



Research Article

Newspaper Cartoon Framing of the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria: A Content Analysis of Selected National Dailies

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

Cartoons are humorous illustrations that communicate serious societal issues through caricature and satire. This study examined newspaper cartoon framing of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, focusing on four national dailies: Daily Sun, Vanguard, The Guardian and Punch. Anchored on agenda-setting, social responsibility and framing theories, the study adopted the content analysis method to investigate the frequency, direction, dominant frames and prominence of placement of cartoons depicting the three leading candidates: Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress, Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party, and Peter Obi of the Labour Party. Using the composite week sampling technique, 252 editions were drawn from a population of 1,096 editions published between July 2022 and March 2023, and analysed with a validated coding sheet and coding guide that returned an inter-coder reliability coefficient of 0.78. Findings show that only 44 cartoon items appeared across the sampled editions, indicating a generally low frequency of cartoon usage, with Tinubu attracting the highest share (52%) of cartoon coverage. The overall direction of the cartoons was predominantly unfavourable (68%), while corruption (32%) and fake promises (23%) emerged as the dominant frames. Most cartoons (64%) were placed on editorial pages rather than front or back pages. The study concludes that Nigerian newspapers under-utilise cartoons as a tool of political communication and recommends that editors increase the frequency and front-page prominence of political cartoons, and that political actors address the corruption and unfulfilled promises that dominate public perception of Nigerian elections.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Newspapers remain one of the most enduring channels through which the mass media disseminate information, set the public agenda and hold power to account (Asemah, 2011). Beyond straight news reports, feature stories and editorial comments, newspapers also communicate through cartoons: humorous caricatures that satirise public issues while telling readers what happened and what is happening (Nwabueze, Igboeli, & Ubah, 2017). Webster (2010) defines the newspaper cartoon as a drawing, usually in the form of caricature, carrying satirical, humorous or witty comments that discuss topical, often political, issues. Because cartoons compress complex political realities into a single striking image, the manner in which a cartoonist frames a candidate or an issue, whether favourably, unfavourably or neutrally, can shape how readers interpret that candidate or issue (Liabwuk, Barde, Muhammad, & Sidi, 2019)..

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election, held on 25 February 2023, was one of the most keenly contested in the country's Fourth Republic, featuring Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP), candidates drawn from different regional, ethnic and religious backgrounds. The election was notable for the emergence of Peter Obi's Labour Party candidacy as a credible third force, breaking, at least in terms of public enthusiasm and social media mobilisation, the duopoly the APC and PDP had held over Nigerian presidential politics since 1999, and for the unusually high level of youth engagement the contest generated both online and offline. Given that newspaper

ownership, regional spread and political affiliation can influence how a medium frames a story (Asemah, 2011), it becomes pertinent to examine whether and how Nigeria's leading national dailies used cartoons to frame the leading candidates in that election.

While several studies have examined the use of cartoons on newspapers generally and their influence on audiences (Nwabueze, Igboeli, & Ubah, 2017; Ezegwu, Ntewung, Nwodu, & Nengi, 2022), comparatively little empirical attention has been paid to how ownership, regional spread and political affiliation of Nigerian newspapers shape the framing of election cartoons. This study addresses that gap by examining cartoon framing of the three leading candidates in the 2023 presidential election across four national dailies: Daily Sun, Vanguard, The Guardian and Punch.

Beyond their entertainment value, political cartoons occupy a curious space in journalism: they are simultaneously opinion and news, art and argument. A single frame can compress an entire editorial position into an image that a reader absorbs in seconds, often more memorably than a lengthy column would be absorbed. This economy of meaning is precisely what makes cartoon framing worth studying empirically rather than simply assuming it is neutral decoration. If, as agenda-setting theory suggests, the volume and prominence the press accords an issue signals its importance to the public, then cartoons, as a distinct and highly visible content type, deserve to be examined with the same analytical rigour applied to straight news coverage.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The central function of the mass media, and of newspapers in particular, is to provide the public with information on which to base rational decisions (Asemah, 2011). Newspapers discharge this function through several formats, straight news, features, editorial comments, and cartoons, each carrying its own persuasive weight. Existing studies on Nigerian newspaper cartoons have examined their use in relation to health crises, farmer-herder conflict and civil unrest (Nwabueze, Igboeli, & Ubah, 2017; Nwabueze, Ikegbunam, & Obiakor, 2019; Ezegwu, Ntewung, Nwodu, & Nengi, 2022), yet the question of how ownership, regional spread and political affiliation of the press shape cartoon framing of presidential candidates during a keenly contested national election has received little sustained empirical attention. This is a significant gap: the 2023 election was unusually competitive, featured candidates with sharply distinct regional and religious bases, and generated an unusually intense volume of political commentary across all media formats. It is against this backdrop that the present study interrogates the frequency, direction, dominant frames and prominence of placement with which Daily Sun, Vanguard, The Guardian and Punch newspapers presented cartoons of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi.

2.0 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objective of this study was to assess the cartoon framing of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria by Daily Sun, Vanguard, The Guardian and Punch newspapers. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Determine the frequency of cartoon presentation on the 2023 presidential

election in the national dailies.

2. Ascertain the direction of the cartoons on the 2023 presidential election in the national dailies.
3. Examine the dominant frames used in communicating the 2023 presidential election in the national dailies.
4. Ascertain the prominence of placement of the cartoons on the 2023 presidential election in the national dailies.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on three complementary theories: agenda-setting theory, social responsibility theory, and framing theory. Each addresses a different dimension of how newspapers use cartoons to shape public perception of political candidates, and together they provide a fuller theoretical account than any single theory could offer alone.

3.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

Propounded by McCombs and Shaw (1972), agenda-setting theory holds that the media may not be able to tell people what to think, but are remarkably successful in telling readers what to think about. The theory suggests that the salience the media accord an issue, through repetition, prominence of placement and volume of coverage, transfers to the salience the public accords that issue (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Cohen, 1963). A cartoon that recurs frequently, or that is placed on a page readers are likely to see, signals to the audience that the candidate or issue depicted is one worth paying attention to. Applied to this study, the frequency and prominence with which the national dailies placed cartoons on the 2023 presidential candidates would indicate the level of

importance the newspapers wanted readers to attach to those candidates and their conduct. Critics of agenda-setting theory note that it says little about why the media choose to emphasise some issues over others, and that establishing a causal, rather than merely correlational, link between media agenda and public agenda remains methodologically difficult (Ngoa, 2012, as cited in the original study). Nonetheless, the theory remains one of the most widely applied frameworks in political communication research and retains clear relevance to a study concerned with the frequency and placement of election cartoons.

3.1.1 Social Responsibility Theory

Social responsibility theory holds that the press, while free from state control, owes a duty to society to be truthful, accurate, fair and accountable in its reportage, serving as a forum for the exchange of ideas rather than a mouthpiece of sectional or partisan interest (Nwabueze, 2022). The theory emerged partly as a corrective to purely libertarian conceptions of press freedom, insisting that freedom must be exercised responsibly and that the press has an obligation to represent the diversity of views in a plural society. This theory is relevant to the study because it provides the normative standard against which the fairness, or lack of it, of cartoon framing of the three candidates across newspapers of different regional and political leanings may be evaluated: if a newspaper's cartoons consistently favour a candidate from its own region of ownership while consistently disavowing rivals, this would suggest a departure from the social responsibility ideal. Critics of the theory point out that it offers no enforcement mechanism beyond the press's own

conscience, relying on voluntary compliance in an industry driven substantially by commercial and political interest; even so, it continues to serve as the aspirational standard against which many media scholars evaluate press performance in developing democracies such as Nigeria.

3.1.3 Framing Theory

Framing theory holds that the manner in which an issue is presented, the words, images and angles selected, shapes how audiences interpret and evaluate that issue (Liabwuk et al., 2019). The theory shares conceptual ground with agenda-setting theory: where agenda-setting is concerned with which issues the media choose to cover, framing is concerned with how those issues are packaged and presented once selected, sometimes described as second-level agenda-setting. Because cartoons rely heavily on caricature, exaggeration and symbolism to make a point, framing theory is particularly suited to explaining how a single cartoon image can predispose readers toward a favourable, unfavourable, or neutral view of a political candidate, and toward particular thematic interpretations such as corruption, incompetence or victimhood. Together, agenda-setting, social responsibility and framing theories provided the theoretical anchor for this study, guiding the examination of how frequently, how favourably, along which thematic frames, and how prominently the sampled newspapers presented cartoons of the three leading candidates in the 2023 presidential election.

4.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Cartoon has been described as a humorous drawing that satirises public figures and

current issues, while framing refers to the placement of an issue within a particular interpretive context that guides how audiences make sense of it (Liabwuk et al., 2019). Applied to newspapers, cartoon framing is the process by which a cartoonist directs readers toward a particular way of perceiving a political figure or event. Prior studies have examined cartoon framing of issues such as the Ebola virus disease (Nwabueze, Igboeli, & Ubah, 2017), the EndSARS protest (Ezegwu, Ntewung, Nwodu, & Nengi, 2022), and the Fulani herdsmen-farmers crisis (Nwabueze, Ikegbunam, & Obiakor, 2019), generally finding that Nigerian newspapers frame national issues in ways that reflect ownership and regional interest. However, none of these examined cartoon framing of the leading candidates in the 2023 presidential election across newspapers of differing regional ownership, the gap this study addresses.

4.1 Conceptual Review

Cartoon, as used in this study, refers to a humorous drawing or caricature that satirises public figures and current issues while telling a story about what has happened or is happening in society (Nwabueze, Igboeli, & Ubah, 2017). Cartoons may appear with or without accompanying text and still convey their intended meaning through exaggeration, symbolism and visual metaphor. The tradition of editorial cartooning in Nigerian newspapers dates back to the colonial and early independence press, when cartoonists used caricature partly as a way of commenting on sensitive political issues in a form less likely to attract the direct censure that a straightforwardly worded editorial might invite, a tradition that has persisted into the contemporary press even

where formal censorship no longer applies in the same way.

Framing, following Liabwuk et al. (2019), is the process by which communicators, deliberately or otherwise, select and emphasise certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others, thereby guiding how audiences interpret that issue. Cartoon framing, therefore, is the angle or perspective from which a cartoonist depicts a political figure or event, an angle that can be favourable, unfavourable, or neutral, and that can foreground particular themes, such as corruption, competence, or ethnicity, over others. Newspaper, for the purposes of this study, refers to a periodical publication carrying news, commentary and cartoons on a regular (typically daily) basis; the four dailies examined here, Daily Sun, Vanguard, The Guardian and Punch, are among Nigeria's most widely circulated newspapers (Nigerian Finder, 2022).

4.1.2 Empirical Review

A growing body of literature has examined the use and framing of cartoons in the Nigerian and international press. Nwabueze, Igboeli, and Ubah (2017) content-analysed the framing of cartoons on the Ebola virus disease in selected Nigerian dailies and found that the newspapers used cartoons predominantly to sensitise the public on preventive measures, with a generally informational rather than political frame. While that study, like the present one, adopted the content analysis method, it examined a public health issue rather than an electoral contest, and did not consider how newspaper ownership or regional affiliation might shape cartoon framing, a gap the present study addresses.

Nwabueze, Ikegbunam, and Obiakor (2019) examined the framing of cartoons on the Fulani herdsman-farmers' crisis in Benue State across Daily Trust, Leadership, Punch and Vanguard newspapers, finding that the crisis was predominantly framed using violence and ethnic conflict frames, with the newspapers' regional bases appearing to influence the sympathy extended to different parties in the conflict. This finding lends indirect support to the present study's expectation that ownership and regional spread may shape how newspapers frame political actors, though again the focus was a security crisis rather than an election.

Ezegwu, Ntewung, Nwodu, and Nengi (2022) analysed selected Nigerian newspapers' framing of cartoons on the EndSARS protest and found that political and human rights frames dominated coverage, with the newspapers largely sympathetic to the protesters. Their study, like the present one, relied solely on framing theory as its theoretical anchor, whereas the present study additionally draws on agenda-setting and social responsibility theories, offering a broader theoretical lens for interpreting the findings.

Obiakor and Owuamalam (2023) conducted a comparative analysis of Nigerian print media coverage of the secessionist movements led by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu and Mr. Sunday Igboho, finding a considerably higher frequency of coverage than the present study found for election cartoons, and identifying political framing as the dominant frame. The contrast in frequency between that study and the present one suggests that separatist agitation may attract more sustained cartoon attention from the Nigerian

press than a presidential election does, an observation worth further empirical investigation.

Beyond the Nigeria-specific literature, international scholarship on political cartoon framing offers useful comparative insight. Gilboa (2018), examining how the media frame wars, found that frames emphasising national security and humanitarian concern tend to attract stronger public support for the positions being advocated, an argument that, extended to election coverage, suggests the corruption and fake-promises frames dominant in this study's findings may correspondingly shape public distrust of the candidates so framed. Ugondo (2015) similarly found, in a study of media framing of conflict and terrorism in Nigeria, that the frames the press adopts for a national crisis tend to mirror the specific anxieties most salient to the public at the time of coverage, a pattern this study's findings on corruption and fake promises appear to replicate in the electoral context.

Johnston (2018), writing on the effects of positive versus negative press framing, argued that critical or negative reporting, rather than being merely destructive, can perform a democratic function by challenging dominant political narratives and prompting more nuanced public engagement with complex issues. This perspective offers a useful lens for interpreting the present study's finding that 68% of cartoons framed the candidates unfavourably: rather than reading this finding as evidence of press hostility toward the political class, it may instead reflect the press's watchdog function operating as social responsibility theory would prescribe.

Taken together, the reviewed studies confirm that Nigerian newspapers do use cartoons to frame significant national issues, and that the frames adopted, whether violence, human rights, security, or political frames, tend to track both the newspapers' broader editorial priorities and the anxieties most salient to the public at a given moment. However, none of the reviewed studies specifically examined cartoon framing of the three leading candidates in the 2023 presidential election across newspapers selected for their differing regional bases of ownership. It is this gap in the literature that the present study sets out to fill.

4.1.3 Summary of Literature Review

This review has established that cartoons occupy a distinct and under-examined place in Nigerian newspaper political coverage, that agenda-setting, social responsibility and framing theories together provide a robust lens for analysing cartoon content, and that prior empirical studies, while informative on non-electoral issues, leave open the specific question this study addresses: how did Nigeria's leading national dailies frame cartoons of the three leading presidential candidates during the highly competitive 2023 election. The methodology adopted to answer this question is set out in the section that follows.

5.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the content analysis method, described by Babbie (2013) as the study of recorded human communication such as newspapers, magazines and other media content. Content analysis was chosen over alternative approaches, such as survey or in-depth interview, because the research

questions concerned the manifest characteristics of published cartoon content itself, frequency, direction, frame and placement, rather than audience perceptions of that content, a question content analysis is uniquely suited to answering objectively and systematically (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). The design was chosen for its suitability in systematically and objectively identifying the frequency, direction, frames and placement of cartoons in the sampled newspapers, and for allowing quantifiable comparison across the four newspapers under study.

5.1 Population and Sample size

The population comprised all editions of Daily Sun, Vanguard, The Guardian and Punch newspapers published between 1 July 2022 and 31 March 2023 (nine months), a period spanning the end of party primaries to shortly after the declaration of the presidential election results. The Independent National Electoral Commission had fixed 3 June 2022 as the deadline for the conclusion of party primaries; the study period therefore began on 1 July 2022, by which point cartoons relating to the emerging candidates could reasonably be expected to have begun appearing, and ran through 31 March 2023, a few weeks after the presidential election and the declaration of the president-elect. Across the nine months, July, August, October, December, January and March each contributed 31 days, September and November 30 days each, and February 28 days, giving 274 days per newspaper. Multiplied across the four newspapers, this yielded a population of 1,096 editions, as summarised in Table A.

Newspaper	Jan	Feb	Mar	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Daily Sun	31	28	31	31	31	30	31	30	31	274
Vanguard	31	28	31	31	31	30	31	30	31	274
The Guardian	31	28	31	31	31	30	31	30	31	274
Punch	31	28	31	31	31	30	31	30	31	274

Table A: Population of the study (editions per newspaper, July-2022 March 2023). Source: Researcher's content analysis.

Using the composite week sampling technique, a method found to be superior to simple random and consecutive-day sampling in newspaper content analysis (Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 1993; Luke & Caburnay, 2011), one edition of each day of the week was purposively drawn from each month until all seven days of the week were represented within that month, and the process was replicated across all nine months under study. This produced an average of seven editions per newspaper per month ($7 \text{ days} \times 9 \text{ months} = 63 \text{ composite-week editions per newspaper}$), and, multiplied across the four newspapers, a total sample of 252 editions (63×4). Purposive sampling was applied within this framework: the four newspapers themselves were purposively selected on the basis of national spread, regional readership base, and accessibility to the researcher, rather than drawn at random from the more than fifty newspapers in circulation in Nigeria (Nigerian Finder, 2022).

5.2 Units of Analysis and Content Categories

The unit of analysis was the individual cartoon item relating to any of the three leading presidential candidates found within a sampled edition. Each identified cartoon was coded along four content categories aligned with the study's objectives: frequency (how many cartoon items appeared per candidate, per newspaper, per month), direction (whether the cartoon's portrayal of the candidate was favourable, unfavourable, or neutral), frame (the dominant theme the cartoon foregrounded, categorised as corruption, election manipulation, fake promises, hardship, or people's mandate), and prominence of placement (whether the cartoon appeared on the front page, back page, editorial page, or an inside page). These categories were derived from a review of comparable studies (Nwabueze, Igboeli, & Ubah, 2017; Nwabueze, Ikegbunam, & Obiakor, 2019) and refined for the specific context of the 2023 presidential election.

5.3 Instrumentation, Validity and Reliability

Data were collected using a coding sheet and coding guide capturing the newspaper, month, day, and four content categories aligned to the study's objectives: frequency, direction (favourable, unfavourable, neutral), frame (corruption, election manipulation, fake promises, hardship, people's mandate), and prominence of placement (front page, back page, editorial page, inside page). Operationally, a cartoon was coded as favourable where the caricature depicted the candidate in a complimentary light or associated the candidate with positive attributes such as competence or popularity; unfavourable where the caricature ridiculed, mocked, or associated the candidate with negative attributes such as corruption or incompetence; and neutral where the cartoon merely depicted an event or statement involving the candidate without a discernible evaluative slant. Similarly, the frame categories were operationalised from a close reading of the cartoons in a pilot sample of ten editions drawn outside the main study period, from which the five recurring themes, corruption, election manipulation, fake promises, hardship and people's mandate, were derived inductively before being applied deductively to the full sample. The instrument was validated by the researcher's supervisors and an external reviewer drawn from a university in a different geopolitical zone to strengthen content validity, in line with the recommendation that content-analytic instruments be reviewed by scholars independent of the primary research team (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Two independent coders, trained on the coding guide using the pilot sample, then coded the full sample of 252 editions separately. Inter-

coder reliability, computed using Wimmer and Dominick's (2011) coefficient formula ($R = 2M / [N1 + N2]$), where M represents the number of coding decisions on which the two coders agreed and N1 and N2 represent the total number of coding decisions made by each coder respectively, returned a value of 0.78, indicating an acceptable level of agreement between coders and lending confidence to the reliability of the reported findings.

5.4 Method of Data Analysis

Data generated from the coding exercise were analysed using simple frequency counts, percentages and pie charts, presented in line with the four research questions guiding the study. Descriptive statistics were considered adequate for the study's purpose since the objectives were concerned with describing patterns of frequency, direction, framing and placement rather than testing hypothesised relationships between variables. Data were organised into contingency tables cross-tabulating each content category against the four newspapers, allowing both within-newspaper and across-newspaper comparisons.

5.5 Results and Discussion

Out of the 252 sampled editions, a total of 44 cartoon items relating to the 2023 presidential election were identified across the four newspapers: Daily Sun (7), Vanguard (18), The Guardian (11) and Punch (8).

Frequency and Distribution of Cartoons

Table 1 presents the distribution of cartoons by candidate and newspaper.

Candidate	Daily Sun	Vanguard	The Guardian	Punch	Total	%
Atiku Abubakar	1	4	2	2	9	21%
Bola Tinubu	3	9	7	4	23	52%
Peter Obi	3	5	2	2	12	27%
Total	7	18	11	8	44	100%

Source: Researcher's content analysis.

Cartoons of Bola Tinubu dominated coverage (52%), followed by Peter Obi (27%) and Atiku Abubakar (21%). Vanguard alone accounted for 18 of the 44 items (41%), suggesting a comparatively higher appetite for cartoon-based political commentary than its peers, while Daily Sun, despite its Southeast readership base, one that might be expected to devote more attention to Peter Obi as the region's candidate, published the fewest cartoons overall (7). This finding is worth pausing on: it complicates any simple assumption that a newspaper's cartoon output will straightforwardly favour, in either volume or tone, the candidate from its own region of readership. Overall, only 44 items emerged from 252 sampled editions, an

indication that the frequency of cartoon usage by Nigerian dailies in covering a major national election remains low, corroborating Ekeli's (2008) broader observation regarding the underutilisation of illustrative journalism in Nigeria's press. The comparatively higher volume of cartoons devoted to Tinubu may reflect his status as the eventual winner and sitting-party candidate, a position that tends to attract more sustained media scrutiny regardless of a newspaper's regional base.

Direction of the Cartoons

Table 2 shows the direction, favourable, unfavourable or neutral, of the sampled cartoons.

Direction	Daily Sun	Vanguard	The Guardian	Punch	Total	%
Favourable	1	2	1	1	5	11%
Unfavourable	5	13	8	4	30	68%
Neutral	1	3	2	3	9	21%
Total	7	18	11	8	44	100%

Source: Researcher's content analysis.

The majority of cartoons (68%) framed the candidates unfavourably, against 21% neutral and 11% favourable. This finding suggests that Nigerian newspaper cartoonists leaned more toward critical, watchdog-style commentary than toward promotional coverage of the leading candidates, a pattern consistent with Johnston's (2018) observation that critical or negative framing can challenge dominant political narratives and encourage more nuanced public scrutiny of political actors. This predominance of unfavourable framing is broadly consistent with the watchdog function that social responsibility theory expects of the press: rather than functioning as a promotional

platform for any single candidate, the cartoonists across all four newspapers appear to have used caricature chiefly as a tool of critique. At the same time, the near-total absence of a single newspaper skewing heavily favourable toward its regionally-aligned candidate suggests that, at least at the level of cartoon direction, the sampled newspapers exercised a degree of restraint that runs somewhat counter to fears that ownership and regional affiliation would produce blatantly partisan cartoon coverage.

Dominant Frames

Table 3 presents the frames identified in the cartoons.

Frame	Daily Sun	Vanguard	The Guardian	Punch	Total	%
Corruption	2	5	5	2	14	32%
Fake Promises	0	3	6	1	10	23%
Election Manipulation	2	5	0	1	8	18%
Hardship	1	4	0	3	8	18%
People's Mandate	2	1	0	1	4	9%
Total	7	18	11	8	44	100%

Source: Researcher's content analysis.

Corruption (32%) emerged as the dominant frame, followed by fake promises (23%), with election manipulation and hardship tied at 18% each, and people's mandate the least prevalent (9%). This mirrors the finding of Obiakor and Owuamalam (2023), who identified political framing as dominant in their comparative study of Nigerian press

coverage of separatist movements, and lends support to Gilboa's (2018) and Ugondo's (2015) argument that the frames newspapers adopt for a national issue tend to reflect the most pressing public concerns of the period, in this case, endemic corruption and distrust of campaign promises in Nigerian politics.

Prominence of Placement

Table 4 shows where the cartoons were placed within the newspapers.

Placement	Daily Sun	Vanguard	The Guardian	Punch	Total	%
Front page	0	1	0	0	1	2%
Inside page	6	2	0	6	14	32%
Back page	0	1	0	0	1	2%
Editorial page	1	14	11	2	28	64%
Total	7	18	11	8	44	100%

Source: Researcher's content analysis.

Most cartoons (64%) appeared on editorial pages, consistent with the agenda-setting assumption that placement on pages associated with opinion and analysis signals an issue's importance to the newspaper's editorial stance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Anaeto, Onabanjo, & Osifeso, 2008). Front-page and back-page placements were negligible (2% each), suggesting that while editors valued cartoons as commentary, they did not consider them prominent enough for the most visible pages of the newspaper. This pattern has implications for reach: readers who skim only the front page, arguably the majority of casual newspaper buyers, are unlikely to encounter the bulk of the cartoon commentary this study identified. The concentration of cartoons on editorial pages may therefore limit the agenda-setting potential of this content type, since editorial pages tend to be read more deliberately and by a narrower, more politically engaged segment of the readership than front pages are.

5.6 Discussion of Findings

Read together, the four findings paint a coherent picture of how Nigeria's national

dailies used cartoons in covering the 2023 presidential election. First, the low overall frequency (44 items across 252 editions) indicates that cartoons remained a marginal rather than central tool of election coverage, despite their demonstrated capacity, established in prior studies of health and security issues (Nwabueze, Igboeli, & Ubah, 2017; Nwabueze, Ikegbunam, & Obiakor, 2019), to communicate complex social realities accessibly. Second, the predominantly unfavourable direction (68%) suggests that where cartoonists did engage with the election, they did so chiefly in a critical register, positioning the press in its traditional watchdog role rather than as a promotional vehicle for any candidate. Third, the dominance of the corruption frame (32%), followed by fake promises (23%), signals that Nigerian cartoonists, much like the electorate they served, remained preoccupied with questions of integrity and credibility in political leadership rather than with policy substance, ethnicity, or security concerns, frames that might have been expected given Nigeria's well-documented ethno-religious fault lines. Fourth, the

concentration of cartoons on editorial pages (64%) rather than front pages suggests a missed opportunity: cartoons capable of distilling complex political critique into an immediately graspable image were, for the most part, confined to a page segment less likely to be seen by casual readers.

These findings should be read against the theoretical framework guiding the study. Agenda-setting theory would predict that low frequency and modest front-page placement translate into a comparatively limited role for cartoons, relative to straight news coverage, in shaping public perception of the 2023 candidates. Social responsibility theory finds partial support in the predominantly critical but not overtly one-sided direction of the cartoons, suggesting the sampled newspapers exercised a measure of the fairness the theory prescribes, even if imperfectly. Framing theory is borne out most clearly in the corruption and fake-promises frames that dominated the sample, themes that speak directly to the credibility crisis besetting Nigerian political discourse and that likely shaped how readers who did encounter these cartoons interpreted the candidates' fitness for office.

It is also worth situating these findings within the broader climate of the 2023 election, a contest conducted amid widespread public frustration over fuel scarcity, a controversial currency redesign policy, and long-standing grievances over insecurity and economic hardship. That corruption and fake promises, rather than security or ethnicity, emerged as the dominant cartoon frames suggests that Nigerian newspaper cartoonists, whatever their outlets' regional base, converged on integrity and credibility as the lens through

which the electorate was invited to judge the three leading candidates, a convergence that may itself be read as evidence of a shared professional news judgement across an otherwise regionally and commercially diverse national press.

5.7 Implications of the Study

The findings carry implications for theory, practice and policy. Theoretically, the study extends agenda-setting and framing scholarship into a content type, the political cartoon, that remains comparatively under-theorised relative to straight news and editorial commentary, demonstrating that these frameworks travel well beyond text-based content to explain how a single caricatured image can carry agenda-setting and framing weight. The study also nuances social responsibility theory's application to the Nigerian press: rather than finding blatant partisan skew tied to newspaper ownership, the data suggest a more complicated picture in which critical, watchdog-style framing predominated across all four newspapers regardless of their differing regional bases, indicating that Nigerian newspaper cartoonists may exercise a form of professional restraint not always evident in straight political reportage.

For practice, the findings suggest that Nigerian newspaper editors are not yet making full use of the cartoon format's persuasive economy in election coverage; a format capable of distilling complex political argument into a single memorable image was used sparingly and was rarely accorded front-page prominence. For policy, the dominance of the corruption and fake-promises frames offers civil society organisations, election observers and media literacy advocates a data-

driven basis for public conversations about the specific credibility concerns that recur in how the Nigerian press, at least through the medium of cartoons, evaluates presidential candidates. These implications collectively suggest that cartoon content, though currently underused, represents an underexploited resource for both newsroom practice and civic media literacy efforts around future Nigerian elections, one that editors, journalism trainers and election-monitoring bodies alike may wish to invest greater attention in developing.

5.8 Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to Nigerian media scholarship in at least three ways. First, it extends cartoon-framing research, previously concentrated on health crises, farmer-herder conflict and civil unrest (Nwabueze, Igboeli, & Ubah, 2017; Nwabueze, Ikegbunam, & Obiakor, 2019; Ezegwu, Ntewung, Nwodu, & Nengi, 2022), into the specific domain of a keenly contested presidential election, an event type with its own distinctive dynamics of candidate rivalry, regional loyalty and campaign messaging that earlier cartoon studies did not directly address. Second, it offers an empirically grounded four-newspaper comparison, Daily Sun, Vanguard, The Guardian and Punch, selected specifically for their differing regional readership bases, providing a dataset against which claims about regional or ownership-driven bias in Nigerian cartoon coverage can be tested rather than merely assumed. Third, by combining agenda-setting, social responsibility and framing theories within a single analytical frame, the study demonstrates that these three theories, often applied separately in Nigerian media scholarship, can be productively integrated to explain not just whether the press covers an issue, but how prominently, how favourably,

and along which thematic lines that coverage unfolds.

The dataset and coding instrument developed for this study, comprising the composite-week sample of 252 editions and the four-category coding scheme (frequency, direction, frame, and placement), also offer a replicable template that other researchers may adapt to examine cartoon framing in subsequent Nigerian elections, in gubernatorial and legislative contests, or in other countries with similarly plural and regionally segmented press systems.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how four leading Nigerian national dailies, Daily Sun, Vanguard, The Guardian and Punch, framed cartoons of the three leading candidates in the 2023 presidential election. It was motivated by the observation that, despite the well-documented persuasive economy of political cartoons, established across earlier Nigerian studies of health, security and civil-unrest coverage, comparatively little empirical attention had been paid to how the country's press deployed this content type during a keenly contested presidential contest. The findings show a generally low frequency of cartoon usage, a predominantly unfavourable direction toward the candidates, corruption and fake promises as the dominant thematic frames, and a strong preference for editorial-page rather than front-page placement. These findings affirm the relevance of agenda-setting, social responsibility and framing theories in explaining how Nigerian newspapers use cartoons to shape public perception of political candidates and, by extension, of the state of governance in the country.

6.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from these findings, the study recommends that:

1. Nigerian newspapers should increase the frequency with which they deploy cartoons in covering major political events, given the medium's demonstrated capacity to communicate complex political realities in an accessible, engaging form.
2. Editors should consider placing more politically significant cartoons on front pages rather than confining them largely to editorial pages, to maximise reader exposure and engagement.
3. Political actors and parties should address the corruption and unfulfilled campaign promises that dominate the frames through which the press and, by extension, the public view them.
4. Media regulatory and professional bodies should encourage newspaper cartoonists to broaden the thematic range of election cartoons beyond corruption and fake promises, to include policy substance and candidates' developmental track records, so that cartoon commentary contributes a fuller picture of each candidate to the electorate.
5. Further research should extend this line of inquiry to other national dailies, such as Daily Trust, Leadership and This Day, and to broadcast and social media cartoon content, to establish whether similar patterns hold across platforms and in subsequent election cycles.

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