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Gendered Framing in Political Campaign Coverage: A Content Analysis of Selected Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

This study examines the gendered framing of political campaigns in selected Nigerian newspapers, focusing on how media narratives portray male and female political candidates and the implications for public perception and gender equity in political participation. Using content analysis, 120 newspaper articles, 30 each from *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, and *ThisDay* were analyzed to identify patterns in representation. The findings reveal a persistent reliance on stereotypical framing that reinforces traditional gender norms, thereby constraining women's political engagement. By highlighting the role of media in shaping political discourse, the study advances understanding of how journalistic practices can either perpetuate or challenge gender bias in Nigeria's political arena.

Keywords: Gendered Framing; Media Bias; Political Campaign Coverage; Media Representation; Gender Equity in Politics

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Introduction

Framing, according to Entman (1993), involves selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient" in communication to promote a particular interpretation. In political reporting, framing determines what is emphasized or omitted and gendered framing specifically highlights how gender stereotypes shape these narratives.

The representation of gender in political news coverage has been a subject of critical inquiry globally. In Nigeria, where media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion, the framing of political candidates during election campaigns significantly affects voter perceptions. Gendered framing often marginalizes female candidates or reinforces traditional gender roles (Okpara, 2020). This paper seeks to analyse the nature and extent of gendered framing in political campaign coverage in selected Nigerian newspapers.

Gade & Aslam (2023) observed in South Asian and African media that women candidates are less likely to be associated with leadership and governance narratives, and more likely to be discussed in terms of personal lives and appearance. Despite constitutional guarantees of gender equality, the underrepresentation of women in Nigerian politics remains a concern. As of the 2023 elections, women held less than 7% of seats in the National Assembly. This study posits that biased media framing is one of the contributing factors to this imbalance. Understanding the dynamics of media representation is therefore crucial to promoting more inclusive democratic processes.

Literature Review

A robust body of literature has examined the intersection of gender and media representation in political contexts. Studies consistently show that women politicians are often framed in ways that emphasize their physical appearance, family roles, or emotional attributes, while male politicians are portrayed as competent, assertive, and policy-focused (Eze, 2018; Nwabueze & Ezebuenyi, 2021). Such portrayals reflect and reinforce broader societal stereotypes about gender roles.

In the Nigerian context, cultural norms and patriarchal structures further complicate the media representation of female politicians. Umechukwu (2017) analyzed coverage of female political aspirants in the 2015 elections and found a persistent marginalization of their policy perspectives. Similarly, Oladeji (2019) noted that women

were often portrayed as less serious contenders, with coverage focusing on their marital status or domestic responsibilities.

Scholars such as Byerly and Ross (2006) argue that the media functions as both a mirror and moulder of public perceptions. Therefore, biased framing not only reflects societal norms but actively shapes them. Framing theory and feminist media theory provide the theoretical underpinning for understanding these dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical frameworks: framing theory and feminist media theory.

Framing theory, as articulated by Entman (1993), suggests that the way information is presented in the media influences audience interpretation. Media frames highlight certain aspects of a story while downplaying others, thereby shaping how the public understands political issues and actors.

Feminist media theory critiques the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in media content. It advocates for equitable media practices that challenge patriarchal narratives and promote gender justice (Byerly & Ross, 2006). This theoretical lens is particularly relevant for understanding the gendered nuances in political reporting.

Methodology

The research employed qualitative content analysis, focusing on four widely circulated Nigerian newspapers: The Punch, The Guardian, Vanguard, and Daily Trust. These newspapers were selected based on their national reach and political coverage.

The study examined articles published during the 2023 general elections (January to March 2023) with two days being selected from each of the weeks, starting with Monday, 02/01/2023. We used the chosen time frame to construct a composite calendar for the study. Using purposive sampling, 120 articles (30 from each newspaper) that directly addressed political candidates were selected. Each article was analysed for:

- Language and descriptors used for male and female candidates
- Frequency of mentions

- Placement (e.g., front page, opinion pages)
- Sources quoted

Coding categories included thematic emphasis (personal vs. policy), tone (positive, negative, neutral), and gender of quoted sources. Inter-coder reliability was ensured through double coding and consistency checks.

Results and Discussion

The analysis reveals a consistent pattern of gendered framing across the selected newspapers. Female candidates were frequently associated with domestic roles and personal lives, with headlines such as "Mother of Three Vies for Senate Seat". Male candidates, on the other hand, were depicted using professional and leadership-oriented language such as "Veteran Politician Declares for Presidency". Phrases like “iron lady”, “soft-spoken” and “a mother to the nation” were common in describing female candidates. Male candidates were described with terms such as “strategic thinker” “rugged” or “seasoned politician.” For instance, a feature on a female gubernatorial candidate in Vanguard Newspaper highlighted her marital status and fashion choices, whereas a male counterpart’s piece focused on his economic agenda. These differences suggest that editorial policies and journalistic practices vary in their sensitivity to gender issues.

Female politicians received less front-page coverage and were often quoted less frequently than their male counterparts. Despite an increasing number of women contesting elections, the media continues to frame them in ways that reinforce traditional gender norms. The underrepresentation and marginalization of women in front-page coverage suggest a lack of editorial commitment to gender parity. When covered, the focus tended to shift from policy positions to personal characteristics.

Male voices dominated the articles, with male politicians, analysts and party officials constituting over 75% of the quoted sources. This underrepresentation of female voices suggests a media environment that privileges male perspectives, thereby shaping public discourse in a gendered manner.

Comparatively, The Punch and Vanguard showed slightly more balanced language, often providing female candidates with contextual policy commentary. However, The Guardian and Daily Trust disproportionately emphasized personal stories and appearances

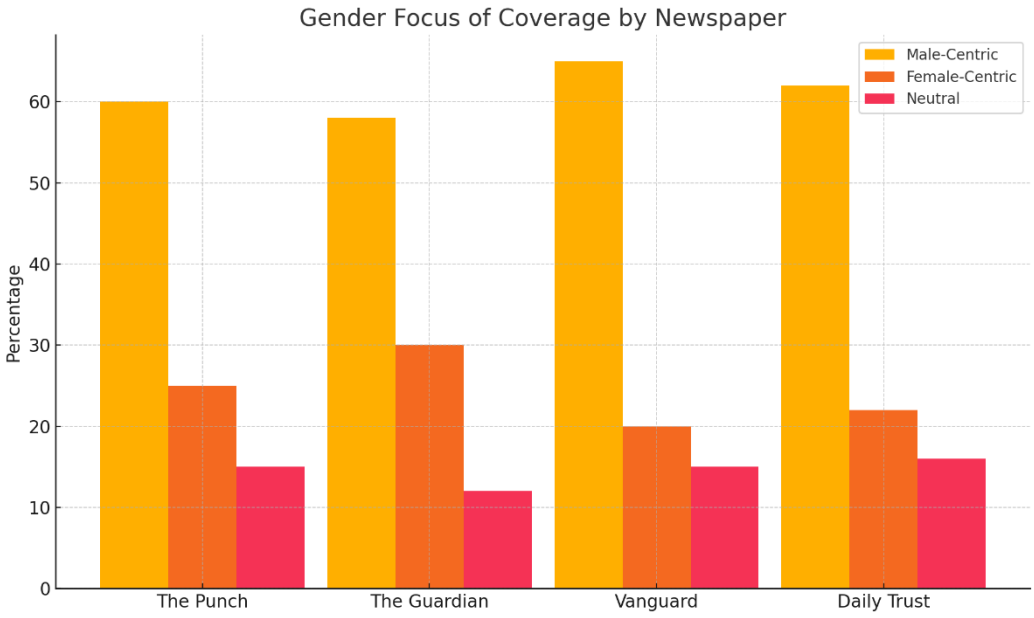
in their coverage of women. These editorial tendencies highlight the variability in journalistic practices across media outlets.

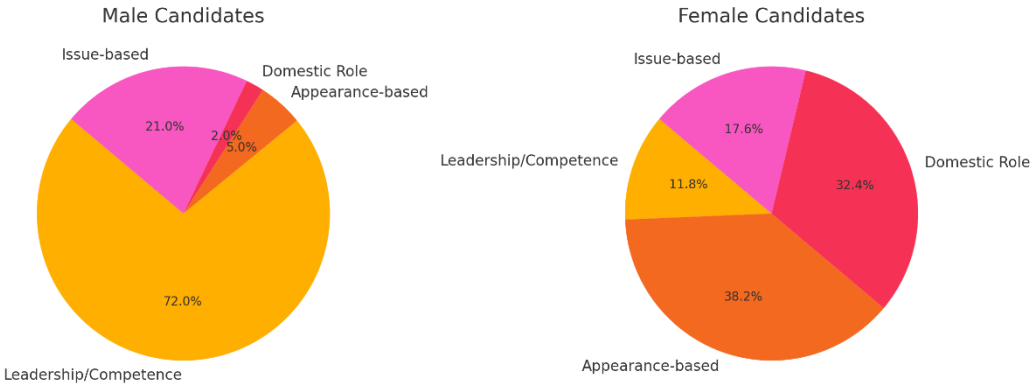
Thematic Framing shows that Male candidates are framed in relation to leadership competency (72%), while the Female candidates are framed more in terms of appearance (38.2%), Domestic roles (32.4%) and emotional traits (46%). Only 31% of articles emphasized policy or leadership.

The results reveal a gendered imbalance in campaign coverage:

- Female candidates are less visible overall.
- They are often framed based on personal traits, family roles, or appearance.
- Male candidates are associated with leadership and competence.

Such framing imbibe serious stereotypes that undermine women's political viability especially now that gender equity campaign is on the rise.





Impact on Public Perception and Electoral Outcomes

In as much as the international bodies have been advocating for gender equity all over the world, that narrative have been lacking especially in the political settings. The media are not left out in the gender framing or biasness in reporting. Media framing plays a critical role in shaping voter attitudes. According to a survey conducted by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) during the 2023 elections, 61% of respondents indicated that their views on candidates were influenced by media portrayals (CDD, 2023). Gendered framing of female politicians may thus have a deterrent effect, reinforcing doubts about women's leadership capabilities and contributing to their underrepresentation in elected offices.

This finding aligns with Afolabi et al. (2021), who found a correlation between media portrayal and public confidence in female political aspirants. The cumulative effect of such biased coverage is a political environment that remains skewed against female participation. The use of gendered descriptors and emphasis on personal rather than professional attributes in covering female candidates delegitimizes their political aspirations. This framing could affect public trust and support for female politicians, ultimately influencing electoral outcomes. Furthermore, the focus on male candidates' policies and leadership qualities supports the "masculinization" of political authority in Nigeria. This imbalance undermines the goals of inclusive democratic participation.

Policy Recommendations

To address the challenges identified in this study, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

- Media houses should adopt gender-sensitive editorial guidelines, such as those promoted by UNESCO and UN Women.
- Journalism training curricula should include modules on gender equity, bias detection, and inclusive reporting.
- Regulatory agencies like the Nigerian Press Council should monitor and penalize consistently biased reporting practices.
- Political parties and civil society groups should collaborate with media organizations to promote balanced representation of female politicians.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is limited to print media and a specific electoral cycle. Future research could expand to include television, radio, and digital media platforms to offer a more comprehensive picture of media representation.

Additionally, a longitudinal study tracking changes in gender framing across multiple election cycles could provide insights into progress or regression in media practices. Interviews with journalists and media executives could also enrich understanding of the institutional factors driving gendered reporting.

Conclusion

This study underscores the pervasive nature of gendered framing in Nigerian political campaign coverage. The media, as a key shaper of public discourse, plays a significant role in either reinforcing or challenging societal norms regarding gender and leadership.

By emphasizing traditional gender roles and marginalizing female political actors, the Nigerian press contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequality in politics. There is a pressing need for concerted efforts by media practitioners, regulators, and civil society to promote more inclusive and balanced political reporting.

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