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**NEWSPAPER COVERAGE, AGENDA CONSTRUCTION, AND THE
REPRESENTATION OF IRREGULAR MIGRATION IN NIGERIA (2020–
2023)**

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Abstract

Newspaper coverage constitutes a structurally strategic variable in the social construction of migration. Despite Nigeria's centrality to trans-Saharan irregular migration flows, systematic empirical analysis of how its national press represents this phenomenon remains scarce. This paper develops a multi-theoretical analytical framework, integrating agenda-setting theory, agenda-building theory, framing theory, gatekeeping theory, and the social responsibility theory of the press to interrogate the frequency, prominence, dominant frames, source hierarchies, and tonal orientations characterising coverage of irregular migration in three leading Nigerian dailies (The Punch, The Guardian, and The Sun) between January 2020 and May 2023. Drawing on a stratified random sample of 362 articles extracted from a population of 3,741 newspaper editions, and employing a mixed quantitative-qualitative content analysis, the framework anticipates that: (1) irregular migration is likely to remain systematically marginalised in national newspaper agendas, with limited front-page visibility; (2) episodic, humanitarian, and criminal justice frames are expected to predominate while thematic, structural coverage remains peripheral; (3) government agencies and international organisations are expected to constitute the dominant source hierarchy, marginalising migrant voices; and (4) negative tonal orientations are likely to reproduce reductive binaries of victimhood and criminality. These anticipated patterns are theorised as structured outcomes of institutional logics, commercial pressures, resource constraints, and source hierarchies, rather than neutral journalistic choices. The analytical framework carries implications for journalism practice, migration governance, and ethical reporting standards.

Keywords: irregular migration; newspaper coverage; Nigeria; content analysis; framing theory; agenda-setting; media ethics; Global South

Introduction

The mass media, newspapers in particular, occupy a structurally strategic position in the social construction of public issues. Within communication theory, newspapers are conceived not as

passive conduits of information but as institutional actors that exercise gatekeeping authority, set public agendas, construct interpretive frames, and shape policy discourse (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Agenda-setting theory posits that the frequency and prominence with which issues appear in the press significantly influence public perceptions of their importance, while second-level agenda-setting demonstrates that the media influence not only what audiences think about, but how they think about it through the selection of attributes, emphases, and evaluative cues (McCombs et al., 1997). Framing theory further explains how media texts define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements, and suggest remedies through patterned narrative structures (Entman, 1993).

Migration, specifically irregular migration, constitutes a domain in which media power is particularly consequential. Migration is inherently multidimensional, intersecting with development, security, human rights, labour markets, gender relations, and international diplomacy. Empirical research across Europe and North America demonstrates that sustained media emphasis on securitisation and criminality frames correlates with restrictive migration attitudes and policy preferences (Benson, 2013; Eberl et al., 2018), while humanitarian framing fosters empathy and rights-based discourse. Newspaper coverage is therefore not epiphenomenal to migration governance; it is constitutive of it.

Nigeria presents a compelling case for such analysis. As a major country of origin and transit for irregular migrants, particularly along the Nigeria-Niger-Libya corridor, Nigeria's migration dynamics are shaped by youth unemployment, economic precarity, insecurity, and the deeply embedded cultural valorisation of overseas mobility (Carling, 2006; de Haas, 2010; IOM, 2021). The period between 2020 and May 2023 witnessed heightened migration salience: the socio-economic disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, intensified anti-trafficking campaigns, the popularisation of 'Japa' discourse (colloquially denoting the desire to emigrate), and high-profile repatriation operations collectively elevated irregular migration in the Nigerian public sphere. Yet, despite the country's centrality in transnational migration networks, systematic empirical analysis of how its national press represents this phenomenon remains surprisingly limited.

This paper addresses this gap through a rigorous content analysis of *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, and *The Sun*, three newspapers with nationwide circulation and editorial influence, examining the frequency, prominence, framing patterns, source diversity, and tonal orientations of irregular migration coverage across 41 months. The study is guided by four research questions: (1) How frequently and prominently is irregular migration reported in the selected newspapers? (2) What dominant frames characterise the coverage? (3) Which source categories are most frequently cited? (4) What tonal and ideological orientations pervade the reportage?

By foregrounding newspaper coverage as the principal variable of analysis, this research shifts attention from descriptive accounts of migration flows to the communicative processes through which those flows are interpreted and rendered socially meaningful. In doing so, it contributes to the comparative media studies literature on migration representation in the Global South, while generating empirically grounded insights for journalism practice, policy formulation, and media ethics in Nigeria.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature on irregular migration, media representation, framing typologies, source hierarchies, and tonal orientations. Section 3 presents the integrated theoretical framework. Section 4 details the methodology, including research design, sampling procedure, and coding framework. Section 5 sets out the theoretical expectations and analytical propositions derived from the framework. Section 6 discusses the implications for theory, journalism practice, and policy. Section 7 concludes with directions for future research.

Literature Review

Irregular Migration: Conceptual Dimensions

Irregular migration lacks a universally agreed-upon definition but generally refers to cross-border movement occurring outside the regulatory norms of sending, transit, and receiving countries (IOM, 2021). Unlike regular migration sanctioned by national and international frameworks, irregular migration involves unauthorised border crossings, visa overstays, or fraudulent documentation. The concept encompasses complex social meanings: it is frequently conflated with human smuggling and trafficking, yet important distinctions remain. Smuggling involves a consensual transaction; trafficking entails coercion, deception, or exploitation (UNODC, 2011). In practice, these categories blur in fragile states and along routes such as the Sahara–Mediterranean corridor (Chatham House, 2024).

In West Africa, irregular migration is embedded in historical and socio-cultural patterns predating colonial demarcations. Contemporary routes often mirror pre-colonial networks maintained by familial ties and informal economies (Adepoju, 2005). The causes are multidimensional: economic deprivation, youth unemployment, conflict, poor governance, environmental degradation, and aspirational mobility. In Nigeria, the 'Japa' phenomenon underscores deeply rooted economic frustration intertwined with migration culture. Crucially, irregular migration is not uniformly perceived negatively within migrant-sending communities. In Edo and Delta States, successful migration, regardless of legality, is socially rewarded, complicating policy responses that conflict with local valorisation of mobility (Aghatise, 2004).

Newspaper Coverage and Media Representation of Migration

Newspaper coverage and media representation are interrelated concepts central to understanding how migration is framed, perceived, and debated. As McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue, the press may not tell the public what to think, but it tells them what to think about; the volume and consistency of coverage are therefore essential to the social salience of migration. Complementing agenda-setting, Hall's (1997) conceptualisation of media representation as a discursive process underscores that representations are never neutral; they are constructed through ideological, cultural, and institutional lenses that can either humanise or dehumanise migrants.

In Nigerian newspapers, irregular migration is frequently covered through episodic reporting focused on dramatic incidents, shipwrecks, trafficking rescues, and deportation exercises, relying on security agencies as sources and privileging law-and-order frames (Egbunike, 2021). Structural causes receive less attention, creating an imbalance in public understanding (Ezeah, 2021). Language choices are critical: terms such as 'illegal migrants' or 'human cargo' carry connotations that reduce migrants to stereotypes, compounding dehumanisation through visual framing, distressed faces and overcrowded boats dominate front pages without contextual analysis (IOM, 2018).

Framing Migration: Typologies and Contextual Adaptation

A substantial body of scholarship identifies recurring framing typologies in migration media discourse: the security frame (portraying migrants as threats to national borders), the humanitarian frame (emphasising vulnerability and victimhood), the economic frame (highlighting costs or contributions), and the criminal justice frame (focusing on illegality and enforcement) (Benson, 2013; Eberl et al., 2018; Berry et al., 2016). These typologies, developed primarily in European and North American contexts, require contextual recalibration when applied to Nigeria, where the country occupies a position as a sending and transit state rather than a primary destination.

The episodic-thematic distinction advanced by Iyengar (1991) provides a further analytical lens. Episodic frames present issues in terms of specific events and discrete occurrences, while thematic frames situate issues within general contexts, structural conditions, and long-term trends. In

Nigerian newspapers, episodic framing likely predominates; reports of trafficking arrests or boat interceptions attract readership and require fewer investigative resources than sustained structural analysis. This predisposition reinforces crisis-driven visibility at the expense of continuity (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009).

Source Hierarchies and Tonal Orientations

Source selection constitutes a foundational dimension of news construction, shaping which voices are amplified and which perspectives are marginalised. Institutional actors, government agencies, law enforcement, and international organisations routinely dominate migration coverage, while migrants and civil society actors are underrepresented (Gans, 1979; Hall et al., 1978; Cavedes, 2015). Hall et al.'s (1978) concept of 'primary definers' explains how official sources establish the initial interpretive framework within which subsequent journalistic discourse unfolds.

In Nigeria, Ezeah (2021) reports that NAPTIP and the Nigeria Immigration Service are the most frequently cited sources in migration reporting, while migrants and returnees appear far less frequently. Ridgeway and UNESCO (2023) further identify structural and professional constraints, tight deadlines, limited investigative capacity, and reliance on press releases as key drivers of institutional source dominance. Tonal analysis consistently reveals that Nigerian newspaper coverage is predominantly negative or crisis-oriented, with selective humanitarian narratives interspersed (Oluwayemi, 2021; Ezeah, 2021). Such patterns reproduce reductive binaries of criminality and victimhood rather than facilitating structural and contextual analysis.

Gap in Existing Literature

Despite growing migration scholarship in Nigeria, the following gaps persist: (1) no comprehensive longitudinal study examines newspaper coverage of irregular migration across the critical post-COVID period 2020–2023; (2) dominant frames employed by Nigerian newspapers have not been systematically analysed within a unified methodological framework; (3) source patterns and their relationship to framing and tone remain undertheorised; and (4) normative frameworks for ethical migration reporting have not been operationalised as measurable variables in systematic content analysis. The present study addresses these gaps.

Theoretical Framework

This study deploys an integrated analytical framework drawing on five interrelated theoretical traditions, each addressing a distinct yet complementary dimension of media representation of irregular migration.

Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) provides the conceptual justification for measuring frequency and prominence. The first level posits that sustained media visibility contributes to public salience; the second level (attribute agenda-setting) suggests that the characteristics emphasised in news reports shape cognitive interpretation frameworks. The study's examination of story frequency, page placement, and headline display is thus theoretically grounded in the assumption that mediated attention constructs social relevance.

Agenda-Building Theory (Cobb & Elder, 1971) shifts analytical focus to the antecedents of the media agenda, examining which actors seek to influence news content and through which strategies. Government agencies (NAPTIP, Nigeria Immigration Service), international organisations (IOM, UNHCR), civil society groups, and migrants themselves compete in the agenda-building process. Gandy's (1982) concept of 'information subsidies' explains why resource-rich institutional actors, whose press releases, media briefings, and data sets reduce news production costs, achieve disproportionate influence over migration coverage.

Framing Theory (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974) provides the framework for analysing narrative construction. Frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral evaluations, and suggest remedies. Iyengar's (1991) episodic–thematic distinction enables evaluation of whether coverage presents migration as isolated incidents or as structurally embedded phenomena. The identification of humanitarian, security, economic, criminal justice, cultural, and governance frames in the present study derives directly from this tradition.

Gatekeeping Theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) accounts for editorial selection processes, explaining how immigration stories pass through layered filters shaped by professional norms, organisational routines, institutional constraints, and ideological pressures. In resource-constrained Nigerian newsrooms, gatekeeping dynamics help explain patterns of frequency and prominence beyond intrinsic newsworthiness.

Social Responsibility Theory of the Press (Hutchins Commission, 1947; McQuail, 2010) provides the normative evaluative dimension, positing that press freedom entails obligations to serve the public interest through accuracy, pluralism, accountability, and respect for human dignity. This theory directly informs the evaluative assessment of source diversity, terminology, and ethical compliance in the study's coding categories.

These five frameworks constitute a coherent analytical architecture: agenda-building explains source influence on the media agenda; agenda-setting explains issue salience and visibility; gatekeeping accounts for editorial selection; framing elucidates narrative construction; and social responsibility provides normative benchmarks. Rather than deploying these theories as isolated models, the study integrates them as mutually reinforcing explanatory lenses capable of capturing institutional, structural, and discursive dimensions simultaneously.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employs systematic content analysis as its research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Content analysis enables the systematic, objective, and replicable examination of both manifest content (frequency, placement, source type) and latent content (frames, tone, symbolic representations) within media texts (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017). This mixed-method approach ensures both breadth, enabling measurement across a large longitudinal dataset and depth, enabling interpretive engagement with framing patterns and ideological orientations.

Population and Sample

The population comprises all editions of The Punch, The Guardian, and The Sun published between 1 January 2020 and 31 May 2023, a span of 1,247 days (41 months). Each newspaper publishes one daily edition, yielding a total population of 3,741 newspaper editions. The Taro Yamane formula was applied to determine the sample size:

$$n = N / (1 + N(e)^2) = 3,741 / (1 + 3,741 \times 0.0025) = 3,741 / 10.3525 \approx 362 \text{ articles}$$

This yields a final sample of 362 articles, statistically adequate at a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. The sample is distributed proportionally across the three newspapers (121 articles from The Punch, 121 from The Guardian, and 120 from The Sun) and across 41 monthly strata, ensuring temporal representation throughout the study period.

Sampling Procedure

A stratified random sampling technique was adopted, with stratification applied at two levels: newspaper (three primary strata) and time period (41 secondary strata per newspaper, totalling 123 strata). Within each monthly stratum, qualifying articles were identified through manual page-by-

page review and keyword searches of digital archives using terms including 'irregular migration,' 'human trafficking,' 'smuggling,' 'deportation,' 'returnees,' and 'Japa.' Simple random sampling was then applied within each stratum, with inaccessible articles replaced by randomly selected substitutes from the same stratum.

Inclusion criteria required articles to address any aspect of irregular migration as operationalised in this study—unauthorised border crossings, human trafficking, smuggling, deportation of undocumented migrants, or rescue missions involving stranded migrants, published in the study newspapers during the defined period.

Coding Framework

A structured coding sheet was developed based on four primary variable categories aligned with the research questions. Table 1 presents the coding framework.

Table 1. Content Analysis Coding Framework

Category	Dimension	Coding Values / Options
1. Frequency & Prominence	Story Placement	Front page / Inside page / Back page
	Headline Size	Banner / Standard / Small
	Visual Elements	Photograph present / absent
	Article Length	Long >800w / Medium 300–800w / Short <300w
2. Dominant Frames	Primary Frame	Security / Humanitarian / Economic / Criminal Justice / Policy / Development / Cultural
	Frame Orientation	Episodic (event-driven) / Thematic (structural)
3. Sources Cited	Source Type	Govt Agency / Official / Law Enforcement / Intl Org / NGO / Migrant/Returnee / Academic / Anon
	Source Diversity	Number of distinct source categories per article
4. Tone & Slant	Evaluative Direction	Positive / Negative / Neutral
	Portrayal	Victim / Agent / Mixed
	Terminology	"Irregular" / "Illegal" / "Japa" / Other

Source: Author's construct (2024)

Validity and Reliability

Content validity was established through a pilot test of 15 articles drawn from each of the three newspapers, confirming the clarity of the coding sheet and the suitability of research instruments. A panel of two expert coders trained jointly in the application of the coding guide conducted double-coding of 10% of the total sample. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, with a threshold of $\kappa \geq 0.80$ required before formal data collection commenced. Discrepancies were resolved through collaborative discussion and clarification of coding rules. NVivo software was employed to support frame identification and coding reproducibility.

The qualitative component of the analysis involved close reading of a purposively selected subset of 45 articles (15 per newspaper), chosen to represent the full range of identified frame categories and tonal orientations. For each article in this subset, a thematic analysis was conducted to examine the

narrative construction of irregular migration, the linguistic choices employed, the positioning of migrant voices relative to institutional sources, and the ideological assumptions underlying framing strategies. Analytical memos were prepared for each article and cross-referenced with the quantitative coding data to ensure integration of findings. This approach follows established mixed-method content analysis protocols (Neuendorf, 2017; Krippendorff, 2018), ensuring that quantitative patterns are contextualised and interpreted through qualitative depth.

Digital archive accessibility across the 41-month study period was addressed as follows. The Punch and The Guardian maintain searchable online archives that were accessed via institutional subscriptions, while physical copies held at the Nigerian Press Council library supplemented digital access for months in which online archives were incomplete. The Sun was accessed primarily through its online portal, with physical copies sourced from the University of Lagos library for periods of limited digital availability. Where editions remained inaccessible after exhausting these sources, they were excluded and replacement issues drawn from the same monthly stratum were substituted using the established random replacement protocol.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. As the research involved analysis of publicly available newspaper content rather than human participants, no formal ethical clearance from an institutional review board was required. Nevertheless, all source materials were treated in accordance with principles of academic integrity: articles are cited accurately, no identifiable information about individual journalists was collected or reported, and findings are presented without attribution of intent to named editorial staff. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Veritas University Abuja College of Postgraduate Studies.

Theoretical Expectations and Analytical Propositions

Frequency and Prominence: Marginalisation and Episodic Salience

On the basis of existing empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks, the study anticipates that irregular migration will constitute a marginalised category within Nigerian newspaper agendas, with limited baseline frequency relative to dominant issue categories such as politics, economy, and security. This expectation aligns with the marginalisation thesis advanced by Fengler, Roessler, and Lorenz (2019), whose comparative African-European study found migration to occupy a peripheral position in African newspaper agendas, and with Nigerian findings by Chukwu (2017) and Mwantok and Godwin (2019) reporting migration stories at less than two per cent of total editorial content.

The pattern of prominence is expected to follow a 'crisis-attention cycle' (Eberl et al., 2018), whereby coverage intensifies during acute humanitarian events, repatriations from Libya, trafficking scandals, before retreating as triggering events subside. Stories are expected to be predominantly positioned on inside pages, with limited front-page treatment reflecting the symbolic secondary status of migration within editorial hierarchies (Adun, Ekwonchi & Okafor, 2022; McCombs, 2004). This spatial marginalisation carries agenda-setting implications: exclusion from the front page signals diminished public priority and constrains policy attention.

The COVID-19 period (2020–2021) presents a particular analytical challenge: pandemic-related disruptions may have temporarily displaced migration from editorial agendas before border closures, stranded migrants, and repatriation operations returned migration-adjacent stories to prominence. Whether Nigerian newspapers responded to this cycle with increased thematic depth or continued episodic crisis coverage constitutes a key empirical question.

Dominant Frames: Securitisation, Humanitarianism, and Cultural Specificity

The study anticipates a complex and context-specific framing landscape shaped by Nigeria's position as a sending state rather than a destination country. Unlike European securitisation narratives that frame migrants as external threats to national cohesion, Nigerian newspapers are expected to deploy security frames primarily in relation to organised trafficking networks, border permeability, and reputational concerns affecting Nigeria's international standing (Akinyemi, 2017; Adepoju, 2005).

Humanitarian frames are expected to feature prominently in stories involving trafficking victims rescued from Libya, returnees undergoing IOM-facilitated reintegration, or migrants stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as Ojo (2022) cautions, victim-centred narratives in West African media may unintentionally obscure migrant agency and the socio-economic rationality underpinning migration decisions, framing irregular migration as a sequence of tragedies rather than as a predictable outcome of structural pressures.

Cultural frames specific to the Nigerian context, particularly 'Japa' discourse linking emigration to economic desperation and national developmental failure, are expected to emerge as a significant category not captured by typologies developed in Western contexts (van Gorp, 2007). The popularisation of 'Japa' during 2021–2023 may have introduced a culturally resonant frame oscillating between critique of governance failure and empathy with aspirational youth mobility. This duality illustrates how framing in Nigeria is embedded in complex cultural narratives of ambition, sacrifice, and communal advancement.

Episodic frames are expected to dominate over thematic frames, reflecting institutional efficiency in resource-constrained newsrooms. Event-driven stories based on official briefings from NAPTIP or the Nigeria Immigration Service require minimal investigative resources and align with established news values of conflict, negativity, and unexpectedness (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). Thematic reporting, requiring sustained research and engagement with multiple perspectives, demands resources that commercial pressures in Nigerian print journalism may not support.

Source Hierarchies: Institutional Dominance and Migrant Marginalisation

Government agencies, particularly NAPTIP and the Nigeria Immigration Service, are expected to constitute the most frequently cited sources in migration coverage, consistent with Ezeah's (2021) findings and with agenda-building dynamics that privilege institutionally resourced actors. International organisations (IOM, UNHCR) are expected to occupy a secondary dominant position, reflecting their sustained engagement with Nigerian migration governance and their capacity to provide information subsidies, press releases, data reports, and journalist training that reduce news production costs (Gandy, 1982).

Migrants and returnees are expected to appear infrequently as direct sources, and where they do appear, they are likely to be positioned as passive objects of policy, pity, or control rather than as decision-making agents (Chouliaraki, 2024). This asymmetry carries normative implications: the exclusion of migrant voices from migration discourse reinforces institutional perspectives that may prioritise enforcement and control over structural explanation and rights-based approaches. The marginalisation of civil society organisations, academic experts, and community representatives further narrows the epistemic boundaries of migration discourse.

The indexing theory framework (Bennett, 1990) helps explain this pattern: the range of perspectives in coverage is contingent on the diversity of debate among elite actors. When political elites express consensus around security and enforcement priorities, media narratives narrow accordingly, constraining the visibility of alternative interpretations that centre migrant agency or structural critique.

Tone and Slant: Negativity, Stigmatisation, and Ethical Concerns

The study anticipates a predominantly negative tonal orientation characterising coverage of irregular migration, manifesting through stigmatising language, criminalising terminology, and crisis framing that amplifies moral panic (Jewkes & Yar, 2010; Bamgbose & Egbunike, 2021). The prevalence of dehumanising terms such as 'illegal migrants' or 'human cargo' reflects a failure to adhere to international ethical guidelines that recommend neutral terms such as 'irregular migrants' or 'undocumented migrants' (IOM, 2018; EJM, 2015). This terminological choice carries legal and moral judgements that reduce complex human experiences to binary categories of legality and criminality (Van Dijk, 1991).

Visual framing is expected to reinforce textual negativity: distressed faces, overcrowded boats, and immigration raids provide visual clichés of irregular migration that evoke emotional responses and shape interpretive frameworks before audiences engage with textual content (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). The visual spectacle of suffering may generate sympathy while simultaneously reinforcing social distance between Nigerian readers and the migrants represented.

From a social responsibility perspective, these tonal patterns suggest significant ethical deficiencies. The predominance of negative framing, institutional source reliance, and episodic coverage structure a public discourse that obscures structural drivers of migration, marginalises migrant perspectives, and potentially reinforces support for restrictive enforcement measures. This constitutes a democratic deficit in migration governance, where media narratives fail to provide the contextual depth necessary for informed public deliberation.

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions to the comparative media and migration literature. First, it demonstrates the analytical value of integrating agenda-building theory with framing theory in the analysis of migration coverage, revealing how source hierarchies shape not only who is quoted but also which frames achieve dominance. Second, it extends episodic–thematic framing analysis to a West African context, where structural conditions, resource-constrained newsrooms, commercial pressures, and 'brown envelope' journalism generate distinctive patterns of episodic dominance that differ in origin from those documented in European or American contexts. Third, it identifies culturally specific frames (particularly 'Japa' discourse) not captured by existing typological frameworks, contributing to the theoretical adaptation of migration framing research for Global South contexts. Fourth, by operationalising social responsibility theory as a set of measurable content variables, the study bridges normative media theory and empirical content analysis in ways that have been underdeveloped in African media scholarship.

Implications for Journalism Practice and Education

The findings carry practical implications for journalism education and practice in Nigeria. The marginalisation of migration stories, over-reliance on official sources, and prevalence of negative framing suggest the need for: (1) specialised migration beats with dedicated reporters trained in rights-based reporting frameworks; (2) expanded source networks that systematically incorporate migrant and civil society voices; (3) editorial policies promoting thematic, context-rich coverage over episodic crisis reporting; (4) adoption of ethical terminology guidelines consistent with IOM (2018) and EJM (2015) standards; and (5) training programmes in investigative journalism on migration governance, building on initiatives by IOM's JIFORM collaboration. Journalism educators should integrate ethical migration reporting frameworks into curricula, equipping future journalists with the conceptual and practical tools to resist institutional source dependence and commercial pressures toward sensationalism.

Policy Implications

For government agencies and international organisations, this study suggests the value of media engagement strategies that go beyond press releases and media briefings to support investigative journalism, facilitate direct journalist access to returnee perspectives, and promote story framing that situates irregular migration within structural development contexts. NAPTIP, the Nigeria Immigration Service, and the IOM could develop sustainable media partnerships that embed ethical migration reporting capacity within newsrooms rather than supplementing their information subsidies with short-term training events. Policymakers should also recognise that the media's role in migration governance extends beyond information dissemination; the frames, tones, and source hierarchies constructed by newspapers shape the normative environment within which migration policy is debated and evaluated.

Conclusion

This paper has developed a theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous framework for examining newspaper coverage of irregular migration in Nigeria between 2020 and 2023. Through the integration of agenda-setting, agenda-building, framing, gatekeeping, and social responsibility theories, the study establishes a multi-dimensional analytical architecture capable of examining institutional, structural, discursive, and normative dimensions of migration coverage simultaneously.

The anticipated findings, systematic marginalisation in newspaper agendas, episodic crisis-driven coverage, humanitarian and criminal justice frame dominance, institutional source hierarchies, and predominantly negative tonal orientations, collectively suggest that leading Nigerian newspapers have not yet fully realised their democratic potential as agenda-setters and frame-makers in migration governance. These patterns reflect not journalistic indifference but structural constraints: commercial pressures, resource limitations, source dependencies, and professional norms that incentivise episodic over thematic engagement.

Addressing these constraints requires coordinated action at multiple levels, editorial policy reform, journalism education, institutional source diversification, and migration-specific professional development. The press's capacity to provide contextual, rights-based, migrant-centred coverage of irregular migration is not merely a matter of professional aspiration; it carries direct consequences for public understanding, policy formulation, and the dignity and welfare of the millions of Nigerians whose lives and decisions intersect with this phenomenon.

Future research should extend this framework to digital and online editions, incorporate audience reception analysis to examine how framing influences public attitudes, and pursue comparative studies across other West African media systems to situate Nigerian patterns within regional trajectories. As Nigeria's migration dynamics evolve, shaped by demographic pressures, climate change, digital connectivity, and evolving governance frameworks, the critical analysis of media representation will remain an indispensable scholarly and civic endeavour.

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