese officials and African actors identifiable speaking positions, while Nation Media Group combines attributed voices with authorial framing. Its headline, **"**Kenya must avoid China debt trap or fall into Sri Lanka pit," strongly connects present Kenyan borrowing with an anticipated risk, while references to analyst Jeremy Zook's "vassal states" and **"**bonded territories**"** extend debt discourse towards political dependence. Agency therefore operates grammatically, through quotation, and through journalistic organisation.

4.3. Modality, Certainty and Risk

Modality regulates the degree of certainty, obligation, possibility, and urgency attached to the debt-trap narrative. The Nation Media Group headline uses *must* in **"**Kenya must avoid China debt trap or fall into Sri Lanka pit,**"** constructing avoidance as an obligation and the Sri Lankan case as a warning precedent. By contrast, Mail & Guardian's description of Africa's debt to China as "complicated**"** foregrounds qualification and ambiguity.

These differences demonstrate that the controversy is not organised simply through positive or negative descriptions. Texts also differ in the degree of certainty and urgency with which propositions are presented. Modality interacts with evidentiary authority: a strong warning may be supported through political testimony, expert interpretation, historical precedent, statistics, or journalistic synthesis. Modality therefore establishes the force of a proposition, while evidentiary mode helps explain how that proposition is authorised.

4.4. Legitimation and Evidentiary Authority

Authority is central because the debt-trap controversy involves competing claims whose significance depends partly on their sources. PM News uses political authorisation through Xu Jinghu, whose description of the accusation as **"**senseless and baseless**"** positions an identifiable official as a source for challenging the narrative. Mail & Guardian instead foregrounds named researchers such as Cobus Van Staden and Ross Anthony. Van Staden's observation that China's share of African debt **"**is not the largest" introduces comparative specialist evidence, while Anthony's claim that the narrative has been "propagated" by Western commentators shifts attention towards the production and circulation of the narrative itself.

The Guardian combines political voices, expert commentary, and economic evidence, including discussion of project profitability, while BBC News uses institutional and quantitative information within its *Reality Check* format. These examples distinguish between the availability of evidence and its discursive authority. Statistics, quotations, institutional sources, and expert statements do not automatically determine meaning; their significance depends on how they are selected, attributed, contextualised, contrasted, and incorporated into the article's argument.

4.5. Ideological Representation and Actor Positioning

The corpus also demonstrates how social actors and interpretive communities are positioned. In PM News, Chinese officials appear as defenders of China's developmental role, while wider African economic circumstances provide alternative explanations for debt difficulties. The discourse therefore does not simply oppose China and Africa but distributes responsibility among multiple actors and conditions.

Mail & Guardian shifts attention towards the production of the debt-trap narrative itself by attributing its circulation to **"**Western commentators." African agency is also represented through different evidentiary routes. PM News and Nation Media Group give African political actors identifiable speaking positions, whereas BBC News states that it is **"**up to African nations themselves to accept or reject Chinese loans," representing agency through authorial synthesis rather than direct quotation. Agency must therefore be examined not merely in terms of whether African actors are mentioned, but in terms of how their decision-making is constituted and authorised.

No outlet-authored article from The Standard met the criteria for inclusion in the focused corpus. Its absence therefore provides no empirical basis for analysing its representation of Chinese lending or ideological positioning within this dataset.

4.6. Intertextuality and the Importation of Precedent

Intertextuality allows current lending relationships to be interpreted through earlier cases and established geopolitical narratives. The Nation Media Group headline's reference to the **"**Sri Lanka pit**"** imports Sri Lanka, particularly the widely circulated Hambantota narrative, as an interpretive precedent for Kenya. The significance of this reference is discursive rather than proof of empirical equivalence: it supplies a familiar narrative structure through which a possible future risk can be imagined.

The *Land into capital* article extends this intertextuality through Zook's references to "vassal states" and "bonded territories**."** Such expressions move beyond financial terminology and connect indebtedness with historical relationships of subordination and political dependence. Intertextuality therefore functions simultaneously as an interpretive and evidentiary resource. Earlier cases, historical metaphors, and established geopolitical narratives provide frameworks through which contemporary lending is made intelligible.

Taken together, the findings show that the debt-trap narrative is produced through the interaction of language, agency, modality, source authority, actor positioning, and intertextuality. The central analytical distinction is not simply whether individual texts support or challenge the narrative, but how they construct the evidentiary and discursive conditions through which competing interpretations become plausible, contestable, or qualified.

4.7. Evidentiary Modes Across the Sampled Texts

The preceding analysis shows that the sampled articles differ not only in their representations of Chinese lending but also in how they construct the evidentiary grounds through which claims are accepted, questioned, or contextualised. Four overlapping modes are identified:

dialogic, expert-authority, statistical/quantitative, and authorial-adjudicative. The dialogic mode relies on identifiable political and analytical voices, particularly in the PM News and Nation Media Group texts, where Chinese officials, African actors, and analysts articulate competing positions. The expert-authority mode gives greater prominence to named researchers and specialists, as illustrated by the Mail & Guardian article. The statistical/quantitative mode foregrounds numerical, financial, or institutional evidence, visible particularly in the BBC News and Guardian texts. The authorial-adjudicative mode becomes prominent where journalists organise and synthesise competing evidence, as in BBC *Reality Check* and the Guardian.

Sampled outlet/text	**Principal evidentiary resource**	**Evidentiary mode**	**Principal CDA function**
PM News	Chinese/African officials' quotations	Dialogic	Authority through political testimony
PM News	Political voices + reporter framing	Dialogic/ authorial	Mediation of competing positions
Nation Media Group	Political/analytical voices + Sri Lanka precedent	Dialogic/ intertextual	Authority through testimony and precedent
Nation Media Group	Analyst testimony	Dialogic/expert	Specialist interpretation of political risk
Mail & Guardian	Named researchers	Expert-authority	Specialist knowledge and qualification
The Guardian	Experts + statistics + political voices	Statistical/ expert/authorial	Organisation of competing evidence
The Guardian	Institutional/economic evidence	Statistical/ authorial	Contextualisation through journalistic synthesis
BBC News	Institutional/quantitative evidence	Statistical/ authorial	Documentary and fact-checking evaluation
Remaining PM News texts	Political/institutional sources	Dialogic	Competing positions through identifiable actors
Remaining retained text	Mixed sources	Mixed	Authority distributed across sources and synthesis

These categories describe dominant evidentiary practices within individual texts, not fixed characteristics of the outlets. The modes also overlap: an article may combine expert testimony, statistics, institutional sources, and journalistic synthesis. The classification therefore identifies different routes to authority rather than rigid media types. This distinction

is important for CDA because it shifts attention from whether a text is simply favourable or critical towards how evidence is selected, attributed, organised, and authorised in constructing competing interpretations of Chinese lending.

4.8. Cross-Textual Synthesis: Evidentiary Mode Rather Than Valence

Taken together, the findings indicate that the most useful cross-textual distinction in the ten-article corpus is not simply whether texts are favourable, critical, or ambivalent towards China, but how competing interpretations are authorised. Different articles mobilise different combinations of political testimony, expert opinion, institutional evidence, statistics, historical precedent, and journalistic synthesis.

The *PM News* texts frequently construct contestation through identifiable political voices, including Chinese officials, African political actors, and analysts. *Nation Media Group* similarly combines political and analytical sources with strong authorial and intertextual framing, including references to the **"**Sri Lanka pit**"** and expressions such as **"**vassal states" and "bonded territories." *Mail & Guardian* places greater emphasis on named researchers, using specialist interpretation to complicate debt-trap claims and situate them within wider debates about African debt. *The Guardian* and *BBC News* combine expert testimony, institutional or quantitative information, and journalistic synthesis.

The central finding is therefore that similar controversies can be authorised through different evidentiary routes. A challenge to the debt-trap narrative may draw authority from official Chinese or African voices, named researchers, statistics, or journalistic synthesis; criticism may similarly rely on political testimony, expertise, historical analogy, or institutional evidence. Evidentiary mode thus provides a useful complement to conventional media-framing analysis by foregrounding the relationship between evidence and authority.

This perspective also clarifies African agency. The BBC formulation that it is "up to African nations themselves to accept or reject Chinese loans" explicitly recognises African decision-making through authorial synthesis, whereas *PM News* and *Nation Media Group* more frequently foreground African and Chinese actors as speaking subjects. The difference concerns not simply whether agency is recognised, but how it is constituted and authorised.

These observations should remain corpus-specific. The ten articles do not establish fixed evidentiary profiles for individual outlets or Commonwealth media generally. Rather, they demonstrate how particular texts construct, contest, qualify, and authorise competing interpretations through combinations of lexical framing, evidence, discourse, and interpretive authority.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that media representations of Chinese lending in Africa are shaped not only by the claims presented but also by the ways in which evidence is selected, attributed, organised, and authorised**.** Evidentiary mode therefore provides an important link between linguistic representation and broader discursive framing. The discussion considers how evidence contributes to the construction of the debt-trap narrative, the positioning of African actors, and the circulation and contestation of established interpretations.

5.1. Evidentiary Mode and Media Framing

The analysis indicates that media framing operates partly through the organisation of evidentiary resources. Political statements, expert assessments, institutional reports, statistics, historical examples, and journalistic synthesis do not necessarily carry equivalent discursive authority. Their placement and attribution within an article can influence how readers interpret Chinese lending and its consequences. For example, an official statement may provide institutional authority, whereas an expert quotation may construct specialised credibility. Statistical evidence can give an interpretation an appearance of empirical precision, while historical references can supply a broader interpretive frame.

Evidentiary mode consequently interacts with lexical choice, modality, and source attribution. A proposition framed as a possibility, for example, acquires a different discursive status from one presented as an established fact. Media framing is therefore produced through the interaction of what is said, who says it, what evidence accompanies it, and how that evidence is incorporated into journalistic narration**.**

5.2. Evidentiary Mode and the Debt-Trap Debate

The findings suggest that the debt-trap debate is sustained partly through competing evidentiary practices. References to debt levels, repayment pressures, infrastructure projects, official statements, and previous international lending cases provide different forms of support for competing interpretations. The invocation of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port is particularly significant because it can function as an intertextual precedent through which contemporary African lending is interpreted.

However, the presence of a precedent does not by itself establish equivalence between cases. Differences in borrowing arrangements, institutional contexts, project financing, debt composition, and political circumstances remain analytically relevant. The CDA findings therefore indicate that the debt-trap narrative should be examined not only in terms of whether it appears, but also in terms of how evidence is assembled to make that narrative plausible, contestable, or qualified**.**

5.3. African Agency and Interpretive Authority

African agency emerges as an important dimension of the discourse. African governments and officials may appear as borrowers,

decision-makers, beneficiaries, critics, or defenders of Chinese financing. Their representation varies according to source selection and attribution. In some texts, African actors are positioned primarily as recipients of external finance; in others, they appear as active political and economic agents capable of negotiating, defending, or questioning lending arrangements.

This variation demonstrates that agency is not simply a matter of grammatical representation. It is also connected to interpretive authority: whose explanation is treated as credible and whose assessment receives sustained attention. The findings therefore highlight the importance of examining African voices not merely as additional quotations but as sources of interpretation and knowledge.

5.4. Contesting and Reproducing the Narrative

The corpus reveals that media discourse can simultaneously contest and reproduce established narratives. Articles may challenge debt-trap interpretations while still reproducing them through headlines, historical references, or repeated attribution. Conversely, articles that foreground debt concerns may incorporate qualifications or alternative perspectives. Such patterns demonstrate the inherently dialogic character of media discourse, in which narratives circulate through repetition, qualification, contradiction, and reformulation.

5.5. Implications for China–Africa Media Scholarship

The study contributes to China–Africa media scholarship by demonstrating the analytical value of evidentiary mode alongside established CDA approaches. Attention to evidence shows how authority is constructed through the interaction of sources, statistics, historical precedents, quotations, modality, and journalistic synthesis. This approach moves analysis beyond a simple opposition between "pro-China" and "anti-China" representations and instead examines the discursive processes through which particular interpretations acquire credibility. It also reinforces the importance of treating African actors as participants in meaning-making rather than merely as objects of external reporting. Overall, the findings suggest that understanding China–Africa media discourse requires attention to both linguistic representation and the organisation of evidence through which competing accounts are authorised, challenged, and circulated.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how selected media texts represent and negotiate Chinese lending in Africa through Critical Discourse Analysis. Drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional model and complementary perspectives from Halliday, van Leeuwen, van Dijk, and Wodak and Meyer, the study analysed a defined corpus of media reports, focusing on

linguistic representation, agency, legitimation, ideological positioning, intertextuality, and evidentiary practices.

The findings show that Chinese lending is not represented through a single, stable narrative. The sampled texts construct competing interpretations through differences in lexical choice, transitivity, modality, source attribution, actor positioning, and historical framing. The debt-trap narrative appears alongside accounts that frame Chinese financing in terms of infrastructure, development, economic cooperation, or African policy choice. These representations are often qualified rather than presented as mutually exclusive positions.

A central finding is the importance of evidentiary mode. Political statements, expert testimony, institutional sources, statistics, documentary evidence, historical precedents, and journalistic synthesis perform different forms of evidentiary and legitimating work. The significance of a claim therefore depends not only on its content but also on who is presented as authorised to make it, what evidence accompanies it, and how that evidence is incorporated into the article. Intertextual references, particularly to earlier lending cases, can further shape the interpretation of contemporary African borrowing.

African agency also emerges as an important dimension of the discourse. African governments and officials are variously represented as borrowers, decision-makers, beneficiaries, critics, and interpreters of Chinese financing. Their visibility and authority vary across texts, demonstrating that media discourse does not simply report lending relationships but also constructs positions from which those relationships can be understood and evaluated. The findings therefore support greater attention to African voices and interpretive authority in China–Africa media scholarship.

The study does not determine whether Chinese lending constitutes debt-trap diplomacy; rather, it demonstrates how the sampled media texts construct, contest, qualify, and authorise competing interpretations of that claim. Its principal contribution is to show how evidentiary mode can complement established CDA approaches in analysing contested China–Africa financial narratives. Given the corpus-specific and interpretive nature of the study, future research could extend the analysis to larger and more diverse media corpora, additional African countries, longer time periods, and audience reception in order to examine how these competing representations circulate and are interpreted beyond the texts themselves.

7. Limitations

Several limitations qualify the interpretation of the findings. First, the focused analysis addresses the debt-trap narrative within a wider corpus covering Chinese engagement across economic, political, security, cultural, and educational domains. The findings therefore do not represent the full range of China-related discourse in the corpus.

Second, the study examines English-language online media only. French-language African media, broadcast media, radio, social media, and other digital platforms are excluded and may employ different sourcing and representational practices.

Third, the analytical corpus comprises only ten outlet-authored articles, unevenly distributed across the six outlets: *Nation Media Group* (2), *Mail & Guardian* (1), *PM News* (4), *The Guardian* (2), BBC News (1), and *The Standard* (0). The comparison is consequently exploratory rather than statistically representative, and findings should not be generalised to African or European media systems or to the outlets as homogeneous entities.

Fourth, three wire-syndicated articles were excluded to maintain the focus on outlet-authored discourse, reducing corpus breadth. Fifth, the study was conducted by a single researcher; although repeated reading, reflexive coding, explicit categories, and constant comparison enhanced consistency, no independent inter-coder reliability assessment was undertaken.

Finally, CDA is inherently interpretive. Although evidentiary modes are grounded in identifiable textual features, their classification reflects analytical judgement. Larger corpora, independent coding, genre-sensitive analysis, multilingual comparison, and replication are therefore needed to test the concept's wider applicability.

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