

## **Perspectives of Selected Lagos State Residents on Nigeria Newspapers' Coverage of Crime on the Gratification of their Safety Information Need**

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### **Abstract**

Insecurity to lives and property in Nigeria continues unabated through crime perpetration of all kinds. All forms of violent crimes and property crimes are reported in the newspapers virtually on daily basis. Concerned by what the feelings of the audience could be on the resonating outcome of Nigerian newspapers' crime reportage, the attendant palpable fear, anxiety, a sense of insecurity and whether or not the newspapers' crime stories gratified their safety information need, this study adopted a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews and probed into the perspectives of selected Lagos State residents on Nigerian newspapers' coverage of crime and the gratification of their safety information need. A total of twelve literate respondents who had lived and worked in Lagos State for at least five years preceding the study were interviewed. Findings revealed that a sense of insecurity and palpable fear among the respondents; Lagos State was prone to crime; murder, robbery, kidnapping, and payment of ransom to secure the release of kidnapped victims were rife in Lagos State and by extension in the Country. The newspapers feasted on crime stories, but embraced episodic crime reportage; the newspapers' crime stories were found educative and gratified the safety information need of readers. The police, judiciary and the political class were found culpable in crime festering in Nigeria. The paper recommends that newspapers engage more in investigative reporting of crime by reporting crime like an epidemic and that the security personnel of the Country requires constant intelligence report, needs to be proactive, and be professional. *The Judiciary should ensure justice in all crime cases.*

**Keywords:** Crime stories, Gratified, Kidnapping, Lagos residents, Perspectives.

## Introduction

Insecurity has become a major concern for Nigerians. It has created an unequalled and unprecedented fear in all and sundry in Nigeria. Both the Government and the governed have had their confidence shaken and doubtful of a day without a security-breach occurring somewhere in the Country (Rufai & Salawu, 2021; Rufai, 2018). The American Psychological Association (APA) regards insecurity as being multifaceted and that it pertains to an all-round sense of uncertainty or anxiety in respect of one's worth, abilities, and conveying the message one is at risk or in danger of something or someone (2024).

The negative impact of insecurity could be physical, mental, or emotional. Insecurity limits one's capability to accomplish tasks. Efforts by the Federal Government of Nigeria to combat the scourge have not achieved the desired results. The Military and other law enforcement agents appear overstretched and seemingly overwhelmed by the level of insecurity in Nigeria. Security breaches had occurred in Nigeria at unimaginable places. For example, the Kuje Correctional Facility was successfully invaded by terrorists with inmates suspected to be detained Boko Haram insurgents freed (Ejiofor, 2022). Also, the advance party of the former President and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, General Murtala Muhammad (Rtd) -was attacked in Katsina with two policemen killed (Oyelude, 2022). Moreover, the Presidential Brigade of Guards was attacked and casualties recorded (Emperor, 2022). Earlier there was the Owo massacre where about forty worshippers were killed and several people injured in a Church service. The import of these security skirmishes is that security of the high and the low in the Nigerian society cannot be taken as granted.

According to Udoh (2015) 'insecurity is the anxiety one experience (sic) when one feels vulnerable and insecure'. Google search engine defines insecurity as "the state of being open to threat; lack of protection". Nigerians at the moment are indeed grappling with daily threats to life, business, movement, relaxation, sports and recreation, to say the least. Many factors can lead to insecurity. It can result from a traumatic event; crisis such as divorce or bankruptcy or a loss. It can also result from one's environment, as unpredictability or upset in daily life can cause anxiety and insecurity about ordinary routine events. Insecurity in Nigeria is informed by the failure of the State in allowing crime and criminality to fester and become an industry (Ajayi, 2017; Omoera & Aiwuyo, 2017; Ngwama, 2014; Rufai, 2018). The former Nigerian President, Muhammad Buhari (Rtd) in his 2022 *Democracy Day* broadcast confessed that he lives in grief on daily basis due to the seemingly intractable cases of killings, kidnappings, armed banditry, murder and other cases of crime and violence happening in the Country (*Punch*, Monday, 12th June 2022). It is in this context that this article investigates the perceptions of selected Lagos State residents on Nigerian newspapers' coverage of crime and the gratification of their safety information need.

## Profile of the Selected Newspapers and the Justification for their Choice

The choice of the newspapers (*Vanguard*, *Punch*, *The Sun*, *Nigerian Tribune*, and the *Daily Trust*) for the study was purposive. Since the heroic deed of Rev. Henry Townsend in establishing *Iwe fun awon ara Egba ati Omo Yoruba* (The newspaper for the Egba and Yoruba) in 1859 (Oso, 2012), many newspapers both privately and

government owned, had existed and gone into extinction in Nigeria ever since (See Daramola, 2006; Salawu, 2001; Ngoa, 2012; Oso, Odunlami & Adaja, 2011). Currently, Nigeria has about one hundred and fifty newspapers of local, regional and national outlook (Bello, 2015). In a recent web ranking of national newspapers in Nigeria, the five selected newspapers for this study were ranked thus: *Punch*, 1<sup>st</sup>, *Vanguard*, 2<sup>nd</sup>, *The Sun*, 5<sup>th</sup>, *Nigerian Tribune*, 6<sup>th</sup> and the *Daily Trust*, 7<sup>th</sup> (Make Money.ng, 2022). In addition, three of the selected newspapers, *Vanguard*, *Punch*, and *The Sun*, are based in Lagos and were established in 1984, 1977 and 2003 respectively.

The fourth newspaper used in the study, the *Nigerian Tribune*, is located in the city of Ibadan (both Lagos and Ibadan are located in South West, Nigeria). It is the only existing pre-independence newspaper in Nigeria, having been established in 1949. The fifth newspaper, the *Daily Trust*, began operation in 1998, and is located in the Northern part of the country, Abuja (the seat of the Nigerian government), to be precise. It is credited as the largest circulating newspaper in Northern Nigeria (Make Money.ng, 2022). The five newspapers share some characteristics. They are listed among the top ten newspapers in Nigeria having national spread and have existed for over a decade, going by their years of establishment (Nigeria Press Council, 2009). They are published in English, and English being the official language in Nigeria, makes them more acceptable to the readers than if the medium of expression had been in any other language.

Despite the dwindling economic fortunes of the newspapers, symbolised by low circulation of the newspapers (Oso, 2012), in line with the economic downturn facing the country, (additional information mine), the selected newspapers, according to the Nigerian Press Council (2009), are widely read newspapers; have national spread in Nigeria, hence, suitable for this study. The newspapers publish on various issues like politics, business, health, finance, crime, law, environment, tourism, sports etc. and have been cited in scholarly articles and at different fora (Okidu, 2013; Onayinka, et al. 2024). All the selected newspapers are available in hard copies and online versions, hence, easily accessible.

### Statement of the Problem

Crime is a pervasive issue in Lagos State, Nigeria's economic hub, where the complexities of urban life contribute to varied criminal activities. Newspapers, as a major source of public information, play a critical role in disseminating crime-related news. However, the effectiveness of crime reporting in fulfilling readers' safety information remains debatable. The problem lies in the nature and presentation of crime stories by newspapers in Lagos. Coverage often emphasizes sensationalism, focusing on violent crimes and dramatic narratives rather than providing actionable insights or preventive safety measures. This approach can induce fear rather than empower the public with strategies to enhance personal and community safety. Additionally, there is limited attention to investigative journalism that could expose systemic issues contributing to crime, or solutions-based reporting that could inform citizens about safety policies and enforcement outcomes.

Moreover, the frequency, accuracy, and framing of crime reports significantly influence public perception of safety. Biased or inadequate reporting can create a distorted image of crime trends, undermining trust in the media as a reliable source

of safety information. Despite the abundance of news sources, there is a lack of comprehensive studies examining how effectively newspapers in Lagos meet the safety information needs of their readers. This research, therefore, seeks to explore the gaps in newspapers' crime coverage and its impact on fulfilling the safety information requirements of Lagos residents. It aims to assess whether the content, framing, and depth of crime reporting are aligned with readers' expectations and needs for practical safety knowledge, ultimately recommending ways to improve journalistic practices to better serve public safety interests.

### **Research Objectives**

The objectives of this study are to:

1. examine the extent to which crime reporting by the selected newspapers gratifies readers' safety information needs;
2. identify gaps and biases in newspaper coverage of crime in Lagos and their implications for public safety; and
3. propose recommendations for improving newspaper reporting to better meet the safety information needs of readers.

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent do Lagos newspapers provide crime-related information that addresses readers' safety needs?
2. What are the key gaps and biases in crime reporting by Lagos newspapers?
3. What strategies can be recommended to improve the quality of crime reporting to enhance public safety information dissemination?

### **Newspaper Readership in Nigeria**

The newspaper has been described as one of the oldest components of the modern era (Boczkowski, 2004) and also regarded as the primary model of information delivery (McQuail, 1994). The newspaper is crucial in opinion formation on domestic and foreign issues towards economic development and diplomacy (Olofin, 2012). The newspaper is an important source of information and could shape readers' thoughts (Awake, 2005). In an attempt to satisfy information need- a basic physiological need for human existence- human beings turn to various media, for information, education, entertainment and national mobilization of the public for national and international integration (Olofin, 2012). The newspaper is a credible source of information on social phenomena (Bello, 2015). The newspaper has also been globally acknowledged as a source of crime information (Altheide, 2003; Chermak, 1994; Sacco, 1995; Surette, 1998; Young, 2005). The advent of the internet and the presence of online newspapers have not diminished the importance of the print medium of newspapers as a news source (Hiebert, Ungurait, & Bohn, 1988). The newspaper is literacy medium and central to governance in any country. It is a vehicle for information dissemination and service delivery from the government to the people. It also serves as a medium through which government policies get to the public domain, hence, a go-between the government and the public.

## **Theoretical Grounding**

### **Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&GT)**

The study is anchored on the Uses and Gratifications theory. The uses and gratifications theory is a response and a challenge to the minimal effects theory. It was proposed to contest the notion of audience docility. McQuail (2005) noted that early communication researchers mainly focused on media effects on children and young people with an emphasis on potential harm and that early theorists on media influence, concentrated on the impact of audience exposure to the media on behaviour. The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to say the least, marked the beginning of research on information seeking behaviour on the part of the audience. Studies in this respect date back to the beginning of empirical mass communication research. (Ketterer, 2000). The U & G has as its main theme an understanding of how and why the media audiences use the media in their daily routine.

### **Media Use and Gratifications**

Gratification is the reward or benefit accruing from an individual media user's engagement with the media. Gratification has been identified to come from two sources: content gratification and process gratification (Rubin, 1985). Process gratification pertains to the practice of using the media, excluding the media content. Such process gratification includes using the media for entertainment, distraction, or companionship. It relates to the act of using the medium itself. Content gratification on the other hand, relates to the message and the importance to the reader. It is about the message, and not the medium. Content gratification is crucial with respect to communication content and future correspondence. It is about the needs of the media user met by his or her engagement with a particular medium or media.

According to Maslow (1943) human needs are hierarchical. The safety and security needs of an individual must be satisfied before higher social needs could be attained. Safety needs are concerned with physical safety, order, stability, familiarity and control over one's life and environment (Parumasur and Roberts- Lombard, 2014). An important need crucial to this study is cognitive need. Cognitive needs which is also referred to as information/surveillance need, is chiefly concerned with "seeking information about relevant events in immediate surroundings, society at large and the world" (Pitout, 2009 p. 392). Other aspects of cognitive needs include, "seeking advice to enhance decision making choices, learning about important topics and self - improvement and gaining a sense of security through knowledge in the media" (Pitout, 2009 p.393). The media therefore provide media users an avenue to enhance their safety information need as a response to the confounding challenges such as pervasive crime and insecurity to lives and property. The media audiences according to Dominick (1993 p. 49) "use media content as gratifications". These are the needs of the audience satisfied by the media.

## **Methodology**

The population for the study comprised selected newspaper readers resident and working in Lagos State for at least five years preceding the study and who are literates. The study adopted a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews. The participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques for

the study. A sample size of twelve (12) participants were used. There is no consensus among scholars on the appropriate sample size for a qualitative study of this nature (Baker & Edwards, 2022). Furthermore, Cresswell (1998) is of the view that between five (5) and fifty (50) respondents is appropriate for an in-depth interview. Similarly, Morse (1995) recommended between five (5) and twenty-five (25) interviewees. Consequently, the study through purposive and snowball sampling techniques interviewed twelve respondents spread across the three Senatorial Districts in Lagos State (four from each Senatorial District). Most of the interviewees were met at designated places and were interviewed based on the objectives of the study. Those in distant places to the researcher were contacted on phone and were interviewed appropriately. The study adopted verbatim quotations of the respondents to ensure the validity of the research instrument. Verbatim quotations according to Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole (2014) is one of the tools to ensure the trustworthiness, credibility and transferability (external validation) of a study.

**The demographics of the participants in the in-depth interviews are provided in Table 1.**

**Table 1: Selected Participants' Demographic Information**

Participants	Age	Gender	Marital/ Status	Educational attainment	Years of residing in Lagos	Occupation	Monthly income range	LG/ LCDA	Senatorial Districts
A	49	F	M	Degree	since birth	Poultry farming	Not disclosed	Lagos Island	Lagos Central
B	52	M	M	Degree	since birth	Media Practice	Not fixed	Kosofe	Lagos East
C	50	M	M	Post – Secondary	since birth	Banking	N120- N150:000	Agbado/ Oke-Odo	Lagos West
D	35	F	M	Degree	since birth	Physician	Not fixed	Ikorodu	Lagos East
E	59	F	W	Higher Degree	since birth	School Principal	N150- N180:000	Ibeju/Lekki	Lagos East
F	48	M	M	H.N.D	since birth	Public servant	N120- N180:000	AmuwoOdofin	Lagos West
G	25	F	S	School Certificate	10	Schooling	_____	Badagry	Lagos West
H	21	F	S	School certificate.	6	Artisan	Not fixed	Eti-Osa	Lagos Central
I	32	M	M	Post – Secondary	12	Teaching	N80:000- N120:000	Ojo	Lagos West
J	55	F	M	Degree	30	Trading	Not fixed	Osodi/Isolo	Lagos East

K	19	M	S	School cert	7	Apprentice	_____	Iru/ Island	Victoria	Lagos Central
L	20	M	S	Post- secondary	Since birth	Attendant	N50:000- N80-000	Epe		Lagos East

From the table, the demographics of the respondents satisfy the criteria set for participants' suitability for the study. The criteria emphasise a minimum of five years (preceding the study) of residency and occupation in Lagos-State and an appreciable level of literacy.

## Results

According to the respondents, crime has remained recurrent in Lagos State despite the spirited efforts of the state government to combat it. The participants were unanimous in their verdict that "every type of crime manifests in Lagos". Participant C spoke of a wave in crime. He said, "when one form of crime goes down in Lagos State, another is on the rise". All the interviewees were unanimous on the presence of crime in Lagos State. According to the interviewees, at a time cases of robbery were high. Recently, cases of kidnappings, murder, and rape are on the increase. On the causes of crime, majority of the respondents answered that crime is mainly caused by the unemployed youths; aided by self-serving political office seekers, who in a bid to secure electoral victory at all costs, buy and distribute guns to the youths, and neglect them after their electoral victory. Such guns were not often surrendered after elections by the recipients. The holders deploy the guns to fend for themselves by committing various crimes. The Police were also said to be culpable. Specifically, Participant A said that:

About crime, I think our politicians brought us to this situation. Nigeria used to be a moderately safe Country. It is our politicians that bought guns for the youths who are unemployed, but find it difficult to get back the guns after the election. The police are also a part of the problem of crime. How can they fight crime when they are a part of it?

Participant C, agreed with the view that the unemployed youths were willing tools in the quest by politicians to attain power desperately for the sake of themselves and their families. He, however, added that other social factors, such as loss of moral values, lust for money, and the youths being their partners in crime, could be adduced for the state of crime and criminality in Nigeria. He said that:

We should not forget that as a people, we have lost our moral values and decency. We now worship money no matter how it is come by. Most times we read from the newspapers and hear from people that the sources of this ill-gotten wealth are evil and through corrupt means. Except we retrace our steps, the fight against crime and criminality can become worse. I hope the government and the newspapers can help us out of this mess.



Participant L corroborated the view. She said that the moral decadence in the society and the influence of negative aspects of foreign culture have led to various acts alien to our culture. She mentioned indecent dressing on the parts of male and female which often results in the ladies being sexually harassed by youths and some elderly ones. She also said further that many homes are broken due to the harsh economic situation in the country and that this development has led to a loss of bonding and the spirit of togetherness that was common in families and in communities in the olden days.

Participant E mentioned the problem in the judiciary. He said that:

Our courts are no longer for the masses. We now have judgement and not justice. It is now *cash and carry* (suggesting a miscarriage of justice due to inducement). The courts give judgement in favour of the highest bidder. There is no hope for the common man. The police too do not help matters. People now lack confidence in the police. That is why people now think twice to give the police any security information. We heard a story of how the police revealed the identity of their informants to the criminals, who were later attacked or even killed. The situation is that bad.

The culpability of the police in combating crime, moral decadence in the society, coupled with the involvement of political office holders in recruiting and equipping youths for crime, as it were, could be partly responsible for the alarming rate of crime and the associated sophistication in crime perpetuation in Lagos State. Crime has remained intractable in Nigeria (as at the time of the study). Of a fact, the Police and the Law Enforcement Agencies in Nigeria do not currently appear to be winning the war against crime and criminality in Nigeria. In addition, it came to the fore at the interview sessions that: murder, kidnapping, robbery, car snatching and burglary were common occurrences in Lagos State, but kidnapping was on the rise. The origin of modern-day kidnapping in Nigeria was traced to the Niger Delta area and dates back to the advent of the current democratic experience. This finding is corroborated by (Ngwama, 2014, p. 134.) He said that:

The first act of kidnapping in Nigeria started in 2006 when the militants of the Niger Delta took total hostage to protest the inequality in the region. According to the militants, Nigeria is built at the expense of the region which serves as the cash cow for the whole country.

Ever since the first reported case of kidnapping in the Niger Delta area in 2000 (Ngwama, 2014), kidnapping has been on the increase and defying every attempt by the government to combat it. The crime of kidnapping has since spread to other parts of Nigeria, especially in the creeks in South west Nigeria, of which Lagos State is prominent. The crime of kidnapping as expressed by one of the respondents is on the high in Lagos, especially, along Ikorodu and Epe axis. Ikorodu and Epe are aquatic communities in Lagos State and are surrounded by creeks. It is a widely held view that people from Niger Delta area, because of their aquatic nature, are the ones



perpetrating the crime of kidnapping, especially, across the creeks to escape arrests. One of the aftermaths of the crime of kidnapping is economic loss (Pshisva & Suarez, 2010). This fact also came to light in one of the interview sessions. Participant A answered that she had to close down her poultry farm and declined to restock for fear of attack by the kidnappers. She did say that poultry and vegetable farmers were often kidnapped along Epe, Sala, Igbodu and Lekki axes of Lagos State. She added that she had contributed levies (ransom) three times to free some kidnapped farmers. Apart from economic loss, the spate of kidnappings from the findings from the in-depth interviews, has affected the psyche and the social lives of the respondents. It has led to fear of strangers and the neighbourhood and also altered movements, especially, commuting at night. This fact about paying ransom to rescue kidnapped victims negates the official position often held by the Nigerian police which claim that no ransom is paid to free kidnapped victims.

### **The Selected Nigerian Newspapers Source(s) of Crime Stories**

In the in-depth interviews, some of the respondents (Participants, A, B, E F H & I) held the views that in covering crime in Nigeria, the media rely on eye witness accounts; report wrongly either by exaggerating, underreporting or by carrying misleading and inaccurate headlines. These views are captured in the words of Participant E, as follows:

Unlike, the practice by CNN and Al Jazeera, Nigerian Newspapers often depend on other news media sources, especially foreign media and the posts by others to serve crime stories to the audience. In the process, facts are distorted and misrepresented, leading to ambiguities and different interpretations by the audience.

This finding is supported by Soola (2007, p.7) who observed the “inadequacy and inefficiency with which crime and violence are being reported in the **Nigerian** (emphasis mine) media”. On how the sampled newspapers can improve on crime reportage in view of what had been said, Participant E said that the newspapers can only help when they are ready to reduce their profits, because:

It is those politicians and the criminals who call themselves business men to deceive people that advertise in the newspapers. So, the press-men would not want to go after them, if investigation links any of their patrons to crime.

This is an indictment on the press in carrying out its social responsibility function of providing factual, objective, fair and balanced reportage. Furthermore, Participant I said that the newspapers can improve crime reportage to benefit the society by visiting crime scenes as much as possible, investigate crime cases further and advise government on how to reduce crime in the society. He said that:

Journalists should do more on crime coverage. They should stop relying on the posts by others, or news by foreign media before they can publish

crime news. As a matter of fact, they should investigate crime cases further and see that offenders are punished. They should do this in the interest of the people and even the journalists themselves. We have heard on many occasions that some journalists were murdered and the killers remain unidentified. If they help the society to report on crime appropriately, they are also helping themselves.

On whether newspapers' crime stories enhance or gratify their safety information need, Participant C said that his exposure to newspapers' crime stories and his accumulated experience as a resident in Lagos State, has led to a change in behaviour safeguarding himself, his property and his loved ones when driving, especially, in the gridlock that often characterise traffic in Lagos State. In his submission, he has had to be applying central locking device, roll up his car glasses, and also hide such personal effects like phones, computers, as well as cash, among other easily attractive valuables from prying eyes.

In the same vein, Participant D said that she used to be a nocturnal person, who enjoyed night journeys. She has had to alter that aspect of her life, in view of the calamities and victimization that befell others that she read about in the selected newspapers, which occurred mostly at nights. Similarly, Participant E said she had fear of sexual assault for her girls. To this end, she finds it difficult leaving them behind with people based on the experience of others she read in the papers and heard from informal discussions that known and familiar faces are those who rape innocent girls. For fear of being kidnapped, Participant A said that she closed down her poultry business situated around the hot-bed of kidnapping activities.

### **Discussion of Findings**

From the analysis, it is evident that the Nigerian Nation, especially, Lagos State was prone to crime. There were cases of murder and kidnapping (violent crimes), as well as cases of robbery, cat theft and burglary (property crimes) during the period of the study. Kidnapping was on the rise during the period and proofs of ransom payment to free the captives were evident. There was proliferation and illegal possession of arms, mainly by the unemployed youths in Nigeria. The selected newspapers carried crime stories but embraced episodic framing in crime reportage. The direct experience of crime victims from the selected Nigerian newspapers' crime stories enhanced and gratified the safety information need of the respondents by avoiding night travels, winding up car windows in traffic gridlocks, not leaving their children, especially, the girls with people, concealing some personal possession like phones from prying eyes at risky environment. The selected newspapers relied on secondary sources for crime reportage. Insecurity, anxiety, and palpable fear pervaded the mind of the respondents. The police, judiciary and the political class were found culpable in crime festering in Nigeria. Moral values are on the decline in our society according to the respondents.

### **Conclusion**

From the findings of the study, it has been established that newspapers, as good sources of crime stories, gratify the safety information need of the sampled Nigerian

newspaper readers. In view of this, it may be safe to conclude that, despite whatever future media technological breakthroughs or the attendant threats that may arise therefrom, the newspaper (hard copy), could remain a veritable source of information about crime to people, and provide gratification from newspapers' crime stories to the readers.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made to the government, media and the public: Government should grant the press more enabling environment to report crime stories contextually. Newspapers in reporting crime stories should strive to balance their profit motives with public interest by being socially responsible. Social responsibility of the media places a moral burden on the media not only to describe social phenomena, but to investigate and interpret social phenomena in public interest. Crime should be treated by the media as a disease requiring diagnosis. On the part of the public, information seeking enhances appropriate behaviour in social contexts. An informed citizenry is an asset to a nation, and easier to govern. The public, through the family and other social systems should join hands in resuscitating the neglected value systems, of honesty, integrity, hard work and decency. The security personnel of the Country should intensify constant intelligence report gathering, needs to be proactive, and be professional. The Judiciary should ensure justice in all crime cases.

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