



Newspaper Framing of the May 2023 Fuel Subsidy Removal by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's Administration in Nigeria

¹Elazeh, Abisabo Muazu, & ²Santas Tsegyu,

¹Department of Mass Communication, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria

²Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria

¹<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7853-634X>

²<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0880-3775>

*Corresponding author: richmuaz@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Background: On May 29, 2023, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, in his inaugural speech, announced the removal of fuel subsidies in Nigeria in an effort to address the many economic challenges facing the country. This decision was met with mixed reactions and controversies from the public, with some supporting the move as necessary for economic reform, while others criticised it as a burden on the already struggling populace. The media effectively reported these reactions in line with its crucial role of shaping public opinion and perception of government policies and actions. Newspaper framing, in particular, can influence how individuals understand and interpret political decisions.

Objective: This study investigated framing of the May 2023 fuel subsidy removal by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's Administration in *Leadership* and *The Nation* newspapers in Nigeria with a focus on prominence, story type/genre used, and direction of story.

Method: The research design adopted for the study was content analysis, the theories used were Framing Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory. Further, the population of the study was 280 and the sample size was 112. This was because the study purposively selected the Mondays and Thursdays Editions of the two newspapers. Newspapers typically run serious, exclusive stories on Mondays and reserve other stories for use on Thursdays, which is the last working day before Friday hence the decision to narrow the sample to Mondays and Thursdays. The sampling techniques were purposive and convenience sampling.

Results: A key finding of the research was that the economic frame was the most dominant frame used by both newspapers in their framing of the issue, suggesting that the newspapers focused more on the economic implications of either removing or retaining fuel subsidy.

Conclusion: The study concludes that while the *Leadership* newspaper was sympathetic to the fears of Nigerians about the removal of fuel subsidy, *The Nation* newspaper supported the government's policy essentially because of its ownership preference.

Unique contribution: The study contributes to framing studies and literature by providing insights into how Nigerian press covered the fuel subsidy regime and how it has impacted the Nigerian economy.

Recommendations: The researcher recommended, among other things, that journalists should frame issues based on public interest. The journalists should also ensure that newspapers to cover more stories about public interest issues and prioritise socially responsible reporting.

Keywords: Framing, Select Newspapers, May 2023, Fuel Subsidy Removal



INTRODUCTION

The mass media play critical role in educating, enlightening, and informing the public. It shapes public opinion and sets the agenda for the public through framing (Gramson & Modigliani, 1989; Graber, 1984), cited in Marrie (2010). Rabiou (2019), citing Age, Ault, and Emery (2002) and Baran and Davies (2007), observes that the media offers a platform for the discussion of ideas. However, as Marrie (2010) observes, because much of the information received from media outlets is second-hand, audiences are subject to frames constructed by the media. The mass media in Nigeria, especially the newspapers, report on critical issues that affect the nation and its people. One issue that attracts the attention of the mass media is fuel subsidy. Fuel subsidy is an economic strategy used by the government to keep the prices of fuel low so that the citizens can easily afford them. Onyeizugbe & Onwuka (2012), note that fuel subsidy is part of the deregulation of the downstream sector of the petroleum industry based on the neoliberal economic prescriptions of the IMF and The World Bank.

The debate around fuel subsidy in Nigeria largely centres on whether the government should remove or sustain it. The government provides subsidy to promote economic and social policy objectives. Subsidies allow citizens to pay little for subsidised products or services, while the government pays the difference. Meanwhile, fuel subsidy had existed in Nigeria since the 1970s, when the government sold petrol to citizens at a price lower than the cost of production to ameliorate the effects of the then-rising global oil prices. They were eventually institutionalised when the government promulgated the Price Control Decree in 1977, which criminalised selling specific products, including petrol, for more than the regulated price. Essentially, the military regime of the Late General Murtala Mohammed enacted the decree to cushion the impact of inflation in the 1970s due to the global energy price increase. Subsequent military and civilian administrations sustained the fuel subsidy payment policy. The first attempt at outright removal was made in 2012 by President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, who insisted that it was unsustainable. Of course, his attempt was fiercely resisted, leading to nationwide protests.

In August 2021, President Muhammadu Buhari signed the Petroleum Industry Bill into Law. The law provides for removing the subsidy by February 2022, but the administration did not suspend fuel subsidy. According to the civic-tech group BudgIT (2023), the administration spent approximately N11.4 trillion on subsidy payments during its eight-year tenure from 2015 to 2023. The Nigerian government paid N316 billion for fuel subsidy in 2015, N99 billion in 2016, and N141.6 billion in 2017. It spent N722 billion subsidising the cost of petrol in 2018, N578 billion in 2019, and N134 billion in 2020. In 2021, it earmarked N1.42 trillion for petrol subsidy, and a sum of N4.3 trillion was budgeted for subsidy in 2022. The trend continues with the government, in 2023, budgeting N3.6 trillion for petrol subsidy for six months. The government's N3.6 trillion budget for six months of subsidy payments translates to N560 billion every month, dwarfing expenditures on education, health, and infrastructure for the same period.

In the build-up to the 2023 general election, fuel subsidy removal became a central issue with all three major presidential candidates, Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) and the eventual winner, Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All-



Progressives Congress (APC), promising its removal. The Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) also laid a legal framework for ending the subsidy. However, the debate over subsidy removal was revisited immediately after President Bola Ahmed Tinubu was sworn in in May 2023. While presenting his inaugural speech, President Tinubu declared that the subsidy was gone, insisting it had been marred by abuse, corruption, and fuel smuggling. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's suspension of petrol subsidy payment was widely covered by major national newspapers, perhaps because of the realisation that citizens require copious information about subsidy removal. After its removal, petrol prices sharply increased, with attendant consequences for prices of other essential commodities, including transportation, healthcare services, rent, and school fees.

Although Nigerians continue to groan over the subsidy removal, President Tinubu said that the nation would have gone bankrupt had his administration not discontinued fuel subsidy payments.

In their study on “Impact of Fuel Subsidy Removal on the Indonesian Economy”, Widodo, T., G. A. Sahadewo, S. U. Setiastuti and M. Chaerriyah (2012) confirmed that subsidy removal affected income distribution of individuals, firms and the government. However, there has been a global call for fuel subsidy reforms because policymakers have reservations regarding the efficacy of subsidy payment (Sdravevichet et al., 2014; Coady et al., 2015; Ebeke & Nguana, 2015; Jakob et al., 2015; Salehi-Isfahani et al., 2015) cited in Omotosho (2019).

Nevertheless, as Onyeizugbe and Onwuka (2012) assert, there are different reasons for introducing or removing subsidies. While environmental issues, international trade, and competitiveness are the main drivers of policy in developed economies, welfare, poverty alleviation and election cycle politics are part of the reasons governments in developing countries introduce subsidy payment (Onyeizugbe & Onwuka, 2012). Fuel subsidy is part of plans to cushion the impacts of oil price shocks on the economy. The government uses it to control how the fuel is sold locally. Concerns have been raised about how well-targeted fuel subsidy protects the poor and vulnerable who need them the most. Those who believe that energy subsidies have outlived their usefulness have called for their abolition to free up fiscal resources for economic development.

However, when on May 2023, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu announced the removal of the petrol subsidy it was followed by marked a steep increase in the price of petroleum, with the cost moving from N189 per litre to N557 before eventually closing at N910 per litre at the NNPC Limited's outlets and N980/litre at outlets ran by independent marketers. This steep increase in petrol per litre translated to a sharp increase in transportation, foodstuffs, rent and school fees, among other essentials. This led to economic hardship for Nigerians, especially the low-income earners. According to the Nigeria Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the food inflation rate in December 2023 was 33.93%, 10.18% higher than the 23.75% rate recorded in December 2022 (NBS, 2023 consumer price index). Because the action caused commodity prices to rise and increased hardship in the country, some Nigerians condemned the removal of the subsidy as a poorly thought-out policy. This, understandably, formed an issue of coverage by the media. The



focus of this study is on how *Leadership* and *The Nation* newspapers reported the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy by the President Bola Tinubu.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What was the volume of coverage given to the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy by the *Leadership* and *The Nation* newspapers in Nigeria?
2. What prominence did the *Leadership* and *The Nation* newspapers give to the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria?
3. What were the story types or genre used in the coverage of the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy by the *LEADERSHIP* and *The Nation* newspapers in Nigeria?
4. What was the direction of coverage given to the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy issue by *Leadership* and *The Nation* newspapers in Nigeria?
5. What were the dominant frames used by *Leadership* and *The Nation* newspapers in their coverage of the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Media and News Framing

The increasing popularity of news framing in media analysis has attracted a plethora of scholarships from media scholars worldwide. According to Entman (2007), cited in Nwabueze & Egbra (2016), frames means the selection of certain aspects of a situation and highlighting them in the media in a way that promotes a specific definition, interpretation, or evaluation of recommendation. Framing is the power of journalists to select what to discuss and how to discuss them (Kolawole, 2021). Vreese (2022) notes that frames have several locations, including in the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture. These components consist of frame-building, frame-setting and individual and societal level consequences of framing. He describes frame-building as the factors that influence the structural qualities of news frames. Vreese asserts that factors internal and external to journalism determine how journalists and news organisations frame issues.

Vreese (2022), notes further that frame-setting refers to the interaction between media frames and individuals' prior knowledge and predispositions. Frames in the news may affect learning, interpretation, and evaluation of issues and events. This part of the framing process has been investigated most elaborately, often with the goal to explore the extent to which and under what circumstances audiences reflect and mirror frames made available to them in, for example, the news. The consequences of framing can be conceived on the individual and the societal level. An individual-level consequence may be altered attitudes about an issue based on exposure to certain frames. On the societal level, Vreese concludes, frames may contribute to shaping social level processes such as political socialisation, decision-making, and collective actions.



Further, Scheufele & Tewksbury (2017) connect the dots between framing, agenda-setting, and priming. They argue that the emerging body of research on framing, agenda setting, and priming has signalled the latest paradigm shift in political-communication research. Framing is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterised in news reports can influence how audiences understand it. To efficiently process new information, individuals apply interpretive schemas or primary frameworks to classify and interpret it meaningfully. Framing, therefore, is both a macro-level and a micro-level construct.

REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES

A number of issues have been subjects of newspaper framing, both in Nigeria and globally; however, very few studies have been conducted in the area of fuel subsidy removal. Ezeah & Abodunrin (2016), studied: “Fuel Subsidy Removal Strike in Nigeria: A Study of Selected National Newspaper Reports”. Using content analysis, the researchers studied *Daily Sun*, *The Punch*, and *Daily Trust*. The research findings showed that the *Daily Sun* had a coverage level of 38.26%, *The Punch* had a coverage level of 32.13%, and the *Daily Trust* had a coverage level of 32.13%. Concerning how the selected newspapers directed their stories, findings of the research showed that the advertorial content on the fuel subsidy removal issue by the *Daily Sun* was 67.2%; that of *The Punch* was 3.5%; while that of the *Daily Trust* was 29.3%.

Further, the number of columns written on the issue by the *Daily Sun* was 57.7%; that of *The Punch* was 12.7%; while that of the *Daily Trust* was 29.6%. Concerning the number of feature stories written on the issues, the *Daily Sun* had 0%; *The Punch* had 42.9%; while *Daily Trust* had 57.1%. Further, for editorial, *Daily Sun* had 28.6%; *The Punch* was 50%; while that of the *Daily Trust* was 21.4%. Concerning photographs, *Daily Sun* had 37.6%; *The Punch* had 41.5%; while *Daily Trust* had 21.0%. For illustrations/cartoons, *Daily Sun* had 17.1%; *The Punch* had 32.9%; while *Daily Trust* had 50%. Also, concerning readers’ opinions, *Daily Sun* had 40%; *The Punch* had 33.3%; while *Daily Trust* had 26.7%. In terms of letters to the editors, *Daily Sun* had 25.0%; *The Punch* had 35.7%; while *Daily Trust* had 39.3%. For interviews, *Daily Sun* had 54.9%; *The Punch* had 19.6%; while *Daily Trust* 25.5%. And finally, concerning news reports, *Daily Sun* had 37.1%; *The Punch* had 29.6%; while *Daily Trust* had 33.3%. The authors concluded that the newspapers were found to be subjective in their reportage, thereby raising ethical questions. They recommended that editors should consider national interest as important while reporting a crisis.

In a related study, Aderogba (2017) carried out research entitled: “A Retrospective Examination of 2012 Fuel Subsidy Removal Crisis in Nigeria: Content Analysis of Selected National Daily”. Using content analysis as the research design, the researcher studied four Nigerian newspapers: *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, *ThisDay*, and *Compass*. Findings from the research showed that the number of news stories published by *The Punch* on the issue was 21.72%; feature was 4.18%; editorial was 0.32%; news analysis was 0.24%; interview was 0%; pictorial illustration was 8.69%; while advertorial was 0%. For *The Guardian*, news stories constituted 9.25%; feature was 8.29%; editorial was 0.24%; news analysis was 0.48%; interview was 0.72%; pictorial illustration was 6.03%; while advertorial was 0.88%. For *ThisDay*, the number of news stories was 13.92%; feature was 4.42%; editorial was 0.24%; news analysis was 0.64%; interview was



0.64%; pictorial illustration was 2.65%; while advertorial was 0.8%. For the *Compass* newspaper, news story constituted 10.23%; feature was 1.45%; editorial was 0.08%; news analysis was 0%; interview was 0.48%; pictorial illustration was 2.89%; while advertorial was 0.48%. Another finding from the research showed that in terms of prominence given to the issue, The Punch published 2.33% of front page stories, 0.32% of back page stories, and 32.5% inside page stories. For *The Guardian*, the front page stories were 2.01%; back page stories were 0.48%; while inside page stories were 23.41%. For *ThisDay*, front page stories were 2.09%; back page stories were 0.16%; while inside page stories were 21.078%. And for *Compass*, front page stories were 1.21%; back page stories were 0.24%; while inside page stories were 10.94%.

In terms of slant, findings indicated that 76.12% of the stories published by the four newspapers were negative towards the government, 16.25% were positive, and 7.56% were neutral. Finally, in terms of the themes of the stories published by the four newspapers, 63.4% were against the removal of fuel subsidy; 15.85% were for the removal of fuel subsidy; 5.56% were in support of protest/strike; 2.97% were on violence/fatality; 2.01% were on the inefficiency of the refineries; while 1.89% were on corruption in the oil industry. Finally, the sources of information on the issue were 45.33% from government sources, 43.04% from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), 9.82% from individuals, 1.37% from foreign sources, and 0.24% from news agencies. The author concluded that the Nigerian media, especially newspapers, were not in support of the removal of fuel subsidy.

From the review of empirical studies above, only two were done on issues relating to fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria, but none on the May 2023 fuel subsidy removal by the President Tinubu Administration. This study fills that knowledge gap.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is anchored the Framing Theory and the Agenda-Setting Theory. Framing theory, propounded by Erving Goffman in 1974, emphasises how the media accord importance to a story by highlighting certain aspects to allow for interpretation and context. It is considered very apt for this study because it deals with the prominence with which the selected newspapers accord to report about fuel subsidy removal. According to Entman (1993), cited in Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma (2022), framing strives to present a message in a manner that supports a specified issue description, causal interpretation, moral judgment and therapeutic prescription of the item described. Framing is about selection, emphasis and presentation. Essentially, this selection starts with the reporter who determines what is newsworthy in his value judgment. Stories are selected, emphasised through placement as front page, back page and then presented. All of these act underscores framing.

As Mohammed and Asemah (2021), cited in Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma (2022) assert, Framing Theory indicates that how the media present messages to the audience influences how the audience processes the information received. Framing theory describes how the media, through how it defines and describes an issue, tells the audience how to think about issues in the news.



The Agenda-Setting Theory deals with how the media prioritise certain issues and defines those issues as important to the public. It focuses on media messages and their influence. According to this theory, how the media reports a story sets the agenda for the public about what to think and discuss. The major thrust of the agenda theory is that the mass media set an agenda for the public to follow. The theory can be traced to Lippmann's book, *Public Opinion* (Asemah et al., 2022). In fact, McCombs (2018) referred to Lippmann as the intellectual father of agenda-setting theory.

METHODOLOGY

This research was based on content analysis. The population of the study was 280 editions of *Leadership* and *The Nation* newspapers published from Monday to Friday, for seven months covering June 1 to December 31st, 2023. The study adopted purposive sampling technique. The study purposively selected Monday and Thursday editions of the two newspapers because Newspapers typically run serious, exclusive stories on Mondays and reserve other stories for use on Thursdays, which is the last working day before Friday. The sample size was 112 editions of the Mondays and Thursdays publications of the selected newspaper published from June 1st to December, 31st, 2023. The units of analysis of this research were volume of coverage (frequency of reports), story direction (slant or tone), story placement (prominence), story type, and framing of stories. To examine the framing of the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy by the selected newspapers, all the news, features, editorials and opinion articles were analysed. However, the explanation of the units of analysis is given below:

1. **Volume of coverage:** This is the total number of editions published by the two selected newspapers on the issue.
2. **Prominence:** This implies where the stories on the fuel subsidy removal issue were located in the selected newspapers whether as front page, back page, inside page, or centrespread.
3. **Story type/genre:** This refers to the forms in which issues on the fuel subsidy removal were presented in the selected newspapers. This can be straight news, feature stories, columns, opinion articles, inter views, editorials, cartoons, and pictures.
4. **Direction/slant:** This refers to the tone of the reportage. In this case, the tone could be positive, neutral, or negative.
5. **Framing:** This refers to how the selected newspapers highlighted the issue of fuel subsidy removal in order to make it memorable for their audience.

The content categories included the nature of the story, frequency of coverage and placement of the story. On coding, contents were categorised into distinct themes or frames based on the way the select newspapers report the 2023 fuel subsidy removal. The coding was based on: “economic frame”, “political frame”, “social justice and equity frame”, “accountability and corruption frame”, “public reaction and protest frame”, as well as “sacrifice and patriotism frame”. The inter-coder reliability is based on Holsti's Formula (1969) cited in Wimmer & Dominick (2015) and expressed as follows:

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{2M}{N}$$



$$N_1 + N_2$$

Where M is the number of coding decisions on which the two coders agree;
 N₁ and N₂ are the total number of coding decisions by the first and second coders, respectively.
 So, following the above, reliability is given thus:

$$\frac{2(37)}{40+40} = \frac{2 \times 37}{80} = \frac{74}{80} = 0.9$$

The measuring instrument was quite reliable, as a relatively high inter-coder coefficient of 0.9 was achieved. According to Wimmer & Dominick (2015), the baseline of the inter-coder reliability result is 0.7; while the method of data analysis involved simple percentages, and frequency tables.

RESULT

Out of the 56 editions for each of the selected newspapers, the volume of coverage of the May 2023 fuel subsidy removal issue is presented below:

Table 1: Volume of Coverage by the *Leadership* and *The Nation* Newspapers

S/N	Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage
1	Leadership	48	53.3%
2	The Nation	42	46.7%
	Total	90	100%

From Table 1 above, it is clear that the *Leadership* newspaper published more stories on the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy issue by the President Bola Tinubu Administration. For *The Nation* newspaper, it was less; this may be attributed to the fact that the president is the owner of The Nation newspaper, and so it did not want to amplify the condemnations that trailed the issue. Concerning the prominence given to the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy issue, the table below presents the results:

Table 2: Prominence Given to the Reportage of the May 2023 Removal of Fuel Subsidy in Nigeria

S/N	Placement	Leadership	The Nation	Total	Percentage
1	Front page	16 (33.3%)	12 (28.6%)	28	31.1%
2	Inside page	28 (58.3%)	24 (57.1%)	52	57.8%
3	Centrespread	2 (4.2%)	2 (4.8%)	4	4.4%
4	Back page	2 (4.2%)	4 (9.5%)	6	6.7%
	Total	48	42	90	100%

From Table 2 above, in terms of the prominence given to the reportage of the issue, more stories were on the inside page than other pages. This could be attributed to the fact that the inside pages of a newspaper, especially print and the e-editions usually have more pages than the rest part of the newspaper. Further, concerning how each of the selected newspapers gave prominence to the reportage of the issue, the *Leadership* newspaper gave more prominence than *The Nation* newspaper. Again, this is quite understandable because *The Nation* newspaper is owned by



President Tinubu. The study also sought to determine the story types or genre used in covering the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy. Below is the presentation of the result:

Table 3: Story Types or Genre Used in the Coverage of the May 2023 Removal of Fuel Subsidy in Nigeria

S/N	Story Types	Leadership	The Nation	Total	Percentage
1	Straight news	22 (24.4%)	18 (20%)	40	44.5%
2	Feature stories	8 (8.9%)	6 (6.7%)	14	15.6%
3	Columns	4 (4.4%)	4 (4.4%)	8	8.9%
3	Opinion articles	6 (6.7%)	4 (4.4%)	10	11.1%
4	Interviews	2 (2.2%)	3 (3.3%)	5	5.6%
5	Editorials	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.1%)	2	2.2%
6	Cartoons	2 (2.2%)	2 (2.2%)	4	4.4%
7	Pictures	3 (3.3%)	4 (4.4%)	7	7.7%
	Total	48	42	90	100%

From Table 3 above, the dominant story type or genre of news used by the two selected newspapers was straight news. The *Leadership* newspaper carried more straight news than *The Nation* newspaper. In addition, the study equally sought to determine the direction of coverage of the stories on the issue. Below is the presentation of the result:

Table 4: Direction of Coverage of the May 2023 Fuel Subsidy Removal in Nigeria

S/N	Direction/Slant	Leadership	The Nation	Total	Percentage
1	Positive	8 (8.9%)	28 (31.1%)	36	40%
2	Neutral	10 (11.1%)	10 (11.1%)	20	22.2%
3	Negative	30 (33.3%)	4 (4.4%)	34	37.8%
	Total	48	42	90	100%

From Table 5 above, in terms of the direction/slant of the coverage of the issue by the two selected newspapers, *The Nation* newspaper published more positive stories on fuel subsidy removal suggesting that it supported the policy. While the *Leadership* newspaper published more negative stories about the issue, the two newspapers paired on neutrality of coverage. Finally, on framing of the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy by the two selected newspapers, which is the central thesis of this research, the result is the presented in the table below:



Table 5: Framing of the May 2023 Fuel Subsidy Removal in Nigeria

S/N	Dominant Frame	Leadership	The Nation	Frequency	Percentage
1	Economic frame	18 (20%)	14 (15.6%)	32	35.6%
2	Political frame	8 (8.9%)	6 (6.7%)	14	15.6%
3	Social justice/equity frame	8 (8.9%)	0 (0%)	8	8.9%
4	Accountability/corruption	6 (4.4%)	10 (11.1%)	16	17.7%
5	Public reactions/protest frame	6 (6.7%)	2 (2.2%)	8	8.9%
6	Sacrifice/patriotism frame	2 (2.2%)	10 (11.1%)	12	13.3%
	Total	48	42	90	100%

From Table 5 above, economic frame was the most dominant used by the two selected newspapers. However, while the *Leadership* newspaper decried the impact of the removal of fuel on the country's economy, *The Nation* framed the issue economically from the standpoint of how the removal of fuel subsidy would block leakages owing to subsidy payment. In other words, the *Leadership* newspaper framed the fuel subsidy removal as constituting an economic drawback, whereas *The Nation* framed not only as an economic masterstroke but also from the standpoint of sacrifice/patriotism.

DISCUSSION

The focus of this research was quite timely given the emotional attachments to the issue of the removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria. The findings of the study are discussed below:

Research Question 1: What is the volume of coverage given to the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy by the *Leadership* and *The Nation* newspapers in Nigeria?

From the volume of coverage of the May 2023 fuel removal by the Tinubu Administration, it can be inferred that the media, especially the selected newspapers gave considerable coverage to the issue as can be gleaned from Table 1. Within the period of the study (seven months), out of the 120 editions used for the study, 90 editions covered the fuel subsidy removal issue. This tended to justify the findings of Ezeah & Abodunrin (2016) as well as that of Aderogba (2017), who noted that the Nigerian media usually gave extensive coverage to issues concerning fuel subsidy because of the level of public interests often generated by the reportage.

Research Question 2: What prominence did the *Leadership* and *The Nation* newspapers give to the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria?

The above research question touched on Agenda-Setting Theory which is one of the cardinal theories used in this research. Most of the stories on the issue were on the inside pages. This could be attributed to the fact that the different perspectives on the issue could not be accommodated on the front page, hence the need to place them on the inside pages. Moreover, an additional insight from the finding is that *The Nation* newspaper owned by President Tinubu was not so keen on amplifying the issue, so it gave less prominence to the issue on the front page, compared with the *Leadership* newspaper. This is quite understandable because all over the



world, the influence of ownership on media content is real. Kolade, Ojomo and Ige (2012), and Zakariyau and Omowale (2022) found that ownership influences media objectivity in Nigeria.

Research Question 3: What are the story types or genre used in the coverage of the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy by the Leadership and The Nation newspapers in Nigeria?

From Table 3, straight news was the most used story type/genre. This is because the structure of news- 5Ws and H (Who, What, Where, When, Why and How) makes it easier to pigeonhole the major issues in a news story. In addition, news determinants also make better for a news story to be presented in a descending order of importance. So in any coverage of an issue, straight news format is often used more than other formats. Even the findings of Nwabueze & Egbra (2016), on the subject-matter studied by them, showed that straight news was used more than other story types/genre.

Research Question 4: What is the direction of coverage given to the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy issue by Leadership and The Nation newspapers in Nigeria?

In framing analysis, two of the key points to note are bias and tone. So from Table 4, the direction/slant of coverage of the removal of fuel subsidy could reveal where the newspaper stands on the issue, apart from the editorial. So from Table 4, while the *Leadership* newspaper was pro the Nigerian public, *The Nation* newspaper was tactically in support of the Tinubu Administration for reasons that are quite obvious. According to Abodunrin & Ezeah (2016), the subjectivity of newspapers can always be seen in times of reporting issues concerning the removal of fuel subsidy in the country. So, in a nutshell, while the *Leadership* carried more stories which showed that it was against the removal of fuel subsidy, *The Nation* newspaper carried more stories indicating that it was in support.

Research Question 5: How did Leadership and The Nation newspapers frame the May 2023 removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria?

In framing, the sociology of newspaper organisations, especially in terms of the reportage of public interest issues usually comes to the fore. This is because newspapers frame issues based on certain factors, apart from their editorial policy. So from Table 5, both *Leadership* and *The Nation* newspapers framed the removal of fuel subsidy issue from the economic standpoint. But where the two newspapers differed was that while *Leadership* newspaper warned about the multiplier effects on the masses, especially cost of living, *The Nation* newspaper saw the fuel subsidy payment as a drain on the economy, and ought to be removed. The findings also lent credence to Onwe, Onu, Alegu, Omu-Ngebo and Lawal (2023) who state that newspapers frame stories about a given event in a manner that factors the interest of their owners.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the study concludes that while *Leadership* newspaper was sympathetic to the masses in view of the consequences of the removal of fuel subsidy in the country, *The Nation* newspaper, probably because of ownership influence, towed the path of the government. Also, while *Leadership* newspaper tried to point out the hastiness of the policy, *The Nation* newspaper



gave an impression that there was no better time. Arising from the above, below are the recommendations of this research:

1. When reporting on public interest issues, newspapers should give adequate coverage, and not just episodic coverage.
2. Newspapers should place stories about fuel subsidy removal or any matter of national interest prominently on the cover or back page and not hide inside news pages. There should be in-depth news analysis on matters of national interest like fuel subsidy.
3. Ownership of a newspaper should not determine the objectivity/subjectivity of its content. Time-honoured journalism principles should always guide coverage, especially on matters of public interest.
4. Newspapers should frame issues based on public interest and strive to cover more stories about issues that are of interest to the public.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were informed that the exercise was purely for academic purposes and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Elazeh, Abisabo Muazu and Tsegyu, Santas conceived the study, including the design. Elazeh collated the data, and handled the analysis and interpretation with Tsegyu who also vetted the initial manuscript. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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