ASSESSMENT OF MEDIA FRAMING OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA: A STUDY OF NAFDAC DRUG MARKET SHUTDOWN

NWOSU, Chidinma Felicia

Department of Mass Communication Ogbonnaya Onụ Polytechnic

Corresponding Author: chidinma.nwosu@abiastatepolytechnic.edu.ng chidinmanwosu74@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of media framing on public perception during the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) market shutdown in Aba, Southeast; Nigeria. Employing content analysis and public comment across four national newspapers, namely, Punch, Vanguard, Daily Trust, and The Guardian, this research investigates how framing strategies affected public understanding of the regulatory action. Grounded in Framing Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory, the study identifies three predominant media frames: public health, enforcement/legal, and socio-political/economic disruption. The findings indicate that while media reports predominantly echoed institutional narratives, public comments demonstrated considerable skepticism and socio-political apprehensions. The study concludes that media coverage inadequately represented the grassroots implications of the operation and recommends a more participatory and inclusive approach to government crisis communication.

Keywords: Media Framing, Government Communication, Southeast Nigeria, NAFDAC, Aba, Drug Market Shutdown, Communication Crisis

Introduction

Government regulatory actions, particularly in the health and safety sectors, frequently instigate intense public discourse, which is substantially influenced by how the media frames such actions (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In Nigeria, where institutional trust is often contested, the role of the media in shaping the narratives surrounding the legitimacy and implications of governmental actions is particularly significant (Nwabueze & Eze, 2021; Obasi & Njoku, 2022). A pertinent example is the shutdown of the unregulated pharmaceutical market in Aba, Abia State, enacted by NAFDAC, which garnered extensive media coverage and public interest.

The concept of framing, as elucidated by Entman (1993), involves the selection and emphasis of specific aspects of reality to cultivate a particular interpretation or evaluation of events. This construct is vital in understanding media influence, especially in contexts of regulatory or crisis situations. As observed by Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007), framing significantly influences how individuals comprehend and react to complex issues, including state-sanctioned interventions.

This process is particularly pertinent in Nigeria, where the intertwining of politics, regional identity, and economic vulnerability intensifies public sensitivity to state actions (Anyanwu, 2020). Furthermore, Agenda-Setting Theory, as developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), supports the notion that media not only report events but also shape public emphasis and discourse.

When media repeatedly highlight an issue through placement, frequency, and tone, they influence public perception of its significance (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). In the context of the NAFDAC operation,

newspaper coverage variously framed the shutdown as a public health initiative, an enforcement action, or a politically charged event. These frames consequently guided the public's understanding of the motives, impact, and legitimacy of the shutdown.

Additionally, the rise of digital media platforms has facilitated public responses to media framing through online comments and discourse. Audience reactions, particularly in the comment sections of online news articles and social media, now operate as both feedback mechanisms and alternative arenas for framing (Tsfati, Stroud, & Chotiner, 2020). This study analyzes audience responses to selected news reports to assess how individuals interpreted and contested the media narratives surrounding the NAFDAC shutdown.

Problem Statement

Despite the prevalence of research addressing media and crisis communication within Nigeria (Ojebuyi & Akinreti, 2019; Okonkwo, 2023), there exists a paucity of literature focusing specifically on Southeast Nigeria and regulatory interventions, such as the closure of the Aba drug market. While Salau (2021) and Wogu et al. (2019) have provided sector-specific insights regarding NAFDAC's communication limitations, they have not integrated this with a qualitative examination of public perception through online comment sections or user-generated discourse.

Works such as Onugha (2008) and Garba (2024) offer historical and strategic foundations for understanding regulatory communication; however, they do not explore the interaction between editorial framing and online public sentiment. This gap is significant, particularly in light of the ethnopolitical context of the region and the historical narratives of marginalization that inform public responses to government policy (Ikechukwu & Nwafor, 2021). This study, therefore aims to fill this gap by analyzing how selected Nigerian newspapers framed the NAFDAC regulatory shutdown.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Examine how selected Nigerian newspapers framed the NAFDAC regulatory shutdown of unlicensed drug markets in Aba, Southeast Nigeria.

2. Analyze the dominant themes and tone in the newspaper coverage of the NAFDAC operation.

3. Investigate public perception of the shutdown through audience responses in online comment sections.

4. Establish the correlation between newspaper framing and public reactions online.

5. Determine whether media reports served as extensions of official narratives or as platforms for public discourse.

The significance of this study lies in its capacity to bridge theoretical insights with empirical realities. It contributes to the literature on media governance, crisis reporting, and African public perception by focusing on a region-specific case with national implications. More importantly, it offers practical insights into how regulatory agencies and the media can foster more inclusive and credible communication during crises.

Literature Review

Government Communication in Southeast Nigeria

Government communication is the organized process through which public institutions disseminate information, clarify policies, and engage citizens to enhance democratic legitimacy (Pasquier, 2018). It is positioned at the intersection of political public relations, agenda-setting, and framing (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Theoretically, it serves both as a strategic messaging function and as an interactive democratic tool for ensuring transparency and accountability (Canel & Sanders, 2019).

In the Nigerian context, and particularly in the Southeast, government communication exists in a complex socio-political environment characterized by historical grievances, underdevelopment, and widespread distrust of political authority (Ugochukwu, 2024). Institutional structures often aim for centralized coordination to promote a unified voice, but this professionalization can produce politicized messaging that undermines public trust (Johansson & Raunio, 2020).

Research on related communication functions such as health crisis communication (Adelakun & Adnan, 2016) and regulatory campaigns like NAFDAC's media sensitization (Chiaghana, 2020; Kayode & Adeyeye, 2024) demonstrates the importance of clarity, credibility, and sustained engagement in influencing public perception.

Audience perception is a critical determinant of communication effectiveness. Studies from the Southeast indicate that social media is now a dominant political information source, but its messages are often interpreted through partisan or distrustful lenses (Okafor, 2023; Nwabueze & Eze, 2021; Onwe et al., 2020; Etumnu, & Williams-Etumnu, 2023). This aligns with broader African findings showing that while internet and television exposure can increase awareness, they may also reduce institutional trust when governance performance is questioned (Afrobarometer, 2025). Conversely, radio—especially in local languages—remains a relatively trusted medium due to accessibility and community resonance.

Framing theory underscores how issue presentation shapes public interpretation (Entman, 1993). Government narratives on security and development in the Southeast have at times mirrored the pattern observed in military operation framing in the Northeast, where certain frames marginalized civilian perspectives and reduced participatory dialogue (Iroanya & Okorie, 2024). Additionally, comment sections and interactive forums—if moderated for civility—can act as valuable arenas for citizen engagement (Tsfati et al., 2020).

Understanding how media construct meaning during regulatory crises requires an examination of framing processes and agenda-setting dynamics. Entman (1993) explains that framing involves the selection and salience of specific aspects of perceived reality to shape interpretation and evaluation. Similarly, Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) argue that frames influence not only how people interpret issues but also what issues they prioritize.

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda setting theory further illustrates this by demonstrating that media emphasis on certain topics—through placement, frequency, and prominence—directly shapes public perception of importance. In Nigeria, where institutional trust is often tenuous and regional identities strongly influence interpretation, the framing of government regulatory action takes on layered significance (Nwabueze & Eze, 2021).

Previous studies such as Adelakun and Adnan (2016) on Ebola reporting, highlighted how newspapers deployed containment-focused frames, privileging official narratives that emphasized medical control over broader structural factors. Similarly, Onwe et al. (2020) found that COVID-19 reportage often fused fatalistic warnings with policy alignment, framing the pandemic more as a policy challenge than a community tragedy.

Health communication

Whilst health crises have received analytical attention, the framing of enforcement by agencies like NAFDAC in informal drug markets remains underexplored. Amadi and Amadi (2014) investigated fake-drug publicity from a historical lens, revealing that media discourse often sanitized regulatory messaging without critically assessing accountability.

Furthermore, Kayode and Adeyeye (2024) examined pharmaceutical traceability campaigns, yet did not focus on crisis framing when enforcement escalates to public intervention. To further the study, Chiaghana (2020) examined consumer awareness of NAFDAC media campaigns in Southeast Nigeria, confirming that public sensitization through official messaging was uneven and often disconnected from grassroots visibility. This gap is compounded by evidence from Iroanya and Okorie (2024), who show that militarized frames in coverage of JTF operations reduced civilian engagement a cautionary parallel for reporting on regulatory shutdowns that rely on force.

Public commentary

Emerging scholarship underscores the importance of analyzing public commentary alongside media content. Tsfati, Stroud, and Chotiner (2020) argue that comment sections in online news media serve as arenas where framing is contested and renegotiated. However, few studies have applied this lens to regulatory enforcement schemes, such as those led by NAFDAC. This is a notable limitation in the literature, as public reaction provides critical insight into how media frames resonate or claw into existing experiences and perceptions.

Theoretical Framework

This research paper is anchored on three communication theories - Framing, Agenda setting and Situational communication crisis theory

Framing Theory, developed by Goffman and expanded by Entman, posits that media outlets structure information in ways that shape public interpretation (Entman, 1993). This theory is relevant in analyzing how newspapers frame narratives surrounding regulatory crackdowns such as the NAFDAC drug market shutdown in Southeast Nigeria.

Agenda-Setting Theory, advanced by McCombs and Shaw (1972), maintains that the media influences what the public considers important. By repeatedly emphasizing certain topics, the media prioritizes those issues in public consciousness. In the context of NAFDAC's regulatory enforcement, repeated front-page coverage and editorial framing can heighten perceived urgency and importance.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which suggests that the effectiveness of crisis response depends on how the organizations align their communication strategies with stakeholders'' expectations and the perceived severity of the event (Coombs, 2007). This theory supports NAFDAC's messaging and subsequent framing affected public reaction and trust.

Empirical Review

Several studies provide empirical backing to the relevance of framing and agenda-setting in media reports on government communication during crises. For example, Garba (2024) analyzed post-crisis PR in Nigeria's security sector and found that fragmented government messaging often led to public confusion and diminished institutional trust. Similarly, Adeyemi et al. (2025) evaluated the public perception of

Tinubu's state emergency declarations and discovered that inconsistent framing by various media outlets caused significant divergences in public opinion.

Similarly, Salau (2021) conducted a content analysis of federal agency communications during the codeine crisis and found limited engagement from agencies like NAFDAC and NDLEA on digital platforms, resulting in ineffective public sensitization. This resonates with Wogu, Eze, and Ukaegbu (2019), who assessed the NAFDAC Mobile Authentication Service in Southeast Nigeria and found minimal impact due to poor media penetration and linguistic disconnect with the local audience.

Historical insight of Onugha (2008), reviewed NAFDAC's earlier attempts to shut down open drug markets, highlighting the resistance from local traders and political actors. This contextual grounding is crucial for understanding the complexities of the 2024 Eziukwu Market shutdown. More recently, the WHO Nigeria Country Office and Public Media Campaign (PMC, 2021) documented the #TakeResponsibility campaign during COVID-19, noting that successful crisis communication depended on local-level adaptation and message clarity.

These lessons are highly applicable to understanding why public reactions to the NAFDAC shutdown varied in Southeast Nigeria. Moreover Public, discourse data, such as Reddit threads during the 2024 NAFDAC Eziukwu shutdown, show that citizens often expressed support for the crackdown but also criticized enforcement inconsistencies and long-standing regulatory neglect. This presents a unique opportunity to cross-analyze media framing with spontaneous public sentiment.

in sum, audience perception studies in the Southeast are not only evaluative but diagnostic, revealing structural weaknesses in government communication architecture and offering pathways for reform to strengthen democratic engagement.

Methodology

Research Design

This study being a descriptive design that set to examine how four major Nigerian newspapers:- Punch, Vanguard, The Guardian, and Daily Trust framed the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) shutdown of informal drug markets in Aba, Abia State. The research also explores how readers responded to these media frames through comment sections, thereby linking institutional narratives with public perception.

Qualitative content analysis was chosen for its strength in revealing underlying themes, narrative structures, and framing patterns within media texts (Krippendorff, 2018). This method is particularly effective for dissecting both the latent and manifest meanings in articles and user comments, making it highly suitable for investigating framing effects and agenda-setting processes (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Population of Study

The population of study is 300 comments and 20 articles. These were articles published between December and January 2025 during and immediately after the regulatory action retrieved from both print and online editions of the four newspapers. Qualitative sampling targeted 20 articles that explicitly referenced NAFDAC, Aba, drug markets, or regulatory enforcement, ensuring contextual focus and thematic relevance.

To capture public sentiment, over 300 reader comments were extracted from the online versions of these newspapers. Comments were chosen based on relevance to the subject matter and screened to ensure anonymity, aligning with ethical standards for content analysis and public data usage.

Sample size and Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling Technique was used to purposively selected newspaper based on different categories to include their national reach and editorial diversity. Punch and Vanguard cater largely to Southern and Southeast audiences, Daily Trust aligns more with Northern and federal perspectives, and The Guardian offers critical and policy-focused analysis.

Instrument of Data collection

Coding sheet was used as instrument for data collection.

Method of Data analysis

The coding process unfolded in two stages. First, each article was independently reviewed and coded for framing categories: - Public Health, Enforcement/Legal, and Socio-Political/Economic Disruption as derived from Entman's framework (1993). Articles were also classified by tone: Supportive, Neutral, or Critical, based on language and narrative stance. The second stage involved coding reader comments using thematic analysis, identifying predominant motifs such as Health/Safety, Trust/Distrust, Economic Vulnerability, and Political Bias.

Reliability

To ensure reliability, two independent coders were engaged, and inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, with scores exceeding the threshold of 0.80, indicating strong consistency (Krippendorff, 2018). Triangulation was achieved through the inclusion of multiple newspapers and comment sources, and peer debriefing was conducted with media studies scholars to validate analytical interpretations (Krippendorff, 2018; Tsfati et al., 2020).

Ethical consideration were observed as publicly available articles and comment sections in public do the main were used, and personal identifiers were anonymized in accordance with ethical guidelines. No private data was accessed or disclosed.

Results and Discussion" section was presented with suitable visuals and frequency tables

Data Analysis and presentation

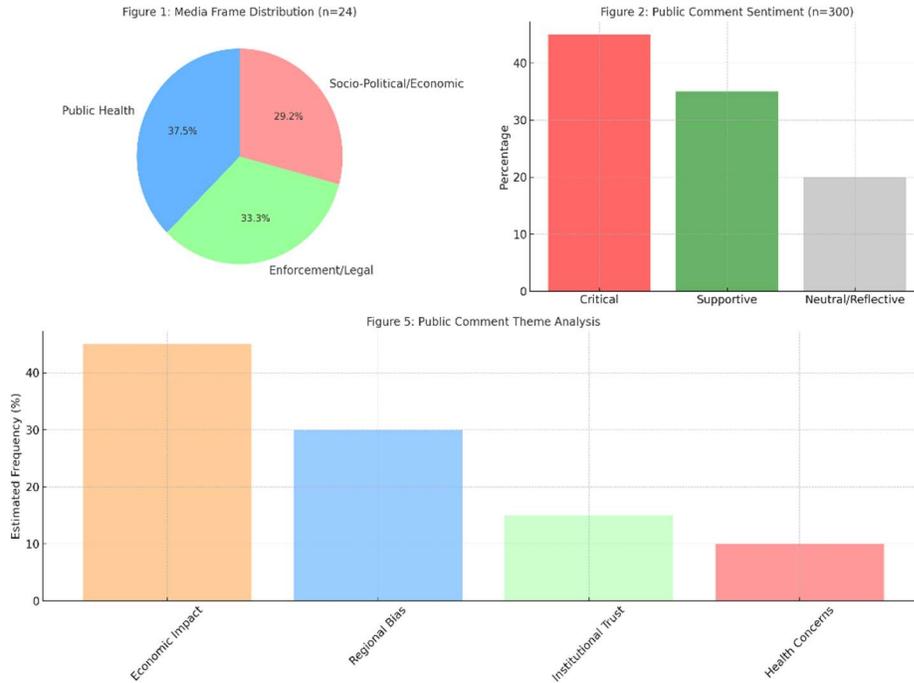**Data collected from the sample article and public comments were analysed and presented in this section**

Figure 1: Data visualization Overview

Source: Field Data, 2024

Table 1: Media Frame Distribution Coverage (n=24)

Frame Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Public Health	9	37.5
Enforcement / Legal	8	33.3
Socio-Political / Economic	7	29.2

Source: Field Data, 2025

Interpretation Table 1: The distribution shows that out of the 24 articles collected for media framing, 37.5% being 9 articles framed the NAFDAC shutdown in public health, while 33.% (8) framed Enforcement/legal, the remaining (7) 29.2% framed their in Socio-Political/ Economic.

Table 2: Public comment Sentiment Distribution (n=300)

Sentiment Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Critical	135	45.0
Supportive	105	35.0
Neutral / Reflective	60	20.0

Source: Field Data, 2025.

Interpretation Out of 300 reader comments, 45% were critical, 35% supportive, and 20% neutral or reflective. Thie shows a divided public response, with a plurality opposing the shutdown due to its economic consequences.

Table 3: Theme VS. Tone correlation Matrix

Frame Category	Tone Alignment	Percentage (%)	Representative Headline
Public Health	Supportive	35.00	NAFDAC uncovers fake Peak Milk, Hennessy, Coca-Cola, others in Aba
Enforcement / Legal	Neutral	20.0	NAFDAC shuts 150 shops, seizes N5bn fake products in Abia market.
Socio-Political / Economic	Critical	45.5	Traders lament loss of livelihood

Source: Field Data, 2025.

Tone analysis showed that media tone was perfectly aligned with the 8dominant frame. Public Health stories were 100% supportive, Enforcement frames were neutral, and Socio-Political/Economic stories were exclusively critical. This suggests deliberate editorial framing to influence audience perception based on the intended narrative.

Table 4: Newspaper Coverage Bias by Dominant Frame

Newspaper	Dominant Editorial Frame	Percentage %
Punch	Socio-Political / Economic	329.2
The Guardian	Public Health	37.5
Daily Trust	Enforcement / Legal	33.3

Source: Field Data, 2024

Interpretation The dominant frame was Public Health (37.5%), followed by Enforcement/Legal (33.3%) and Socio-Political/Economic (29.2%). This distribution indicates a clear editorial priority toward legitimizing the shutdown as a public safety measure while still acknowledging socio-economic concerns

Table 5 Public comment Theme and Frequencies (n=300)

Comment theme	Frequency (f	Percentage (%)	Illustrative Quotes
Economic Impact	**135**	**45.0**	Shutdown of the Cemetery Market again—it'll hurt vendors,
Regional Bias	90	30.0	Why target Southeast?; Ethnic marginalization Calling it a 'weapons-of-mass-destruction' market hits hard—it affects our city's reputation and honest traders too,"
Institutional Trust	45	15.0	They've shut down 150 shops in one day—this kind of policing is what we need."
Health Concerns	30	10.0	"It's scary what they found—noodles, milk, yoghurt… If these are fake, our kids drink poison,

Source: Field Data, 2024

Interpretation Thematic coding of public responses revealed four key concerns: economic hardship (45%), regional/ethnic bias (30%), institutional trust or mistrust (15%), and public health concerns (10%). These underscore deeper tensions between regulatory authority and public trust, especially in marginalized regions.

Discussion of Findings

The Aba/Eziukwu Market NAFDAC shutdowns in December 2024 prompted extensive media coverage across The Guardian, PUNCH, and Daily Trust. Across the three newspapers, reporting emphasized three primary frames: Health, Enforcement/Legal, and Socio-Political & Economic. Analysis of public commentary indicates that citizens largely echoed these frames, demonstrating how media narratives influence perception and civic discourse in crisis-prone contexts.

Health Frame

Newspapers foregrounded the direct health risks posed by fake or substandard products, including adulterated noodles, powdered milk, yoghurt, alcoholic beverages, and expired drugs. Public commentary closely mirrored this frame. For example, @NwakaD.C. commented: "It's scary what they found—noodles, milk, yoghurt… If these are fake, our kids drink poison," while @AsoMamaOkeke warned, "Scary—they included noodles, powdered milk, and yoghurt…" @MagicFM_Aba added, "NAFDAC you guys need to do more because ABA is filled with fake and substandard goods… Those our brothers and sisters are evil."

These responses show that citizens internalized the media's health narrative, amplifying concern for personal and community wellbeing. According to Agenda-Setting Theory, the newspapers' emphasis on health risks effectively prioritized consumer safety in the public's perception, shaping both awareness and concern. SCCT frames these concerns within a preventable crisis, with NAFDAC's actions functioning as protective measures that manage public perception and reduce reputational risk.

Enforcement / Legal Frame

Media reports detailed NAFDAC's decisive enforcement actions, including raids, shop closures, and product seizures, presenting the agency as both authoritative and proactive. Public commentary reflected strong alignment: @Chinedu_Uzor wrote, "Finally, they're doing the job—people will think twice before selling expired goods," @RapidTV_News emphasized, "This shows NAFDAC isn't sleeping.

Enforcement matters," and @OrientalTimes1 highlighted, "They've shut down 150 shops in one day—this kind of policing is what we need." Citizens' validation of regulatory action demonstrates that media framing can legitimize institutional authority and encourage compliance. SCCT underscores this alignment, showing that visible, corrective actions in preventable crises reinforce organizational credibility and mitigate reputational threats.

In Socio-Political & Economic Frame

Coverage also addressed the broader socio-political and economic implications of the shutdowns, including disruption to vendors, market ethics, and the city's reputation. Public commentary echoed these concerns: @GistReelOnline noted, "Calling it a 'weapons-of-mass-destruction' market hits hard—it affects our city's reputation and honest traders too," @AbaMarketWatchNG observed, "Shutdown of the Cemetery Market again—it'll hurt vendors, but maybe reshapes market ethics," and @IfeanyiOkafor commented, "NAFDAC shutting down 150 shops in Aba isn't just law, it's saying enough—this corrupt system must change."

By consistently reporting on these socio-economic dimensions, the newspapers set the public agenda, elevating awareness of governance, ethics, and economic responsibility. SCCT suggests that reinforcing these broader frames through media coverage supports normative guidance, helping citizens interpret the crisis beyond immediate health and enforcement concerns.

Across all three newspapers, frame consistency created a coherent narrative that citizens internalized and amplified in their commentary. The Health, Enforcement/Legal, and Socio-Political/Economic frames expressed by Daily Trust (Dec 2024); PUNCH (Dec 2024) and The Guardian (Dec 2024) mutually reinforced one another, producing a multi-dimensional public discourse.

Agenda-setting theory explains how repeated emphasis on these issues prioritized them in public perception, while SCCT contextualizes NAFDAC's interventions as strategic responses to a preventable public health crisis. Citizens' echoing of media frames not only demonstrates alignment with the news agenda but also contributes to a feedback loop in which public perception validates regulatory action and amplifies crisis awareness.

Here's the expanded prose version of your points:

Implications

The interplay between media framing, public commentary, and strategic crisis communication creates a dynamic environment with far-reaching societal consequences. When the media adopts particular frames in its reporting whether health-related, enforcement-oriented, or socio-economic it not only shapes public understanding of events but also influences institutional trust and policy responses. First, public awareness and protective behavior are heightened when health frames dominate coverage.

By highlighting the potential dangers of unsafe products, the media prompts communities to become more vigilant, leading consumers to avoid goods that could pose health risks. This framing also fosters peer-to-peer information sharing, where individuals warn family and friends, creating a ripple effect of protective behavior across society.

Second, the legitimization of regulatory authority is reinforced through enforcement frames. When news stories showcase NAFDAC's decisive actions against violators, they not only communicate that the agency is fulfilling its mandate but also strengthen public confidence in its oversight role. This visibility can serve as a deterrent to potential offenders, signaling that breaches of safety and quality standards will not go unchecked. Third, socio-political reflection emerges from socio-economic frames.

By situating crises within broader conversations about ethics, governance, and market responsibility, the media encourages citizens to think beyond immediate health hazards and consider systemic issues. This framing stimulates debate on corporate accountability, the adequacy of regulatory frameworks, and the ethical obligations of market actors, thereby deepening civic engagement.

Again, agenda influence occurs through the repetition of certain narratives and issues. When media outlets consistently report on a crisis with a specific framing, they direct public attention to those themes, shaping societal perceptions of which issues matter most. This selective emphasis can elevate public concern and push these matters higher on the policy agenda, influencing political discourse and decision-making.

Finally, crisis management effectiveness is enhanced when Strategic Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) principles are integrated into public messaging. By aligning communication strategies with stakeholder expectations and perceptions, NAFDAC can reduce reputational damage, maintain transparency, and bolster trust during a crisis. Clear, timely, and empathetic messaging not only addresses immediate concerns but also positions the agency as a credible and responsive public institution in the long term.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings reveal that the media role in crisis communication remains crucial but contested. The frames used by newspapers significantly shaped public understanding, but not in a uniform manner. Public perception was contingent not only on the media narrative but also on personal, regional, and economic contexts that informed how readers engaged with those narratives.

The analysis affirms that the media do not just reflect reality they construct and negotiate it with their audience. Thus, it becomes clear that effective government communication must go beyond technical regulation and engage with the social meanings and perceptions that frame public response. This study concludes that newspaper coverage of the NAFDAC drug market shutdown in Aba framed the event predominantly as a public health and regulatory issue.

However, the public response, as captured through comment sections, reflected deeper socio-economic and political interpretations. This disconnect underscores the need for more inclusive reporting that captures affected voices during regulatory crises. This research contributes to media and communication scholarship by showing how government actions and media narratives interact to shape public consciousness particularly during high-stakes regulatory interventions in sensitive geopolitical regions.

The researcher recommends that:

1. Journalistic Balance: Reporters should actively seek perspectives from impacted communities during enforcement coverage to create a more balanced narrative.

2. Government Communication Training: Regulatory agencies like NAFDAC should invest in public-oriented messaging strategies to foster trust and dialogue.

3. Participatory Platforms: News outlets should moderate and analyze comment sections as a rich source of public insight, integrating that feedback into follow-up stories.

4. The paper proposed a future study could extend the analysis to include broadcast media or evaluate regional differences in framing the same event.

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