

Public Perception of Newspaper Coverage of Chinese Railways Development Projects in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined audience perception of newspaper coverage of Chinese railways development projects in Nigeria. The study was situated within the framework of the Agenda Setting theory. Multi-methods research of Quantitative content analysis and survey research methods were adopted. A sample of 314 editions of *The Guardian* and *Daily Trust* newspapers were selected from January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2021, while 395 newspaper readers were selected from newsstands in Lagos and Abuja using the multi-stage approach. A coding sheet was designed for collection of the content analysis data, while a structured questionnaire was used as the survey data collection tool. Data analysis was done quantitatively, using simple percentages and mean scores. Findings showed that the selected Nigerian newspapers gave frequent and prominent coverage to the Chinese railway development projects, and that they reported the rail projects mostly as straight news while also publishing a few features, pictorials, and comments/opinions on them. Data equally indicated that the papers were largely neutral in the slant they gave to their reports on the Chinese railway development projects, even though a significant proportion of these reports were positive towards the projects. The study concluded that notwithstanding the emerging online-based alternatives sources of news which are seriously challenging the hegemony of traditional media, newspapers remain an influential source of news from where members of the public obtain information on issues of public interest such as the Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria. Among others, it was recommended that the press to adopt a more critical approach to its coverage of the Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria, and indeed other aspects of Nigeria-China relations in order to help expose possible exploitative and corrupt dimensions of such bilateral dealings, hence bringing such issues to the table of public discourse as well as directing the attention of both parties to them.

Keywords: *Public perception, Newspaper coverage, Development projects, media framing, Chinese railways.*

INTRODUCTION

In less developed nations, where infrastructure deficit and dearth of resources surmount the deficiencies abound, soliciting for aid from developed nations becomes inevitable for filling the infrastructure gaps and boosting economic development. In this light, Chinese investment loans have become a significant source of external infrastructure financing in at least 35 African nations (Dollar, 2019) of which the largest beneficiaries include Nigeria (Dalibi, & Bello, 2017; Dollar, 2019). No doubt, Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa and the seventh most populous country in the globe is in dire need for sustainable infrastructural development projects that can cater for the needs of the country's present and future generations (Dalibi, & Bello, 2017). Irrespective of the obvious benefits of infrastructural development, poor infrastructure particularly in the transportation sector has been a major economic bottleneck to development in Nigeria.

The need for an efficient transportation system in Nigeria is indispensable. With the deplorable conditions of roads, rising fuel cost as well as rural to urban migration, the need for alternative transportation system is unavoidable. Therefore, Nigerian governments particularly the Buhari administration have directed efforts towards revitalizing the comatose railways transportation system in Nigeria through foreign investors. Consequently, Nigeria and China signed some contracts for the realization of the railways modernization plan.

Official relation between Nigeria and China dates back to 1971 when Nigeria established diplomatic relations with China (Iyatse & Onyekwere, 2021). Chinese railways projects are supported with finance from the Export-Import Bank of China and built by Chinese state-owned enterprises (Chen, 2018). Although the Debt Management Office (2020) insist that China is

not a major source of funding for the Nigerian Government as only 11.28% of the nation's external debt of \$27.67 billion have been borrowed from China (Iyatse & Onyekwere, 2021) but the geometric rise of Nigeria's debt to China is stimulating fears as critical concerns have been raised regarding it.

The Chinese construction companies have been accused of bringing Chinese workers to carry out most of the project operations, thereby relegating the capability of Nigerian Engineers (Dalibi & Bello, 2017). Also, concerns have been raised about the alleged imbalance relationship between China and Nigeria (Chen, 2018). One of such concern is the confidentiality clause specifying that the contract terms with beneficiaries should remain undisclosed (Iyatse & Onyekwere, 2021). These concerns beg for explicit explanations regarding Chinese investments in Nigeria.

Communication is used as an empowerment tool to facilitate public acceptance and participation in development activities. Significantly, communication facilitates understanding of development objectives in the society. Many Nigerians may not be aware about the benefits of certain development projects until it is properly explained via the mass media. Therefore, the reinforcement of infrastructure development projects messages through communication channels will positively impact them and the role of mass media is crucial in this regard. The news media coverage plays an important role in influencing people's perception and opinion toward public affairs (Matanji, 2019). Media agenda help to shape the way people act and react towards development issues such as the modernization of the railways projects through Chinese investment in Nigeria by virtue of agenda setting and framing of this issue. Hence, the study seeks to evaluate how the news media tell the story of the modernization of railways in Nigeria by the Chinese and public perceive this

development projects by the reason of exposure to media messages.

Statement of the Problem

Modern railways transportation system is a key indicator of a modern society. Efficient railways infrastructure contributes to social vibrancy and economic competitiveness by transporting multitudes of people and goods to city centers and inner suburbs in lesser travel time, promoting trade, generating employment, reducing social inequality, reducing pressure on public transportation and road accidents, as well noise pollution (Cascarjo, 2004; Bureau of Public Enterprises, 2018). Moreover, railways need less frequent maintenance and have higher speed and efficiency over long-distance routes, making them a highly advantageous low-cost option for movement of heavy goods (Chen, 2018; Bureau of Public Enterprises, 2018).

Since Nigeria does not have the financial resources to embark on the rehabilitation of the old railways line and construction of new ones, the Chinese development investment offer an alternative development model. More so, the Nigeria's total borrowing from China stands at USD3.121 billion as at March 31, 2020, with interest rates of 2.50% per annum, at Twenty (20) years tenure and Seven (7) years moratorium (Grace Period) and the railways modernization is one of the major areas where these loans are expended.

However, this initiative has elicited mixed feelings and reactions from advanced industrial economies (Dollar, 2019). Critics insist that China imposes unique conditions on borrowing nations and the investment initiatives lacks transparency as confidentiality clauses in the contract terms could bring about imbalance relationship between the lender (China) and the borrower (Nigeria) (Dalibi & Bello, 2017; Chen, 2018; Dollar, 2019; Odunmbaku-Wilson, 2020;

Iyatse & Onyekwere, 2021). An earlier statement by Giammittorio (2014) in the same line of thought, described Chinese investments in Africa as the Scramble for Africa 2.0. These concerns beg for clarification from the watchdog of the society- the mass media for the citizens to better understand the nitty-gritty of this development policy by Nigerian government.

No doubt, the mass media is considered as the major source of information regarding government development policies and a powerful force in shaping public opinion about development issues through its agenda-setting and framing potentials. By providing critical information about development projects, policies and implementations, the news media help to set agenda on these issues and foster public opinions and attitudes towards governments' decisions. However, little is known about the nature of media reportage of the Chinese railways projects in Nigeria and its influence on public perception of the development initiative. It is important to understand how the media report the Chinese investment in railways transportation system development projects in Nigeria as this will enable the citizens' formation of public opinion regarding the benefits or otherwise of the development scheme. Hence, this study aims to ascertain how the media report the Chinese railways development projects in Nigeria through content analysis of two widely read Nigerian dailies –*The Guardian* and *Daily Trust* newspapers and the influence of the reportage on audience perception of the issue.

Research Objectives

The overall objective of this study is to evaluate newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria and its influence on public perception of the projects. Specifically, the study seeks to achieve the following;

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1. To determine the level of audience exposure to reports of the Chinese railway development projects in the selected Nigeria newspapers
2. To establish public perception of newspaper coverage of the Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria
3. To determine how prominent the reports on Chinese railway development projects are, in the selected Nigerian newspapers
4. To ascertain the most popular genre used in reporting Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria
5. To find out the dominant narratives or slant used in reporting Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Perception of Newspaper Coverage of Chinese Railway Development Projects in Nigeria

Public perception refers to the opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and impressions that people form about an issue based on available information and personal experiences. In communication studies, public perception is often influenced by media content because the media serve as a major source of information on social, political, and economic matters. Newspapers play an important role in shaping public understanding of development projects by providing reports, analysis, and commentaries that help citizens interpret events. When newspapers consistently report on major infrastructure projects, they influence how readers evaluate the benefits, challenges, and implications of such projects. According to McQuail (2020), media messages contribute significantly to the formation of public opinion because audiences often rely on the media for information about issues beyond their direct

experience. Consequently, public perception of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria is closely linked to how newspapers present information about these projects.

Chinese railway development projects have become one of the most visible aspects of China-Nigeria cooperation in recent years. Projects such as the Abuja-Kaduna railway, Lagos-Ibadan railway, and Kaduna-Kano railway have attracted substantial media attention because of their significance to transportation and economic development. Scholars have observed that these projects have improved mobility, enhanced regional connectivity, and contributed to infrastructure renewal in Nigeria. At the same time, concerns relating to debt obligations, local participation, technology transfer, and long-term sustainability have generated public debate. These mixed viewpoints have made newspaper coverage an important source through which citizens learn about and evaluate Chinese involvement in Nigeria's railway sector (Abubakar, Hooi, & Rogers, 2024; Ajah & Onuoha, 2025).

Newspaper Framing of China-Nigeria Relations in Railway Development Projects in Nigeria

Newspaper reporting is important in shaping how the public understands China's involvement in Nigeria. This is because many citizens do not have direct access to information about international agreements, project financing, construction arrangements and diplomatic negotiations. Newspapers therefore become an important source through which people learn about the meaning and effects of China-Nigeria cooperation. A recent study by Salaudeen and Thussu (2026) provides particularly useful evidence on this issue. Their analysis of *Guardian*, *THISDAY*, *Leadership* and *Punch*

found that Nigerian newspapers did not present China and its relationship with Africa in exactly the same way. While China itself was sometimes presented through positive images such as a development partner, powerful country and provider of assistance, reports about China's wider relationship with Africa were also associated with negative frames, including economic control, exploitation and hostility. The study is especially relevant because it demonstrates that newspaper coverage can distinguish between portraying China positively as a country and portraying China's relations with African countries more critically (Salaudeen & Thussu, 2026).

The recent study by Eze and Cookey (2025) further strengthens the argument that Nigerian newspapers present China's involvement through competing viewpoints. Their study of selected Nigerian newspapers examined the way Chinese loans to Nigeria were reported and identified three major frames: procedural concerns, infrastructure need and debt caution. The infrastructure need frame presented Chinese financing as a response to Nigeria's urgent need for development, while the debt caution frame drew attention to the financial risks associated with borrowing. This finding is important to railway development because many Chinese-supported railway projects in Nigeria involve questions about financing, loans, construction and the expected economic benefits of the projects. Thus, newspaper reports about railway projects may not simply focus on the physical construction of rail lines. They may also connect the projects to questions about debt, national development, foreign influence and the ability of Nigeria to manage its relationship with China (Eze & Cookey, 2025).

The Lagos-Ibadan railway provides another important example. The project was constructed by the China Civil Engineering Construction

Corporation and began commercial operations in June 2021. Reports about the project have highlighted its role in improving transportation between Lagos and Ibadan and its place in Nigeria's wider railway modernisation programme. The railway has also been described as an important part of Nigeria's transport connection with the wider West African region (Okejeme, 2023). Such reporting can create a development frame in which China is presented as a partner helping Nigeria improve its infrastructure. However, when reports focus on the financial arrangements, delays, costs, employment of local workers or the extent to which Nigerians benefit from the project, the same relationship may be presented differently. This suggests that the newspaper framing of China-Nigeria railway relations is likely to depend greatly on which aspect of the project receives the most attention.

Recent evidence also suggests that the effects of Chinese-built railway projects are mixed. Abubakar et al. (2026), in their study of the Abuja-Kaduna railway, found that the project contributed to employment, improved connectivity and infrastructure renewal. However, the researchers also identified community displacement and limited technology transfer as challenges. These findings are useful for a study of newspaper framing because they provide two broad sets of issues that newspapers can emphasise. A positive frame may focus on improved transportation, employment and economic opportunities, while a critical frame may focus on displacement, dependence on Chinese expertise and questions about whether Nigerians receive sufficient long-term benefits from the project. The way newspapers select and give attention to these issues can influence whether readers see China mainly as a development partner or as a country pursuing its

own economic interests in Nigeria (Abubakar et al., 2026).

Another issue in the literature is the wider pattern of Nigerian newspaper reporting about China. Popoola's study, published in 2022, examined how Lagos-based newspapers reported China and found that the nature of developments in China influenced what Nigerian editors considered newsworthy. Although the study is not limited to railway projects, it is useful because it shows that newspaper attention to China is shaped by editorial decisions about what deserves public attention. This means that railway development projects may receive more attention when they involve major government announcements, financing agreements, project delays, accidents, diplomatic visits or claims about economic benefits. Consequently, newspaper framing is not only about the language used in individual stories. It also involves decisions about which parts of China-Nigeria relations are given regular attention and which issues receive less attention (Popoola, 2022). The literature also shows that China's communication about its relationship with Nigeria tends to emphasise partnership and shared development. In 2024, the Chinese ambassador to Nigeria published an article in several Nigerian newspapers, including *Peoples Daily*, *Vanguard*, *The Guardian*, *The Daybreak* and *Premium Times*, stressing common development and a shared future between the two countries. The publication of such material in Nigerian newspapers shows that newspapers are also spaces where government and diplomatic actors attempt to present their preferred understanding of China-Nigeria relations.

Theoretical Framework

To provide theoretical underpinning for the study, this work is hinged on agenda setting theory.

Agenda Setting Theory

This study is anchored on Agenda-Setting Theory, which was developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. The theory explains the ability of the mass media to influence the importance that people attach to issues in society. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), the media may not always determine what people think about an issue, but they are highly successful in influencing what people think about. By giving more attention to certain issues through frequent and prominent coverage, the media increase public awareness and make those issues appear more important. Agenda-Setting Theory therefore emphasizes the role of the media in directing public attention toward particular events, policies, and development activities (McCombs, 2020).

The central assumption of Agenda-Setting Theory is that the amount of attention the media give to an issue influences the level of importance the public attaches to that issue. Through repeated reporting, headline placement, editorial emphasis, and continuous discussion, the media shape the public agenda by highlighting topics they consider newsworthy (McCombs et al., 2024). Recent studies have shown that agenda-setting effects remain relevant in both traditional and digital media environments because people continue to depend on media sources for information about issues that affect society (Guo & Vargo, 2023). As a result, the media play a significant role in shaping public awareness and discussion of national and international issues.

Agenda-Setting Theory is highly relevant to the study of public perception of newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria. Chinese railway development projects represent some of the most visible infrastructure initiatives undertaken in Nigeria in recent years. Because many citizens do not have direct access to detailed information about these projects, they

rely on newspapers and other media outlets to learn about their objectives, progress, benefits, and challenges. Through news stories, editorials, features, and analyses, newspapers draw public attention to issues relating to railway development and China's involvement in Nigeria's infrastructure sector.

The theory suggests that the frequency and prominence of newspaper coverage can influence how important the public perceives Chinese railway development projects to be. When newspapers consistently report on railway construction, project commissioning, economic benefits, transportation improvements, and employment opportunities, members of the public may regard these projects as important contributors to national development. Conversely, when coverage emphasizes issues such as project delays, funding challenges, debt concerns, or political controversies, these aspects may become the dominant issues in public discussions and evaluations of the projects. This reflects the agenda-setting role of the media in influencing which aspects of an issue receive the greatest public attention (McCombs et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Agenda-Setting Theory explains that newspapers not only influence the issues people think about but can also shape how those issues are understood. This aspect, often referred to as second-level agenda setting, suggests that the attributes or characteristics emphasized in media reports can affect public perceptions of an issue (Kim et al., 2023). In the context of Chinese railway development projects, the particular themes highlighted by newspapers, whether economic development, technological advancement, debt obligations, foreign partnerships, or national progress, may influence how citizens evaluate the projects and their impact on Nigeria.

The suitability of Agenda-Setting Theory for this study lies in its focus on the relationship between media attention and public perception. Since the study seeks to examine public perception of newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria, the theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding how newspaper reports influence the issues the public considers important and the opinions they develop about those issues. The theory therefore offers a useful basis for analysing how newspaper coverage contributes to public awareness, understanding, and evaluation of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the multi-method quantitative design research design. The investigation is designed to gauge the relationship between the media coverage and public opinion regarding Chinese railways projects in Nigeria. Therefore, content analysis and survey were used to generate data for the study. The study adopted the quantitative content analysis which applies numerical values to certain categories and units. Therefore, content analysis in this study critically examined the manifest contents of selected newspapers on Chinese railways projects in Nigeria for various content categories whereas survey method was employed to study audience opinion on the issue.

The content analysis involved 2 widely read Nigerian newspapers (The Guardian and Daily Trust) were selected for the study. The Guardian was purposively selected to represent the Southern region while Daily Trust was selected to represent the Northern region. The justification for the newspaper selection is based wide circulation, geographic location and wide readership in their regions. The study period ranges from January 1ST, 2020 to December 31,

2021. The focus on this period is based on the spike in Nigeria's borrowings from China. Therefore, the total content population for this study is the total number of daily editions of the publications for a year multiplied by 2 which is 1460.

For the survey aspect of the research, respondents were selected from two states (Lagos and FCT-Abuja). These states are purposively selected based on population density and the level of newspaper readership to represent the Southern and Northern perspectives on the Chinese railways projects in Nigeria. The data for the content analysis and the survey were integrated at the point of analysis and discussion of findings to compare and contrast the data together. The total population of residents in Lagos (9,113,605) and Abuja (776,298) according to NPC, (2006) is 9,889,903.

However, due to the fact that all the residents are not newspaper readers, the total copies of newspapers circulated in the state per day shall be used to determine the population of newspaper readers in the selected states.

Table 1: Readership/Circulation of the Selected Newspapers in the Selected States per day

States	Daily Trust	The Guardian
Lagos	1,150	10,000
Abuja	20,000	2,500
Total	21,150	12,500

Source: Daily Trust and The Guardian Bureau Chiefs in Abuja (2021, November 29)

Hence, the total copies of the selected newspapers circulated per day in Lagos and Abuja stands at 33,650.

The sample size for this study shall be determined through Taro Yamane's formula since the population of this study is already.

The Taro Yamane's formula:

$$S = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Where S = Sample size

N = Given population

e = Margin of error

I = Constant

Using the above formula,

$$S = \frac{1460}{1+1460(0.5)^2}$$

Therefore, the sample size for this study is 314 editions.

Systematic random sampling procedure will be employed in the selection of the stories about the Chinese railway's projects in Nigeria, to be used as the study sample. The sample size for each newspaper which is 157 editions into 104 weeks that make up two years will give us a sample of 1.5 editions which is approximately two (2) editions per week.

The data will be obtained from the archival sections of the selected newspapers' office in Abuja.

Systematic sampling will be used in selecting the months and particular editions of the newspapers that will be used for the data. Hence, the months of January, March, May, July, September, November as well as Tuesday and Friday editions shall be systematically studied for the period of two years.

Table 2: Content Population and Sample Size

Selected Newspapers	Total Editions Published	Sample Size
<i>The Guardian</i>	730	157
<i>Daily Trust</i>	730	157
Total	1460	314

Sample Size for Audience Survey

The sample size for the survey study shall be determined through Taro Yamane's formula since the population of this study (total copies of newspapers circulated per day) is already known.

The Taro Yamane's formula:

$$S = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Using the above formula,

$$S = \frac{33650}{1 + 33650(0.0025)^2} = \frac{33650}{1 + 84.13} = \frac{33650}{85.13} = 395.28$$

Therefore, the sample size for this study is 395 participants.

Coding sheet and questionnaire were used as the instruments for the content analysis and Survey respectively.

Inter-coder Reliability

To ensure the reliability of the data, two independent coders entered the newspaper issues and analyzed them independently. Also, the statistical test for inter-coder reliability was conducted to assess the statistical reliability of the instrument using Holstis formula. The formula states that;

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{2M}{N1 + N2}$$

Where M = Number of coding decisions on which two coders agree

N1+N2=Total number of coding decisions by first and second coder respectively. Using this formula of inter-coder reliability test, 75% similarity in independent coding means that the coding as done and obtained can be relied upon whereas the coding is assumed to be unreliable when the similarly result is below 45% and therefore cannot be conveniently or reliably used or depended upon.

Survey Data Presentation

The survey data presentation is presented in line with the objectives on the study in tables.

Exposure to Newspaper Coverage of Chinese Railways Development Projects

This section presents data related to respondents' exposure to newspaper coverage of Chinese railways development projects. Specifically, the data addressed the exposure, frequency of exposure, mode of exposure, and specific newspaper through which the respondents were exposed to the coverage of the projects. Data collected in this respect are as presented in Tables 4.2 to 4.5 below.

Table 3: Respondents' Exposure to Newspaper Coverage of Chinese Railways Development Projects

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	357	90.4
No	38	9.6
Total	395	100

Table presents data on the respondents' exposure to newspaper coverage of Chinese railways development projects in Nigeria. Figures presented in the table indicate that 90.4% were exposed to the reports of the project. Stated differently, majority of the respondents had read newspaper reports on this issue, hence it can be said there was high exposure to the Chinese railways development projects among the respondents.

Table 4: Respondents' Frequency of Exposure to Newspaper Coverage of Chinese Railways Development Projects

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Very many times	66	18.5
Many times	181	50.7
Few times	59	16.5
Very few times	51	14.3

Total	357	100
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Table 4 presents data on the respondents' frequency of exposure to newspaper coverage of Chinese railways development projects. The figures indicate that 18.5% had read reports on the projects very many times, 50.7% had read them many times, 16.5% had read them a few times, while 14.3% had read them very few times. In other words, all together, majority of the respondents (69.2%) had read the newspaper reports frequently – either very many times or many times.

Table 5: Respondents' Mode of Exposure to Newspaper Coverage of Chinese Railways Development Projects

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Hardcopy	121	33.9

Online	32	9.0
Both	204	57.1
Total	357	100

Table 5 presents data on the respondents' mode of exposure to newspaper coverage of Chinese railways development projects in Nigeria. Figures in the table show that 33.9% read the reports in hardcopy newspaper, 9% read them in online newspapers, while 57.1% read the reports via both hardcopy and online modes. These data indicate that all together, majority (66.1%) read these reports via online newspapers, even if they had also read them in hardcopy publications. This dominance of online mode is in line with literature evidence that more and more readers in Nigeria are relying on online publications for newspaper consumption (Omenugha, 2019; Ikechukwu, 2018; Layefa *et al.*, 2021).

Table 6: Newspapers Through Which Respondents Were Exposed to Coverage of Chinese Railways Development Projects

Responses	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>This Day</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	<i>The Sun</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	<i>Business Day</i>	<i>The Punch</i>	<i>Tribune</i>	<i>Daily Trust</i>	Others
Yes	59.1% N = 211	39.8% N = 142	52.7% N = 188	49.3% N = 176	61.9% N = 221	27.5% N = 98	37.3% N = 133	46.5% N = 166	17.1% N = 61	12.0% N = 43
No	40.9% N = 146	60.2% N = 215	47.3% N = 169	50.7% N = 181	28.1% N = 136	72.5% N = 259	62.7% N = 224	53.5% N = 191	82.9% N = 296	88.0% N = 314
Total	100% N = 357	100% N = 357	100% N = 357	100% N = 357	100% N = 357	100% N = 357	100% N = 357	100% N = 357	100% N = 357	100% N = 357

Table 6 presents data on the newspapers through which the respondents were exposed to newspaper coverage of Chinese railways development projects in Nigeria. Figures in the table indicate that *The Nation*, *The Guardian*,

Tribune, *The Sun* and *This Day*, in this order, featured most frequently as the papers in which the respondents read the reports on the rail projects. Unsurprisingly, these are among the leading national dailies in the country, and so, are

always likely to be a source of news on a major national issue for major people. Significantly, one of the two newspapers content-analysed in this study, *The Guardian*, emerged among the major sources of respondents' exposure to the projects.

Perception of Newspaper Coverage of Chinese Railways Development Projects

This section presents data on the respondents' perception of newspaper coverage of Chinese railways development projects in Nigeria. These data specifically relate to the regularity, clarity, comprehensiveness, relevance, accuracy, objectivity, and slant of the reports.

Table 7: Respondents' views as to whether Nigerian Newspapers Gave Sufficient Coverage to the Chinese Railways Development Projects in Terms of Regularity of Reportage

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	121	33.9
Agree	146	40.9
Undecided	32	9.0
Disagree	30	8.4
Strongly disagree	28	7.8
Total	357	100

Mean = 1.9

Table 7 presents data on the respondents' views as to whether Nigerian newspapers gave sufficient coverage to the Chinese railway development projects in terms of regularity of the reportage. Figures in the table indicate that 33.9% and 40.9% agreed and strongly agreed respectively, while 8.4% and 7.8% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. However, 9% were undecided. The implication is that majority were in agreement that Nigerian newspapers gave sufficient coverage to the rail projects in terms of regularity of the reportage. The mean value of 1.9 pattern evidences this pattern of positive response.

Table 8: Respondents' views as to whether Nigerian Newspapers Gave Sufficient

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Coverage to the Chinese Railways Development Projects in Terms of Clarity of Reports Published

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	108	30.3
Agree	132	37.0
Undecided	41	11.5
Disagree	47	13.2
Strongly disagree	29	8.1
Total	357	100

Mean = 2.1

Table 8 presents data on the respondents' views as to whether Nigerian newspapers gave sufficient coverage to the Chinese railway development projects in terms of clarity of the reports published. Figures in the table indicate that 30.3% and 37% agreed and strongly agreed respectively, while 13.2% and 8.1% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. However, 11.5% were undecided. The implication is that majority were in agreement that Nigerian newspapers gave sufficient coverage to the rail projects in terms of clarity of the reports published. The mean value of 2.1 pattern affirms this pattern of positive response.

Table 9: Respondents' views as to whether Newspaper Coverage of Chinese Railway Development Projects is Comprehensive Enough to Offer Good Understanding of the Issues

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	111	31.1
Agree	139	38.9
Undecided	46	12.9
Disagree	51	14.3
Strongly disagree	10	2.8
Total	357	100

Mean = 2.3

Table 9 presents data on the respondents' views as to whether Nigerian newspapers' coverage of Chinese railway development projects is comprehensive enough to offer good

understanding of the issues. Figures in the table indicate that 31.1% and 38.9% agreed and strongly agreed respectively, while 14.3% and 2.8% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. However, 2.8% were undecided. The implication is that majority were in agreement that Nigerian newspapers' coverage of Chinese railway development projects is comprehensive enough to offer good understanding of the issues. The mean value of 2.3 pattern affirms this pattern of positive response.

Table 10: Respondents' views as to whether Newspaper Coverage of Chinese Railway Development Projects has Focused on Relevant Issues

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	138	38.7
Agree	171	47.9
Undecided	11	3.1
Disagree	21	5.9
Strongly disagree	16	4.4
Total	357	100

Mean = 1.7

Table 10 presents data on the respondents' views as to whether newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria has focused on relevant issues. Figures in the table indicate that 38.7% and 47.9% agreed and strongly agreed respectively, while 5.9% and 4.4% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. On the other hand, 3.1% were undecided. The implication is that majority believed that newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria has focused on relevant issues. The mean value of 1.7 strongly evidences this pattern of positive response.

Table 11: Respondents' views as to whether Newspaper Coverage of

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Chinese Railways Development Projects has Been Accurate Enough

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	98	27.5
Agree	130	36.4
Undecided	38	10.6
Disagree	60	16.8
Strongly disagree	31	8.7
Total	357	100

Mean = 2.5

Table 4.10 presents data on the respondents' views as to whether newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria has been accurate enough. Figures in the table indicate that 27.5% and 36.4% agreed and strongly agreed respectively, while 16.8 % and 8.7% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. On the other hand, 10.6% were undecided. The implication is that majority were of the belief that newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria has been accurate enough. The mean value of 2.5 pattern affirms this pattern of positive response.

Table 12: Respondents' views as to whether Newspapers Coverage of Chinese Railways Development Projects has Been Objective and Balanced in Presenting Issues

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	87	24.4
Agree	150	42.0
Undecided	57	16.0
Disagree	41	11.5
Strongly disagree	22	6.1
Total	357	100

Mean = 2.4

Table 12 presents data on the respondents' views as to whether newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria has been

objective and balanced in presenting issues. Figures in the table indicate that 24.4% and 42% agreed and strongly agreed respectively, while 11.5 % and 6.1% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. On the other hand, 16% were undecided. The implication is that majority were of the belief that newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria has been objective and balanced in presenting issues. The mean value of 2.4 pattern affirms this pattern of positive response.

Table 13: Respondents' views as to Whether Reports Published by Nigerian Newspapers on Chinese Railway Development Projects has Been Positive Towards the Projects

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	101	28.2
Agree	127	35.6
Undecided	47	13.2
Disagree	51	14.3
Strongly disagree	31	8.7
Total	357	100

Mean = 2.5

Table 13 presents data on the respondents' views as to whether newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria has been positive towards the projects. Figures in the table indicate that 28.2% and 35.6% agreed and strongly agreed respectively, while 14.3 % and 8.7% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. On the other hand, 13.2% were undecided. The implication is that majority were of the belief that newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria has been objective and balanced in presenting issues. The mean value of 2.5 pattern affirms this pattern of positive response.

Table 14: Respondents' views as to Whether the Manner of Newspaper Coverage of Chinese Railway Development Projects is Such that Would Promote Accountability in Regard to the Projects

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Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	126	35.3
Agree	161	45.1
Undecided	22	6.2
Disagree	27	7.5
Strongly disagree	21	5.9
Total	357	100

Mean = 1.9

Table 14 presents data on the respondents' views as to whether newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria is such that would promote accountability in regard to the projects. Figures in the table indicate that 35.3% and 45.1% agreed and strongly agreed respectively, while 7.5 % and 5.9% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. However, 6.2% were undecided. The implication is that majority were of the belief that newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria has been objective and balanced in presenting issues. The mean value of 1.7 strongly evidences this pattern of positive response.

Table 15: Respondents' views as to whether Newspaper Coverage of Chinese Railway Development Projects is Generally Satisfactory

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	96	26.9
Agree	135	37.8
Undecided	44	12.3
Disagree	45	12.6
Strongly disagree	37	10.4
Total	357	100

Mean = 2.4

Table 15 presents data on the respondents' views as to whether newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria has been positive towards the projects is generally satisfactory. Figures in the table indicate that 26.9% and 37.8% agreed and strongly agreed respectively, while 12.6% and 10.4% disagreed

and strongly disagreed respectively. On the other hand, 12.3% were undecided. The implication is that majority were of the belief that newspaper coverage of Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria has been positive towards the projects is generally satisfactory. The mean value of 2.4 pattern affirms this pattern of positive response.

Content Analysis Data Presentation

Table 16: Frequency of Coverage of Chinese Railway Development Projects

	Newspapers		Total
	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Daily Trust</i>	
Editions with reports on Chinese Railway Development Projects	61.8% N = 97	69.4% N = 109	65.6% N = 206
Editions without reports on Chinese Railway Development Projects	28.2% N = 60	30.6% N = 48	34.4% N = 108
Total	100% N = 157	100% N = 157	100% N = 314

Table 4.15 presents data on the frequency of newspaper coverage of the Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria. Figures in the table indicate that all together, 65.6% of the editions selected had report(s) on the project as against 34.4% that did not. Similarly, this pattern of distribution reflected in each of the two newspapers studied. For *The Guardian*, over 61% had such reports, while over 69% of the editions of *Daily Trust* published the reports.

Table 17: Content Type

	Newspapers		Total
	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Daily Trust</i>	
Straight news story	72.2% N = 151	81.1% N = 189	76.9% N = 340
Feature	15.8% N = 33	11.4% N = 26	13.3% N = 59
Editorial	0% N = 0	0% N = 0	0% N = 0
Pictorial	7.7% N = 16	5.2% N = 12	6.3% N = 28
Letter-to-the-editor	0% N = 0	0% N = 0	0% N = 0
Comments/Opinions	4.3% N = 9	2.6% N = 6	3.4% N = 15
Others	0% N = 0	0% N = 0	0% N = 0

Total	100% N = 209	100% N = 233	100% N = 442
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Table 17 presents data on the content types published by the selected newspapers in their coverage of the Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria. Figures in the table indicate that, on the whole, straight news stories constituted majority (76.9%) of the reports published. This is followed by features which accounted for 13.3% of the reports. This pattern reflects as well in the individual newspapers, as straight news and features accounted for 72.2% and 15.8% of the reports in *The Guardian*, and 81.1% and 11.4% of the reports in *Daily Trust* respectively. Pictorials and comments/opinions accounted for a negligible proportion of the reports, while editorial and letter-to-the-editor did not feature in the newspapers.

Table 18: Prominence

	Newspapers		Total
	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Daily Trust</i>	
Front Page	19.6% N = 41	23.6% N = 55	21.7% N = 96
Back Page	10.0% N = 21	7.3% N = 17	8.6% N = 38
Centre Spread	6.7% N = 14	1.7% N = 4	4.1% N = 18
Inside Page	63.6% N = 133	67.4% N = 157	65.6% N = 290
Total	100% N = 209	100% N = 233	100% N = 442

Table18 presents data on the level of prominence accorded to the reports published by the selected newspapers in their coverage of the Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria. Figures in the table indicate that, on the whole, 21.7% of the reports appeared in the front page, 8.6% appeared in the back page, while 4.1% were published in the centre spread. However, 65.6% of the reports were placed in inside pages. Thus, on the whole, 34.4% of the reports were published in the more conspicuous pages. This pattern is equally observable when the two newspapers are considered individually.

Table 19: Dominant Narrative/Slant

	Newspapers		Total
	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Daily Trust</i>	
Support	24.9% N = 52	40.3% N = 94	33.0% N = 146
Condemnation	20.6% N = 43	15.9% N = 37	18.1% N = 80
Neutral	54.5% N = 114	43.8% N = 102	48.9% N = 216
Total	100%	100%	100%

N = 209	N = 233	N = 442
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Table 19 presents data on the dominant narrative/slant of the reports published by the selected newspapers in their coverage of the Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria. All together, close to a half of the reports (48.9%) were neutral, while 33% and 18.1% were supporting and condemnatory of the projects respectively. In terms of the individual newspapers, 24.9%, 20.6%, and 54.5% of the reports in *The Guardian* were supportive, condemnatory and neutral respectively, while 40.3%, 15.9%, and 43.8% in *Daily Trust* respectively supported, condemned and were neutral towards the rail projects.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this research are discussed in this section. This discussion is done along the line of the five research questions formulated to guide this study.

Research Question 1: What is the level of audience exposure to reports of the Chinese railway development projects in the selected Nigeria newspapers?

To answer this research question, the reference is made to Tables 3 to 5. Data in these table indicate that majority of the respondents had read reports on the Chinese rail projects in Nigeria, and that *The Guardian* and *Daily Trust* were among the papers through which they read the reports. This reading was done both via hardcopy and online publications, and had largely occurred frequently. Consequently, it is stated, in answer to the first research question, that there was high audience exposure to reports of the Chinese railway development projects in the selected Nigerian newspapers.

This finding is in line with results of previous studies (such as Ganiyu, 2017; Nkemdilim, 2020) which indicate that newspapers continue to be an

influential source of information among Nigerians in regard to issues of public interest. Nkemdilim (2020) argues that while newspaper's influence is being greatly challenged by the advent of alternative online news sites, the migration into the cyberspace of traditional newspapers has kept them relevant in the modern news business.

Research Question 2: How do the public perceive newspaper coverage of the Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria?

To answer the above research question, the researcher refers to Table 7 to table 9. Data in the table indicate that the respondents saw the newspaper reports on the Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria as regular, comprehensive, clear, relevant, accurate, and objective. In fact, Table 9 specifically shows that majority of the respondents considered the performance of the newspapers "generally satisfactory" in terms of their coverage of the projects. Based on the foregoing, the second research question is answered by admitting that the public perception of newspaper coverage of the Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria was largely positive in terms of the regularity, comprehensiveness, clarity, relevance, accuracy and objectivity of the reports published. This finding reflects the result in the study by Nassanga and Makara (2016) which showed that audience in Uganda, East Africa, had positive perception of the media coverage of Chinese firms in the country. Audience positive perception of media reportage is often a reflection of the extent of credibility which the media command in the eyes of the audience. Omenugha (2019) elaborates as follows:

Audience perception
of media coverage of

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any issue or event is often influenced by the extent audience considers the media as credible. In other words, credibility perception is a strong predictor of audience response to media message. Readers and viewers may not have any other way of verifying the accuracy of newspaper and television reports, hence, would largely rely on trust to believe or disbelieve such news. So, whenever consumers of media message have positive opinion regarding media's performance in reporting an issue or event, then it is more than likely that there is a pre-existing positive perception of the media generally by these audience members (p.47).

The foregoing reinforces the literature evidence (see Eyiuche, 2013; Adedeji, 2009; Eze, 2018) that newspapers remain an influential source of news in Nigeria. While people are finding online alternatives in their news consumption, newspapers remain a popular and trusted platform for obtaining information among the populace (Eze, 2018).

Research Question 3: How prominent are the reports on Chinese railway development projects in the selected Nigerian newspapers?

To answer this research question, reference is made to the tables earlier presented. Data in Table 16 indicate that majority of the selected newspaper editions published reports on the rail projects. Furthermore, a good number (34.4%) of the reports were published in the more conspicuous pages (front, centre spread, and back). This figure is significant considering the number of reports competing for space in these pages. Consequently, it is stated, in answer to the third research question, that the selected Nigerian newspapers gave frequent and prominent coverage to the Chinese railway development projects.

The foregoing resonates the findings in by Ojo (2016) and Ojo (2020) which showed that the news media gave regular and prominent coverage to issues of China-Africa relations. A similar finding was made by Mari-Anne (2012) who assessed how China-Africa relations were framed by the Chinese and British media. It is well established in media effect scholarship that regular and prominent coverage of an issue is an important determinant of how much public attention such issue would command (McQuail & Deuze, 2020). In fact, this is the position of the Agenda Setting Theory. By implication, there may be a relationship between the finding that the selected newspapers covered the Chinese railway development projects regularly and prominently and the earlier finding that there was high exposure to reports on the projects among the audience. In other words, the regular and prominent manner in which the papers reported the projects may have contributed in drawing public attention to the reports.

Research Question 4: What is the most popular genre used in reporting Chinese railways development projects in Nigeria?

To answer this research question, the researcher referred to Table 19 and 18 above. Data in Table 16 indicate that Figures in the table indicate that, on the whole, straight news stories constituted majority (76.9%) of the reports published on the railway development projects. There were, however, a small number of features, pictorials, comments/opinions, while no editorial or letter-to-the-editor was published on the projects. In view of the foregoing, the fourth research question is answered by admitting that the selected Nigerian newspapers reported the Chinese railway development projects mostly as straight news while also publishing a few features, pictorials, and comments/opinions on them.

This finding resonates findings in previous content analysis studies showing that Nigerian newspapers have tended to report issues mostly as straight news (Sule, 2015; Nwafor, 2015). The reason may simply be found in the fact that traditionally newspaper content is generally dominated by straight news reports (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012). However, it has also been observed that emphasis on straight news by newspapers tends to result in oversimplification and shallow treatment of issues which may not be the case where investigative and interpretative approach is applied. The argument has been that such in-depth reports are generally more in keeping with the media's responsibility to inform the public (McQuail & Deuze, 2020; Okunna & Omenugha, 2012).

Research Question 5: What is the dominant narrative or slant used in reporting Chinese railways development projects in Nigeria?

To answer the above research question, reference is made to Table 19. Data in the table indicate that

while the newspapers were largely neutral in reporting the rail project, a significant number of the reports showed some positive leaning toward the projects. The newspapers, however, seemed reluctant to be condemnatory towards the projects. Consequently, it is stated, in answer to the fifth research question, that the selected Nigerian newspapers were largely neutral in the slant they gave to the reports on the Chinese railway development projects, even though a significant proportion of their reports were positive towards the projects.

The foregoing reflects the findings of previous studies (such as Wekesa, 2013; Paterson & Nothias, 2016; Matanji, 2019; Anunne & Yan, 2018). Nigerian studies like Ojo (2016), Ojo (2020), and Umejei (2013) came up with similar findings showing how willing the media were to portray China positively in its relationship with Africa. Commenting on their findings, Paterson and Nothias (2016) argue that this sort of coverage tends to promote imperialism by obscuring the exploitative dimensions of the relations between a super power like China and much weaker nations of Africa.

Again, the fact that audience generally perceived newspaper coverage of the Chinese railway development projects positively (as earlier found) may be an indication that these papers may have become a tool for reinforcing imperialism. This is because, based on the earlier cited argument of Omenugha (2019), audience positive perception of the newspaper reports may seriously suggest that the readers do find the reports credible.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that newspapers remain an influential source of news from where members of the public obtain information on issues public interest such as the Chinese railway development projects. This is notwithstanding the fact that the emerging online-based alternatives sources of news are seriously challenging the hegemony of traditional media,

as these conventional media, including newspapers, extend their presence to the online space where they are equally proving influential. Significantly, one inference that can be drawn via combined reading of the findings of the content analysis and survey aspects of the study is that the pattern of audience exposure and perception to news on the rail projects tends to reflect the pattern of newspaper coverage of same. The newspapers were found to have covered the projects regularly as well as given prominence to issues related to the projects regularity and prominence being key determinants of how much public attention a news event commands. Thus, it can be stated that these findings reinforce the Agenda Setting perspective by demonstrating that the newspapers' regular and prominent focus on the Chinese railway development projects may have helped place the issue on the public agenda.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are put forward by the researcher:

1. There is need for the press to adopt a more critical approach to its coverage of the Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria, and indeed other aspects of Nigeria-China relations. This will help expose possible exploitative and corrupt dimensions of such bilateral dealings, hence bringing such issues to the table of public discourse as well as directing the attention of the both parties to them.
2. As against relying mainly on straight news reports, newspapers should do more in the area of investigative and interpretative journalism while reporting issues such as the Chinese railway development projects in Nigeria. This will help the media better fulfil their role of sufficiently informing the public and exposing hidden facts which it is in the interest of the public to know.
3. Other genres such as editorials should be included in reporting issues like the Chinese rail development projects. The researcher did not find a single editorial on the project in the two newspapers studied. Inclusion of such a genre would help newspapers to better influence public opinion through the stance it may take on the matter.

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