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IDENTIFYING AND USING VARIABLES IN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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&

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ABSTRACT

This paper recognises that mass communication research is tilting increasingly towards quasi scientific research methods, despite its multidisciplinary background. The tilt is a response to the global trend of rising bias against the humanities and social sciences, in favour of the pure sciences and technology. However, a vital point in the adaptation of the scientific method to communication research is the mastery and application of the concept of variable. This paper therefore explores the nature of research per se in human aspirations, in addition to the basic types, characteristics, and the pivotal role of variables in mass communication research. To demonstrate the presence of variables in all major stages of the research process, the paper also selectively reviews two published research reports, and concludes with a discussion of some pitfalls to avoid while working with variables.

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Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Mass Communication is a multi-disciplinary subject with roots in the Pure Sciences, Social Sciences, and the Humanities. Therefore, Mass Communication research can be mathematical or non-mathematical in approach. To the mathematically oriented scholar, research is a straightforward and quotidian process involving symbols, formulae, calculations, and results. However, to the scholar who is not mathematically oriented, research is often a complicated and nebulous voyage through uncharted territories. Consequently, any discussion that has some relationship with mathematics and or statistics cannot thrive among the latter population of academics.

Nevertheless, confronted by a global society with increasing bias for the sciences over the Humanities and Social Sciences, Mass Communication researchers are under mounting pressure to embrace the scientific method in their studies. One crucial key in the direction of applying the scientific method to Mass Communication research is the mastery of the concept of *variable*. This paper therefore sought to explore the concept of *variable*, within the context of Mass Communication research in the Humanities and Social Sciences, with student researchers as primary beneficiaries.

Understanding Mass Communication Research

The discussion on the proper nomenclature for the communication discipline in Nigeria is on. The argument is simply that there is an enormous rise in the number of universities running Mass Communication as a discipline, while a few others offer almost a similar programme structure with a different title like Communication and Language Arts, and Communication

Arts respectively. Mass Communication is one of the three major parts of Human Communication. Other parts are intrapersonal and interpersonal communication. Baran (2007:6) aptly captured the meaning of Mass Communication as a process of creating shared meaning between mass media and their audience. The next question is what are mass media? Mass media are media of communication which are used to reach heterogeneous audience. There are two elements in this definition; they are mass media and mass media audience. These two form the basis of Mass Communication research all over the world. So, if we are to define Mass Communication research; we would say it is the research directed at understanding the use of mass media and its effects on media audience.

Conceptualising Humanities and Social Sciences

Science is the systematic study of the physical and natural world through experiments and observations. Science subjects include physics, chemistry, and biology, et cetera. However, the expression, "Social Sciences" refers to the adaptation of the scientific techniques of systematic study, to non-scientific courses such as human society, human institutions, human relationships, and ideas that underlie social life. Social Sciences courses include but are not limited to Mass Communication, Marketing, Accounting, Business Administration, Anthropology, Sociology, Political Science, Economics, Law, Psychology, and Criminology.

The word, "Humanities" is a referent to courses such as history, languages, and philosophy. It is a synonym for the phrase, "Liberal Arts". Humanities revolve around the study of culture and ideas, in contrast to the Pure Sciences, which focus on the study of the physical and natural world. Although the concept of Humanities or Liberal Arts refers to a broad range of subjects in the past, it contemporarily indicates unspecialized and non-

scientific courses of study pursued by undergraduate students in universities or colleges. Another difference between the Humanities and non-Humanities courses is that, while the former are non-vocational or non-professional, the latter are vocational or professional in essence. Vocational or professional courses prepare students directly for specific careers or employment. Examples of these include programmes in the health sciences, engineering, architecture, and law. Nevertheless, Humanities now frequently refers to all courses, other than the Pure Sciences, which are available at undergraduate and postgraduate levels of study in universities.

Tankard & Severin (1987:1) capture the argument when they affirmed that:

Mass Communication is part skill, part art, and part science. It is a skill in the sense that it involves certain fundamental learnable techniques such as focusing a television camera, operating a tape recorder, and taking notes during an interview. It is an art in the sense that it involves creative challenges such as writing a script for a television documentary, developing a pleasing and eye-catching layout for a magazine advertisement, and coming up with a catchy, hard-hitting lead for a news story. It is a science in the sense that certain verifiable principles involved in making communication work can be used to achieve specific goals more effectively.

Exploring the Nature of Research

Research, at any level, is a systematic inquiry directed at solving a societal problem. It is a search for answers to solve a

problem. It is a systematic investigation of *a problem* aimed at finding solutions to a specific problem. Inherent in the above delineation of research are the following facts.

(1) Discovering Facts about a Problem

When the issue of discovery comes up in research, supervisors ask a number of questions. Some supervisors ask for the topic, while others ask for the problem (or statement of the problem). The issue and dynamics of a topic is a discussion for another day, suffice to state for now that every topic is a working-topic until a research supervisor and or research committee deems it appropriate. What a researcher and his supervisor should then be concerned about is the problem. Is there a problem? If yes, is there a clear statement of the problem? If there is no problem, keep searching till you get one. That goes to show that a problem is not necessarily identifiable from a topic. However, a problem could be identified from the observation(s), experience(s), and or speculations that prompted a choice of research topic; also from literature, and the environment.

Literature helps the researcher to discover and understand the gap in knowledge. For instance someone concluded through a study in 2016 that Nigerian Women do not aspire to study journalism at the postgraduate level without advancing the reasons. There is already a gap in that study; that is a problem. That means that what we call research problem could be a fall-out of someone else's conclusion.

(2) Establishing or Verifying a Theory about a Problem

Theories, according to MacLean (1972) cited in Tankard & Severin (1987), are a basic understanding of

how things work. Let us reflect on this definition quickly. It goes to show that for a person to clearly demonstrate understanding of a problem, it has to be driven by a theory. This is because theories provide an insight into the manoeuvrings of the problem by exposing the numerous angles from where the problem can be viewed. Someone is bound to ask then, what if I cannot find a suitable theory for my work? That is possible in fairly extreme cases.

The best interpretation for this question is simply that, no scholar has advanced any theory that directly explains the problem or a related problem. If that is the case, a researcher has a truly original research at hand. While one can congratulate a researcher for a possible search for breakthrough, it then becomes imperative that as a pathfinder, researchers need to draw (establish) a model to describe how the problem should be viewed by future researchers.

(3) Revising a Theory about a Problem

Over the years, theories have been subjected to critical inputs by scholars seeking to proffer new perspectives to the way a theory is viewed. These suggestions usually come from rigorous research which proves a theory wrong or strengthen the theory to a point where additional assumptions becomes important. This will definitely influence an acceptable revision to the model or theory. Revision can also be a concern of the researcher to delimit the assumptions of the theory for the purpose of the work at hand. If, for instance, a researcher wishes to drive a study with a theory, and the theory has eight assumptions, it is only logical to review the assumptions to the point where relevant assumptions discusses the problem and not an unnecessarily verbose

discussion in the name of theoretical framework.

(4) **Articulating a Plan of Action for Solving a Problem**

Every empirical research has a plan properly cut out for its execution. Any research that lacks the proper outlining of a proposed plan of execution has failed before commencement. This is because research design helps to differentiate a serious researcher from the not-too-serious. From the research design, it is easy to ascertain very clearly whether the researcher understands the relationship of the variables, or the problem of the research.

(5) **Proffering Solutions to a Problem Based on Facts Discovered**

There is the need to properly define what a research work is at this point. For the purpose of this paper, we to define research work as any attempt to probe into the nature of a problem through empirical (evidence based or scientific) instruments. This is different from the conceptual approach where argument is employed for probing. Lelaurin & Wolery (1992: 276) state that the central purpose of empirical research is to determine the relationship between and among variables. If this is the case, empirical research has one goal, and that is to elicit findings in order to establish a proven fact; while doing this, solutions are suggested and gaps are identified for further research.

(6) **Research is a Rigorous Activity**

Rigour is extreme care and thoroughness. By way of technical explanation, let us consider qualitative and quantitative research as example. Few questions are asked to confirm the rigour of quantitative and qualitative

research, especially in respect to internal and external validity and reliability. The questions are: Is there a causal relationship between the treatment and the outcomes? Are the results internally consistent among subjects? Can we generalize these results to other settings? Are the results consistent across uses, such as the use of a test to measure achievement? It is clear from this questions that research involves extreme details and care in order to avoid or minimise errors.

(7) **Research Seeks Solution to Human Problems**

Whether it is in the physical sciences, or the behavioural sciences, the whole essence of research is to make the physical world of humans more pleasant, enduring, and sustaining, through behavioural change. This shows that the procedure for solving problems may be divergent depending on the discipline, but the focus is simply to solve human problem; if research is not all about making the world a better place, then what is its primary goal? Moreover, research is intrinsically endless because humanity will always search for answers to meet unending human needs.

Understanding Variables

A variable is *anything* with at least two or more integral categories as exemplified in Tables 1, 2, and 3. In a study, a variable can either remain constant or change in quality and or quantity, either in isolation, or in the course of its interplay with other variable or variables. Therefore, a variable is anything and everything, to which a researcher may assign, or from which a researcher may infer, qualitative and or quantitative values. A researcher may assign either qualitative or quantitative values to some factors (for instance, performance, age, income level, and

television viewing, et cetera). Nevertheless, some other factors are amenable to assignment of qualitative values only (for instance, marital status, gender, and religion). The issue of variables is an important component of researchable ideas.

The preceding statements are without prejudice to coding, a process in statistics in which any factor may be assigned quantitative values, for data analyses purposes. Thus, in the process of analysing data, a researcher may code (i.e. assign quantitative values to) an apparently qualitative factor, for instance, marital status (which has the corresponding qualitative values, single, married, separated, divorced, and widowed) as 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 respectively.

Table 1. Variables and Corresponding Categories Values

Variables	Corresponding Categories
Sex	Male, female
Temperature	Hot, warm, cold
Attitude	Favourable, unfavourable
Mass Media	Radio, television, newspaper, magazine, books
Social Media	Blackberry messenger, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, et cetera
Newspaper	<i>The Guardian, The Punch, The Sun, The Vanguard</i>

Table 2. Variables with Corresponding Qualitative Values

Variables	Corresponding Qualitative Values
Age	Young, middle-aged, old
Performance	Fail, pass, fair, average, good, very good, excellent
Income level	Low, average, high
Television viewing	Heavy, moderate, light
Gender	Male, female
Employment status	Unemployed, underemployed, fully employed, retired
Marital status	Single, married, separated, divorced, widowed

3. Variables with Corresponding Quantitative Values

Variables	Corresponding Quantitative Values
Age	0-12, 13-19, 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70 years and above
Performance	0-39, 40-44, 45-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70-79, 80-100
Income level	Below ₦10,000; ₦10,000 - ₦29,000; ₦30,000 and above p.a.
Television viewing	1 hour, 2 to 4 hours, 5 or more hours daily

Characteristics of Variables

Variables possess many inherent characteristics that help in

Variable Detecting Questions

1. Am I dealing with a concept (or a construct)?
2. Will the concept (or construct) change or remain constant in values in my study?
3. Does the concept (or construct) have at least two categories?
4. Is the concept (or construct) measurable?
5. Can I assign quantitative and or qualitative values to the concept (or construct)?
6. Is the concept (or construct) central to my research process?
7. Does the concept (or construct) underlie every stage of my research process?
8. Will the concept (or construct) cause or contribute to causes of changes in other variables?

If the answer to all the eight questions above is, "Yes" then a concept or a construct has all the characteristics of a variable and the researcher can treat it as one.

Uses of Variables

There is no naysaying the fact that the process of conducting any study begins and ends with variables because variables constitute the fulcrum around which any validly designed study revolves. This statement is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. Moreover, to underscore the pivotal role of variables in every stage of Mass Communication research, a published study "Newspaper On-Air and On-Line: Boom or Doom to Readership among Journalism-Educators?" (Oketunmbi 2015) is selectively reviewed here as illustration. Specifically, variables enable researchers to make and implement appropriate decisions on the following issues.

1. Selection of research topic
2. Construction of research titles
3. Articulation of research problems
4. Identification of research objectives
5. Generation of research questions
6. Formulation of research hypotheses
7. Operationalization of concepts and constructs
8. Theoretical grounding
9. Selection of literature review contents
10. Research design
 - (a) Research population
 - (b) Sampling techniques
 - (c) Choice and structure of research instruments
 - (d) Et cetera
11. Data Analyses
12. Conclusions and recommendations

Selection of Research Topic

In the study entitled, "Newspaper On-Air and On-Line: Boom or Doom to Readership among Journalism-Educators?" the topic is "Influence of On-Line Newspapers and Newspaper Review Programmes on Radio and Television on Hardcopy Newspaper Readership among Journalism-Educators". Therefore, "On-Line Newspapers and Newspaper Review Programmes on Radio and Television" constitutes the independent variable, while "Hardcopy Newspaper Readership among Journalism-Educators" constitutes the dependent variable of the study.

Constructing of Research Titles

Flowing from the research topic above, the title, with the variables underlined, "Newspaper On-Air and On-Line: Boom or Doom to Readership among Journalism-Educators?" emerged.

Articulation of Research Problems

The major problem the aforementioned study sought to address was to "...determine whether there is a connection between availability of newspapers on-air and on-line and the level of readership among journalism-educators in Ilorin, Malete, and Offa metropolises of Nigeria" (variables underlined).

Identification of Research Objectives

One of the objectives of the study (variables underlined) was, to determine whether there is "...a connection between newspaper reviews on radio and readership patterns among journalism-educators in Ilorin, Malete, and Offa".

Generation of Research Questions

One of the research questions in the study (with variables underlined) was, "Is there a connection between availability of newspapers on-line and readership patterns among journalism-educators in Ilorin, Malete, and Offa?"

Formulation of Research Hypotheses

Although no hypothesis was tested in the study above, one (with variables underlined) is formulated here as follows for the purpose of illustration. "There will be no connection between availability of newspapers on-air and on-line and the level of readership among journalism-educators in Ilorin, Malete, and Offa metropolises of Nigeria".

Operationalization of Concepts and Constructs

To operationalize a key term, the study defined it as, "Journalism-educators are teachers of various aspects of mass communication in universities, polytechnics, and other tertiary institutions of learning" (key variable underlined).

Theoretical Grounding

The following is an excerpt from the theoretical

framework of the study under review (with key variables underlined).

The uses and gratification theory is a postulation that an individual would select and use a particular communication medium rather than others due to imagined or established higher satisfaction potentials of that medium relative to other media because...the audience makes a conscious and motivated choice among channels and contents on offer...Moreover, the ...theory is relevant to this paper in the sense that it provides an insight into whether people (Journalism-educators) would choose radio, television, or the Internet because of the presence of newspapers in them or settle for traditional hardcopy newspaper because of its peculiarities or both.

Selection of Literature Review Contents

In any study, literature review is a short history and status report on a topic. It involves scrutinizing the body of published works and related documents on specific topics in order to establish the status, adequacy, accuracy, currency, or correctness thereof. To accomplish that task, the researcher must invariably discuss variables. The following excerpt from the study under review (with key variables underlined) could clarify the point.

...The issue of newspapers reviews on-air has generated tensions among stakeholders in the country. The Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN) had complained that the manner in which broadcast stations reviewed newspapers on air was causing problems for newspapers

proprietors. The...stations "read virtually all the stories instead of the headline and maybe the intro or lead...with the exception of the last paragraph. Most of their listeners rely on (these reviews) instead of buying the newspapers and this is not good for sales".

Research Design

Research design, which involves choosing research population(s), sampling technique(s), and research instrument(s), et cetera, also revolves around variables as demonstrated in the following excerpt from the research report under review.

The population of the study were communication educators in universities and polytechnics in Ilorin, Malete, and Offa metropolitan areas of Kwara State, Nigeria....The researcher purposively selected a sample size of 40 respondents... from each of the five institutions sampled. The actual number of sample per institution depended on staff strength and their availability at the time of sampling. Instrumentation was a structured questionnaire administered to respondents in their various campuses.

Data Analyses

Data analyses involve declaration of the answer to each research objective or question, based on the identified relationship within, between, or among variables. The variables in the following excerpt from the study under review are underlined.

On research question 6, "is there a connection between newspapers reviews on television

and readership patterns among journalism-educators in Nigeria" the study found out that majority of the journalism-educators read hardcopy newspapers and watched newspapers reviews on television regularly, that translates into 80.65 (n=25) and 51.62 (n = 16) respectively. Therefore, there is a positive connection between reviews of newspapers on television and readership patterns among journalism-educators in Ilorin, Malete, and Offa.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To demonstrate the presence of variables in conclusions and recommendations, the following excerpt is drawn from another research report entitled, "The Influence of *Abule Oloke Merin* Radio-Drama in the Crusade against HIV and AIDS/STDs in Nigeria" (Akinwande & Oketunmbi 2013). The key variables are underlined.

Abule Oloke Merin radio-drama is observably effective in the crusade against HIV and AIDS/STDs among final year students at the Department of Mass Communication, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria.... In the light of their findings, the researchers recommend that...the planners and sponsors of development communication in Nigeria such as Abule Oloke Merin should increase the number of media units and number of broadcast media that they use in disseminating their messages. However, they should also register their presence in the preferred media of the minority of the respondents in this study. Finally, Nigerian

youths should look beyond the entertainment benefits of development communication efforts because the adoption of the innovations characteristics of such enterprises is in their interest and that of the society.

Figure 1. Pervasiveness of Variable in the Research Process

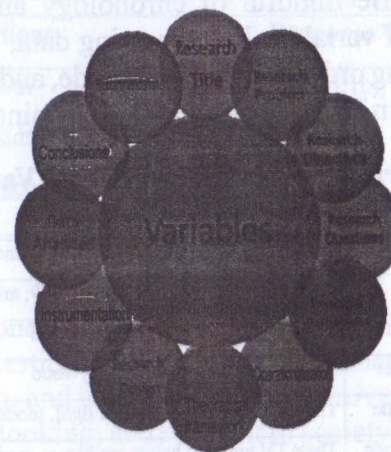
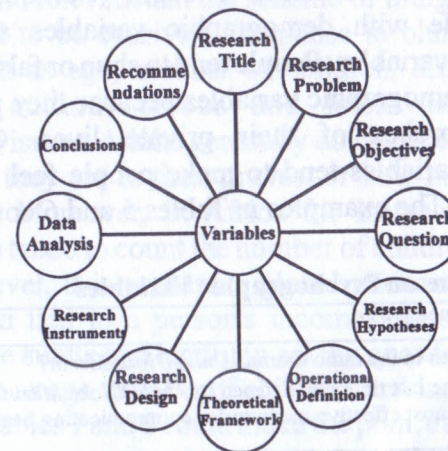


Figure 2. Centrality of Variable to a Cohesive Study



Some Pitfalls to Avoid while Using Variables

It may be desirable to add the following pieces of advice on some pitfalls to avoid while using variables. The word, "some" clearly implies that the list is by no means exhaustive. Firstly, do not present variables haphazardly. Presenting variables haphazardly suggests an incompetent, confused, indolent, or biased mind. Be mindful of chronology and sequence in the presentation of variables by presenting data, either in ascending or in descending order of date, magnitude, and alphabet, et cetera. The examples in Table 4 could clarify the point.

Table 4. Orderly Presentation of Data on Variables

Order Type	Data
Ascending Date	Megida, 2009: 324; Obi, 2010: 379; and Balogun, 2012: 366
Descending Date	Balogun, 2012: 366; Obi, 2010: 379; and Megida, 2009: 324
Ascending Alphabet	Bollywood, Hollywood, Nollywood
Descending Alphabet	Nollywood, Hollywood, Bollywood
Ascending Magnitude	Their TV viewing habits are light, moderate, and heavy
Descending Magnitude	Their TV viewing habits are heavy, moderate, and light

Secondly, it is not advisable to begin your questionnaire or interview guide with demographic variables and end with psychographic variables. People tend to shun or falsify answers to questions on demographic variables because they perceive them as intrusive probes of their private lives. Questions on demographic variables tend to make people feel vulnerable or self-conscious. The examples in Tables 5 and 6 could clarify the point.

Table 5. Questions on Psychographic Variables

Demographic Questions	Options
1. Did you listen to the radio drama, <i>Abule Oloke Merin</i> ?	(a), (b), (c)
2. When was the last time you listened to <i>Abule Oloke Merin</i> ?	(a), (b), (c)
3. Is radio the most effective medium for communicating health issues?	(a), (b), (c)

Source: Adapted from Akinwande and Oketunmbi (2013: 176)

However, people are more comfortable and honest with answers to psychographic variables because they tend to perceive them as non-personal issues of life. It is therefore advisable to begin a questionnaire or interview guide with psychographics and end it with demographics. The examples in Tables 5 and 6 could clarify the point.

Table 6. Examples of Questions on Demographic Variables

Demographic Questions	Response Options
1. How old are you?	(a), (b), (c), (d), (e)
2. How many children do you have?	(a), (b), (c), (d), (e)
3. What is your income level per annum?	(a), (b), (c), (d), (e)

Thirdly, do not assume that you will obtain the cooperation and honest answers of respondents when you are too direct in your questions on sensitive variables such as age, number of children, and income level. Instinctively, people want to be young, good looking, and relevant in society. Asking people about their age is like telling them that they are losing their youth, good looks, and relevance in the scheme of things. Respondents therefore tend to be evasive in response to blunt questions on variables such as age, number of children, and income level because of cultural taboos and latent but unresolved psychological issues. Adults generally do not like to be reminded of how close they are to their graves, or how much of life had eluded them. Moreover, in Africa for instance, it is widely perceived as a taboo to count the number of children a person has. On income level, it is perhaps a global phenomenon that self-worth is often tied to a person's income level. It is therefore advisable to be subtle and tactful in asking questions on sensitive variables such as age, number of children, and income level. The examples in Tables 7 and 8 could make the point clearer.

Fourthly, do not present data on religion variables haphazardly. Haphazard presentation of data on religion variables suggests an incompetent, confused, indolent, or biased mind. It is particularly necessary to note that religion is a sensitive and volatile issue globally. There are hundreds of religions in the world and religions revolve mostly around issues, claims, and beliefs that cannot be verified empirically. Most of the adherents of most religions believe either that *theirs is the ultimate religion*, or that *their religion is the only real one*. People like that think other religions are second best at best, and that *theirs is unquestionably the final word on religion*. Thus, when the agenda gets to the issue of one's religion, most people are alarmingly intolerant and reason-blind. Your research supervisor, members of research committees, members of research sub-committees, and research grant donors are human and they could be promotive and protective of their religions. Haphazard presentation of data on religion variables is guaranteed to draw the ire of such people. Avoid allegations of bias and irrational victimization from your readers by being pragmatic enough to present data on religion variables, *always* in ascending alphabetical order.

Table 7. Examples of Tactless Approach to Sensitive Questions

Questions	Response Options
1. How old are you?	Please write in the space provided
2. How many children do you have?	Please write in the space provided
3. What is your income level per annum?	Please write in the space provided

Table 8. Examples of Tactful Approach to Sensitive Questions

Questions	Response Options
1. What is your age bracket? (Please tick one of the options provided)	(a). 13-19 (b). 20-29 (c). 30-39 (d). 40-49 (e). 50-59 (f). 60-69 (g). 70 and above
2. How many children do you have? (Please tick one of the options provided)	(a). None (b). 1 to 4 (c). 5 or more
3. How would you describe your level per annum? (Please tick one of the options provided)	(a). Less than ₦100,000 per annum (b). ₦100,000 - ₦499,000 per annum (c). ₦500,000 and above per annum

The following hypothetical statement could clarify the point. "In the course of analysing data, the study discovered that the respondents were adherents of various religions including Afrelist, Ancestral Worship, Atheism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Eckankar, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism".

Concluding Remarks

This paper has attempted to discuss the nature of research, especially from the angle of communication research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Although students researchers are the primary target beneficiaries of this paper, advanced and accomplished communication researchers in the Humanities and Social Sciences could find some useful reminders in the article. To achieve the objective of this paper, the discussion revolved around variables and their uses in communication research.

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