

Newspaper Coverage of Irregular Migration in Nigeria: A Content Analytic Study of The Punch, The Guardian, and The Sun (2020-2023)

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Abstract: *This study examined how three leading Nigerian newspapers, namely The Punch, The Guardian, and The Sun, covered irregular migration between January 2020 and May 2023. Anchored in agenda-setting, framing, agenda-building, gatekeeping, and social responsibility theories, the study employed a quantitative content analysis design. A sample of 362 articles was drawn from a population of 3,741 newspaper editions using the Taro Yamane formula and a stratified random sampling technique, with strata defined by newspaper and time period. A structured coding sheet was used to capture data on frequency and prominence, dominant frames, sources of information, and tone and slant of coverage. Findings showed that migration coverage was numerically sustained but spatially marginal, with only 13.3% of articles placed on front pages and 79.8% confined to inside pages. Episodic framing (74.0%) considerably outweighed thematic framing (26.0%), while the security (27.1%), humanitarian (23.5%), and criminal justice (21.0%) frames jointly accounted for 71.6% of coverage. Government agencies and international organisations supplied 49.5% of all cited sources, whereas migrants and returnees accounted for only 7.8%, indicating a pronounced source hierarchy. Negative tone characterised 48.6% of articles, migrants were portrayed as victims in 54.7% of reports, and stigmatising terminology appeared in 39.5% of articles despite explicit guidance from international ethical bodies. The Guardian consistently demonstrated more balanced and ethically grounded reporting than The Punch and The Sun. The study concludes that Nigerian newspapers privilege institutional voices and episodic drama over sustained, contextualised, and migrant-centred reporting, with implications for journalism practice, media policy, and migration governance in the Global South.*

Keywords: irregular migration, newspaper coverage, content analysis, framing, agenda-setting, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Newspapers occupy a structurally strategic position in the construction of social reality. Rather than functioning as neutral conduits of information, they exercise gatekeeping authority, set public agendas, construct interpretive frames, and shape policy discourse (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda-setting theory holds that the frequency and prominence with which issues appear in the press influence public perceptions of their importance, while second-level agenda-setting demonstrates that the media shape not only what audiences think about but also how they think about it (McCombs et al., 1997). Framing theory complements this perspective by explaining how media texts define problems, diagnose causes, render moral judgements, and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993).

Migration, and irregular migration in particular, is a domain in which this media power is especially consequential. Empirical research across Europe and North America has demonstrated that sustained media emphasis on securitisation and criminality correlates with restrictive migration attitudes, whereas humanitarian framing is associated with heightened empathy and rights-based discourse (Benson, 2013; Eberl et al., 2018). In Nigeria, structural conditions including commercialisation pressures, ownership interests, and shrinking newsroom resources may mediate how a complex phenomenon such as irregular migration is represented (Oso, 2012). Between 2020 and May 2023, migration discourse gained heightened visibility in Nigeria, propelled by the socio-economic disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising youth unemployment, intensified anti-trafficking campaigns, and the popularisation of the colloquial term “Japa” to describe the emigration of young professionals.

Despite this heightened salience, there remains limited longitudinal, theoretically grounded empirical evidence on how Nigerian newspapers covered irregular migration during this period. Existing Nigerian studies on media and migration tend to be short term, event based, or descriptive, and rarely measure issue frequency, framing, source diversity, and ethical compliance within a single, integrated framework (Chukwu, 2017; Mbaka & Nwaolikpe, 2020). This paper addresses that gap by reporting the empirical findings of a systematic content analysis of *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, and *The Sun* between January 2020 and May 2023, focused on four research questions concerning frequency and prominence, dominant frames, sources of information, and tone and slant of coverage.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on five complementary theoretical perspectives. Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) underpins the analysis of frequency and prominence, on the assumption that the volume and placement of coverage shape the perceived importance of an issue. Agenda-building theory (Cobb & Elder, 1971) explains how the media agenda itself is constructed through the interaction of journalists, sources, and institutional actors, and informs the analysis of source

patterns. Gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) accounts for the editorial selection processes that determine which migration stories are pursued and how prominently they are displayed. Framing theory (Entman, 1993), together with Iyengar's (1991) distinction between episodic and thematic framing, provides the analytical lens for identifying dominant frames. Finally, social responsibility theory (Hutchins Commission, 1947; McQuail, 2010) supplies the normative standard against which the ethical performance of the press, including tone, source diversity, and terminology, is evaluated.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative content analysis design, which permitted systematic and objective examination of manifest content, such as headlines, frequency, and placement, as well as latent dimensions, such as frames and tone, within newspaper texts (Krippendorff, 2018). This design aligned with the study's objective of assessing both explicit and underlying patterns in newspaper coverage of irregular migration.

Population and Sample

The population comprised all editions of The Punch, The Guardian, and The Sun published between 1 January 2020 and 31 May 2023, a period of 1,247 days. As each newspaper produced one edition per day, the population consisted of 3,741 newspaper editions (1,247 days × 3 newspapers). The Taro Yamane formula was applied to determine an appropriate sample size at a 5% margin of error and a 95% confidence level:

$$n = N / [1 + N(e)^2] = 3,741 / [1 + 3,741(0.05)^2] = 3,741 / 10.3525 \approx 361.4$$

Rounded up, this yielded a final sample of 362 articles, statistically adequate to represent the population within the specified margin of error.

Sampling Technique and Procedure

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure balanced representation across newspapers and time periods, thereby reducing sampling error and enabling meaningful comparative analysis. Stratification proceeded at two levels. First, the population was divided into three primary strata corresponding to each newspaper (1,247 editions each). Second, within each newspaper stratum, editions were further stratified by year and month, generating 41 secondary strata per newspaper. The total sample of 362 articles was then allocated proportionally across strata, yielding 121 articles from The Punch, 121 from The Guardian, and 120 from The Sun, distributed at approximately three articles per newspaper per month, with additional articles allocated to specific months to reach the exact totals. Within each monthly stratum, all qualifying articles were identified through manual review of editions and keyword searches of newspaper archives using terms such as "irregular migration," "human trafficking," "smuggling," "deportation," "returnees," and "Japa." Articles meeting the inclusion criteria were then numbered,

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and the required quota was drawn using a random number generator; inaccessible articles were replaced through further random selection within the same stratum.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured coding sheet and accompanying coding guide developed in line with the study's four research objectives. The instrument captured bibliographic information (newspaper, date, article type), and four substantive categories of analysis: (a) frequency and prominence, comprising placement (front, inside, or back page), headline size, presence or absence of photographs, and article length; (b) dominant frames, comprising eight substantive frame categories (security, humanitarian, economic, criminal justice, policy/governance, development, public health, and cultural/social) together with frame orientation (episodic versus thematic); (c) sources of information, comprising eleven source-type categories including government agencies, international organisations, law enforcement, civil society, and migrants/returnees; and (d) tone and slant, comprising overall evaluative tone (positive, negative, neutral), victim-agent portrayal of migrants, and terminology choice ("irregular migration," "illegal migration," or "Japa").

Validity and Reliability

Instrument validity was established through a pilot study in which 15 articles drawn from the three newspapers were coded to confirm the clarity of category definitions and the feasibility of the coding procedure. Reliability was reinforced through structured coder training, joint coding sessions, and double-coding of 10% of the final sample, with discrepancies resolved collaboratively until an acceptable level of inter-coder agreement was achieved.

Method of Data Analysis

Coded data were analysed using descriptive statistics, principally frequencies and percentages, to identify patterns and cross-newspaper variations across the four research questions. Quantitative analysis of manifest content (frequency, placement, source counts) was complemented by interpretive analysis of latent content, including framing patterns, symbolic representation, and ethical dimensions of the reportage, in order to provide a fuller account of how irregular migration was constructed in Nigerian newspaper discourse.

RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings of the content analysis, organised according to the four research questions guiding the study.

Frequency and Prominence of Coverage (Research Question 1)

A total of 362 articles on irregular migration were analysed, distributed almost evenly across the three newspapers: 121 (33.4%) in The Punch, 121 (33.4%) in The Guardian, and 120 (33.2%) in The Sun. Table 1 presents the distribution by year, placement, headline size, and article length.

Table 1. Frequency and prominence of irregular migration coverage, 2020–May 2023 (N = 362)

Indicator	The Punch	The Guardian	The Sun	Total	%
Total articles	121	121	120	362	100.0
2020 (Jan–Dec)	33	32	33	98	27.1
2021 (Jan–Dec)	37	38	37	112	30.9
2022 (Jan–Dec)	36	36	36	108	29.8
2023 (Jan–May)	15	15	14	44	12.2
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
Standard headline	71	72	71	214	59.1
Small headline	38	38	40	116	32.1
Long article (>800 words)	22	28	17	67	18.5
Medium article (300–800 words)	66	64	68	198	54.7
Short article (<300 words)	33	29	35	97	26.8

Coverage was lowest in 2020 (27.1%), coinciding with stringent global mobility restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, before rising in 2021 (30.9%) and remaining broadly stable in 2022 (29.8%). The overwhelming majority of articles (79.8%) were placed on inside pages, with only 13.3% accorded front-page prominence; The Punch (15.7%) and The Guardian (14.9%) gave front-page treatment more often than The Sun (9.2%). Banner headlines were used in only 8.8% of articles, and 48.3% of articles were published without an accompanying photograph. Medium-length articles (300–800 words) predominated (54.7%), while long, investigative articles exceeding 800 words constituted only 18.5% of coverage.

Table 2. Dominant frames in irregular migration coverage (N = 362)**Dominant Frames in Coverage (Research Question 2)**

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
Cultural/social	6	6	6	18	5.0
Development	3	2	2	7	1.9
Public health	2	2	1	5	1.4
Episodic orientation	90	85	93	268	74.0
Thematic orientation	31	36	27	94	26.0

The security frame was the most prevalent (27.1%), followed by the humanitarian (23.5%) and criminal justice (21.0%) frames; together, these three frames accounted for 71.6% of all coverage. The Guardian employed the humanitarian frame considerably more often (30.6%) than The Punch (19.8%) and The Sun (20.0%), whereas The Punch and The Sun relied more heavily on security and criminal justice framing. Episodic framing (74.0%), centred on discrete events such as arrests, deportations, and rescue operations, substantially outweighed thematic framing (26.0%), which addressed structural drivers such as unemployment and governance deficits.

Table 3. Sources of information cited in irregular migration coverage (665 total citations)**Sources of Information (Research Question 3)**

Source type	The Punch	The Guardian	The Sun	Total	%
Government agencies (NAPTIP, NIS, NCFRMI)	63	52	72	187	28.1
International organisations (IOM, UNHCR, ILO)	41	50	51	142	21.4
Government officials	26	21	31	78	11.7
Law enforcement	22	15	27	64	9.6
NGOs/civil society	15	22	19	56	8.4
Migrants/returnees/victims	14	19	19	52	7.8
Academic experts/researchers	9	13	9	31	4.7
Migrants' families/community	6	5	7	18	2.7

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Source type	The Punch	The Guardian	The Sun	Total	%
Foreign governments/diplomats	5	4	6	15	2.3
Religious/traditional leaders	4	3	5	12	1.8
Anonymous sources	3	3	4	10	1.5
Total citations	208	207	250	665	100.0

Government agencies (28.1%) and international organisations (21.4%) were the most frequently cited source categories, and together with government officials (11.7%) and law enforcement (9.6%), institutional actors accounted for 70.8% of all citations. By contrast, migrants and returnees, the principal subjects of the coverage, comprised only 7.8% of citations, and their family members a further 2.7%. Source diversity was constrained overall: 9.4% of articles contained no identifiable source, 30.9% relied on a single source type, and only 27.1% drew on three or more source types. The Guardian demonstrated the greatest source diversity, including higher proportions of citations from international organisations, civil society, and migrants themselves, while The Sun showed the heaviest reliance on a single government source.

Table 4. Tone, portrayal, and terminology in irregular migration coverage (N = 362)
Tone and Slant of Coverage (Research Question 4)

Indicator	The Punch	The Guardian	The Sun	Total	%
Positive tone	15	24	13	52	14.4
Negative tone	63	49	64	176	48.6
Neutral tone	43	48	43	134	37.0
Migrants as victims	65	59	74	198	54.7
Migrants as agents	12	14	8	34	9.4
Mixed victim-agent portrayal	30	32	25	87	24.0
"Irregular migration" (neutral term)	62	68	57	187	51.7
"Illegal migration" (criminalising term)	49	41	53	143	39.5
"Japa" (colloquial term)	10	12	10	32	8.8

Negative tone dominated overall coverage (48.6%), exceeding both neutral (37.0%) and positive (14.4%) tone. The Sun displayed the strongest negative orientation (53.3%), whereas The Guardian recorded the lowest negative tone (40.5%) and the highest positive tone (19.8%). Migrants were portrayed as victims in over half of all articles (54.7%), compared with only 9.4% portraying them as agents exercising deliberate choice, and 24.0% offering a mixed victim-agent portrayal. Regarding terminology, the criminalising label "illegal migration" appeared in 39.5% of articles, most frequently in The Sun (44.2%) and least frequently in The Guardian (33.9%),

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despite explicit guidance from the International Organization for Migration (2018) and the Ethical Journalism Network (2015) discouraging such usage. The neutral term “irregular migration” was nonetheless the most common designation overall (51.7%), and the colloquial term “Japa” appeared in 8.8% of articles, largely within feature stories and opinion pieces.

Discussion

The findings offer several insights into how the Nigerian press constructed irregular migration as a public issue between 2020 and May 2023. First, in relation to frequency and prominence, the sustained volume of coverage (362 articles) did not translate into high editorial prominence: the marginal proportion of front-page placements (13.3%) and banner headlines (8.8%) suggests that, consistent with the marginalisation thesis advanced by Chukwu (2017) and Mwantok and Godwin (2019), Nigerian newspapers have not treated irregular migration as a consistently high-salience issue. From an agenda-setting perspective (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), this pattern of modest prominence may dampen public perception of migration as an urgent policy concern, even as the underlying phenomenon intensified.

Second, the dominance of episodic framing (74.0%) over thematic framing (26.0%) indicates that Nigerian newspapers tend to present irregular migration as a sequence of discrete incidents, such as arrests, rescues, and deportations, rather than as a structurally embedded socio-economic phenomenon (Iyengar, 1991). The joint prevalence of the security and criminal justice frames (48.1% of coverage) reinforces a discourse of threat, control, and enforcement, while the comparative rarity of economic and policy/governance frames (11.3% and 8.8% respectively) suggests limited engagement with the structural drivers of migration, such as unemployment and governance failure.

Third, the marked hierarchy of sources, with government agencies and international organisations supplying 49.5% of citations against just 7.8% for migrants and returnees themselves, empirically substantiates the source-hierarchy thesis advanced by Gans (1979) and the “primary definers” concept of Hall et al. (1978). Institutional actors possess the communication infrastructure to supply journalists with low-cost, ready-made “information subsidies” (Gandy, 1982), whereas migrants lack comparable access to newsrooms. This pattern is consistent with the regional findings of Ridgeway and UNESCO (2023) on migration reporting across West and Central Africa, and indicates that those most directly affected by migration policy are systematically excluded from shaping its public narrative (Couldry, 2010).

Fourth, the predominance of negative tone (48.6%) and victim-centred portrayal (54.7%) aligns with Van Dijk’s (2006) concept of the “ideological square,” whereby media discourse emphasises negative out-group attributes while downplaying positive ones. The continued use of the criminalising term “illegal migration” in nearly four out of ten articles, notwithstanding explicit international guidance against such usage (International Organization for Migration, 2018; Ethical Journalism Network, 2015), points to a gap between normative journalistic standards and routine

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newsroom practice. Cross-newspaper comparison consistently positioned The Guardian as the most ethically balanced outlet, with the lowest negative tone, the highest migrant-voice inclusion, and the lowest use of stigmatising language, suggesting that more responsible migration reporting is achievable within the Nigerian context given sufficient editorial commitment (Ajetunmobi, 2023).

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Nigerian press functions less as a platform for migrant voice than as a mirror of institutional anxiety, prioritising state-defined narratives of security and enforcement over migrant-centred, contextualised analysis. This pattern carries implications for media policy, journalism training, and the broader governance of migration in Nigeria and comparable Global South contexts.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has provided systematic empirical evidence on how three leading Nigerian newspapers covered irregular migration between 2020 and May 2023. The findings demonstrate that, despite a sustained volume of reporting, coverage was characterised by limited front-page prominence, overwhelming episodic framing, a pronounced hierarchy of institutional sources, and a predominantly negative, victim-centred tone that retained substantial use of stigmatising terminology. These patterns indicate that Nigerian newspapers, while fulfilling a basic informational function, have yet to fully discharge the contextualised, balanced, and ethically grounded reporting envisaged by social responsibility theory (Hutchins Commission, 1947; McQuail, 2010).

The study contributes to comparative media and migration scholarship by extending established agenda-setting, framing, and source-hierarchy frameworks, developed primarily in European and North American contexts, to a Global South country of migrant origin. Practically, the findings suggest that newsroom editors should adopt process-centred rather than purely event-centred reporting strategies, actively cultivate migrant and returnee sources as expert witnesses, formally retire stigmatising terminology in favour of guidance issued by the International Organization for Migration and the Ethical Journalism Network, and invest in specialised migration-reporting training. Future research could usefully extend this analysis to broadcast and digital-native outlets, incorporate newsroom interviews to explain observed patterns, and examine audience reception of migration coverage in the Nigerian context.

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