

Exploring Audience Perception on the Impacts of Religo-Culturo-Contextual Factors (RCCF) on Newspaper Salience and Framing of Child Defilement in Osun State

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Abstract

This study explored audience perception on the impacts of Religo-Culturo-Contextual Factors (RCCF) on Newspaper Salience and Framing of Child Defilement in Osun state. This study was anchored on Social Judgement Theory (SJT). This study employed a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews to explore audience perception on how Religo-Culturo-Contextual Factors (RCCF) influence newspaper salience and framing of child defilement. Purposive and Convenient Sampling techniques were used to select 15 participants who were knowledgeable about the issue and could provide insights on the focus of this study. Results showed three recurrent themes which are; selective media attention, victim-blaming, and diminished public awareness. The findings revealed that RCCF strongly influence which child defilement cases are covered by newspapers and how prominently they are reported to the media. Participants indicated that newspapers often give less attention to cases involving influential community or religious figures. Also, it was found that inadequate and biased media coverage discourages families from seeking justice for child defilement, as the crime is often framed as private or less severe matter with blames on the victims at times. This study recommend that newspapers should adopt more balanced and sensitive rather than reinforcing cultural and religious biases. Also, journalists in Osun State should be trained to recognize and counteract RCCF in their reporting to ensure that all child defilement cases receive fair and consistent coverage. Lastly, media organizations should collaborate with NGOs to raise awareness about the legal and human rights dimensions of child defilement to counter RCCF-driven narratives that stigmatize victims.

Keywords: Audience, Perception, Newspaper salience, Media framing, Osun State

Introduction

Child defilement is a menace with significant implications for the physical, psychological, and emotional well-being of victims (Anneke, 2015). The prevalence of this crime in Nigeria is high, with numerous cases going unreported due to societal stigma, cultural taboos, and inadequate legal frameworks (UNICEF, 2020). In regions like Osun State, these issues are exacerbated by deeply entrenched religious and cultural beliefs that influence public attitudes and the legal response to such crimes (Akanni, et al., 2015; Saint-Jacques, et al., 2012).

The role of newspapers in shaping public opinion and raising awareness about child defilement cannot be overstated. Newspapers serve as a critical medium through which information about such crimes is disseminated to the public, influencing societal attitudes and potentially shaping policy responses (Fieldman & Crespi, 2012). However, the manner in which these stories are framed by the media can significantly affect public perception, with certain aspects of the crime being either emphasized or downplayed based on cultural and contextual factors (Goffman, 1974; McCombs, 2018). Religio-Culturo-Contextual Factors (RCCF), which encompass religious, cultural, and contextual elements, play a crucial role in how child defilement cases are reported in the media. These factors can influence the salience of the issue in newspapers, determining how prominently it is featured and the narrative surrounding the crime (Ajayi, et al., 2022; Olawa, 2023). In Osun State, where religious and cultural beliefs are deeply embedded in the social fabric, these factors can lead to a skewed representation of child defilement cases, either minimizing the severity of the crime or shifting blame away from perpetrators (Ebenezer, et al., 2018).

Previous studies (Olawa, 2023; Ajayi, et al., 2022; Okoji & Azeez, 2023) have highlighted the impact of media framing on public perception of social issues, particularly in the context of child abuse and defilement. For instance, research has shown that newspapers in Nigeria often frame child defilement within the context of cultural and religious beliefs, which can influence how the public perceives the victims and perpetrators of these crimes (Olawa, 2023). Despite these insights, there is a noticeable gap in research specifically exploring audience perception on how RCCF influences newspaper's salience and framing of child defilement in Osun State.

To this end, this study seeks to address this gap by examining audience perception on the interplay between RCCF and media coverage of child defilement in Osun State. In other words,

the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the factors that shape public perception and response to child defilement. Essentially, this study would explore these objectives:

1. Examine audience perception on how Religo-Culturo-Contextual Factors (RCCF) influence the salience of child defilement cases in Osun state;
2. Explore audience perception on the framing patterns employed by newspapers in reporting child defilement within the context of RCCF in Osun State;
3. Understand the perceptions of Osun State residents on how RCCF affects newspaper reporting of child defilement cases.

Literature Review

Child Defilement

Child defilement is a form of sexual violence involving minors under the age of consent in Nigeria (WHO, 2012). The Child Rights Act (2003) clearly defines and criminalizes child defilement by ensuring that in its provisions, children are protected from sexual abuse and exploitation. However, despite the legal provisions, child defilement continues to be a pervasive issue in Nigeria. In Nigeria, child defilement cases often go unreported due to cultural, religious, and societal pressures (Ajayi, et al., 2022). Victims and their families are frequently discouraged from pursuing legal action due to the stigma attached to such crimes. In many cases, victims are blamed for their abuse, especially in instances where cultural and religious norms emphasize female purity and sexual morality. This culture of silence, combined with inadequate legal and institutional support, often leaves victims without justice and allows perpetrators to act with impunity (Banda, 2016) cited in (Okoji, 2023).

Child defilement has devastating consequences for victims, both physically and psychologically. Victims often suffer from long-term trauma, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Ebenezer et al., 2018). Many victims also face social ostracization, further compounding their trauma. Physically, the abuse can result in unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and other health complications. For young girls, these physical consequences can also disrupt their education and future prospects, leaving them vulnerable to further exploitation and abuse (Banda, 2016).

Media Salience

Media salience refers to the importance or prominence given to an issue in media coverage, which shapes public perception by determining what people think is important. According to the agenda-setting theory, the media doesn't tell people what to think but rather what to think about, by emphasizing certain issues over others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the context of child defilement, media salience plays a crucial role in determining how much attention the issue receives from the public, policymakers, and advocacy groups.

In Osun State, the salience of child defilement in newspapers is significantly influenced by RCCF, which shape both the content and frequency of coverage. Newspapers may choose to prioritize or downplay child defilement cases based on cultural and religious considerations. For example, cases involving high-profile individuals or those challenging religious or cultural norms may receive less coverage, while others that align with societal values may be given more prominence (Banda, 2016). The placement and prominence of stories in newspapers also affect media salience. Research shows that stories on the front page or given prominent headlines are perceived as more important by readers, while stories buried in the middle or back pages are less likely to capture public attention (Kashaf, 2019; McCombs, 2018, Okoji, 2023). In the case of child defilement, if these stories are given minimal or less prominent placement, it signals to the public that the issue is not a high priority. This, in turn, affects how much attention is paid to the issue and whether policymakers feel pressure to address it.

Media salience also involves the depth of coverage provided on an issue. While newspapers may report on specific incidents of child defilement, they may not provide sufficient analysis or exploration of the broader societal factors that contribute to the crime, such as poverty, gender inequality, and weak legal frameworks. This superficial coverage can lead to a lack of understanding among the public, who may see child defilement as an isolated incident rather than a systemic issue (Jane, 2012; Mather & Debye, 2014). In turn, this can result in a failure to address the root causes of the problem and a lack of sustained public advocacy for stronger legal protections and victim support.

Media Framing

Media framing refers to how the media organizes and presents information about an issue, shaping how audiences interpret and understand it. Framing involves selecting certain aspects of

an issue and making them more salient in a communication text, thereby promoting a particular interpretation (Entman, 1993). In the case of child defilement, media framing can significantly influence how the public perceives both the victims and the perpetrators, as well as how the crime itself is understood within the broader societal context.

In Osun State, media framing of child defilement is shaped by RCCF, which can lead to biased or culturally insensitive representations of the crime. Religious and cultural beliefs often influence how child defilement is framed in newspapers, with some frames focusing on victim-blaming narratives or minimizing the responsibility of the perpetrator. For instance, a newspaper may frame a child defilement case in a way that portrays the victim as responsible for the crime due to cultural beliefs about chastity or religious teachings that promote forgiveness of the perpetrator (Olawa, 2023). This type of framing reinforces harmful stereotypes and further stigmatizes victims, making it difficult for them to seek justice or receive public support.

Framing can also affect how the public perceives the severity of child defilement. When the media frames the crime as an isolated incident or the result of a personal failing on the part of the perpetrator, it is less likely to be seen as a systemic issue that requires societal or legal reform. However, when the media frames child defilement as part of a broader pattern of sexual violence against children, it can lead to increased public awareness and calls for stronger legal protections and victim support services (Okoji, 2023).

In addition to influencing public perception, media framing also affects policy responses. Policymakers often rely on media coverage to gauge public opinion and prioritize issues on the legislative agenda. If the media frames child defilement as a pressing social problem, it is more likely to receive attention from lawmakers and lead to policy interventions aimed at protecting children. Conversely, if child defilement is framed as a minor or isolated issue, it may fail to receive the needed attention.

Religio-Culturo-Contextual Factors (RCCF)

Religio-Culturo-Contextual Factors (RCCF) are the intertwined religious, cultural, and contextual influences shaping public perception and behaviour towards social issues, particularly sensitive ones like child defilement. In Nigeria, RCCF plays a significant role in how people view societal issues, including crimes against children. Osun State, where this study focuses, is a region with

deeply entrenched traditional and religious norms that significantly influence societal behaviours and opinions.

Religious factors, especially in regions like Osun State, where Christianity, Islam, and indigenous beliefs co-exist, heavily impact how communities perceive child defilement. Religious leaders, often seen as moral authorities, shape how the crime is discussed. Some religious interpretations may downplay the gravity of child defilement by promoting forgiveness or rehabilitation for the perpetrator, especially if they are influential in the community (Ajayi, et al., 2022). At the same time, some teachings might also stigmatize the victim, particularly girls, casting aspersions on their moral character. These religious perspectives often complicate efforts to report and legally address cases of child defilement, with religious communities sometimes favouring in-house resolutions over legal proceedings.

Cultural influences also play a significant role in shaping societal responses to child defilement in Osun State. Yoruba culture, which dominates the region, places strong emphasis on family honor, reputation, and traditional gender roles. These cultural norms can lead to the suppression of child defilement cases, with families preferring to handle matters internally rather than expose the issue to public scrutiny, fearing social ostracism or dishonour. Furthermore, cultural taboos surrounding discussions of sexual violence prevent open conversations about defilement, thus leaving victims without adequate support (Banda, 2016).

Contextual factors like socio-economic conditions, political structures, and educational levels also influence how child defilement is addressed. In many rural areas of Osun State, poverty and lack of access to proper legal mechanisms can prevent victims and their families from pursuing justice. Additionally, weak law enforcement coupled with corrupt practices may allow powerful individuals to escape punishment, further perpetuating the cycle of impunity in such cases (Adeleke, et al., 2012; Miliambo, 2015). RCCF, thus, has a profound impact on both the reporting and handling of child defilement cases in Osun State. These factors influence not only how individuals perceive the crime but also how it is framed in media coverage in creating a complex interplay that affects public discourse and response.

Theoretical Review

This study would be anchored on Social Judgement Theory (SJT). Social Judgment Theory (SJT), introduced by Sherif and Hovland (1961), explains how individuals assess new

information based on their existing beliefs, attitudes, and biases. The theory posits that people categorize incoming messages into three zones: latitude of acceptance (where information aligns with their views), latitude of rejection (where it conflicts), and latitude of non-commitment (neutral or ambivalent information). Sherif and Sherif (1967) expanded on this by arguing that individuals are more likely to be persuaded by messages within their latitude of acceptance, while information in the latitude of rejection is either dismissed or reacted to negatively. Over time, SJT has been employed to understand how deeply rooted values affect perception and judgment across multiple fields, including media consumption and audience engagement.

However, critics argue that the model is overly simplistic, suggesting that individuals either accept or reject information without considering more complex cognitive processing (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Also, scholars, such as Kruglanski (1996), believe that SJT underestimates how contextual factors and social dynamics affect perception beyond simple attitudinal zones.

As relevance, SJT is directly applicable to this study because it helps explain how RCCF affect audience perceptions of newspaper framing on child defilement in Osun State. Religious and cultural beliefs act as filters, determining whether media portrayals of child defilement fall within the audience's latitude of acceptance or rejection. For example, the media's framing of perpetrators or victims may align with cultural and religious beliefs (accepted) or challenge them (rejected), influencing how the community engages with the issue and responds to legal interventions. This theory, therefore, provides a framework for understanding how deeply rooted RCCF shape audience perception of newspaper salience and framing.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews to explore audience perception on how Religo-Culturo-Contextual Factors (RCCF) influence newspaper salience and framing of child defilement. The study focused on parents and community leaders in Ajenisuwa, a community in Osogbo, Osun State. Purposive and Convenient Sampling techniques were used to select 15 participants who were knowledgeable about the issue and could provide insights into how RCCF affects their perceptions of child defilement as portrayed in newspapers.

Data collection involved semi-structured, face-to-face interviews which allowed for deep exploration of the participants' experiences and opinions. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and themes related to

RCCF's impact on media framing and public awareness as perceived by the respondents. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent and confidentiality as well as proper referencing, were strictly observed throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Three main themes emerged on the three objectives guiding this study. The themes are: selective media attention, victim-blaming, and diminished public awareness.

Objective	Emerging Theme
Examine audience perception on how Religio-Culturo-Contextual Factors (RCCF) influence the salience of child defilement cases in Osun state	selective media attention
Explore audience perception on the framing patterns employed by newspapers in reporting child defilement within the context of RCCF in Osun State	victim-blaming
Understand the perceptions of Osun State residents on how RCCF affects newspaper reporting of child defilement cases	diminished public awareness

Selective Media Attention

A recurrent theme from the interviews was that Religio-Culturo-Contextual Factors (RCCF) shape the visibility of child defilement cases in newspapers. Several respondents felt that religious and cultural norms often lead to selective reporting. One parent mentioned, *"In our community, if the perpetrator is a well-known person or someone respected in the church, newspapers don't carry the story much. They prefer to keep it quiet."* This suggests that high-profile individuals, especially those tied to religious institutions, can escape media scrutiny due to the social pressure to resolve such matters internally. Another community leader noted, *"People do not want to talk about these cases, talk less of exposing it to the media because they think it will bring shame to the families involved."* This points to how cultural values around

family honour and shame suppress public discourse on child defilement and as well, diminish its media salience.

Victim-blaming

The framing of victims and perpetrators emerged as a significant theme. Many respondents argued that newspapers often frame child defilement cases in a way that stigmatizes victims while downplaying the crime. One parent remarked, *“The way they write, you would think it is the girl’s fault, like maybe she did something wrong to invite the attack.”* This reflects a framing pattern where the media implicitly blames the victim, a narrative shaped by religious beliefs emphasizing purity and chastity. A community elder added, *“If the man is a religious leader or a rich person, they make it seem like he didn’t mean to do it, like he made a mistake.”* This suggests a sympathetic framing of perpetrators, especially those with power or status, which reinforces societal power structures and undermines the seriousness of the crime. Newspapers, therefore, contribute to a culture of victim-blaming and perpetrator protection, influenced by RCCF.

Diminished Public Awareness

Another theme that consistently emerged was the effect of RCCF on public awareness and legal responses to child defilement. Many respondents expressed that newspaper coverage influenced by RCCF often weakens public understanding of the issue. One community leader pointed out, *“People do not talk about these things openly because the newspapers make it seem like it is not serious. They don’t report it properly, and that is why families do not go to court or even escalate the issue. Instead they prefer to keep it a secret”.* This sentiment reflects how media framing, influenced by cultural and religious factors, discourages victims’ families from seeking justice, as the crime is perceived as less severe or a private matter. Another respondent noted, *“There are laws to protect children, but when the newspapers don’t give the stories the attention they deserve, the community does not act as they believe the end result will not justify the efforts put into it.”* This highlights how underreporting and biased framing prevent the public from fully understanding child protection laws, thus, leaving cases unresolved and perpetuating the cycle of abuse.

Discussion of Findings

The study explored audience perception on how Religo-Culturo-Contextual Factors (RCCF) influence newspaper salience and framing of child defilement in Osun State. The thematic analysis revealed key patterns regarding selective media attention, victim-blaming, and diminished public awareness. These findings align with previous studies but also highlight gaps in media coverage and public responses influenced by RCCF.

On selective media attention, the findings suggest that RCCF strongly influence which child defilement cases are covered by newspapers and how prominently they are reported. Participants indicated that newspapers often give less attention to cases involving influential community or religious figures, preferring to keep such matters private. This supports the work of Olawa (2023), who found that cultural taboos and religious pressures in Nigerian communities often lead to selective reporting of sexual crimes. In their study on rape and child defilement in Nigeria, they highlighted how media outlets sometimes avoid cases that could harm the reputation of religious or cultural institutions, focusing instead on less controversial stories.

Also, this finding ties into the broader issue of media gatekeeping, where editors and reporters decide which stories are newsworthy. In Osun State, RCCF act as informal gatekeepers, influencing what is deemed acceptable for public consumption. This is consistent with studies by McQuail (2010) on media ethics and editorial biases, where societal norms heavily influenced the prioritization of news content. The reluctance to cover sensitive topics, such as child defilement, stems from the potential backlash against violating cultural or religious expectations.

Furthermore, the study's findings regarding the framing of child defilement cases—particularly the victim-blaming narrative—are supported by prior research on media framing of sexual violence in Nigeria. Respondents frequently pointed out that newspapers tend to blame victims, often implying that they may have provoked the crime. This aligns with the findings of Adeleke, et al (2012) and Akani, et al. (2015). The studies revealed that Nigerian newspapers commonly frame victims of sexual violence in ways that shift the focus from the crime itself to the victim's behaviour, appearance, or background. This type of framing, influenced by religious and cultural beliefs, can reinforce stereotypes about purity and morality, especially in societies where traditional gender roles are dominant (Saint-Jacques, et al., 2012). In the present study, several respondents commented on how newspapers seem to emphasize cultural ideas about chastity and

sexual propriety, which indirectly blames the victim and excuses the perpetrator. However, this finding of victim-blaming is in contrary to the findings of Okoji (2023) who found that majority of the stories on child defilement published in Nigeria newspaper reported child defilement as negative (perpetrators should be blamed entirely).

The final key finding of the study, that RCCF diminish public awareness and reduce legal actions, reflects previous research on media influence and public engagement with legal systems. Respondents frequently mentioned that inadequate and biased media coverage discourages families from seeking justice for child defilement, as the crime is often framed as a private or less severe matter. This is consistent with the findings of Ajayi, et al. (2022), who explored the relationship between media framing and public willingness to engage with legal systems in cases of sexual violence. The study showed that when the media presents crimes like child defilement as isolated incidents or moral failings, it prevents the public from recognizing them as systemic issues that require legal and policy interventions.

Moreover, the lack of media salience reduces the likelihood of collective societal action. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting theory posits that the media plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse by determining which issues are seen as important. When child defilement is underreported or inadequately framed in the media, it does not become a significant part of the public agenda, leading to weak advocacy for legal reforms. This finding is crucial for understanding how RCCF, through media framing and salience, can suppress public awareness and discourage efforts to strengthen child protection laws in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study examined audience perception on how Religo-Culturo-Contextual Factors (RCCF) influence the salience and framing of child defilement in Osun State. Through in-depth interviews with parents and community leaders, the study revealed that RCCF significantly shapes media coverage, often leading to selective reporting, victim-blaming, and sympathetic portrayals of perpetrators. This not only diminishes public awareness but also deters legal actions and societal response to child defilement. As recommendation, newspapers should adopt more balanced and sensitive reporting practices which emphasize the human rights violations in child defilement cases rather than reinforcing cultural and religious biases. Also, journalists in Osun State should be trained to recognize and counteract RCCF in their reporting, ensuring that all

child defilement cases receive fair and consistent coverage. Lastly, media organizations should collaborate with NGOs to raise awareness about the legal and human rights dimensions of child defilement to counter RCCF-driven narratives that stigmatize victims.

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