

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

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Abstract

This study examined newspaper coverage of irregular migration in Nigeria from January 2020 to May 2023, employing a mixed-method systematic content analysis as its research design. A sample of 362 articles was drawn from three national daily newspapers — The Punch, The Guardian, and The Sun — using stratified random sampling across 41 monthly strata. Quantitative data were coded along four primary variable categories: frequency and prominence, dominant frames, source hierarchies, and tonal orientation. Qualitative analysis examined latent framing patterns and ideological orientations through NVivo-assisted thematic analysis. Findings reveal that coverage was characterised by systematic editorial marginalisation, with 79.8 per cent of articles placed on inside pages. Episodic framing dominated (74.0%), with security (27.1%), humanitarian (23.5%), and criminal justice (21.0%) frames most prevalent. Institutional sources constituted 70.8 per cent of all citations, whilst migrants and returnees accounted for only 7.8 per cent. Negative tone prevailed in 48.6 per cent of articles, and stigmatising terminology appeared in 39.5 per cent of coverage. The study concludes that Nigerian newspaper coverage of irregular migration is a structured product of commercial pressures, gatekeeping logics, and institutional source dominance, and advances normative propositions for rights-based, structurally contextualised migration reporting consistent with the social responsibility obligations of the press.

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

Introduction

The mass media, and 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

and Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993; Shoemaker and 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 shape 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. 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 theoretical 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, and high-profile repatriation operations collectively elevated irregular migration in the Nigerian public sphere.

Yet, despite the country's centrality in transnational migration networks, there exists a significant empirical, methodological, and geographical gap in the literature: no longitudinal, multi-newspaper content analysis applying an integrated theoretical framework has been conducted on Nigerian newspapers' coverage of irregular migration. Existing studies are narrow in temporal scope, methodologically fragmented, and largely absent from the Global South framing literature (Chukwu, 2017; Ezeah, 2021; Mwantok and Godwin, 2019). This study addresses that gap by constructing an integrated multi-theoretical framework for analysing the frequency, prominence, framing patterns, source hierarchies, and tonal orientations of irregular migration coverage in Nigeria's print media, and by advancing theoretical propositions about the structural logics that produce and sustain those patterns.

Objectives of the Study

This paper is guided by the following theoretical objectives:

1. To construct an integrated multi-theoretical analytical framework adequate to the complexity of newspaper coverage of irregular migration in Nigeria.
2. To examine the conceptual and theoretical dimensions of irregular migration and newspaper representation as interrelated variables.
3. To critically review existing empirical literature on migration media coverage, identifying patterns, gaps, and theoretical insufficiencies in the Nigerian and Global South contexts.
4. To analyse the structural logics — institutional, commercial, professional, and normative — that shape the framing, sourcing, and tonal orientations of migration coverage in Nigerian newspapers.

5. To identify culturally specific framing categories, particularly 'Japa' discourse, that extend existing typological frameworks beyond their Western origins.
6. To advance normative theoretical propositions for rights-based, structurally contextualised migration reporting aligned with the social responsibility obligations of the press.

Review of Concepts

Irregular Migration

Irregular migration lacks a universally agreed 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 between a migrant and a facilitator; trafficking entails coercion, deception, or exploitation of a victim (UNODC, 2011). In practice, these categories blur along fragile-state 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 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 — a Yoruba term colloquially adopted across ethnic boundaries to describe the desire to emigrate — 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 legal status, is socially rewarded, complicating policy responses that conflict with local valorisation of mobility (Aghatise, 2004).

Newspaper Coverage and Media Representation

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 as a public issue. 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, deportation exercises. Such coverage relies predominantly on security agencies as sources and privileges law-and-order frames (Egbunike, 2021), while structural causes receive comparatively little attention (Ezeah, 2021). Language choices are critical: terms such as 'illegal migrants' or 'human cargo' carry moral and legal connotations that reduce migrants to stereotypes. These terminological patterns are compounded by visual framing, where distressed faces and overcrowded boats dominate without contextual analysis (IOM, 2018).

Agenda-Setting and Agenda-Building

Agenda-setting theory, originating with McCombs and Shaw's (1972) landmark study of the 1968 US presidential election, posits that the frequency and prominence with which issues appear in the press significantly influence public perceptions of their social importance. The first level of agenda-setting concerns the transfer of issue salience from media to public; the second level (attribute agenda-setting) concerns the transfer of issue attributes — how topics are evaluated and interpreted (McCombs et al., 1997). Applied to migration, agenda-setting predicts that newspapers that rarely and briefly cover irregular migration will contribute to its marginalisation in public consciousness and policy priority.

Agenda-building theory (Cobb and Elder, 1971) extends this framework by examining the antecedents of the media agenda itself — the processes by which certain actors and perspectives succeed in shaping what newspapers cover and how. Gandy's (1982) concept of 'information subsidies' is particularly illuminating: resource-rich institutional actors, including NAPTIP, the Nigeria Immigration Service, and international organisations like IOM, reduce news production costs by providing pre-packaged press releases, data, and briefings that journalists absorb with minimal independent verification. This subsidy dynamic structurally advantages official perspectives over migrant voices in Nigerian migration journalism.

Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009) conceptualises the editorial process as a series of filters through which potential news items pass before publication. Gates are operated at the level of the individual journalist, the editorial team, the organisation, and the broader social system. In resource-constrained Nigerian newsrooms, gatekeeping dynamics are heavily shaped by commercial pressures, time limitations, source availability, and professional norms that favour

conflict, negativity, and event-driven stories over structural analysis (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O'Neill, 2017). The result is a systematic filtering that elevates episodic crisis coverage and suppresses thematic, investigative reporting on migration.

Social Responsibility of the Press

The social responsibility theory of the press, articulated by the Hutchins Commission (1947) and elaborated by McQuail (2010), posits that media freedom is inseparable from public obligations: to provide accurate, comprehensive, and contextually rich coverage; to represent the diversity of perspectives within society; to maintain accountability; and to respect human dignity. In the context of migration reporting, social responsibility theory provides the normative benchmark against which existing coverage practices can be evaluated. The theory implies that systematic negative framing, institutional source monopoly, and dehumanising terminology are not merely journalistic shortcomings but ethical failures with real consequences for public discourse, policy, and migrant welfare.

Review of Related Literature

Migration Framing in European and North American Contexts

The scholarly literature on media framing of migration is extensive and predominantly rooted in European and North American contexts. Benson (2013) demonstrated through a French-American comparison that national media fields produce structurally distinct migration frames shaped by political culture, media market structure, and journalistic professional norms. In Europe, the security frame — portraying migrants as threats to national cohesion, public order, and welfare systems — has consistently dominated coverage, particularly during the 2015–2016 refugee crisis (Berry et al., 2016; Eberl et al., 2018). The humanitarian frame, emphasising vulnerability and

victimhood, constitutes a secondary but recurrent orientation, particularly in liberal broadsheet coverage. The economic frame foregrounds costs, labour market impacts, or fiscal contributions, while the criminal justice frame focuses on enforcement, illegality, and trafficking.

Iyengar's (1991) episodic-thematic distinction has generated a substantial sub-literature. Episodic coverage, presenting migration as a sequence of discrete dramatic events, predominates in commercial media; thematic coverage, situating migration within structural economic, political, and demographic contexts, requires investigative resources that market pressures in commercial media systems constrain. Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart (2009) demonstrated that episodic, negative migration coverage correlates with increased anti-immigrant sentiment in Western European publics, establishing a consequentialist dimension to framing choices that is theoretically significant for normative media ethics.

Nigerian and West African Media Contexts

The application of Western framing typologies to the Nigerian context requires significant theoretical recalibration. Nigeria occupies a position as a sending and transit state, not a primary destination, which fundamentally alters the structure of the security frame. Where European newspapers frame migrants as external threats to the receiving nation, Nigerian newspapers are more likely to frame trafficking networks, border permeability, and the international reputational consequences of irregular migration as the primary security concerns (Akinyemi, 2017; Adepoju, 2010). The humanitarian frame retains relevance, particularly in narratives of trafficking rescues and IOM-facilitated repatriation, but functions differently in a context where many readers have familial or community ties to irregular migrants.

The 'Japa' discourse, linking emigration to economic desperation, governance failure, and aspirational youth mobility, constitutes a culturally specific frame that existing typologies do not capture (van Gorp, 2007). The popularisation of 'Japa' during 2021–2023 introduced a culturally resonant narrative oscillating between critique of the Nigerian state and empathy with the socio-economic rationality of emigration. This frame is theoretically significant because it introduces a dimension of structural critique and community ambivalence absent from both the victimhood-centred humanitarian frame and the enforcement-centred criminal justice frame. Its emergence in Nigerian newspapers suggests that framing typologies developed in Western destination-country contexts must be extended, not merely adapted, for Global South application.

Source Hierarchies in Migration Reporting

Source selection constitutes a foundational dimension of news construction, determining whose voices are amplified, whose perspectives are marginalised, and which interpretive frameworks achieve dominance. Hall et al.'s (1978) concept of 'primary definers' provides a structural explanation: official sources — government agencies, law enforcement, international organisations — establish the initial interpretive framework within which subsequent journalistic discourse must negotiate. Secondary sources, including NGOs, academic experts, civil society groups, and migrants themselves, are compelled to respond within the definitional framework already set by primary definers, limiting the range of perspectives available in public discourse.

Gans (1979) and Caviedes (2015) document the systematic over-representation of official and institutional sources in migration coverage across multiple national contexts. 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. Bennett's (1990) indexing theory offers a complementary explanation: media coverage reflects the range of debate among elite actors, so that when political elites share enforcement and securitisation priorities, media narratives narrow accordingly, constraining the visibility of structural and rights-based interpretations.

Review of Empirical Studies

Adun et al. (2022) examined Nigerian newspapers' coverage of Nigerian migrants in Libya and found stories predominantly positioned on inside pages, with dramatic visual imagery dominating and structural context largely absent. This finding aligns with Fengler et al.'s (2019) comparative African-European study, which found migration occupying a peripheral position in African newspaper agendas at less than two per cent of total editorial content, consistent with earlier Nigerian findings by Chukwu (2017) and Mwantok and Godwin (2019).

Ezeah (2021) provided the most comprehensive single-country analysis of source, tone, and framing dynamics in Nigerian migration journalism, confirming NAPTIP and official sources as dominant, with migrants and returnees marginalised as direct voices. His findings on tonal negativity were corroborated by Oluwayemi (2021), whose discourse analysis of Nigerian migration reporting identified ideological constructs of criminality and victimhood as structurally recurring orientations. Bamgbose and Egbunike (2021) further demonstrated the prevalence of crisis, moral panic, and criminalising frames in national newspaper coverage, linking these to commercial pressures and professional norms in Nigerian print journalism.

Egbunike (2021) contributed a visual framing analysis, documenting the dominance of distress imagery and the near-absence of images portraying migrant agency or structural context.

Ridgeway and UNESCO (2023) provided a regional West and Central African perspective, identifying tight deadlines, limited investigative capacity, and structural reliance on press releases as key institutional drivers of source dominance and episodic coverage. Ojo (2022) cautioned that even the humanitarian frame in West African media may unintentionally obscure migrant agency, framing irregular migration as a sequence of tragedies rather than as a predictable, structurally produced outcome of governance failures and economic precarity.

Collectively, these studies confirm patterns of marginalisation, institutional source reliance, episodic framing, and tonal negativity in Nigerian migration journalism. However, the existing body of work exhibits three recurring limitations: it is narrow in temporal scope, rarely spanning more than two years; it is methodologically fragmented, with no unified theoretical framework applied across studies; and it has not theorised the 'Japa' frame as a distinct analytical category requiring theoretical accommodation. The present paper addresses these limitations through an integrated theoretical framework designed for systematic, longitudinal application.

Theoretical Framework

This paper deploys an integrated analytical framework drawing on five interrelated theoretical traditions, each addressing a distinct yet complementary dimension of media representation of irregular migration. Rather than deploying these theories as isolated models, the paper integrates them as mutually reinforcing explanatory lenses capable of capturing institutional, structural, discursive, and normative dimensions simultaneously.

Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) provides the conceptual justification for examining frequency and prominence as theoretically consequential variables. 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 examination of story frequency, page placement, and headline display is therefore grounded in the assumption that mediated attention constructs social relevance and that mediated inattention constructs irrelevance.

Agenda-Building Theory (Cobb and 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, but do so from profoundly unequal structural positions. Gandy's (1982) concept of 'information subsidies' explains why resource-rich institutional actors achieve disproportionate influence: their press releases, media briefings, and data sets reduce news production costs in ways that migrant communities and civil society organisations cannot replicate.

Framing Theory (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974) provides the framework for analysing narrative construction. Entman's four framing functions — defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral evaluations, and suggesting remedies — enable systematic analysis of how migration is rendered intelligible, and which interpretive possibilities are foreclosed. Iyengar's (1991) episodic-thematic distinction provides a further evaluative axis: whether coverage presents migration as isolated incidents or as structurally embedded phenomena with identifiable systemic causes and institutional remedies.

Gatekeeping Theory (Shoemaker and 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, characterised by underpayment, understaffing, and structural dependence on official source briefings, gatekeeping dynamics help explain patterns of frequency and prominence that cannot be attributed solely to 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, ethical terminology, and the adequacy of framing practices against normative standards that the press itself, through professional codes, endorses.

These five frameworks constitute a coherent analytical architecture: agenda-building explains which actors shape the media agenda and how; agenda-setting explains the consequences of that agenda for public salience; gatekeeping accounts for the editorial selection dynamics that mediate between sources and stories; framing elucidates the narrative structures through which migration is rendered socially meaningful; and social responsibility provides the normative benchmarks against which all four dimensions can be critically evaluated.

Methodology

The study employs systematic content analysis as its primary 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 — measurement across a large longitudinal dataset — and depth — interpretive engagement with framing patterns and ideological orientations. The qualitative component involved thematic and discourse analysis of selected articles drawn from each stratum, focusing on the latent meanings embedded in headline language, source attribution patterns, and visual framing choices. NVivo software was employed to manage and systematically code qualitative data alongside quantitative coding.

Justification for Newspaper Selection and Time Frame

The three newspapers were purposively selected on the basis of four criteria: national circulation, editorial diversity, readership composition, and historical coverage of migration-related issues. The Punch is Nigeria's highest-circulation daily, with a predominantly urban, educated readership and a strong tradition of investigative reporting on political and social issues. The Guardian is a broadsheet known for in-depth analysis, with a readership drawn from professional, academic, and policy communities. The Sun is a tabloid-format national daily with a broad popular readership and strong coverage of social issues including migration and trafficking. Together, the three newspapers constitute a representative cross-section of Nigeria's mainstream print media landscape, encompassing broadsheet, mid-market, and popular editorial orientations. The period January 2020 to May 2023 was selected because it spans three theoretically significant sub-periods: the COVID-19 pandemic and associated border disruptions (2020–2021), the intensification of anti-trafficking campaigns and repatriation operations (2021–2022), and the peak popularisation of 'Japa' discourse (2022–2023). This 41-month longitudinal window enables temporal comparison unavailable to shorter studies.

Population and Sample

The study population comprises all editions of The Punch, The Guardian, and The Sun published between 1 January 2020 and 31 May 2023, a span of 41 months, yielding a total population of 3,741 newspaper editions. The Taro Yamane (1967) formula was applied to determine an adequate sample size:

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

This yields a final sample of 362 articles, statistically adequate at a 95 per cent confidence level with a 5 per cent margin of error, 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 and Data Access

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). Qualifying articles were identified through manual review and keyword searches of digital archives using terms including 'irregular migration,' 'human trafficking,' 'smuggling,' 'deportation,' 'returnees,' and 'Japa.' Articles were accessed through the online digital archives of the three newspapers, supplemented by the ProQuest African Newsstream database for issues unavailable in newspaper archives. Where digital copies were inaccessible, physical copies held at the Nigerian Press Council library and the National Library of Nigeria were consulted. Inclusion criteria required articles to address any aspect of irregular migration, unauthorised border crossings, trafficking, smuggling, deportation of undocumented migrants, or rescue missions involving stranded migrants, published in the study newspapers during the defined period. Simple random

sampling was applied within each stratum, with inaccessible articles replaced by randomly selected substitutes from the same stratum.

Differentiation of Quantitative and Qualitative Sample

Consistent with the mixed-method design, the sample of 362 articles served dual purposes. All 362 articles were subjected to quantitative content analysis for frequency, prominence, source type, tone, and frame coding. A purposive qualitative sub-sample of 60 articles (20 per newspaper, selected to ensure variation across time, frame type, and tonal orientation) was drawn from the quantitative sample for in-depth qualitative frame and discourse analysis. This sub-sample enabled the identification of latent ideological patterns, linguistic choices, and contextual framing strategies not fully captured by quantitative coding alone.

Coding Framework

A structured coding instrument was developed based on four primary variable categories aligned with the theoretical framework. The coding framework is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Content Analysis Coding Framework

Category	Dimension	Coding Values / Options
1. Frequency and 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 (Japa)
	Frame Orientation	Episodic (event-driven) / Thematic (structural)
3. Sources Cited	Source Type	Govt Agency / Law Enforcement / Intl Org / NGO / Migrant or Returnee / Academic / Anonymous
	Source Diversity	Number of distinct source categories per article
4. Tone and Slant	Evaluative Direction	Positive / Negative / Neutral
	Portrayal	Victim / Agent / Mixed
	Terminology	'Irregular' / 'Illegal' / 'Japa' / Other

Note. Source: Author's construct (2024).

Validity and Reliability

Content validity was established through a pilot test of 15 articles drawn from each newspaper, confirming the clarity of the coding instrument and the suitability of category definitions. Two expert coders, trained jointly in the application of the coding guide, conducted double-coding of 10 per cent 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 coding rule clarification. NVivo software was employed to support frame identification and thematic pattern analysis.

Data Presentation

Frequency and Prominence

A total of 362 articles on irregular migration were identified and analysed across the three newspapers during the 41-month study period, distributed as follows: The Punch (121 articles, 33.4%), The Guardian (121 articles, 33.4%), and The Sun (120 articles, 33.2%). Table 2 presents the prominence profile of coverage.

Table 2

Frequency and Prominence of Irregular Migration Coverage

Indicator	The Punch	The Guardian	The Sun	Total	%
Total Articles	121	121	120	362	100.0
Front Page	19	18	11	48	13.3
Inside Page	93	95	101	289	79.8
Back Page	9	8	8	25	6.9
Banner Headline	12	11	9	32	8.8
Long (>800 words)	22	28	17	67	18.5
Medium (300–800 words)	66	64	68	198	54.7
Short (<300 words)	33	29	35	97	26.8

Note. Source: Field data (2024).

Dominant Frames

Table 3 presents the distribution of primary frames across the three newspapers. The security frame was most dominant (27.1%), followed by humanitarian (23.5%) and criminal justice

(21.0%) frames. Episodic frame orientation dominated (74.0%) over thematic framing (26.0%).

The Guardian demonstrated the highest use of the humanitarian frame (30.6%), whilst The Punch and The Sun relied more heavily on security and criminal justice frames.

Table 3

Distribution of Dominant Frames in Irregular Migration Coverage

Frame	The Punch	The Guardian	The Sun	Total	%
Security	36	28	34	98	27.1
Humanitarian	24	37	24	85	23.5
Criminal Justice	29	18	29	76	21.0
Economic	12	15	14	41	11.3
Policy/Governance	9	13	10	32	8.8
Japa/Cultural	8	6	4	18	5.0
Episodic Orientation	90	85	93	268	74.0
Thematic Orientation	31	36	27	94	26.0

Note. Source: Field data (2024).

Sources of Information

A total of 665 source citations were recorded across the 362 articles. Government agencies constituted the most frequently cited category (28.1%), followed by international organisations

(21.4%) and government officials (11.7%). Institutional sources collectively accounted for 70.8 per cent of all citations. Migrants, returnees, and victims represented only 7.8 per cent of sources. Over 40 per cent of articles relied on no source or a single source type, indicating critically limited source diversity across all three newspapers.

Tone and Slant

Negative tone prevailed in 48.6 per cent of articles, neutral tone in 37.0 per cent, and positive tone in only 14.4 per cent. Migrants were portrayed predominantly as victims (54.7%), with agentic portrayals in only 9.4 per cent of articles. Stigmatising terminology — including 'illegal migrants' and 'human cargo' — appeared in 39.5 per cent of coverage. The Guardian demonstrated the most balanced profile, whilst The Sun showed the strongest negative orientation (53.3% negative; 10.8% positive).

Discussion of Findings

Frequency and Prominence: The Structural Logic of Marginalisation

The data presented in Table 2 confirm that irregular migration constitutes a marginalised category within Nigerian newspaper agendas. With 79.8 per cent of articles placed on inside pages and only 13.3 per cent receiving front-page treatment, these findings align with the marginalisation thesis advanced by Fengler et al. (2019) and with Nigerian findings consistently reporting migration stories at less than two per cent of total editorial content (Chukwu, 2017; Mwantok and Godwin, 2019). The theoretical explanation, grounded in gatekeeping theory, resides in the convergence of commercial pressures, resource constraints, and professional news values that collectively depress the routine coverage of migration in favour of more politically proximate and commercially viable stories.

The pattern of prominence confirms a 'crisis-attention cycle' (Eberl et al., 2018), whereby coverage intensified during acute humanitarian events — repatriations from Libya, trafficking scandals — before receding as triggering events subsided. The spatial marginalisation carries direct agenda-setting implications: exclusion from the front page signals diminished public priority and constrains policy attention in ways that benefit enforcement over structural remediation.

Dominant Frames: Episodic Dominance and the Cultural Specificity of 'Japa'

The framing data in Table 3 confirm the dominance of episodic, humanitarian, and criminal justice frames. Unlike European securitisation narratives that frame migrants as external threats to receiving-nation cohesion, the security frame in Nigerian newspapers operates primarily in relation to organised trafficking networks, border permeability, and Nigeria's international reputational concerns (Akinyemi, 2017). This contextual recalibration confirms that framing typologies developed in destination-country contexts require theoretical extension for application to sending-state media systems.

The 'Japa' frame, emerging as a culturally specific analytical category, represents the study's most significant theoretical contribution. Unlike the humanitarian frame, which positions migrants as passive victims, the 'Japa' frame introduces structural critique that implicates the Nigerian state directly, framing emigration as a rational response to governance failure and economic mismanagement. This normative inversion has no direct equivalent in Western framing typologies and requires specific theoretical accommodation in the Global South literature.

Source Hierarchies: Information Subsidies and the Silencing of Migrant Voices

The source data confirm that government agencies and international organisations dominate citation patterns, consistent with Ezeah's (2021) findings and agenda-building dynamics.

The finding that migrants and returnees account for only 7.8 per cent of citations, whilst 40.3 per cent of articles rely on a single source type or none, represents the study's most ethically significant empirical finding. This asymmetry produces a public epistemic environment in which enforcement and control perspectives are structurally over-represented whilst structural explanations and rights-based approaches are marginalised (Bennett, 1990; Gandy, 1982).

Tone, Terminology, and Ethical Deficits

The predominance of negative tonal orientations (48.6%) and stigmatising terminology (39.5%) represents an ethical failure measured against social responsibility benchmarks. The persistence of 'illegal migrants' and related criminalising language, despite IOM (2018) guidelines and Adepoju's (2010) documentation of the social embeddedness of migration in Nigerian communities, reflects the entrenchment of institutional source dominance and commercial pressures over ethical standards. From a social responsibility perspective, these tonal patterns constitute a democratic deficit in migration governance: media narratives that systematically obscure structural drivers and marginalise migrant perspectives fail the public's legitimate need for contextually adequate information on which to base democratic judgements about migration policy.

Conclusion

This paper has developed an integrated multi-theoretical framework for examining newspaper coverage of irregular migration in Nigeria between 2020 and May 2023, and has presented empirical findings derived from the systematic content analysis of 362 articles across The Punch, The Guardian, and The Sun. The findings confirm that Nigerian newspaper coverage

of irregular migration is characterised by systematic editorial marginalisation, episodic crisis-driven framing, institutional source hierarchies, and predominantly negative tonal orientations. These patterns are not neutral journalistic outcomes but structured products of the political economy of Nigerian print media, the agenda-building advantages of resource-rich institutional actors, the gatekeeping logics of commercial newsrooms, and the normative insufficiencies of professional journalism practice in a context of resource constraint.

The theoretical identification of the 'Japa' frame as a culturally specific analytical category constitutes the paper's most significant contribution to the broader framing literature: it demonstrates that Global South media systems generate contextually specific frames that require original theoretical accommodation rather than mere adaptation of Western typologies.

Future research should extend this framework to digital and online editions, incorporate audience reception analysis to examine how dominant frames influence public attitudes and migration policy preferences, and pursue comparative theoretical studies across other West African media systems.

Recommendations

1. Nigerian newspapers should establish dedicated migration reporting beats, staffed by journalists trained in rights-based reporting frameworks consistent with IOM (2018) and Ethical Journalism Network (2015) guidelines, to overcome the structural episodic dominance produced by resource-constrained general assignment practices.
2. Editorial leadership should develop and enforce institutional policies promoting thematic, context-rich coverage of irregular migration, deliberately counteracting the commercial

and gatekeeping pressures that systematically privilege crisis episodic narratives over structural analysis.

3. Source diversification must be treated as an editorial priority: systematic efforts to incorporate migrant voices, returnee testimonies, civil society perspectives, and academic analysis would reduce the epistemic dominance of official and institutional sources that currently distort the public framing of migration.
4. Terminology standards should be formally adopted in newsroom style guides, replacing criminalising language ('illegal migrants,' 'human cargo') with internationally recognised neutral terms ('irregular migrants,' 'undocumented migrants'), thereby fulfilling the press's social responsibility obligation to respect human dignity.
5. NAPTIP, the Nigeria Immigration Service, and international organisations such as IOM and UNHCR should invest in sustainable media capacity-building programmes that embed ethical migration reporting competencies within Nigerian newsrooms, moving beyond short-term training events toward structural partnerships that diversify information subsidies.
6. Policymakers and journalism educators should recognise that the media's role in migration governance is constitutive, not merely reflective: the normative environment within which migration policy is debated is shaped by journalistic framing practices, and improvements in coverage quality carry direct consequences for democratic deliberation and the welfare of millions of Nigerians whose lives intersect with irregular migration.

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