



Homosexuality Framing by a Nigerian Newspaper

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Abstract: The literature on how the dominant media in Nigeria report the sensitive issue of homosexuality is not visible. This study sheds some light and explores how one of the country's prominent newspapers – *The Punch* - frames it. The descriptive data from the content analyzed show that homosexuality is framed mainly as illegality and negativity; not acceptable to the citizens. Religion, a strong factor that influences several perspectives of the issue in the country, does not significantly reflect in the framing by the newspaper. This reportage, which aligns with the perspective of the law of the land, elicits the recommendation of the corrective reporting approach, rather than the type that wants punishment for those who disobey the law.

Keywords: Newspaper reporting, homosexuality, framing, law, Nigeria.

Introduction

Despite the current theoretical orientation that the press is no longer all-powerful owing to the emergence of new media, amongst other reasons, it still possesses the

power to direct the thoughts of its audiences in the desired direction to some considerable level. One way the press achieves this is through the framing of issues in the news. This work brings to the fore the

issue of homosexuality in Nigeria and how the press frames it. The Nigerian government in 2013, signed into law the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act. Section 5 states that:

(1) A person who enters into a same-sex marriage contract or civil union commits an offense and are each liable on conviction to a term of 14 years in prison.

(2) A person who registers, operates or participates in gay clubs, societies and organizations or indirectly makes a public show of same-sex amorous relationship in Nigeria commits an offense and shall each be liable on conviction to a term of 10 years in prison.

(3) A person or group of persons who administers, witnesses, abets or aides the solemnization of same-sex marriage or civil union, or supports the registration, operation, and sustenance of gay clubs, societies, organizations, processions or meetings in Nigeria commits an offense and is liable on conviction to a term of 10 years of imprisonment.

This law has had some ramifications one of which is for the press. Besides expatiating on the law to ensure that citizens decipher it correctly, the press

should also not be seen promoting homosexuality directly or indirectly. We have observed that many, or probably most Nigerians, often describe homosexuality in the context of what the two major religions in the country (Christianity and Islam) say about it. The position of traditional religion is not clear on the matter. This is in spite of the fact this Section 5 of the Act does not allude to any of these religions. Nigerians do not take issues of religion lightly and are averagely likely to publicly reject any concept or behavior that is against their religions. The country has recorded several religious crises even though the religions lay claim to being peaceful as a paramount doctrine. The media mirrors society and this issue of homosexuality is a critical attraction. This leads to the question: how does the press frame homosexuality? This is the question that this work addresses.

Problem Statement

Naij (2017) narrated that an expatriate was beaten to a pulp in Lagos, Nigeria for attempting to initiate a homosexual relationship with a Nigerian. *The Punch* (2018) (one of Nigeria's prominent newspapers in the country that calls itself "most widely read newspaper") reported the story of a cop who had a part of his penis sliced off by a 13-year-old boy who

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had accused the policeman of having sexual intercourse with him. In the news report, the paper stressed that the errant inspector might have been set up following allegations in the community that he was fond of having sex with young boys. The northern part of Nigeria is assumed to be highly populated by Muslims whose religion also abhor homosexuality and several northern Nigerians who commented on the matter expressed their views about how they are critically averse to homosexuality on account of their religion. Could this professed religiosity be playing a huge role in determining how the press presents issues about homosexuality?

According to McKenzie (2019), Nigeria is one of the 38 countries that 'actively persecute' the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community. He referenced a poll whose findings claimed Nigeria is regarded as the most homophobic country on the planet, with 98 percent of the population vehemently opposed to homosexuality in all of its dimensions. The findings of Mapayi, Oginni, Akinsulore, and Aloba (2016), however, revealed a lower level (54.5%) of aggressiveness towards homosexuality but the fact that the figure is more than 50 percent is of

note. Nigerians have an assumption that homosexuality is strange to their culture and that cultural nuance are shaped by religion. This study is an exploration of the framing of homosexuality in one of the dominant Nigerian newspapers and this is being implemented with the citizens' religious culture as a factor for consideration. This exploration is put in proper perspectives using a few research questions.

Research Questions

1. What is the framing of homosexuality in the selected Nigerian newspaper?
2. How has the source influenced the framing of homosexuality in the selected Nigerian newspapers?
3. To what extent has religion influenced the framing of homosexuality in the selected Nigerian newspaper?

On Media Framing

No picture is made up of just one element. Of the elements that make up a photograph, some are made more prominent, while the others are less noticeable (Odiboh et al., 2017; Folayan, et al., 2018). In spite of this variation, the choice of the aspects the viewer focuses on also goes a long way in determining how the viewer describes what he or she has seen. Therefore, some level of

subjectivity, which in many cases is in line with the viewer's interest, is a strong factor in the framing process. A definition from this perspective seems reasonable. As Kuypers (2009) puts it, framing "can be understood as taking some aspects of our reality and making them more accessible than other aspects" (p. 181). Framing, which appears qualitative as a process, is a subset of agenda-setting which is often quantitative. Several studies on media framing have been conducted, and framing in communication has been proven to be largely effective in determining the type of feedback the communicator gets (Entman (1991), Iyengar (1991), Sniderman P. M., Brody R. A., and Tetlock P. E., 1991; and Nelson, T. E., Clawson, R. A., and Oxley, Z. M., 1997), Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), and Dimitrova and Stromback (2003)).

Significance of the study

The issue of homosexuality and how the media handles it is receiving increasing attention in the Global North (Gomillion and Giuliano (2011); Soto-Sanfiel, Palencia, & Ibiti (2014); Papadaki, Iliadou, Karouzou, Maragianni, Pateraki, and Plotnikof (2019); Grossman, Park, Frank & Russell (2019); Day & Nicholls (2019); Giano (2019)). However, literature on homosexuality in Nigeria is lean

(Tesunbi (2010); & Green-Simms (2016) as pointed out earlier. Therefore, we think that this study, amongst a few by other scholars, can create a visible research trajectory, thereby enhancing literature in the area.

This research presents how the meaning of homosexuality is being negotiated and framed in Nigeria via the media, thereby creating the avenue to source policy input. Therefore, this content should also be important to policymakers and the LGBT community as it represents the current conversation on the subject.

Framing Theory

A frame or more can be discovered in a particular communication piece. However, to find a subsisting trend of framing, it is important to examine content from a particular source. This position is corroborated by Freeman (2017) who submitted that framing, "...when undertaken over a while, can allow observations of patterns that might not be as apparent in the immediate period of the material's release" (p. 3146). According to Entman (2003), frames are determinants of what issue will be more prominent than the others in a piece of communication but what source would emerge has so much to do with the source of the communication content. Goffman

(1974), cited in Zhou & Moy (2007) defines frames as “the schemata of interpretation that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences” (p. 80). Wang (2013) defines framing as the process of, “interpreting and expressing a person's subjective understanding of an event or issue concerning the person’s immediate environment” (p.378).

Framing theory is chosen for this research because this study aims to find out how homosexuality was framed in Nigerian newspapers between 2013 and 2018. According to Entman (2003), frames can take the form of sentences, images or words which, when arranged together, do reinforce several clusters of judgments or facts.

Framing is inevitable in every published content, and its presence can be employed to identify opposition to or support for any issue. Media audiences are likely to turn into public conversation any agenda that is being set in the media. Subsequently, should the agenda be spun in a particular direction, it is likely to influence how the audiences react or relate with it. Incidentally, this reaction is what many citizens take as realities, applicable to their lives.

Review of Literature

According to the submissions of Scheufele & Tewksbury (2007),

and Weaver (2007), the high visibility of literature on the discussion and argument about the relationship between priming, framing, and agenda-setting theories are indicators of the significance of this relationship. The concepts of priming and framing are an extension of the discussion of the agenda-setting system. In framing, according to Wang (2013), the frames discovered can be categorized based on the nature of the study or issues being analyzed. Goffman’s (1974) observes social and natural frames based on his study, while Iyengar (1990) identifies thematic and episodic frames based on the objectives that were set out to be achieved. Jasperson and Kikhia (2003) identify official, military, and humanitarian frames that were adopted by Freeman (2017). Lee, McLeod, and Shah (2008), listed strategy frames, and value frames. Freeman (2017) looks at religious frames. All these frames are not mutually exclusive.

However, sometimes frames can be issue-specific as they are influenced by the peculiarities of the topic. In this review, we zero in on those researchers who made efforts to gather data on the representation of homosexuals in the mass media in other parts of the world since such data are either not

available or are least visible on Nigeria.

Fisher, Hill, Grube, and Gruber (2007) conducted two yearly content analyses of programming from the 2001/2002 and, 2002/2003 television seasons respectively in the United States. The studies were carried out to assess the behaviors and verbal messages as they relate to the sexuality of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Sexual content that relates to non-heterosexuals was found in about 15 percent of the programs. Of the 14 program types analyzed, only movies and variety/comedy shows had a substantial percentage of programs that contained non-heterosexual content.

Similarly, Gross, cited in Fisher et al. (2007), found in a study out that television is a major influence on the assumptions people have about members of minority groups such as gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. This they argue is because many viewers may have had little personal experience with such individuals.

Fejes and Petrich also cited in Fisher et al (2007) found out in their study that when gay characters are portrayed on television, they are often shown in an asexual context. However, heterosexuals are often shown in intimate sex scenes with their male or female partners.

According to Mbugua (2010), homosexuality was framed in Kenyan newspapers as negative behavior. In a comparative study of two newspapers, Pan, Mengb, Zhouc (2010) discovered that while one newspaper framed homosexuality from the standpoint of equality, thereby not necessarily presenting homosexuality negatively, the other newspaper framed homosexuality from the standpoint of core family values, religion, and the American tradition, thereby technically not supporting homosexuality.

Anderson (2009), and Channon and Matthews (2015) submitted that the way that the media now presents homosexuality shows a gradual decline in homophobia. Anderson (2009), Channon and Matthews (2015), however, failed to acknowledge that their findings might be limited to a section of the American population, and the study did not capture African countries and contexts. Therefore, their assertions might not apply to Nigeria, and by extension, most of Africa. In Australia where the law that allows the practice of homosexuality has been passed it was discovered that negativity still surrounds the practice, as several murders of homosexuals were reported, which suggests that despite the law, the public still consider any sexual culture that is

not heterosexual as negative (Braun and Gray, 2016).

According to Namusoga (2016) who conducted a comparative study of two newspapers on the framing of homosexuality in Uganda, the human rights frame, and religious frame were observed. The study also discovered that both newspapers studied presented homosexuality as negative, and most of the content seen during the period of the study were news stories. There were a few feature articles and interviews. These researchers are of the view that interviews and features might not be as common as news stories because the public might want to avoid being stigmatized as being sympathetic towards homosexuality, which might influence the negative framing observed during the study. It is worthy of note that the law prohibiting homosexuality in Uganda carries a life in jail penalty (Laccino, 2015).

Vincent and Howell (2014) asserted that despite being the first African country to legally recognize the rights of equality for homosexuals in 2006, under the Civil Union Act No. 17, 2006, homophobia in South Africa is comparable to what is obtainable in other African countries. Vincent and Howell (2014) remarked that

homosexuals were framed as criminals, and as people who murder children, thereby presenting them as dangerous to society. The other frames exhibited to discourage homosexuals, and present homosexuality negatively were the ungodly, the unnatural sex, and the un-African frames (Vincent and Howell, 2014). According to Reddy (2002), Ssempe (2007) and Vincent and Howell (2014), politicians and religious leaders played a huge role in influencing the frames through which homosexuality was reported in the media. One of the objectives of this work is to determine the role of religion in the framing of homosexuals in Nigeria by the media.

In research conducted in Ghana concerning the framing of homosexuality in newspapers, the findings showed that homosexuality was framed negatively in the country. The frames visible were those of immorality, conflict, irresponsibility and human interest frames (Anipah, 2017). In the case of New Zealand and the United States, Kenix (2008) discovered that on a general note, newspapers from New Zealand framed homosexual issues more favorably compared to newspapers domiciled in America. According to the author (2008), American

newspapers were discovered to be indifferent: they were neither supporting nor rejecting homosexuality. Kenix attributed the positivist nature of the New Zealand press to the time that the homosexuality rights law was passed in 1986. The implication of this is that society was already legally used for homosexuality. Another difference noticed between the framing of homosexuality in the two countries was that newspapers from New Zealand used human interest frames, while American newspapers used more of conflict frames. Further, the American press used more of responsibility, and morality frames more than their New Zealand counterparts (Kenix, 2008). The differences between the two countries, according to Kenix, (2008), aligns largely with their cultural differences the core of which were religion, education, and morality. Hence, Kenix's submission that the framing of media content can be influenced by societal cultural factors.

The review, so far, has demonstrated that religion is a key factor in the discourse on the subject of homosexuality and it wouldn't make any difference whether it is interpersonal, group or media discussion. This study aims to find out how homosexuality is framed in Nigeria, a country that is

known to have based much of its culture on religion.

Method

The method of study is content analysis. The online version of *The Punch* was analyzed. The Punch's portal is a port of call for many visitors who agree to its bottom-line of "the most widely read newspaper" in Nigeria. Its search engine was deployed to locate the words related to homosexuality. The keywords were *homosexuality*, *sodomy*, and *unnatural sex*. The stories selected were limited to the period between 2016 and 2018. Another keyword "Nigerian" and "Nigeria" were also used to delimitate the study to the geographic domain of Nigeria. All the stories that emerged were studied.

The rationale for selecting only one newspaper

Data for framing studies are usually from purposively selected sources based on the existence of required data for the study following the study objectives and other requirements. (Braun & Clarke, 2006; and Barglowski, 2018). The newspaper used for this study was selected because it met certain requisite criteria set that we set. First, it has a national outlook based on its wide reach. Second, it appears the paper appeals to an impressive range of demographics.

This has been trumpeted by the organizers of the reputed Nigerian National Merit Awards (NMMA) of which another globally respected Nigerian professor Ralph Akinfeleye is the chairman of the awards committee. In the nearly 30 years of the existence of the awards body, The Punch has come tops as the Newspaper of the Year many times with its editor named "Newspaper Editor of the Year" a few times. This awards have helped significantly the paper's brand positioning and created the mileage attractive to the 'average' Nigerian. Punch was also selected because this study is not a comparative one.

It appears the paper also performs its social responsibility without doubt while legal cases of ethical infractions are fewer compared to its peers in the country. Omojola (2008; Omojola & Yartey, 2016; Okorie, et al., 2016) notes that this

characteristic is a remarkable one, especially with the increasing cases of unethical behaviors of journalists in the country. This is evidenced by the fact that literature about criticisms of its ineffectiveness in this area is not visible. This lack of visibility elicits the conclusion that it adequately mirrors society. What is more, a preliminary analysis has shown that it has published some articles relevant to this study, which makes it qualify for selection and investigation. As the study aims to find out the influence of the source on framing, any newspaper selected is expected to quote or mention sources from which it got its stories. Punch has fulfilled this expectation to a considerable level.

Data Presentation

Within the period under study, 70 news stories found on homosexuality were analyzed. The following are the analyses.

Table 1: Keyword Occurrence

Keyword	F	%
Homosexuality	28	40
Sodomy	23	33
Unnatural sex	19	27
Total	70	100

From the data above, it was realized that stories with the word *homosexuality*, has the highest occurrence of 28 (40%), while stories with the word *sodomy* came up 23 times (33%). The stories with the keyword *unnatural sex* came up

19 times (27%). This shows that reportage of homosexuality with some coloration of religion came second highest (33%). The preponderance of homosexuality is proof of the commonness of the word among readers.

Table 2: Frame type

Frame type	<i>F</i>	%
Religion	11	16
Health	3	4.2
Morality	15	21.4
Unnatural	15	21.4
Illegal/Criminal	25	36
Trendy/Acceptable	1	1
Total	70	100

According to Table 2, homosexuality was framed in Nigeria mostly as illegal (36%), followed by unnatural, and morality framing, both of which occurred 15

(21.4%) times respectively. In the third on the table is religion (16%), while health comes fourth (4.2%). Homosexuality was framed acceptable by one percent.

Table 3: Sources of frames

Frame type	<i>f</i>	%
Government/Politicians	3	4.2
Public	17	24.3
Journalists	10	14.3
Religious Leaders	5	7.1
Police/Security Agents	34	49.1
Others	1	1
Total	70	100

Table 3 shows that the highest source of framing is the police/security agents (49.1%), followed by the public (24.3%). Journalists came third (14.3%) as sources or frames, while religious

leaders came fourth (7.1%). The government and or politicians came fifth (4.2%), while others, in this case, the Red Cross society came sixth (1%).

Table 4: Content Format

Content format	<i>f</i>	%
News	55	79
Features/Opinion	9	12
Interviews	6	9
Total	70	100

From the data above, it could be seen that 55 of the contents were news which represents 79 percent, while features/opinion articles were

nine (12%). Interviews were the third, which occurred six (9%) times.

Table 5: Frame Slant

Frame slant	<i>f</i>	%
Positive/Acceptable	3	4.3
Neutral/Undecided	3	4.3
Negative/Unacceptable	64	91.4
Total	70	100

Table 5 shows that homosexuality was framed as unacceptable and negatively most of the time (91.4%), while it received positive/acceptable framing three times (4.3%), same as the figure for the neutral frame (4.3%).

The following is a summary of the findings:

1. The reportage of homosexuality with a bias for religion came second highest (33%).
2. Homosexuality was framed in Nigeria mostly as illegal (36%), followed by unnatural, and immorality, which both occurred 15 (21.4%) times respectively.
3. The highest source of framing is the police/security agents (49.1%),
4. Issues on homosexuality were mostly reported in the news section (79%).
5. Homosexuality was framed as unacceptable/negatively most of the times (91.4%),

Discussion of Findings

The framing of homosexuality in Nigerian newspapers

Going by the assertion of Wang (2013) that frames uncovered can be categorized based on the objectives of the study, the following frame categories have been revealed by this study based on the first research question that asked what the framing of homosexuality was in the selected Nigerian newspaper: religion, health, morality, unnatural, illegal/criminal, and trendy/acceptable frames. From the data gathered we uncovered that stories with the word *homosexuality* had the highest occurrence of 28, while stories with *sodomy* came up 23 times. Stories with the phrase *unnatural sex* came up 19 times. The data also indicated that the reportage of homosexuality with religious bias came second highest (33%). The word homosexual is related to sodomy and it is an allusion to the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah.

Homosexuality was framed mostly as illegal (36%), followed by unnatural, and immoral (21.4%). Religion came third (16%), while health came fourth (4.2%). This framing sequence by Punch does not align with the findings of studies presented in the review of literature earlier, which exhibits the preponderance of religion in frames. This means that in spite of the high regard Nigerians generally have for religion, it is not the most significant factor influencing the framing by the newspaper.

It should, however, be noted that homosexuality was also framed unacceptable/negatively most of the time (91.4%). The positive/acceptable framing was low at 4.3 percent as acceptable. This finding follows the pattern in Kenya (Mbugua (2007) where homosexuality is also portrayed as a negative social behavior and same in Uganda (Namusoga, 2016) and in Ghana (Anipah, 2017).

How source has influenced framing of homosexuality in Nigerian newspapers

Our data show that the highest source of framing is the police/security agents (49.1%), followed by the public (24.3%). Journalists came third (14.3%) while religious leaders came fourth (7.1%). The government and or politicians came fifth (4.2%), while

others, in this case, the Red Cross society came sixth (1%). This has more direct implications on the framing of homosexuality by the newspaper. The highest source of framing was found out to be police/security agents (49.1%), while homosexuality was framed mostly as illegal/criminal. Our investigations showed that most of the stories were those of arrests by the police. In those stories, the police often claimed that those arrested, and or arraigned in court had disobeyed the law. Members of the public were the second-highest source of frames, and they used the immorality and unnatural sex frames most often. This was also captured in the data presented, as the morality and unnatural sex frames came joint second highest (21.4% respectively). Therefore, the source is an influencer of the newspaper framing of homosexuality in Nigeria.

The extent to which religion has influenced the framing of homosexuality in Nigerian newspapers

Religion was the third-highest frame used in presenting stories on homosexuality (16%). This means that religion was not as powerful as an influencer of the newspaper framing of homosexuality. There was, however, the subtle use of sodomy in presenting the stories on homosexuality. Most of the

contents, in this case, were news stories (55) which is 79 percent of the total, while features/opinion articles were nine (or 12%). Interviews came the third with six times (9%). One of the ethical principles guiding news publishing is objectivity. We, however, discovered that sodomy was still mentioned 23 times (33%), while homosexuality had the highest occurrence of 28 (40%). Stories with the phrase *unnatural sex* came up 19 times (27%). This elicits a conjecture that religion was injected into this framing but that would have to be proved in another study. What researchers could endeavor to determine would be if what is illegal is also unholy. According to the findings of this study, religious leaders were the third-highest source of content on homosexuality, and though a biblical word (sodomy) was used as the second most used keyword in stories related to homosexuality, religion did not influence the reporting/presentation of homosexuality in the selected newspaper to a very large extent.

Summary and Conclusion

The initial conjecture that newspaper framing of homosexuality had the preponderance of religion was disproved as the data we gathered showed that it was framed mostly as *illegal*. Homosexuality was

framed as unacceptable/negatively most of the times. Also, the highest source of framing was discovered to be police/security agents. The source influenced the framing of homosexuality, as homosexuality was framed as illegal almost every time the source of the frame comprised the police/security agents.

What is more, religious leaders were the third-highest source of content on homosexuality. Though a biblical word (sodomy) was used as the second most used keyword in contents that were related to homosexuality, religion did not influence the reporting or presentation of homosexuality in the selected newspaper to a very large extent. Homosexuality framing by the dominant media in Nigeria as represented by “the most widely newspaper” in the country is on an *illegal* terrain, not religious or better still, least religious.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations:

1. As homosexuality is currently proscribed by the law in Nigeria, a corrective reporting approach should be adopted by the press against the current vindictive approach that presents homosexuals as those who disobey the law and should be published. The

current approach in a country that has a history of jungle justice is not right. Cases of lynching on the streets have been reported of victims whom the courts have neither tried nor pronounced guilty.

2. The government should make provisions for correction of the behavior, rather than imprisonment which is the current provision by law.
3. It was discovered during this study that despite the

continued reportage of several arrests in the press, more alleged acts were committed which led to increased arrests. Therefore, the government should establish a research trust that will find out possible motivators for the act.

4. Further framing studies should be conducted to establish the influence of the framing by the press on Nigerians.

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