

Media Narratives and Sustainable Development: Newspaper Framing of Recurrent Building Collapses in Lagos, Nigeria

¹OMALE, Gloria Eneh; ²EZEGWU, Daniel T; ³EZEJI, Agnes O. ⁴OKEKE, Samuel

¹Department of Information Science and Media Studies, Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria.

²Department of Mass Communication, Glorious Vision University, Ogwa, Edo State, Nigeria.

³Department of Mass Communication, Rhema University, Aba, Abia, Nigeria.

⁴Department of Mass Communication, Legacy University, Okija, Anambra State, Nigeria.

¹e.gloria@futminna.edu.ng,

²ezegwudaniel@gmail.com

³agnes.ezeji@rhemauniversity.edu.ng

Abstract: Nigeria's pursuit of sustainable cities, as outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11, is severely undermined by recurrent building collapses, which have resulted in significant loss of lives, economic setbacks, and displacement of families. This study examines how select Nigerian newspapers. The Guardian and Punch framed building collapse incidents in 2021, a year marked by notable disasters, including the collapse of a 21-story skyscraper in Lagos. The study adopted content analysis as a method and analyzed 252 editions of the newspapers, focusing on journalistic genres, framing patterns, and sources of reporting. Findings revealed that straight news stories dominated coverage (58%), while investigative and editorial pieces were minimal. Six frames were identified, with the "death frame" being the most prevalent (32%), followed by the "economic frame" (20%). Reporters' analysis served as the primary source (53%), with limited reliance on interviews or stakeholder perspectives. The study highlights a critical gap in solution-oriented reporting, as newspapers predominantly emphasised the tragic outcomes rather than preventive measures or policy recommendations. To foster public awareness and proactive responses, the study recommends that Nigerian media adopt a more balanced approach, incorporating solution-based and rescue frames. This shift could better align media reporting with the broader goal of achieving sustainable urban development and reducing building collapse incidents in Nigeria.

Keywords: Newspaper framing, building collapse, economic distress, media role, sustainable cities.

1. Introduction

Building collapses in Nigeria have become a distressing and recurrent phenomenon, posing significant threats to human lives, economic stability, and urban sustainability. The country's aspiration to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, which advocates for sustainable cities

and communities, is increasingly jeopardized by these structural failures. One of the most tragic incidents in recent years was the collapse of a 21-story skyscraper in Ikoyi, Lagos, on November 1, 2021, which claimed 42 lives and left many others trapped (Punch editorial, May 13, 2022). Over the past two decades, Nigeria has witnessed a surge in building collapses, resulting in extensive loss of

life, property, and displacement of families (Adedokun, 2021).

Statistics reveal the alarming scale of the problem. A 2017 report by the Federal Ministry of Power, Works, and Housing documented 54 collapsed buildings within four years, yet the trend has persisted (Imafidon & Ogbu, 2020). Lagos, the nation's commercial hub, remains the epicenter of these disasters, accounting for 39.53% of cases in 2019 alone (Adenuga, 2021). According to the Brookings Institution, between 1974 and 2019, Nigeria recorded over 221 building collapses, with Lagos alone experiencing 167 incidents from 2000 to 2021, leading to an estimated \$3.2 billion in property losses and displacing more than 6,000 households.

Building collapse, defined as the complete failure of a structure due to material defects, poor construction practices, or regulatory lapses (Imafidon & Ogbu, 2020), inflicts profound physical, economic, and psychological harm on victims while tarnishing national integrity (Meena, Moirongo, & Munala, 2018). The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception and policy responses to such disasters. However, existing studies have predominantly focused on technical causes, with limited attention to media framing (Oloke *et al.*, 2017; Wordu & Kanu, 2021).

This study addresses this gap by analyzing how The Guardian and Punch framed building collapse incidents in 2021, a year marked by heightened public concern. By examining journalistic genres, dominant frames, and sources, the research seeks to evaluate the media's role in influencing public discourse and policy interventions toward sustainable urban development in Nigeria.

I. STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The persistent occurrence of building collapses across Nigeria has evolved from isolated incidents into a disturbing national crisis, particularly in urban centers. While structural failures are not unique to Nigeria, the alarming frequency and devastating consequences demand urgent attention (Imafidon & Ogbu, 2020). Lagos, the nation's economic nerve center, bears the brunt of these disasters, accounting for the majority of cases (Adenuga, 2021). Each collapse brings tragic loss of life, economic setbacks, and lasting trauma for

survivors and affected communities (Meena, Moirongo, & Munala, 2018).

Despite the severity of this issue, scholarly attention has predominantly focused on technical causes such as substandard materials and poor construction practices (Ede *et al.*, 2021; Wordu & Kanu, 2021). Critical gaps remain in understanding how the media frames these disasters and shapes public perception. As noted by Oloke *et al.* (2017), existing studies have largely employed survey methods to examine construction-related factors, neglecting the communicative dimensions of this crisis.

The media serves as the primary conduit through which the public understands and responds to building collapses (Chong & Druckman, 2007, as cited in Ezegwu *et al.*, 2022). However, the nature of media coverage - whether it emphasizes human tragedy, systemic failures, or potential solutions - significantly influences policy responses and public engagement (Baran & Davis, 2013). Presently, there is insufficient research examining how Nigerian newspapers frame these incidents, what narratives dominate coverage, and how these representations might perpetuate or mitigate the crisis.

This study addresses these critical gaps by investigating the framing patterns in two prominent Nigerian newspapers: The Guardian and Punch. By analyzing the journalistic genres, dominant frames, and sources employed in their 2021 coverage, this research illuminates how media representations shape understanding of building collapses. The findings will contribute to more effective disaster communication strategies and inform policy interventions aimed at achieving sustainable urban development in Nigeria (Adedokun, 2021; Adenuga, 2021).

Research Questions

The following research questions were stated to guide this study:

1. What are the journalistic genres used for the reportage on building collapse cases in select Nigerian newspapers?

2. What are the frames employed by the select newspapers in their reportage of building collapse cases in Nigeria?
3. What are the dominant frames in the coverage that dominated public discourse in building collapse cases in Nigeria?
4. What were the various sources or attributes of building collapse stories reported in Nigerian newspapers?

Literature Review

The growing incidence of building collapses in Nigeria has emerged as a critical urban development challenge, with far-reaching consequences for public safety and economic stability. Scholarly investigations into this phenomenon have identified multiple causative factors that warrant systematic examination.

Causes of Building Collapse in Nigeria

Existing literature points to several interrelated factors contributing to structural failures. Foremost among these is the widespread use of substandard building materials, which accounts for 10-25% of collapse cases nationwide (Adenuga, 2021). This practice compromises structural integrity from the foundation stage, creating inherent weaknesses in buildings. Equally problematic is the prevalent non-adherence to approved building plans, where contractors frequently deviate from architectural specifications through unauthorized modifications (Imafidon & Ogbu, 2020).

The problem is further exacerbated by the rampant practice of illegal structural conversions. As noted by building professionals, the unauthorized addition of extra floors to existing structures places unsustainable loads on original foundations, often with catastrophic results (Adenuga, 2021). This practice has been particularly prevalent in Lagos, where space constraints and economic pressures drive such risky modifications.

Professional malpractice constitutes another critical factor. The construction industry suffers from the pervasive involvement of unqualified contractors and laborers who lack proper technical training

(Wordu & Kanu, 2021). Many of these actors operate with impunity, often benefiting from political connections that circumvent regulatory oversight. Compounding this issue is the widespread employment of unregistered professionals who fail to detect or report structural deficiencies during construction (Ede *et al.*, 2021).

Theoretical Foundations

The framing theory provides a valuable lens for understanding media representations of these disasters. Originating from Goffman's (1974) work on social cognition, this theory explains how media outlets select and emphasize particular aspects of complex issues (Ardevol-Abreu, 2015). In the context of building collapses, framing determines whether coverage focuses on human tragedy, systemic failures, or potential solutions - each shaping public perception differently (Chong & Druckman, 2007, as cited in Ezegwu *et al.*, 2022).

Media frames serve as interpretive packages that influence how audiences understand and respond to building collapses (Baran & Davis, 2013). The consistent use of certain frames - such as the "death frame" emphasizing casualties or the "economic frame" highlighting financial losses - can significantly impact policy priorities and public demands for accountability. This theoretical perspective underscores the media's crucial role in disaster communication and urban governance.

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies have investigated the building collapse phenomenon in Nigeria, employing diverse methodological approaches that yield critical insights. Oloke *et al.* (2017) conducted a landmark survey in Lagos State examining post-development property management practices. Their findings revealed systemic abuse of property management functions by both owners and non-professionals, with alarming deficiencies in regular integrity assessments. The researchers strongly advocated for making professional property management mandatory, particularly given the correlation between poor maintenance and structural failures.

Imafidon and Ogbu (2020) advanced the discourse through their taxonomic analysis of collapse causes in Lagos. Their survey-based study identified three primary causal clusters: design/construction flaws (notably poor maintenance culture), policy-related

factors (especially unauthorized changes in building use), and material quality issues (predominantly substandard materials). The researchers called for enhanced government monitoring throughout the building lifecycle, from design approval to construction supervision, while recommending comprehensive measures to combat counterfeit construction materials.

Ede *et al.* (2021) adopted a longitudinal approach, analyzing collapse trends in Lagos between 2013-2019. Their documentary analysis of structural failures revealed disturbing patterns - 2017 recorded the highest incidence (14 collapses), while 2014 saw the greatest fatalities (204 deaths). The study established a clear correlation between building height and collapse risk, particularly when unauthorized additional floors compromised structural integrity. These findings underscore the dangers of unapproved modifications to existing structures.

Wordu and Kanu (2021) focused on Port Harcourt's residential buildings through a survey of 86 registered builders. Their research identified the proliferation of unqualified practitioners as the primary cause of collapses, highlighting systemic failures in professional regulation. Among their recommendations, strict enforcement of the National Building Code emerged as crucial for standardizing construction practices nationwide.

While these studies provide valuable technical insights, they collectively exhibit three significant limitations. First, their predominant focus on Lagos and Port Harcourt creates geographical gaps in understanding regional variations. Second, their heavy reliance on survey methods limits exploration of socio-political dimensions. Most critically, none address the communicative aspects of building collapses, particularly how media framing influences public perception and policy responses. This study examines newspaper representations of building collapses across Nigeria, complementing existing technical research with crucial media perspectives.

Gaps in Existing Research

While numerous studies have examined the technical causes of building collapses (Oloke *et al.*, 2017; Imafidon & Ogbu, 2020), few have investigated how these incidents are communicated to the public. The absence of media-focused

research represents a significant gap, particularly given journalism's power to shape policy agendas and public understanding (Ezegwu *et al.*, 2018). This study addresses this gap by analyzing framing patterns in Nigeria's leading newspapers, contributing to both media scholarship and urban development discourse. The literature reveals an urgent need for research that bridges construction engineering perspectives with communication studies, particularly in understanding how media representations might influence preventive measures and policy responses to Nigeria's building collapse epidemic.

Materials/Methods

The study's methodological approach builds upon established content analysis protocols and is adapted to the specific context of disaster reporting in Nigeria (Neuendorf, 2017). This systematic examination of newspaper framing provides empirical evidence about media representations of building collapses, complementing existing technical studies on the phenomenon.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative content analysis approach to systematically examine how Nigerian newspapers frame building collapse incidents. The method was deemed most appropriate as it allows for in-depth examination of textual and visual representations within their natural context (Krippendorff, 2018). This approach aligns with similar media framing studies conducted in developing contexts (Ezegwu *et al.*, 2022).

Population and Sampling

The research population comprised all editions of The Guardian and Punch newspapers published throughout 2021, a year marked by several high-profile building collapses, including the Ikoyi high-rise disaster. Using Wimmer and Dominick's (2013) sample size calculator with a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, the study derived a sample size of 252 editions (126 per newspaper).

A systematic random sampling technique was employed to select editions for analysis. For each month, every third edition was selected, resulting in 10-11 editions analysed per month, depending on the publication frequency. This rigorous sampling approach ensured representative coverage while minimizing selection bias (Neuendorf, 2017).

Units of Analysis

Four key analytical units were examined:

1. Journalistic Genres: Categorised as:
 - i. Straight news reports
 - ii. Feature articles
 - iii. Opinion pieces/columns
 - iv. Editorial content
 - v. Photographic representations
 - vi. Editorial cartoons
2. Framing Patterns: Identified frames included:
 - i. Rescue operations frame
 - ii. Political accountability frame
 - iii. Economic consequences frame
 - iv. Government response frame
 - v. Human interest frame
 - vi. Fatality/death frame
3. Dominant Frames: The most frequently occurring frames that shaped narrative emphasis.
4. Information Sources: Categorised as:
 - i. Government officials
 - ii. Journalists' analyses
 - iii. Institutional statements
 - iv. Press conference remarks
 - v. Expert interviews

Data Collection and Analysis

Validity and Reliability Measures

Several safeguards were implemented to ensure research rigor:

1. Clear operational definitions for all coding categories
2. Pilot testing of the coding instrument
3. Continuous coder training sessions
4. Periodic reliability checks
5. Peer debriefing sessions to address interpretive challenges

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Journalistic genres used for the reportage on building collapse cases in Nigeria

Journalistic Genres	The Guardian	Punch	Total	Percentage
News	26	20	46	58
Feature	5	4	9	12
Opinion/Columns	8	6	14	18
Pictures	4	5	9	12
Cartons	0	0	0	0
Editorials	1	1	2	1
Total	43	35	78	100

This table outlines the distribution of journalistic genres employed by The Guardian and Punch

The research team developed a standardized coding sheet to ensure consistent data extraction across all sampled editions. Two trained coders independently analyzed each selected newspaper item, with regular reconciliation meetings to resolve coding discrepancies. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Holsti's (1969) formula, yielding a satisfactory coefficient of 0.72, indicating acceptable consistency in coding decisions.

: Reliability = $2M$

$$N1+N2$$

Where M is the number of coding decisions on which the two coders agree, on N1 number of coding decisions by the first coder

N2 number of coding decisions by the second coder. Therefore, inter-coder reliability

$$= \frac{2(23)}{32+32}$$

$$= \frac{46}{64}$$

$$= 0.72$$

Inter-coder reliability = 0.72

newspapers, revealing that straight news stories dominated coverage at 58%, while features, opinion pieces, and visuals like pictures were used sparingly, and editorials were notably minimal.

Table 2: Frames employed by the selected newspapers in their reportage of building collapse cases in Nigeria

Frames Employed	The Guardian	Punch	Total	Percentage
Rescue Frame	5	5	10	13
Political frame	4	3	7	9
Economic Frame	9	7	16	20
Response Frame	4	5	9	12
Death Frame	15	11	26	33
Human Interest Frame	6	4	10	13
Total	43	35	78	100

Table 2 identifies six frames: rescue, political, economic, response, human interest, and death, used in reporting building collapses, with the death frame being the most prevalent at 33%, reflecting a focus on fatalities rather than systemic solutions.

Table 3: Dominant Frames employed by the select newspapers in their reporting of building collapse cases in Nigeria

Frames Employed	The Guardian	Punch	Total	Percentage
Rescue Frame	5	4	9	12
Political frame	4	4	8	10
Economic Frame	9	8	17	21
Response Frame	4	5	9	12
Death Frame	15	10	25	32
Human Interest Frame	6	4	10	13
Total	43	35	78	100

This table reinforces the prominence of the death frame (32%) in coverage, followed by economic and human-interest frames, suggesting a prioritization of immediate tragedy over deeper structural or policy discussions.

Table 4: Sources or attributes of building collapse stories reported in Nigerian newspapers

Sources/Attributes	The Guardian	Punch	Total	Percentage
Government Source	3	4	7	9
Reporters Analysis	22	19	41	53
Press Release/Statement	9	7	16	21
Press conference	5	3	8	10
Interview	4	2	6	7
Total	43	35	78	100

Data in Table 4 highlights that reporters' analyses constituted the primary source (53%) for building collapse stories, while interviews and government sources were underutilised, indicating a reliance on journalistic interpretation over direct stakeholder input.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal critical insights into how Nigerian newspapers frame the recurring crisis of building collapses, offering a nuanced understanding of media representations and their implications for public discourse. The dominance of straight news reports (58%) in the coverage suggests that newspapers primarily focus on episodic reporting of building collapse incidents rather than in-depth analysis. This aligns with the observations of Amenaghawon (2017), who noted a similar trend in Nigerian newspapers' coverage of socio-political issues. The limited use of editorials (1%) and investigative features is particularly

concerning, as these genres typically provide context, critique, and policy recommendations. This finding diverges from the expectations of framing theory, which posits that media should employ diverse formats to shape public understanding (Chong & Druckman, 2007, as cited in Ezegwu et al., 2022). The minimal editorial engagement weakens the media's advocacy role, reducing its capacity to influence policy responses or systemic reforms.

The prominence of the "death frame" (32%) in coverage reflects a media tendency to prioritize human tragedy over structural causes or preventive measures. This aligns with Baran and Davis's (2013) assertion that media often amplify emotional narratives to capture audience attention. However, this framing approach risks reducing complex issues of urban governance and construction malpractice to mere spectacles of disaster. The economic frame (20%), while less dominant, at least directs attention to the financial repercussions of collapses, resonating with Meena, Moirongo, and Munala's (2018) argument about the multidimensional impacts of building failures. The near absence of a "solution frame" contradicts the framing theory's emphasis on media's potential to shape problem-solving perspectives (Ardevol-Abreu, 2015). Instead of fostering public engagement with preventive measures, the coverage may inadvertently normalize building collapses as inevitable tragedies rather than preventable failures of regulation and professionalism.

The heavy reliance on reporters' analyses (53%) as primary sources, coupled with minimal use of expert interviews (7%), raises questions about the depth of technical scrutiny in these reports. This finding contrasts with Oloke et al.'s (2017) recommendation for greater inclusion of professional voices in discussions about building safety. The limited engagement with construction experts, architects, or materials engineers represents a missed opportunity to educate the public about the technical aspects of building integrity. While government sources accounted for 9% of attributions, their relatively marginal presence suggests either limited official responsiveness or media reluctance to foreground policy perspectives, a concerning gap given the regulatory implications of these disasters.

These findings both confirm and challenge aspects of framing theory. While the study demonstrates that media selectively emphasize certain aspects of building collapses (consistent with the theory's core premise), the narrow range of frames employed fails to fully exploit the theory's potential for shaping multidimensional understanding. The emphasis on aftermath and tragedy over causation and prevention reflects what Imafidon and Ogbu (2020) might characterise as a superficial treatment of systemic issues in Nigeria's built environment. The minimal convergence between media frames and the technical literature on building collapses (Ede *et al.*, 2021; Wordu & Kanu, 2021) suggests a disconnect between journalistic practices and expert knowledge, a gap that undermines public awareness of root causes and solutions.

The study's findings resonate partially with Ezegwu *et al.*'s (2018) observations about Nigerian media's disaster reporting patterns, particularly the tendency toward episodic rather than thematic framing. However, the current research extends this understanding by revealing how specific framing choices in building collapse coverage may inadvertently perpetuate cycles of inadequate policy response and public resignation. The near absence of the "prevention frame" noted in this study diverges significantly from international best practices in disaster communication (Neuendorf, 2017), where media are increasingly expected to play proactive roles in risk reduction.

In essence, these findings suggest that Nigerian newspapers' framing of building collapses currently falls short of the normative ideals implied by framing theory, particularly its potential to facilitate informed public discourse and policy engagement. While the theory anticipates that media frames can construct diverse interpretations of reality, the empirical evidence shows constrained framing repertoires dominated by tragedy narratives. This limitation becomes particularly consequential in contexts like Nigeria, where media representations could otherwise catalyse much-needed reforms in urban governance and construction standards. The study thus underscores the urgent need for more solution-oriented, expert-informed reporting approaches that align with both the transformative potential of framing theory and the technical realities documented by built environment researchers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study paint a concerning picture of how Nigerian newspapers frame the critical issue of building collapses. While the media fulfills its basic function of reporting these tragedies, its predominant focus on episodic news coverage and sensational "death frames" fails to address the systemic roots of the problem or promote meaningful solutions. This limited framing approach does little to advance public understanding of the technical, regulatory, and professional failures that underlie Nigeria's building collapse epidemic. Rather than serving as a platform for informed debate and policy advocacy, current media representations risk normalizing these disasters as inevitable occurrences rather than preventable failures of urban governance.

Actionable Recommendations

Based on the findings from the study, the following recommendations were made for media professionals, policymakers, regulatory bodies, and professional bodies.

1. For Media Practitioners:

- i. Expand beyond basic news reporting by incorporating more investigative features and expert analyses that explore the root causes of building collapses
- ii. Develop a "prevention frame" that highlights regulatory gaps, professional malpractice, and proven safety measures
- iii. Increase collaboration with construction professionals, engineers, and urban planners to improve the technical accuracy of reporting
- iv. Implement editorial policies that prioritize solution-oriented coverage alongside disaster reporting

2. For Policymakers and Regulatory Bodies:

- i. Establish mandatory media engagement protocols to ensure timely, accurate information flow during collapse investigations
- ii. Develop journalist training programs on building safety standards and construction best practices.

- iii. Create a national database of certified construction professionals that journalists can consult for expert commentary
- iv. Implement stricter enforcement of building codes with regular public reporting on compliance rates

3. For Professional Associations:

- i. Form media liaison committees to provide authoritative technical perspectives on collapse incidents
- ii. Produce regular public awareness materials about construction safety standards
- iii. Develop rapid response teams to assist journalists covering building emergencies

Policy Implications

The study reveals an urgent need to reconceptualise the media's role in urban safety governance. Rather than serving merely as chroniclers of disaster, Nigerian newspapers should be empowered and encouraged to function as active participants in prevention efforts. This requires:

- i. Integrating media literacy about building safety into journalist training curricula
- ii. Establishing formal partnerships between media houses and professional construction bodies
- iii. Developing government incentives for investigative reporting on construction sector malpractice
- iv. Creating platforms for regular dialogue between journalists, policymakers, and built environment professionals

The authors strongly believe that transforming how building collapses are framed in Nigerian media will require concerted effort from all stakeholders. It will require shifting from reactive tragedy reporting to proactive solution journalism, the media can play a transformative role in breaking Nigeria's cycle of preventable building disasters. This evolution in reporting practices would not only better serve public interest but also contribute substantially to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 11's vision of safe, resilient cities. The time has come for Nigerian media to move beyond simply documenting collapses to actively preventing them through more rigorous, nuanced, and solution-focused reporting. Only then can

journalism fulfil its potential as both mirror and catalyst for meaningful change in Nigeria's built environment.

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Appendices



<https://guardian.ng/news/death-t...>

Death toll in Lagos high-rise collapse rises to 42

7 Nov 2021 — The death toll in a high-rise collapse in Nigeria's Lagos has risen to 42 while the number of...

<https://www.theguardian.com/nov>

Six dead and 100 feared missing after tower block collapses in Lagos

1 Nov 2021 — At least six people have died after a luxury residential high-rise under construction in Nigeria's commercial capital, Lagos, collapsed, ...

Newspaper Photograph Showing some dead people at collapsed 21 story building been evacuated



The Punch newspaper November, 6, 2021 (Online version)

Newspaper photograph showing excavator searching for survivors and clearing the collapsed building site.



The Guardian newspaper, November 2, 2021

(online version)


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Editorial

After lamentations on Ikoyi building collapse

By **Editorial Board**
12 November 2021 | 3:55 am

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Reversing Lagos' incidence of building collapse

7th November 2021



File: The collapsed building on Gerrard Road, Ikoyi, Lagos.

By Punch Editorial Board