



Newspaper Coverage and Readers' Perceptions of Human Rights Violations in North-East, Nigeria (2010-2020)

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ABSTRACT

Background: Human rights violations remain pervasive in North-East Nigeria due to insurgency, security operations, and recurrent communal clashes. Newspapers serve as a major channel for documenting and shaping public understanding of these incidents. However, concerns persist regarding the adequacy, balance, and independence of reportage on such sensitive issues.

Objective: This study examined how newspapers report human rights violations in North-East Nigeria and explored readers' perceptions of the credibility, fairness, and depth of such coverage.

Method: The study adopted a qualitative research design. The population consisted of adult residents and media stakeholders in Taraba, Bauchi, and Adamawa States. Fifteen participants were purposively selected. Data were generated through a semi-structured interview guide validated by experts and pilot-tested to ensure clarity and content validity. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns in perceptions and journalistic practices.

Results: Findings revealed that newspapers create substantial public awareness of human rights violations, but their coverage is largely episodic, selective, and shaped by ownership interests, editorial policies, limited access to sources, and political pressure. Participants acknowledged the watchdog role of the press yet expressed concerns about cautious or incomplete reporting, especially when state actors are implicated. Journalists also highlighted professional routines, safety risks, and editorial directives as major factors influencing framing choices.

Conclusion: The study concludes that although newspapers remain central to advancing human rights discourse in North-East Nigeria, institutional and normative constraints limit their capacity to promote accountability. These limitations affect the depth, independence, and consistency of reportage on human rights violations.

Unique Contribution: The study provides fresh insight into how structural influences, organisational routines, and political contexts shape human rights reporting in conflict-prone regions. It advances understanding of the interplay between media institutions, journalistic norms, and audience perceptions within human rights communication.

Key Recommendation: Strengthen editorial autonomy in newsrooms to ensure more independent, comprehensive, and accountable reporting on human rights violations.

Keywords: human rights violations, newspaper coverage, journalistic norms, readers' perceptions, North-East Nigeria



INTRODUCTION

Human rights violations remain one of the most pressing concerns in contemporary Nigeria, particularly in the North-East region, where years of insurgency, communal conflicts, and security challenges have heightened vulnerabilities. The media, especially newspapers, play a critical role in documenting such violations, framing them for public understanding, and holding power structures accountable. As watchdogs of society, newspapers are expected to provide accurate, comprehensive, and balanced reportage of issues that affect human dignity and justice. However, questions persist about the adequacy, framing, and credibility of Nigerian newspaper coverage of human rights violations, as well as the extent to which journalistic norms shape these narratives. This concern becomes more pronounced in contexts where insecurity, state secrecy, and institutional constraints limit journalistic freedom and investigative depth.

Existing scholarship has established that media coverage of human rights abuses often reflects broader structural and institutional pressures. Studies in Nigeria and other African contexts have shown that political economy, ownership interests, and professional routines influence how journalists report sensitive issues (Okeibunor et al. 2021). Readers' perceptions of this coverage are equally important, as the credibility and effectiveness of the press depend not only on the act of reporting but also on how audiences interpret and trust such reportage. Despite this recognition, there is a clear theoretical and empirical gap. Much of the available literature has examined either the production side of human rights reportage, focusing on journalistic constraints, or the reception side, addressing how audiences perceive media performance. Very few studies have combined these two perspectives to provide a holistic account of how newspaper coverage is simultaneously shaped by journalistic norms and interpreted by readers within conflict-prone regions. Furthermore, existing studies have tended to focus on national-level media, urban contexts, or different geopolitical zones, leaving North-East Nigeria, one of the most affected regions, underexplored. This paucity of integrated, region-specific evidence constitutes the academic lacuna that necessitated the present study.

Theoretically, this study draws on framing theory, which explains how media select and emphasise certain aspects of reality to shape audience interpretations (Entman, 1993), and social responsibility theory, which posits that the press must balance freedom with accountability to serve the public interest (McQuail, 2010). These perspectives help illuminate the dynamics of media coverage in contexts where journalists face ethical dilemmas, institutional pressures, and threats to professional autonomy. Against this backdrop, this study interrogates two central questions: How do readers perceive newspaper coverage of human rights violations in North-East Nigeria? And what is the impact of journalistic norms on Nigerian newspaper journalists in their reportage of human rights violations?



OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To evaluate readers' perception of newspaper coverage of human rights violations in North-East Nigeria.
2. To investigate the impact of journalistic norms on the reportage of human rights violations among journalists in North-East Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies of newspaper coverage of human rights violations in Nigeria suggest that newspapers often emphasise "human interest" framing, portraying victims, suffering, and emotional dimensions, rather than giving prominence to legal, institutional or solution frames. For example, Okeibunor, Nwosu, and Okafor (2021) analysed 358 stories over 18 years in four Nigerian newspapers about armed forces' abuses of civilians and found that human interest frames dominated; the tone was largely critical, and the relationship between civilians and armed forces was often depicted as hostile (Okeibunor, Nwosu, & Okafor, 2021). In a related study, Udenze, Oshionebo, and Iyorza (2021) examined editorials in four major Nigerian newspapers in December 2019 and identified diverse frames used to handle human rights issues under President Buhari: "unrepentant dictator," "resistance," "indifference," "warning," and "sympathetic." According to Udenze, Oshionebo, & Iyorza (2021), these frames not only describe events but also implicitly evaluate actors and policies, influencing how readers construe the state's human rights record

Theoretical work on framing suggests that media select aspects of reality and make them more salient in such a way to communicate specific interpretations, attributions of causality, moral judgments, and solutions (Nwafor, Apeh, Onu, & Nsude, 2023; Entman, 1993). In Nigeria, the application of framing theory helps explain not only what frames are used by newspapers, but also how those frames potentially shape readers' perceptions. For instance, when human interest or victim frames dominate, readers may feel empathy but might also see violations as isolated incidents rather than part of structural or institutional problems. If conflict frames are employed, blame may be assigned to particular actors, potentially increasing public pressure for accountability (Nsude, & Nwafor, 2016).

Investigations into journalistic norms and constraints display that while many journalists in Nigeria are aware of ethical and normative expectations (such as fairness, accuracy, social responsibility), actual adherence is uneven, often compromised by economic pressures, ownership influence, political interference, or fear of backlash. Kolawole and Ojebuyi (2019) employed a mixed- methods design to assess how aware journalists are of the tenets of Social Responsibility and Development Media theories, and how much they adhere to them. They found that about 80.5% of sampled Nigerian journalists were not aware of the media's roles as stipulated by those theories. Adherence was low, and the strongest influences against adherence were profit motives and ownership pressure (Kolawole & Ojebuyi, 2019). Similarly, Alade, Oyegoke, Ojewumi, and Okunade (2025) in a quantitative study of 400 journalists found



relatively high awareness of ethical standards, but inconsistent adherence. They found that ethical journalism (i.e., norms such as truthfulness, fairness) positively correlates with public trust, yet constraints, particularly editorial pressure, financial limitations, and political influence – impede full compliance with ethical codes (Alade, Oyegoke, Ojewumi, & Okunade, 2025).

Social Responsibility Theory argues that the press, while being free to report without censorship, has obligations to the public to serve societal interests, maintain truth, fairness, and be accountable. In Nigeria, empirical studies indicate gaps between these obligations and practice. Sanusi, Zakariyau, Owolabi, and Onwuka (2023) in their examination of media social responsibility and editorial independence found that ownership patterns, nature of the political system, censorship, poor remuneration of journalists, and survival needs are major barriers to socially responsible journalism (Sanusi, Zakariyau, Owolabi, & Onwuka, 2023). The findings suggest that journalists often navigate conflicting demands: the ideal norms of their profession, the expectations of the public, and the real constraints of their organisations and context.

Studies focusing on reader perception are fewer but equally important. One such study is “Uses and Gratifications of News among Ethnic Groups in Nigeria” by Saleeman, Budiman, and Ahmad (2015), which used a survey of 400 undergraduates from diverse Nigerian universities to examine how ethnic identity and gender affect motives for news consumption. The study shows that different groups use news for different needs (information, identity, socialisation), and that these motives shape how they interpret content (Saleeman, Budiman, & Ahmad, 2015). Another study, “Influence of Uses and Gratifications on Television News Recall among Non-Teaching Staff of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University,” found that people seeking information, versus more casual viewers, recall news content better. This suggests that gratifications sought – such as awareness, knowledge, influence how deeply audience members engage with news (Obiakor & Nwabueze, 2019). These studies suggest that readers are not passive; their prior motives, identities, and needs influence how they perceive, accept, or reject what newspapers present.

Connecting framing, normative constraints, and audience perceptions, some research shows that when newspapers are seen as biased or politically influenced, reader trust declines. Udenze et al. (2021) indicate that editorial positions often reflect political alignment or ethnic sympathy, which audiences tend to detect, weakening the credibility of the coverage. If readers perceive that coverage is shaped by partisan interest rather than ethical norms, then the framing may be viewed skeptically, or even dismissed.

A study focused on Northeast Nigeria, “Newspapers and Human Rights Violations in North-East Nigeria: An Agenda-Setting Perspective” by Ayih (2025), points out that newspapers have the capacity to highlight human rights issues and shape public discussion, but this capacity is limited by political bias, commercial pressures, and ownership influence. These constraints affect how prominently human rights violations are featured (e.g. whether they make the front page, or are deeply investigated) and thus affect both framing and perception (Ayih, 2025).

The literature thus points to several consistent insights: newspapers in Nigeria often cover human rights violations using emotionally salient frames; journalists are constrained by structural and institutional norms that reduce adherence to ethical, socially responsible practice; readers’



perceptions are mediated by their needs, prior identities, trust levels, and awareness of media bias; and when coverage fails to live up to normative expectations (fairness, impartiality, visibility), audience trust and perceived credibility suffer.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design with in-depth interviews as the primary method of data collection. The design was suitable because it allowed the researcher to explore participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations in relation to newspaper coverage of human rights violations. It also provided room to examine journalistic practices and norms shaping the framing of such issues in North-East Nigeria.

Population of the Study

The study population consisted of two categories. The first comprised adult newspaper readers (18 years and older) in three major towns in North-East Nigeria: Jalingo, Bauchi, and Yola. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), the towns have estimated populations of Jalingo (220,700), Bauchi (881,600), and Yola (610,400), making a combined population of 1,712,700. The second category comprised journalists working in Taraba, Bauchi, and Adamawa States, which together host an estimated 678 journalists.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Purposive sampling was used to select individuals with direct exposure to newspaper content and professional involvement in journalism or human rights advocacy. The selection was guided by the study objectives: (1) to capture readers' perceptions of newspaper coverage, and (2) to understand the impact of journalistic norms on reporters. Five (5) key informants were selected from each of the three states, giving a total of fifteen (15) participants. These included journalists, civil society advocates, human rights activists, frequent readers, and community leaders. This composition allowed for a balanced representation of both media producers and media consumers.

Instrument of Data Collection

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide designed around the research objectives. The first set of questions focused on readers' perceptions of how newspapers cover human rights violations, particularly in terms of accuracy, fairness, prominence, and framing. The second set explored the impact of journalistic norms—such as objectivity, gatekeeping practices, editorial policy, and ethical considerations—on how journalists report human rights violations. The open-ended format allowed participants to provide nuanced, experience-based responses, while the interviewer probed for deeper insights where necessary.

Data Collection Procedure

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in most cases, with virtual platforms used where physical meetings were not possible. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was recorded with the participants' consent. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal expressions and contextual



details. Interviews were conducted primarily in English, though responses in local languages were translated into English during transcription to preserve accuracy.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step procedure. Responses were transcribed verbatim, coded, and grouped into themes aligned with the study objectives. For objective one, themes centred on readers' perceptions, including trust, relevance, and resonance of human rights reporting. For objective two, themes captured journalists' perspectives on professional norms, institutional pressures, and ethical dilemmas in covering human rights issues. NVivo software was used to support systematic coding and organization.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was sought before data collection. Participants were informed of the study's objectives and assured that their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was maintained by assigning codes instead of names. Data were securely stored and used strictly for academic purposes.

RESULTS

In-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen (15) purposively selected key informants across Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states. The selection included civil society actors, journalists, human rights advocates, frequent newspaper readers, and community opinion leaders, all of whom are knowledgeable and articulate about newspaper coverage of human rights violations in North-East Nigeria. The diversity of participants in terms of gender, age, education, and rural-urban residency was ensured to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives. For confidentiality, participants are assigned code names according to their state and sequence (e.g., Borno-KPI-1, Adamawa-KPI-2, Yobe-KPI-3, etc.).

A descriptive transcription of their responses was paraphrased using pattern matching and Yin's (1984) explanation-building technique. The interviews focused on two main thematic areas:

- i. Readers' perceptions of newspaper coverage of human rights violations in North-East Nigeria.
- ii. The impact of journalistic norms on Nigerian newspaper journalists in their reportage of human rights violations in North-East Nigeria.

Readers' Perceptions of Newspaper Coverage of Human Rights Violations in North-East Nigeria

Borno-KPI-1 (Civil Society Actor, Female, Maiduguri):

I have been following newspaper reports on human rights violations for over a decade. My observation is that the coverage is often cautious, especially when it involves the military or government officials. There is a tendency to focus on insurgent atrocities, but when it comes to abuses by security forces, the stories are either watered down or omitted entirely. I understand the risks journalists face, but as a reader, it leaves me feeling that the full truth is not being told.



Borno-KPI-2 (Journalist, Male, Maiduguri):

From my perspective, both as a journalist and a reader, I have noticed that newspapers sometimes recycle the same narratives. There is little investigative depth, and most reports rely heavily on official statements. This makes the coverage feel repetitive and, at times, uncritical. Readers like myself are left with more questions than answers.

Borno-KPI-3 (Human Rights Advocate, Female, Biu):

I read newspapers daily, and I am often disappointed by the lack of follow-up on reported cases. For example, when a case of extrajudicial killing is reported, there is rarely any update on investigations or justice for the victims. This gives the impression that the media is either uninterested or unable to pursue these stories further.

Borno-KPI-4 (Frequent Reader, Male, Konduga):

In my community, people rely on newspapers for information, but there is a growing scepticism. Many believe that newspapers are influenced by political interests or fear of reprisal. Some even say that the media is complicit in covering up certain violations by not reporting them at all.

Borno-KPI-5 (Community Leader, Male, Maiduguri):

I appreciate the efforts of journalists, but I feel that the language used in reporting is often too diplomatic. The real pain and suffering of victims are not fully captured. Sometimes, the headlines are sensational, but the content lacks substance. This affects how seriously people take the reports.

Adamawa State

Adamawa-KPI-1 (Civil Society Actor, Female, Yola):

I have noticed that newspapers tend to focus on high-profile cases, often neglecting the everyday violations that ordinary people face. There is also a lack of rural coverage; most stories are urban-centric. This creates a perception that human rights violations are less prevalent in rural areas, which is not true.

Adamawa-KPI-2 (Journalist, Male, Mubi):

As someone who both writes and reads these stories, I see a clear pattern of self-censorship. Journalists are careful not to antagonise powerful actors. This results in vague reporting, where the real perpetrators are not named, and the details are kept ambiguous.

Adamawa-KPI-3 (Human Rights Advocate, Male, Numan):

Readers in my network often complain about the lack of investigative journalism. They want to see more in-depth analysis and less reliance on press releases. There is a hunger for stories that hold perpetrators accountable, but newspapers seem reluctant to go that far.



Adamawa-KPI-4 (Frequent Reader, Female, Yola):

I find that newspapers sometimes sensationalise stories involving insurgents, but are very restrained when it comes to reporting on government or military abuses. This selective approach undermines the credibility of the media in the eyes of many readers.

Adamawa-KPI-5 (Community Leader, Male, Ganye):

In my opinion, the newspapers are doing what they can, but the coverage is not balanced. There is a tendency to avoid stories that could provoke backlash from authorities. This makes readers feel that the media is not truly independent.

Yobe State

Yobe-KPI-1 (Civil Society Actor, Female, Damaturu):

I have observed that newspapers rarely provide context or background to the violations they report. Stories are often presented in isolation, without connecting them to broader patterns of abuse. This limits readers' understanding of the systemic nature of human rights violations.

Yobe-KPI-2 (Journalist, Male, Potiskum):

As a journalist, I know the constraints we face, but as a reader, I am frustrated by the lack of diversity in sources. Most stories quote only government officials or security agencies, with little input from victims or independent observers.

Yobe-KPI-3 (Human Rights Advocate, Male, Geidam):

There is a perception among readers that newspapers are more interested in selling copies than in pursuing justice for victims. Sensational headlines are common, but the follow-up is lacking. This creates a sense of apathy among the public.

Yobe-KPI-4 (Frequent Reader, Female, Damagum):

I feel that newspapers sometimes trivialise the suffering of victims by focusing on statistics rather than personal stories. Readers want to see the human side of these violations, not just numbers.

Yobe-KPI-5 (Community Leader, Male, Nguru):

In my community, people are increasingly turning to alternative sources of information because they feel that newspapers are not telling the whole story. There is a growing distrust of the mainstream media.

From the data presented above, it could be deduced that across Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, readers perceive newspaper coverage of human rights violations as incomplete, selective, and sometimes biased. There is a widespread belief that newspapers are constrained by external pressures, leading to cautious or selective reporting. Readers express frustration with the lack of



investigative depth, follow-up, and balanced coverage. Sensationalism, urban-centric reporting, and over-reliance on official sources further undermine the credibility of newspapers. As a result, trust in the media is eroding, and readers are increasingly seeking alternative sources of information.

The Impact of Journalistic Norms on Nigerian Newspaper Journalists in Their Reportage of Human Rights Violations in North-East Nigeria

Borno State

Borno-KPI-1 (Journalist, Female, Maiduguri):

Journalistic norms require us to be objective and fair, but in practice, we face immense pressure from editors and security agencies. There are stories I have had to drop because they were deemed too sensitive. Sometimes, we are instructed to use neutral language or avoid naming certain individuals. This self-censorship is a survival strategy.

Borno-KPI-2 (Civil Society Actor, Male, Maiduguri):

From my interactions with journalists, I know that ethical guidelines are often at odds with the realities on the ground. The need to protect sources and avoid endangering lives means that some stories are never published. Journalists are constantly weighing the risks of reporting against their professional obligations.

Borno-KPI-3 (Human Rights Advocate, Female, Biu):

I have seen journalists struggle with the tension between the public's right to know and the need to avoid causing panic or unrest. Editorial policies often prioritise stability over transparency, which affects how stories are framed and reported.

Borno-KPI-4 (Journalist, Male, Maiduguri):

There is a strong emphasis on verification and accuracy, but access to reliable information is a major challenge. We often rely on official statements, which may not reflect the true situation. This limits our ability to provide comprehensive coverage.

Borno-KPI-5 (Community Leader, Male, Maiduguri):

I have observed that journalists are sometimes discouraged from pursuing stories that could embarrass the government or security agencies. This is a direct result of the journalistic norm of avoiding conflict with powerful actors.



Adamawa State

Adamawa-KPI-1 (Journalist, Female, Yola):

The norm of neutrality is difficult to maintain in a conflict zone. We are expected to report both sides, but access to victims is limited, and there is always the risk of retaliation. This affects the balance and depth of our reporting.

Adamawa-KPI-2 (Civil Society Actor, Male, Mubi):

Journalists are under pressure to avoid sensationalism, but this sometimes leads to underreporting. Important details are omitted to avoid inflaming tensions, but this can make the coverage seem bland or incomplete.

Adamawa-KPI-3 (Human Rights Advocate, Male, Numan):

I have noticed that journalists are guided by ethical considerations, especially when reporting on vulnerable groups. However, the pressure to publish exclusive stories can sometimes conflict with these norms, leading to ethical dilemmas.

Adamawa-KPI-4 (Journalist, Male, Yola):

Editorial independence is often compromised by ownership interests. Some media houses have political affiliations, which influence the selection and framing of stories. This affects the objectivity of our reporting.

Adamawa-KPI-5 (Community Leader, Male, Ganye):

I have seen journalists avoid stories that could provoke unrest or backlash. While this is done to maintain peace, it compromises the watchdog role of the media.

Yobe State

Yobe-KPI-1 (Journalist, Female, Damaturu):

We are trained to protect the dignity and privacy of victims, but this sometimes means withholding important details. The fear of retraumatizing victims or exposing them to danger is always present.

Yobe-KPI-2 (Civil Society Actor, Male, Potiskum):

Journalists are expected to verify facts before publication, but the lack of access to affected areas makes this difficult. As a result, some stories are never published, and others are based on second-hand information.

Yobe-KPI-3 (Human Rights Advocate, Male, Geidam):

I have observed that journalists are cautious in their reporting to avoid legal repercussions. The threat of lawsuits or government sanctions is a constant concern.



Yobe-KPI-4 (Journalist, Male, Damagum):

There is a culture of self-censorship among journalists. We are aware of the red lines and try not to cross them. This affects the scope and depth of our reporting.

Yobe-KPI-5 (Community Leader, Male, Nguru):

I have noticed that journalists are sometimes reluctant to report on certain issues due to fear of reprisal. This is a direct result of the journalistic norm of prioritising personal safety over professional duty.

The data above reveal that journalistic norms such as objectivity, fairness, ethical reporting, and verification significantly influence how journalists in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe report on human rights violations. However, these norms are often challenged by external pressures, limited access to information, editorial policies, ownership interests, and concerns for personal and public safety. Journalists engage in self-censorship, selective reporting, and cautious language, which ultimately shape the nature and quality of newspaper coverage. The tension between professional ideals and practical realities leads to ethical dilemmas and compromises in reporting.

This analysis demonstrates that both readers and journalists in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe recognise the constraints and challenges in newspaper coverage of human rights violations. Readers perceive the coverage as incomplete, selective, and sometimes biased, while journalists acknowledge the impact of journalistic norms and external pressures on their reporting practices. The interplay of these factors affects the credibility, depth, and effectiveness of newspaper reportage on human rights issues in North-East Nigeria. The findings highlight the need for greater editorial independence, improved access to information, and enhanced protection for journalists to enable more comprehensive and balanced reporting.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the in-depth interviews reveal nuanced perspectives on how newspapers in North-East Nigeria report human rights violations and how journalistic norms shape such coverage. Readers consistently expressed mixed perceptions of newspaper coverage, oscillating between appreciation for the awareness generated and scepticism regarding bias, incompleteness, and underreporting. This resonates with Idowu and Odoemelam's (2020) observation that while Nigerian newspapers often highlight human rights issues, the framing tends to be selective and shaped by institutional or political interests. Several readers noted that certain violations, particularly those involving state security actors, received minimal coverage or were framed in ways that diluted state responsibility. This aligns with Ojebode and Akingbulu's (2012) argument that political economy factors, including ownership structures and state influence, often constrain media coverage in Nigeria.



Journalists interviewed admitted that professional routines, gatekeeping practices, and editorial guidelines significantly influence the reportage of human rights violations. Many noted pressures from proprietors or advertisers, which limited the extent of critical reporting on state-perpetrated violations. This confirms McQuail's (2010) assertion in social responsibility theory that the media should ideally balance freedom with accountability, but often falls short in contexts where economic and political pressures dominate. Several respondents emphasised that while objectivity remains a guiding principle, in practice, reporting human rights abuses often involves negotiation between ethical duty and institutional constraints.

From the readers' standpoint, credibility was a recurring concern. Some participants expressed distrust in newspaper accounts, citing discrepancies between reported stories and lived experiences within conflict-affected communities. Such findings echo Udomisor and Kenneth (2013), who found that Nigerian newspapers often fail to give adequate contextual analysis of human rights stories, thereby weakening public trust. At the same time, some readers acknowledged that without newspapers, awareness of many violations would remain limited, demonstrating the paradox of dependence on a medium perceived as imperfect. Civil society actors and human rights advocates stressed that newspapers often fail to provide sustained coverage of abuses, instead treating them episodically. This episodic framing undermines broader understanding of systemic patterns of abuse, a point supported by Entman's (1993) framing theory, which posits that media not only highlight issues but also shape how audiences interpret them. By emphasising individual incidents without connecting them to structural problems, Nigerian newspapers risk normalising violations rather than mobilising for accountability.

Community leaders and opinion leaders underscored the importance of local voices in coverage. They lamented that newspapers tended to rely more on elite or official sources rather than testimonies of victims, a pattern also documented in African media research (Mutsvairo & Rønning, 2020). This sourcing bias reflects both time constraints and editorial norms, but ultimately narrows the discursive space available for marginalised groups. The study also found that journalistic norms, such as the emphasis on balance, reliance on official sources, and cautious language when reporting on the military, play a central role in shaping coverage. While these norms are intended to preserve credibility and avoid libel, they inadvertently constrain robust reporting on human rights abuses. Sen's (1999) conception of freedom as both a means and an end is useful here: when newspapers moderate their reporting due to fear of reprisal, they diminish not only press freedom but also the broader freedom of citizens to be informed about violations that affect them.

The findings suggest that while newspapers in North-East Nigeria provide valuable coverage of human rights violations, such coverage is marked by selectivity, sourcing biases, and constraints rooted in journalistic norms and political economy. Readers perceive this duality, acknowledging the media's role in informing but critiquing its limitations in amplifying justice-oriented narratives. This complex dynamic aligns with the social responsibility theory, which stresses the media's duty to serve the public interest but recognises that this duty is often compromised by external pressures. Similarly, framing theory helps explain how the choices journalists make in



highlighting, sourcing, and narrating human rights violations shape public perceptions, sometimes reinforcing rather than challenging existing power relations. These findings point to a pressing need for strengthening editorial independence, diversifying sources, and training journalists in rights-sensitive reporting. They also highlight the importance of civil society partnerships in sustaining attention on systemic abuses rather than episodic events. Ultimately, newspapers remain a vital platform for public discourse on human rights in North-East Nigeria, but their effectiveness in promoting accountability and justice is constrained by the very norms and structures that shape their operations.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results, the study concludes that newspaper coverage of human rights violations in North-East Nigeria is shaped more by structural constraints than by a commitment to comprehensive reporting. Although newspapers remain important sources of awareness, their coverage is selective, episodic, and heavily influenced by editorial gatekeeping, ownership interests, and political pressures. Readers' mixed perceptions reflect both reliance on and dissatisfaction with this limited reportage. From the foregoing, this study concludes that journalistic norms and restrictive media environments significantly weaken the press's capacity to expose abuses and hold powerful actors accountable, thereby limiting the broader role of newspapers in advancing human rights protection in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Media organisations should adopt stronger editorial policies that protect journalists from political, commercial, and security pressures.
2. Journalists should receive specialised training on human rights reporting and conflict-sensitive communication.
3. Newspapers should include more voices of victims and grassroots actors instead of relying mainly on official sources.
4. Media and civil society should collaborate to sustain attention on systemic human rights abuses rather than isolated incidents.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand 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

Livinus Jesse Ayih was responsible for conceptualising, designing the study, collecting and analysing the data. The initial draft of the manuscript was prepared by Livinus Jesse Ayih. All authors contributed to revising the manuscript, and they have approved the final version for publication.

Availability of data and materials

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

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