

NEWSPAPER FRAMING OF INSECURITY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC PERCEPTION IN BIDA TOWN

Millicent Fatima Aliyu

Department of Mass Communication, Federal Polytechnic, Bida
milfaliyu@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Insecurity in Nigeria, particularly in Northern Nigeria, is increasingly experienced not only as a physical reality but also as a mediated construct shaped by mass media narratives. This study examines newspaper framing of insecurity and its influence on public perception and fear among residents of Bida, Niger State. Grounded in Framing Theory and Cultivation Theory, the study adopts a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, integrating survey data from 378 respondents with content analysis of 25 purposively selected online news articles. Survey results indicate high newspaper exposure significantly shapes cognitive perception of insecurity ($\chi^2(9, N = 378) = 52.31, p < .001$). However, regression analysis shows that perception does not significantly predict fear ($R^2 = 0.002, p = 0.393$), suggesting that emotional responses are contextually mediated. The study concludes that while media framing strongly constructs perceptions of insecurity, fear responses are moderated by lived experience and environmental familiarity. It contributes empirical evidence from a semi-urban Northern Nigerian context, advancing understanding of how mediated insecurity narratives influence public interpretation and emotional resilience.

Keywords: Fear, Insecurity, Media framing, Newspaper, Public perception

INTRODUCTION

Insecurity remains a persistent socio-political challenge in Nigeria, particularly in the North, where banditry, kidnapping, terrorism, and communal violence are widespread. Beyond its physical consequences, insecurity is increasingly mediated through continuous exposure to reports on television, radio, newspapers, and online platforms (Ijirshar et al., 2025). The media shape perceptions of insecurity by selecting, emphasizing, and framing events. Sensationalism, episodic reporting, and conflict-oriented narratives can heighten anxiety and perceived risk (Onwe et al., 2024; Sholola et al., 2025). Digital and social media further expand access to information while facilitating emotionally charged and unverified content, influencing audience fear and risk perception (Ajaegbu et al., 2025).

Insecurity in Northern Nigeria, including banditry, kidnapping, insurgency, and communal conflicts remains a persistent socio-political challenge affecting physical safety and psychological well-being (Ijirshar et al., 2025). Media reporting can heighten perceived insecurity beyond direct exposure, generating fear through mediated experiences (Imam, Ajetunmobi, & Salman, 2022). Media framing shapes how audiences interpret insecurity by emphasizing particular aspects of violent events (Entman, 1993). Nigerian studies indicate that conflict-driven, episodic, and sensational reporting

can amplify perceived threats (Onwe et al., 2024). Digital platforms further intensify these effects through algorithmic amplification. Consequently, media exposure significantly influences public perception, anxiety, and perceived vulnerability (Ajaegbu et al., 2025).

Empirical studies show a strong relationship between media framing and public perceptions of insecurity. Ajaegbu et al. (2025) found that television news framing significantly influences Nigerian audiences' perceptions, while Onwe et al. (2024) reported that political and crisis-oriented newspaper frames shape interpretations of insecurity. Felix, Jigem, and Ngantem (2023) similarly found that online framing influences public understanding. In West Africa, Abwami and Shahid (2024) linked media framing to public opinion and policy responses. Sholola et al. (2025) associated conflict framing with increased threat perception. However, Ijirshar et al. (2025) noted desensitization, while socioeconomic conditions, experiences, and media trust mediate emotional responses.

This study is grounded in Framing and Cultivation Theories. Framing Theory, developed by Entman (1993), explains how media shape reality by selecting and emphasizing particular aspects of events (Asemah, Nwammuo, & Nkwam-Uwaona, 2017). In reporting

insecurity, framing can present violence as political failure, criminality, or systemic instability. Nigerian studies support this view, showing that ownership, political affiliation, and framing influence audience perceptions of insecurity (Onwe et al., 2024; Ajaegbu et al., 2025). However, framing effects may be stronger on cognitive perceptions than emotional fear (Lecheler et al., 2015; Scheufele, 2014).

Cultivation Theory, developed by Gerbner (1969), proposes that prolonged media exposure shapes perceptions of reality. Repeated exposure to insecurity may increase perceived danger or produce a “mean world” perception. Nigerian evidence shows increased insecurity awareness, although fear may be moderated by experience and resilience (Imam et al., 2022; Ijirshar et al., 2025). Together, the theories explain how media construct and sustain perceptions of insecurity.

Although the literature on insecurity in Nigeria is expanding, there has been little incorporation of media content analysis and audience perception research especially on a local level. This void restricts knowledge of the transformation of media framing into social understanding and affect.

Looking into the problem statement, Nigeria, particularly the Northern region, faces persistent insecurity, including banditry, kidnapping, terrorism, and communal violence. Newspapers significantly shape public understanding of these issues, yet reports are often sensational, conflict-oriented, episodic, and fear-inducing (Onwe et al., 2024; Sholola et al., 2025). Despite this influence, limited empirical evidence exists on how newspaper framing affects public perception and emotional fear, especially in semi-urban communities. Previous studies largely examine media content or audience perception separately and focus on major urban centers.

This study therefore investigates newspaper framing of insecurity and its influence on public perception and fear among Bida metropolis residents using a mixed-methods approach. The study is guided by these objectives: to examine the extent to which exposure to media coverage of insecurity influences Bida residents’ perception of insecurity; to assess how exposure to different media platforms influences residents’ fear of insecurity in Bida;

to identify the dominant frame used in the coverage of insecurity in selected Nigerian media; and to determine the tone and sources of insecurity reports in selected media and how they may shape narratives about insecurity.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, where quantitative survey and content analysis were conducted independently and integrated during interpretation to enable triangulation of media framing patterns and audience responses.

The study was carried out in Bida, Niger State, Nigeria, a semi-urban community with high exposure to national and regional media coverage of insecurity. The population comprised adult residents regularly exposed to media content through television, radio, newspapers, and online platforms.

A sample size of 378 respondents was determined using Cochran’s formula at 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error ($p = 0.5$). A multistage sampling technique was used, Bida was stratified into 14 political wards; thereafter, selected wards were randomly chosen through simple random sampling. In the selected wards, households were systematically selected using a sampling interval, while one eligible respondent aged 18 years and above was purposively selected from each household based on regular exposure to newspaper and online insecurity reports.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire covering demographics, media exposure, perception, and fear of insecurity, measured on a 4-point Likert scale.

For the content analysis, coding sheet/content category was used. The unit of analysis was the individual news story (headline). Content categories included type of insecurity, dominant frame (fear, conflict, responsibility, human interest), tone, story format, and source type. A total of 25 purposively selected online news reports were analyzed within a defined timeframe.

Reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed using Cronbach’s Alpha (> 0.70). For content analysis, inter-coder reliability was used. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic and response data,

while chi-square and simple linear regression analyses were employed to test relationships between media exposure, perception of insecurity, and fear responses at 0.05 level of significance. Effect sizes (e.g., Cramer's V) were reported where appropriate. Content data were analyzed using frequency and percentage distributions to identify dominant framing patterns. Ethical standards were observed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymization of respondents. All data were used strictly for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents integrated findings from survey and content analysis using a convergent parallel approach. Survey data from 378 respondents were analyzed using descriptive statistics, chi-square, and regression analysis, while content analysis involved 25 purposively selected online news articles on insecurity were also analysed in frequency and percentage.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	185	48.9
Female	176	46.6
No Response	17	4.5
Age Distribution		
18–25 years	131	34.7
26–35 years	118	31.2
36–45 years	74	19.6
46 years and above	55	14.5

The demographic findings in Table 1 revealed relatively balanced gender participation, with males constituting 48.9% and females 46.6% of respondents. The majority of respondents were youths aged 18–25 years (34.7%), followed by those aged 26–35 years (31.2%), indicating high youth exposure to insecurity-related media content within Bida town.

Table 2: Respondents' Perception of Newspaper Influence on Insecurity Using 4-Point Likert Scale

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Newspaper reports influence my perception of insecurity	42	42	10	6
Newspaper reports amplify perceived insecurity severity	39	42	12	7
Frequent exposure to insecurity news increases public concern	45	41	8	6
Newspaper framing affects how people interpret insecurity issues	40	43	11	6

The results Table 2 showed that there was high newspaper exposure related to insecurities among the respondents. In particular, 84% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that newspaper reports affect their perception of insecurity, and 81% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that newspaper reports increase the perceived insecurities. Likewise, 86%

agreed that the constant exposure to insecurity news duly raises communal concerns; 83% confirmed that framing of insecurity issues by the newspaper would impact on how concerns on insecurity would be interpreted. The results indicate that the use of framed insecurity narratives does have a significant impact on people's knowledge and perceptions of insecurity in Bida town.

Table 3: Chi-Square Analysis Showing Relationship Between Newspaper Exposure and Perception of Insecurity

Variable	χ^2	df	p-value	Decision
Newspaper Exposure and Perception of Insecurity	52.31	9	< .001	Significant

The chi-square result in Table 3 shows a statistically significant relationship between media exposure and

perception of insecurity among respondents ($\chi^2 = 52.31$, $df = 9$, $p < .001$). This implies that increased exposure to

insecurity-related media reports significantly influences

how residents perceive insecurity issues within Bida.

Table 4: Simple Linear Regression Analysis on Perception and Fear of Insecurity

Predictor Variable	R ²	Beta (β)	p-value	Decision
Perception of Insecurity Predicting Fear	0.002	0.041	0.393	Not Significant

The regression analysis in Table 4 indicates that perception of insecurity does not significantly predict emotional fear among respondents ($\beta = 0.041$, $p = 0.393$). The R^2 value of 0.002 further suggests that perception explains only 0.2% variation in fear responses, indicating very weak explanatory power.

Table 5: Content Analysis of Newspaper Framing of Insecurity

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Type of Insecurity Reported		
Banditry	10	40
Kidnapping	7	28
Terrorism	5	20
Communal Conflict	3	12
Dominant Frame		
Fear Frame	12	48
Conflict Frame	5	20
Responsibility Frame	4	16
Human Interest Frame	4	16
Tone of Report		
Negative	17	68
Neutral	5	20
Positive	3	12
Headline Style		
Alarmist	16	64
Moderate	9	36
Story Format		
Straight News	17	68
Feature/Analysis	8	32
Primary Sources Used		
Security Agencies	9	36
Victims	7	28
Government Officials	5	20
Experts/Others	4	16

The content analysis in Table 5 reveals that banditry (40%) and kidnapping (28%) dominated newspaper reports on insecurity in Bida. Fear framing constituted 48% of the reports, while 68% adopted negative tones

and 64% used alarmist headlines. Furthermore, straight news reporting accounted for 68%, with security agencies (36%) serving as the major information sources. These findings indicate that newspaper coverage largely emphasized crisis narratives and episodic reporting patterns with limited focus on contextual or solution-oriented perspectives.

In convergent integration and discussion of findings, the integrated findings from the survey and content analysis reveal a strong convergence between newspaper framing patterns and public perception of insecurity among residents of Bida town. The content analysis showed that newspaper coverage was predominantly fear-driven and episodic, as fear framing accounted for 48% of reports, while 68% adopted negative tones and 64% used alarmist headlines. These findings indicate that insecurity reports were largely presented through crisis-oriented narratives capable of amplifying public concern and perceived threats. This aligns with Framing Theory advanced by Entman in 1993, which explains that the media shape audience interpretation of reality through selection, emphasis, and presentation of issues. The findings further corroborate the empirical studies of Lecheler, Bos, and Vliegenthart (2015), who found that emotionally framed news stories significantly influence audience cognitive interpretation of social issues.

Similarly, the survey findings showed that 84% of respondents agreed that newspaper reports influence their perception of insecurity, while 81% believed that newspaper reports amplify the perceived severity of insecurity. In addition, the chi-square result established a statistically significant relationship between newspaper exposure and perception of insecurity ($\chi^2 = 52.31$, $df = 9$, $p < .001$). These findings support Cultivation Theory developed by Gerbner in 1980, which posits that repeated media exposure shapes audience perception of social reality. The findings also agree with Romer, Jamieson, and Aday (2013), who established that persistent exposure to violence-related news cultivates heightened perceptions of societal danger and insecurity.

However, despite the strong relationship between newspaper exposure and perception, the regression analysis revealed that perception of insecurity did not significantly predict emotional fear among respondents ($\beta = 0.041$, $p = 0.393$). This finding partially contradicts the deterministic assumptions of Cultivation Theory which suggest that repeated exposure to violent media content directly increases fear. Instead, the result supports the argument of Slone (2020) that individuals living in insecurity-prone environments often develop psychological adaptation and coping mechanisms that moderate emotional fear responses. Similarly, Nabi and Sullivan (2021) argued that audience emotional reactions to media content are mediated by personal experiences and contextual realities rather than exposure alone.

Furthermore, the predominance of negative and alarmist reporting patterns observed in this study aligns with the findings of Gross and D'Ambrosio (2014), who maintained that emotionally charged media framing intensifies perceived vulnerability and social anxiety among audiences. The dominance of straight news reporting and reliance on security agencies as primary sources also confirms the argument of Iyengar (2021) that episodic reporting limits contextual understanding and encourages issue interpretation through isolated crisis events rather than broader structural explanations.

Overall, the integrated findings demonstrate a qualified convergence between newspaper framing and public perception of insecurity. While newspaper framing strongly shapes cognitive understanding and interpretation of insecurity issues, emotional fear responses remain context-dependent, psychologically adaptive, and socially mediated.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that media framing significantly influences public perception of insecurity in Bida metropolis. The findings revealed that continuous exposure to insecurity-related media content, particularly fear-based and conflict-oriented reports, contributes to heightened cognitive perception of insecurity among residents. The dominance of negative tones, alarmist headlines, and episodic reporting patterns in the analysed media contents demonstrates that Nigerian media largely

construct insecurity narratives in ways that amplify perceived societal risk.

However, the study also established that although media exposure significantly shapes perception, it does not directly predict emotional fear among audiences. This suggests that emotional reactions to insecurity are moderated by realities such as lived experiences, environmental familiarity, coping mechanisms, and psychological resilience. Consequently, the study concludes that media effects on insecurity are not entirely deterministic but operate through complex interactions between media narratives and social realities. The study therefore contributes to media effects scholarship by extending the assumptions of Framing and Cultivation theories within the context of insecurity reporting in Northern Nigeria. It further fills an empirical gap by providing integrated evidence from both media content analysis and audience perception within a semi-urban Nigerian setting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Media organisations should adopt more balanced, contextual, and solution-oriented approaches in reporting insecurity issues in order to minimise unnecessary fear amplification among audiences.
2. Journalists and editors should reduce excessive use of sensational headlines, fear-inducing language, and conflict-driven framing that may heighten public anxiety and social tension.
3. Media practitioners should incorporate expert analysis, peace journalism strategies, and explanatory reporting into insecurity coverage to provide audiences with deeper understanding rather than mere crisis amplification.
4. It is recommended that future studies should further investigate insecurity reporting within semi-urban and rural communities in Northern Nigeria in order to deepen empirical understanding of how mediated insecurity narratives shape public interpretation, psychological adaptation, and emotional resilience across different socio-cultural issues.

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