

Coverage of Child Abuse in Online Versions of Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

Children are believed to be the future of a nation necessitating efforts to protect them and ensure the full development of their potentials. Despite these efforts, a major impediment to their existence, child abuse, still has a high prevalence. The media, as the watchdog of the society, are expected to play a pivotal role in promoting efforts to safeguard children. This, the media can do through providing adequate coverage to issues relating to children, advocating for their rights and giving them a voice. This study sought to find out whether these responsibilities are being adequately carried out by the online versions of three Nigerian newspapers, the *Daily Trust's* www.dailytrust.com; the *Daily Sun's* www.sunnewsonline.com; and *The Nation's* www.thenationonline.net. The researchers used content analysis to ascertain frequency of child abuse stories, their depths, frames, and tones as well as the prominence given to the stories. The findings from the study, underpinned by the Agenda Setting theory, were that child abuse stories were few with less-than-desired depths but having more of tones considered favourable to the interest of abuse victims and frames that tend towards advocacy. The overall impression is that more efforts need to be made by online newspapers to further ethically highlight the abuse of children by giving increased coverage to abuse stories, projecting them in the right frames and further improving on the existing advocacy skills of their reporters and online editors.

Keywords: Child Abuse; Online Newspapers; Media Coverage

Introduction

Children are the future and the treatment meted out to them is often an accurate pointer to the long-term fate of a nation. The world recognised this fact long ago and so came up with numerous legal and material provisions meant to ensure the welfare of children at global, regional and national levels. Nsude (2021) points out some of the legal provisions as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); the African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1999); and the Child Rights Act of Nigeria (2003).

Olusegun and Idowu (2016) note that an instrument like the 1999 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child provides for the protection of children from all forms of torture, inhuman, or degrading treatment, physical, mental or sexual abuse, and neglect or maltreatment. The Nigeria Child Rights Act of 2003, according to them, provides that children must be protected from child marriage or betrothal; tattoos and skin marks; exposure to and use of narcotic drugs; abduction, removal or transfer of the child from lawful custody; child labour; and unlawful sexual intercourse.

However, despite these efforts at various levels to provide a good, meaningful and fulfilling life for children, there are many references to the fact that their plight leaves much to be desired, especially in Nigeria. UNICEF (2022) believes that abuses directed at children are a daily reality in Nigeria; as, for instance, six out of every 10 children experience some form of violence; with one in four girls and 10 per cent of boys experiencing sexual violence. UNICEF (2022) also estimates that Nigeria has more than 23 million child brides and believes that the drivers of violence against children (VAC) are rooted in social norms.

Still on the rate of child abuse in Nigeria, NOIPolls (2017), in partnership with Child Protection Hub Nigeria (CPHub), uncovered a high child abuse prevalence of 92 per cent in Nigeria. In another instance, Ekeanyanwu (2016) reports that the Nigeria Violence Against Children Survey – carried out by the National Population

Commission, with the support of UNICEF and US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – revealed that half of all children in Nigeria experience violence and that four in 10 girls experience sexual violence while one in 10 boys experience sexual violence. UNICEF and other agencies, according to Ekeanyanwu (2016), also revealed that Nigeria has approximately 10 million out of school children; three-quarters of the suicide bombers in the north east are young girls; one in two underage girls are married; about 800,000 children under five years die; while about 12.3 million children suffer from chronic malnutrition, out of which 300,000 are at risk of dying.

Child abuse in Nigeria, as well as other parts of the world, negatively affects the children and some forms of abuse rampant in Nigeria are child marriages, molestation, child labour, kidnapping, and neglect (Olusegun and Idowu, 2016). It, however, appears that violence against children is more prevalent than all the others as Edeh (2017) quotes UNICEF as insisting that it occurs in all 36 states of Nigeria. In another development, a recent report on the state of Nigerian children launched on May 27, 2022 indicated that 54% of children in Nigeria are facing ‘multi-dimensional poverty’ as they live with at least three deprivations out of seven dimensions of child rights made up of nutrition, healthcare, education, water, sanitation, adequate housing and information (Ezeh, 2022).

In keeping with their watch dog role and to ensure a better future for the nation, Nigerian media organisations are expected to highlight the abuses and work closely with other agencies to curb them. The media are arbiters of good taste and determinant of what a society considers acceptable behaviour (Vivian, 2014) and so can influence a decrease in child abuse. Nsude (2021) and Nair (2019) are among scholars that believe the media of all genres should actively work to lower the prevalence of child abuse by giving it copious, quality, ethics-compliant and advocacy-framed coverage.

In recent years, the new media have started to enjoy a lot of patronage leading to the widespread migration of media audience and entrepreneurs to online platforms and alternatives (Taylor, n.d.). Many Nigerian newspapers now have online alternatives in the form of websites and research shows these online platforms of newspapers enjoy more patronage than the hard copy versions (Adedina, Adeniyi and Bolaji, 2008; Babaleye, Layefa, and Aletor; Patrick, 2015; Mbachu, 2003; and Hakirkir, 2018). Many Nigerian newspaper organisations just copied content meant for the hard copy and pasted on the websites at the beginning of online activities by Nigerian media organisations. However, as time went on, the newspapers set up online editors and desks charged with creating content for the websites such that they ceased being exact replicas of the hard copies (2022).

Not every story on the hard copy gets moved to the online platform and due to the flexible nature of the world wide web, the online version can accommodate breaking news, be updated within the day and a news item can be pulled down in the course of the day. It follows, therefore, that newspaper organisations might be selective in the content moved to the websites and so pick what they consider the most important content from stories meant for the hard copy. By this, we can infer that the website is a second level determinant of what is important, right after the initial selection process involving what goes into the hard copy version.

Statement of the Problem

Child abuse appears to be an intractable problem globally. International organisations, nations and various states have taken many steps to curb and reduce child abuse by way of legislation, penalties, awareness and creating special events like the International Year of the Child, annual Children’s Day, and Day of the African Child (Nsude, 2021). However, rather than decrease, child abuse appears to be on the increase globally and in Nigeria, necessitating the search for further ways of tackling the problem (Save the Children, 2022). This study is an effort to chip more at the problem through probing media support of the attempts to highlight and fight abuse of children.

Many studies have, however, been carried out both in Nigeria and beyond on media handling of child abuse stories from such angles as framing of stories; prevalence in the news; correlation between media reportage and

prevalence of child abuse; and the impact of news media in child abuse reporting by the public, among others (Uzochukwu, Morah, and Okafor, 2015; Mulugeta, 2014; Ojiakor, Iheanacho, Nkam-Uwaoma, and Dibia, 2019; Saint-Jacques, Villeneuve, Turcotte, Drapeau, and Ivers, 2011; Nwodu and Ezeoke, 2012; Oyero, 2009 and 2010). However, much of the research efforts are on child abuse reportage in traditional media channels like hard copy newspapers, magazines, radio and television. The World Wide Web is a relatively new and rapidly evolving technology which poses peculiar problems to developing countries and so not much research has been carried out in the area of newspaper websites' content on child abuse, especially in Nigeria. The World Wide Web appears to increasingly be the go-to place for news due to ease of access and affordability in developing countries and so the issue of child abuse will not be on the front burner if it is missing there.

Research Questions

The primary aim of this study was to assess media coverage of child abuse on the websites of three Nigerian newspapers and the specific questions that were addressed are:

1. What is the frequency of child abuse stories on the websites of the selected newspapers?
2. What are the frames used in stories of child abuse on the websites of the selected newspapers?
3. What are the tones of stories on child abuse used on the websites of the selected newspapers?

Literature Review

Child Abuse and Media Coverage

Section 277 of the Child Rights Act of 2003 defines "a child as a person who has not attained the age of eighteen years." Latest demographic data in Nigeria place the population of citizens 0 to 15 years at over 43 per cent of the Nigerian population (Statista, 2022), with no isolated data for the remaining segment from 16 to 17 years. Children are more vulnerable to violence than the rest of the populace because they are physically weaker, dependent, easier to manipulate and often too young and ignorant to understand their experiences (Olusegun and Idowu, 2016).

According to NOIPolls (2017), child abuse can be defined as any action by a parent, guardian, caregiver, any other persons, organisation or institution that causes harm to a child. It could be through deliberate action or failing to act such that a child sustains injury, emotional harm, or is at risk of serious harm or even death. There are many forms of child abuse, including neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, exploitation and emotional abuse (NOIPolls, 2017).

Many laws and policies were put in place with the purpose of protecting children from abuse. However, they have not been effective for many reasons including poor enforcement mechanisms, poverty, corruption, lack of rehabilitation of sexual offenders, negative attitude of parents, and inefficient judicial processes (Olusegun and Idowu, 2016). The Child Rights Act, for instance, has been domesticated in 31 out of 36 states in Nigeria (Emmanuel, 2022) with some states, mostly in northern Nigeria, yet to work on the domestication.

The media have the traditional role of informing, creating awareness and often suggesting solutions to society's ills and so do have a place in the fight to curb child abuse (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2008). The media are not only expected to create social awareness about child abuse through news coverage, analysis and intervention, but also need to place the problem on the political and social agenda (Nair, 2019) even as media representations are regarded as a primary source of information on social problems for many people (Hutson and Liddiard, 1994).

Again, Goddard and Saunders (2001) drew attention to the role of the media in increasing the society's awareness of, and response to, child abuse and neglect and that such media attention can positively influence public opinion and professional and political responses to the circumstances in which children and young people find themselves. However, Döring and Walter (2019) warned that sensationalist, stereotyping or otherwise

biased media coverage of abuse, especially child sexual abuse can harm survivors and is detrimental to rational, solution-oriented public debates on the issue.

Part of the recognition of the media's role in helping to improve the welfare of children was the launching of a call for action, the Oslo Challenge in 1999 as a collaboration between the Norwegian Government and UNICEF while Article 17 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child specifies the role the media should play in the promotion and protection of children's rights, which will contribute in reducing abuse.

Online Newspapers

Newspapers started building and expanding to websites as the internet and digitalisation of communication systems developed further with the Columbus Dispatch being the first to do so on July 1, 1980 (Kurt, 2007). Many did it out of necessity and as a means of survival and maintaining relevance as online news sites and the internet threatened to overwhelm the newspaper print industry (Leksono and Elmada, 2017). The internet and computer revolution easily transformed the mass media and also changed patterns of readership, especially among young people, with a large percentage consuming news products through online channels (Vivian, 2014; Babaleye, Oluwasola, Layefa, and Aletor, 2017); Hakirkir, 2018). Thottam (1999: 217), cited in Babaleye (2017), outlined three principal ways through which the Internet poses a threat to the newspaper industry. These include loss of breaking-news function, declining newspaper readership owing to new technology-based leisure activities and the decline in advertising revenue. Developments in the digital world at a point looked like they will sound the death knell for hard copy newspapers as circulation figures dropped drastically and advertisers went online with readers (Taylor, n.d.). Babaleye *et al.* (2017) cited a 2010 study carried out by the Advertisers Association of Nigeria (ADVAN) across the country, which showed that the daily sales figure of all the newspapers was less than 300,000. Nigerian newspapers, like their counterparts globally, had to also establish online presence by way of websites in order to survive.

With the ascendancy of all things digital, newspaper websites have fast gained popularity globally, with Nigeria not left out. In various recent studies, the consensus is that newspaper websites are more read than hard copy versions (Patrick, 2015 and Hakirkir, 2018). Patrick (2015) noted that online versions of newspapers have some advantages and additional attractions over hard copy versions and these include the possibility of multi-media presentations, hyperlinks and the resultant greater depth.

Empirical Review

A plethora of empirical studies have been done on media coverage of children and child abuse. A study by Uzochukwu, Morah, and Okafor (2015) focused on the media coverage of child related issues, with emphasis on child rights and protection and with a view to investigating the extent the Nigerian broadcast media give prominence to child related issues. In the study, underpinned by the agenda setting theory, the researchers monitored six broadcast stations for a period of three months through content analyses and the results showed that child rights and protection as well as child related issues are not salient in Nigerian broadcast media. This study focused on child abuse issues and not every child related issue like the cited study. Again, this new research analysed content on websites of three newspapers which might also affect results due to the differences between traditional media and the new media where websites belong.

Ojiaikor, Iheanacho, Nkwam-Uwaoma, and Dibia (2019) analysed the manifest media contents of two major Nigerian newspapers, the *Daily Sun* and *Punch* from January to April 2017 with a view to ascertaining the frequency, depth, direction and prominence of coverage of reports on child rights in Nigeria. They based the study on the agenda setting theory. Their findings were that the selected newspapers did not give adequate coverage to child rights abuse issues in Nigeria and also failed to give prominence to the stories reported as almost all were buried in the inside pages. The present study differs in just the area of exploring new media components of newspapers in the form of websites rather than the hard copy versions.

Oyero (2009), in a study that spanned five years (1999 to 2003) carried out a content analyses of two Nigerian national newspapers (*The Guardian* and *Daily Times*) and two Ghanaian newspapers (*Daily Graphic* and *Daily Guide*) with a view to uncovering the frequency of reportage of children's issues, prominence given to the reports concerning children in terms of newspaper page placements, and people quoted as regards individuals that were contacted as news sources in the report. He anchored the study on the agenda setting theory. His findings showed that the presentation of children by the two countries' newspapers did not deliver the expected understanding of child rights' issues, due to under reportage of children and the discovery that these issues were not given extensive treatment by the media and were rather presented as not newsworthy. A year later, Oyero (2010), in a follow-up study in Nigeria alone, titled: *Children: as Invisible and Voiceless as Ever in the Nigerian News Media* still arrived at the conclusion that children seemed to be invisible in the news media. Oyero's two studies are similar to the present study but differ by the fact that this research focused on the new media versions of three Nigerian newspapers.

Mulugeta (2014) examined the media coverage of child abuse and child prevention with a view to finding out whether the media promote this issue as a vital part of the public agenda. His study was a content analysis of news and programmes of Ethiopian Television Police Program broadcast from January 2009 to January 2012 and the data reveal that the majority of the news items and programmes were not focused on children rights and abuses and the media failed to emphasis child abuse issues. The implication is that the media failed to play their part in placing the issue of child abuse and child protection on the public discourse agenda. The study bears a close resemblance to the present research but focused on the traditional medium of television and on a special television programme by the police while the present research adopted a content analysis of the entire content of newspaper websites which are purely new media options. Mulugeta (2014) studied coverage in Ethiopia but this study focused on child abuse in Nigeria.

In yet another study, Saint-Jacques, Villeneuve, Turcotte, Drapeau, and Ivers, (2011) explored whether media coverage of child maltreatment increases public awareness about this issue and helps individuals realise the need to report such situations. The number of reports made to child protection agencies in the greater Quebec City region (Canada) was tallied each week over a 24-month period. During the same period, a content analysis of the print media was conducted regarding child maltreatment and/or child protection services so as to identify and count the number of articles published and single out media frenzy events. The researchers were able to work out the relation between the number of child abuse reports and the number of published newspaper articles with two tools: a) a statistical correlation approach and b) an intervention time-series analyses. They arrived at two conclusions which were that a statistically significant relationship does indeed exist between media coverage of child welfare agencies and the number of cases reported to child protection agencies and that media frenzy concerning child maltreatment does not show a statistically significant effect on the number of reports made to child protective services. The Canadian study focused on the agenda setting effects of media coverage of child abuse issues while the present study looked at the extent and quality of such coverage, which might possibly determine the extent to which the media dictate subjects of public discourse.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the Agenda setting theory propounded by Maxwell Combs and Donald Shaw in 1972. Agenda setting function is based on the assumption that the media have the ability to determine the issues that are considered important in a society at any given time. This they can do by isolating and giving salience, prominence and priority to certain issues such that they gain a lot of visibility and provoke discussions in the public space.

The Agenda Setting theory has it that media audience members learn about public issues through the media and most often also attach importance to such issues based on the emphasis the media place upon them; they will

also proceed to further examine and discuss the said issues (McQuail, 2005). It also involves the media's ability to control the topics the public perceives as important in that the frequency of coverage and prominence attached to certain issues by the media makes the audience to adopt and believe that the issues are salient in their lives (McLeod, Kosicki, and McLeod, 2009). Severin and Tankard (1997) viewed agenda setting process as the media's capability, through repeated news coverage, of raising the importance of an issue in the public's mind.

Agenda setting, in a clarification by Oyero (2009), is the process whereby the news media lead the public in assigning relative importance to various public issues in a situation where the media agenda influences public agenda not by saying 'this issue is important' in an overt way but by giving more space, and prominence to that issue. Cohen (1963, p. 13) succinctly summarised the theory by noting that the press:

...may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. And it follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors and publishers of the papers they read.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) investigated the correlation between media agenda and public agenda. First, they carried out a content analysis of newspapers and television coverage of the 1968 American presidential election, taking special note of the time and space accorded to various issues. This was set aside as the media agenda. McCombs and Shaw then interviewed 100 undecided voters in the Chapel Hill, North Carolina area and asked them what issues they believed were most important. This public opinion polling was considered as the public agenda. McCombs and Shaw found an incredible correlation as the public agenda was a virtual reflection of the media agenda.

The Agenda setting theory is apt for this study because it examined the frequency and prominence given to child abuse issues by the websites of three Nigerian national newspapers which will directly determine the salience of the issue in the public and the likelihood of it being part of public discourse and policy.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative content analysis method. Content analysis primarily assesses frequency, frames, tones and nuances in coverage. It is appropriate for this study which focused on the quantity, quality and tones of child abuse stories published by the online versions of three Nigerian newspapers the *Daily Trust* (www.dailytrust.com), *Daily Sun* (www.sunnewsonline.com), and *The Nation* (www.thenationonline.net).

The population of the study consists of all contents of the websites of *TheDaily Sun*, *The Nation*, *TheDaily Trust* for three months starting from April 1 to June 30, 2022. The months were chosen to incorporate May, a special month for children, as they are celebrated on the 27th day and policy statements and state of their well-being reports are released and reviewed on the said day. However, for ease of generating and managing of data, the researcher coded on alternating days resulting in the coding of forty-six online editions of each of the three newspapers and the sample size came to 138 editions in the three-month period for the three newspapers. Each member of the sample sub-set was selected on the basis of being a published material on child abuse in Nigeria.

Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis is a published item on child abuse on the online versions of the three newspapers other than advertisements, photographs, videos and podcasts. These were excluded because the depth parameter was in paragraphs. The acceptable items included: news stories, editorials, features, opinions, and special page stories, with all contents in text.

Content Categories

The following content categories featured in the study:

- 1) Source: The sources included the websites of *The Nation* (www.thenationonline.net), the *Daily Sun* (www.sunnewsonline.com), and the *Daily Trust* (www.dailytrust.com).
- 2) Story Type: News stories, Features, Editorials, Opinions, Special Pages Stories.
- 3) Frequency: Number of stories on child abuse.
- 4) Prominence: Breaking News, Front page, Other pages.
- 5) Depth: This was categorised as One to five paragraphs, six to ten paragraphs, eleven or more paragraphs
- 6) Slant/Tone: This was categorised as Favourable (when the story included content that highlights child rights), Not favourable (when the story included content that may reinforce or promote further abuse) and Neutral (when the story neither promotes nor hurts child rights).
- 7) Frames: These include Advocacy (where story content highlights child rights and suggests ways of promoting them), Sensational (when story content emphasises loud, sensational content), and Straight news frame (when story content adopts a news pattern devoid of either sensationalism or advocacy).

Test of Reliability and Validity

Inter-coder reliability was tested using Holsti's inter-coder reliability formula. The formula is:

$$Reliability = \frac{2M}{N1+N2}$$

Where: M= the number of coding decisions which two coders agree.

N1 & N2= the number of coding decisions by the first and second coder respectively.

Results

Frequency and percentage tables, with brief interpretations were used to analyse usable data generated.

Table 1: Frequency of stories on child abuse on the websites of the three newspapers

Newspaper	Number of Stories	Percentage (%)
sunnewsonline.com	14	18.92
thenationonline.net	22	29.73
dailytrust.com	38	51.35
Total	74	100

Table 1 shows the frequency of child abuse stories on the websites of the three newspapers. The website of the *Daily Trust* newspapers —www.dailytrust.com—published the most stories. The *Daily Trust* is strongly aligned to northern Nigeria where there is ongoing insurgency, banditry and terrorism. This may have significantly contributed to the numbers as children were not spared in attacks in the region. Inter-Coder Reliability for the frequency of child abuse stories was 0.96.

Table 2: Story Types on Child Abuse used on the websites of the three newspapers

Story Type	sunnewsonline(%)	thenationonline.net(%)	dailytrust(%)	Total(%)
News	9(64.3)	11(50)	22(57.9)	42(56.8)
Editorial	0(0)	2(9.1)	2(5.3)	4(5.4)
Opinion	2(14.3)	0(0)	1(2.6)	3(4.1)
Special Pages	3(21.4)	8(36.4)	13(34.2)	24(32.4)
Column	0(0)	1(4.5)	0(0)	1(1.3)
Total	14(100)	22(100)	38(100)	74(100)

From Table 2 above, two story types dominate on child abuse on the websites of the three newspapers. The two types are straight news stories and the stories on special pages on the website. The special pages are mainly

those for education and crime news. There were four editorials and two were on a ‘media frenzy’ event, dubbed, “the Dubai Sex Tape Scandal.” The Inter-coder Reliability for Story Types is 0.96.

Table 3: Prominence of child abuse stories on the websites of the three newspapers

Story	sunnewsonline(%)	thenationonlineng(%)	dailytrust(%)	Total
Breaking News	0(0)	1(4.5)	2(5.3)	3(4.1)
Front Page	8(57.1)	13(59.1)	22(57.9)	43(58.1)
Other Pages	6(42.9)	8(36.4)	14(36.8)	28(37.8)
Total	14(100)	22(100)	38(100)	74(100)

Table 3 above shows that out of the 74 stories on child abuse, 46 or 62.2% occupied top positions as either ‘Breaking News’ or front page stories. However, the stories that were prominent were sensational stories or offshoots of terror attacks and insurgency in which children were attacked in northern Nigeria. Examples on www.dailytrust.com include an April 21, 2022 front page story with the headline, “NAF strike kills children, destroy houses in Niger State”; the ‘Breaking News’ of April 9, 2022, with the headline as “Gun men invade residence of Plateau commissioner, abduct wife, daughter”; “Train attack: 41 women, 22 men, 5 kids held by terrorists” on April 11, 2022 and “Gun men abduct housewife, 3 children in Katsina on April 13, 2022.

A media frenzy event involving pupils of Chrisland Schools, Lagos, who had group sex in Dubai that was filmed and released online, also made the front page on all the three websites on April 19, 2022. The implication of placing only sensational media frenzy stories of child abuse on the front page is that only such issues become visible while every day abuse stories go unreported and are not open to discussion or to agenda setting activities. The Inter-coder Reliability for Prominence of stories was 0.92.

Table 4: Depth of child abuse stories on the websites of the three newspapers

Depth (in paragraphs)	sunnewsonline(%)	thenationonlineng(%)	dailytrust(%)	Total(%)
1 to 5	2(14.28)	3(13.64)	5(13.16)	10(13.5)
6 to 10	6(42.86)	9(40.91)	18(47.37)	33(44.6)
Above 10	6(42.86)	10(45.45)	15(39.47)	31(41.9)
Total	14(100)	22(100)	38(100)	74(100)

Table 4 above shows details of space allotted to child abuse stories on the websites of the three newspapers. The internet is notably an impatient medium (Parker-Pope, 2010) and so not much space is allotted to stories such that stories having more than ten paragraphs are considered as having adequate depth. From Table 4, 31 stories (41.9%) occupied significant spaces on the websites. However, a closer look at the coding sheet and proforma showed, for instance, that six out of the ten stories in May with significant depth were from a media frenzy event, the Dubai sex tape scandal. This denotes that importance is only attached to sensational child abuse stories and only those are considered important enough to receive detailed coverage by way of editorials and opinions. The Inter-coder reliability for the depth of stories was 0.98.

Table 5: Frames used in child abuse stories on the websites of the three newspapers

Frames	sunnewsonline(%)	thenationonlineng(%)	dailytrust(%)	Total(%)
Advocacy	10(71.43)	12(54.545)	11(28.95)	33(44.59)
Sensational	1(7.14)	3(13.636)	8(21.05)	12(16.22)
Straight News	3(21.43)	7(31.818)	19(50)	29(39.19)

Total	14(100)	22(100)	38(100)	74(100)
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The advocacy frame dominated as 44.59% of the stories appeared in that frame, from figures on Table 5 above. This is considered a good development since it means that close to half of the stories contained narratives that condemned child abuse or called for measures to contain it. The sensational frame came third at 16.22% and included frames from stories that would qualify as oddities. An example is a www.dailytrust.com story of April 7, 2022 with the headline, “107-year-old woman remanded for plucking boy’s eyes.” The remaining 29 (39.19%) were in straight news frames, signifying that they mainly did not lend themselves to framing in any direction. The Inter-coder Reliability for Frames used was 0.89.

Table 6. Tones used in child abuse stories on the websites of the three newspapers

Tones	sunnewsonline(%)	thenationonlineng(%)	dailytrust(%)	Total(%)
Favourable	8(57.14)	10(46.67)	12(31.58)	30(40.5)
Not Favourable	0(0)	0(0)	2(5.26)	2(2.7)
Neutral	6(42.86)	12(53.33)	24(63.16)	42(56.8)
Total	14(100)	22(100)	38(100)	74(100)

Data from coding as displayed on Table 6 above show that despite the presence of sensational frames and the outbreak of a media frenzy event during the period under study, there were only two stories with unfavourable tones. The stories did not disclose faces or names of child abuse victims except in cases where they were missing and a photograph was needed for the public to assist in the search. The Inter-coder Reliability for Tones of stories was 0.89.

Discussion

The results of the study fit into an already observed trend of low coverage of child abuse not only in Nigeria but also in other countries of the world, especially in the much studied traditional media. The low number of stories, with little depth in all media genres in Nigeria, with a near epidemic of child abuse, seems to be an established trend. Ojiakor, Iheanacho, Nkwam-Uwaoma, and Dibia, (2019) reported low coverage in hard copy Nigerian newspapers while Uzochukwu, Morah, and Okafor (2015) also arrived at the same conclusion on an allied subject, the reportage of child rights and protection issues in the Nigerian broadcast media. Uzochukwu et al. (2015) wrote that the implication was that child rights and protection as well as child related issues are not salient in Nigerian broadcast media despite the important place that children ought to occupy in any nation.

In another African country, Ethiopia, research also showed low coverage of child abuse issues. Mulugeta (2014) found out that in Ethiopia, majority of the television news items and programmes were not focused on children’s rights and abuses and that the media failed to emphasise such issues. The implication is that that the media failed to play their part in placing the issue of child abuse and child protection on the public discourse agenda (Mulugeta, 2014).

Data from this study agree with the findings of other researchers that child abuse issues are not considered important and so are not put at the front burner of national discourse. The only time a child abuse issue received sustained coverage during the period under study was the Dubai sex tape scandal episode and that was because the incident elicited media frenzy. However, media frenzy events are not known to have significant impact as can be seen from a study in Quebec, Canada, where media frenzy concerning child maltreatment did not have a statistically significant effect on the number of reports made to child protection services (Saint-Jacques *et al*, 2011).

Conclusion

The study answered all the research questions on media coverage of child abuse issues on the websites of three

newspapers in Nigeria. It uncovered that child abuse received low coverage and that the stories were shallow, though with favourable tones and mostly advocacy frames.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings, the researcher recommends as follows:

- 1) That media managers should train and encourage online news editors to value and include child abuse stories among the ones posted on the websites.
- 2) That media managers and online editors allot more significant spaces to child abuse stories so that important details can be included in these stories on the newspapers' websites.
- 3) That the *status quo* of a significant use of advocacy frames be maintained and improved upon while efforts should be made to reduce sensationalism and media frenzy in child abuse coverage.

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