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Coverage of Economic Crises Occasioned by Fuel Subsidy Removal from October 2023 to March 2024 by three selected Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

This study assessed how economic crises occasioned by fuel subsidy removal was reported by three selected Nigerian newspapers, namely, *The Sun*, *The Punch* and *The Guardian* between October 2023 to March 2024. The study aimed to ascertain the frequency of coverage, the level of prominence and the direction given to economic crises in Nigeria by selected Nigerian newspapers and identify the story genre mostly used by these Nigerian newspapers in the reportage of economic crises. The study was anchored on agenda setting theory. Stratified sampling technique was used to select 144 editions of the three selected national newspapers. A total of 613 stories were published in selected newspapers within the period of 6 months under study. Findings revealed that economic crises in Nigeria were adequately and frequently reported by the selected newspapers within the study period; that economic crises were not given adequate prominence; the newspapers mostly gave favourable direction of coverage to stories on economic crises issues and the story genre mostly adopted by the three selected newspapers in reportage of economic crises was straight news stories. Consequently, the study recommended among other things that efforts should be made by Nigerian newspapers to give more in-depth and background information on the subject matter through features and opinion articles. It was also recommended that subsequent stories on economic crises and similar issues of public concern should be reported in the newspapers editorials to help sensitise the readers on such issues for their proper decision-making.

Keywords: Economic crises, mass media, fuel subsidy, Nigerian newspapers, fuel subsidy removal



Introduction

Nigeria is ranked the 21st largest economy in the world in terms of nominal GDP, and the 20th largest in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (Ekwueme, 2017). Ekpo et al., (2016) stressed before 1970s, agriculture is the predominant occupation in Nigeria. Hence, Nigeria accumulated foreign exchange from cash crops like cotton, groundnut, cocoa and palm oil. Nevertheless, the unearthing of crude oil in profitable measure at that period made the then government to abandon agriculture for the new oil dollars and this became the origin of economic crises in the country. This development has made Nigeria to depend on mono-economy and since then the managers of Nigeria economy have been trying to find their footing in terms of building a strong and progressive economy like the developed countries of the world (Ekpo, et al, 2016).

Nigeria has the second largest oil reserve in Africa at 37.2 billion barrels, seconding Libya and it is Africa's largest producer of oil (Olisah, 2020; Adekoya, 2020). However, the subsidy on refined oil or Petroleum has proven to be the biggest challenge to the managers of the Nigerian economy. Despite huge incomes from Nigeria's crude oil export, successive governments have not been able to provide social amenities needed by her people for poverty reduction. This led to the introduction of fuel subsidy in the mid-1980s to reduce the suffering of her people due to the high cost of pump price of fuel (Agu, et al., 2018). However, scholars and international organisations, like the International Monetary Funds (IMF) demanded for the removal of subsidy from energy fuel because of its distortions to the actual market price resulting in failure to reflect the actual market cost (Okwanya, et al., 2015).

President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan led administration, in 2012 started a partial removal of the fuel subsidy in Nigeria. Also, due to the recent recession in the country because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Nigerian government could no longer sustain the payment of subsidy on fuel because the cost of subsidising fuel in the country keeps increasing just as population is increasing causing an increase in the demand for fuel (Umeji&Eleanya, 2021, p.1). As such, President Buhari led administration announced subsidy removal from fuel in the country. Equally due to the pressure of international organisations, President Ahmed Bola Tinubu, on his inaugural speech in May 2023 announced the full subsidy removal with immediate implementation.

The removal of fuel subsidy has led to high rate of inflation thereby subjecting many Nigerians to untold hardship. In agreement, Umeji and Eleanya (2021) noted that the effect of fuel subsidy removal is that the poor will suffer more in the form of higher transport fare and increased price of food items and other commodities. Although there had been past attempts and discussions on removal of fuel subsidy, the May 29, 2023, pronouncement has turned out to be different because it has fully eliminated subsidy, unlike past instances of partial removal. According to National Bureau of Statistics, the average cost of intra-city bus transportation in Nigeria has increased from ₦649.59 in May 2023 to ₦1,285.41 in June 2023, representing about 979% increase, largely due to the increase in pump price of petrol (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Average salary increases have generally lagged inflation due to affordability and sustainability issues. However, pay increases have trended in similar trajectory as inflation. For the gap between pay increases and inflation to narrow, the former must either grow at a higher pace and/or inflation drops over time. Also, rising energy and food prices present a challenge to this, including persistent currency depreciation (KlynveldPeat Marwick Goerdeler, 2023).

Although the benefits of fuel subsidy removal include reducing government borrowing and the associated huge deficit; reduced incentive for smuggling and associated security risk, stronger Naira and decline in imported inflation; investment flow to the downstream sector; product availability etc (www.pwc.com/ng). However, when petrol prices increase because of fuel subsidy removal, small businesses tend to raise their prices to cover the increased cost of operation. This makes it more difficult



for people to afford necessities, lead to a decrease in the standard of living and contribute to hunger, poverty and inequality(www.pwc.com/ng), a situation known as economic crises.

Ekwueme (2017) citing Mutz (1992) opined that the mass media, particularly newspapers are major sources of information about economic developments, especially the state of the national macro-economy. It is therefore, the responsibility the Nigerian mainstream newspapers to ensure that such economic challenges as inflation, hike in pump price of fuel and transportation, high prices of food stuffs and essential commodities, high rate of unemployment, poor salary structure, high cost of living, inequality etc are given adequate coverage. By providing adequate information on these economic issues, the media shape public opinion about such issues and their consequent implications. The way the media reports stories on economic crises in Nigeria influence public knowledge and discourse on them. This study therefore, sought to analyse how economic crises were reported in Nigeria from October 2023 to March 2024 by three mainstream Nigerian Newspapers namely *The Sun*, *The Punch* and *The Guardian*.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives that guided this study were to:

1. ascertain the frequency of coverage given to economic crises in Nigeria by the selected Nigerian newspapers.
2. find out the level of prominence given to economic crises in Nigeria by selected Nigerian newspapers.
3. determine the slant/direction given to economic crises issues in Nigeria by the selected Nigerian newspapers.
4. identify the story genre mostly used in the reportage of economic crises by the selected in Nigerian newspapers.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on the Agenda Setting theory of the mass media. Agenda-setting theory is traced to the first chapter of Walter Lipmann's (1922) book titled 'Public Opinion'. In that first chapter - "The World Outside and The Pictures In Our Heads", Lipmann argues that the mass media are the principal connection between events in the world and the images in the minds of the public. In other words, people attach importance to an issue or topic base on the manner such issue is portrayed by the mass media. This theory is also linked to Bernard Cohen (1963) when he states that because of the kind of coverage given to a particular issue by the media, there is a kind of importance attached to it by the mass media audience. Cohen (1963) observed that "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (p.13).

McCombs and Shaw (1972) who formally formulated the agenda setting theory in 1972 emphasised the relationships between the emphasis placed on issues by the mass media and the importance media audiences attach to those issues. In agreement this statement, McQuail (2010, p. 548) stressed that "... the more attention the media give to a topic, the greater is the importance attributed to it by the news audience". The implication of these statements is that the coverage given to an issue, (in this case, economic crises prompted by fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria) in terms of prominence of the story, frequency of coverage and slant/direction determines to a great extent the importance that will be attached to the issue by the public, as opposed to when the issue is not adequately reported by the media.



The relevance of this theory to the study is that with constant media reportage of economic crises prompted by fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria, the issue will become an important public discourse. With constant media reports, there is the possibility that Nigerian citizens will understand and discuss the economic challenges and its implication on their lives and the nation's economy and this discourse could possibly persuade Nigerian government into positive actions towards resolving the issues and improving the economic conditions of the citizens.

Method

Research Design

The research design adopted for this study is Content Analysis. "The rationale for content analysis is that this research design is found relevant when handling research topics on press coverage of various issues" (Nwala 2014, p.42).

Population of the Study

This study analyzed three newspapers namely: *The Sun*, *The Punch* and *The Guardian*, purposively selected from the entire Nigerian newspapers based on distinct criteria such as wide coverage, availability and accessibility, wide circulation and wide readership across the country. Since this study is on newspaper coverage of Economic crises in Nigeria, the population of study comprised all the editions of the three selected Nigeria newspapers published from 1st October 2023 to 31st March 2024 (6 months). This period was considered important and chosen because it is the period when the crises occasioned by fuel subsidy removal by Presidents Tinubu's administration started hitting very hard on the well-being and living conditions of Nigerians. Therefore, the total population of study is 549 (that is: $183 \times 3 = 549$) including weekend editions.

Sample Size

A sample size of 144 issues was selected for the months of October 2023 – March 2024. For each of the weeks of the months studied, two issues were selected for the three newspapers. Specifically, Mondays and Wednesdays were selected for *The Sun*, Tuesdays and Fridays were selected for *The Punch* while Thursdays and Saturdays were selected for *The Guardian*. The reason to study two issues for each newspaper and to select Mondays and Wednesdays for *The Sun*, Tuesdays and Fridays for *The Punch* and Thursdays and Saturdays for *The Guardian* was based on stratified sampling technique where the days were selected to represent the rest of the days that could not be studied since it would have been cumbersome to study all the editions of the newspapers within the period under study. Therefore, the selection resulted in 144 issues from the calculation of the issues from the newspaper selected for each of the weeks for the six (6) months.

Sampling Technique

Multistage sampling technique was used in selecting the sample. First, the three newspapers and the six months period were selected using purposive sampling technique. Asemah et al (2012, p.187) assert that "purposive sampling is used when the researcher just picks the sampling elements considered to possess the required characteristics". In this study, it was discovered that the selected newspapers have some common attributes of daily publication, wide readership, wide circulation, national outlook and professionalism and the six months were the periods when the economic crises started hitting so hard on the well-being and living conditions of Nigerian citizens. Therefore, the researcher purposively chose *The Sun*, *The Punch* and *The Guardian* newspapers because of the characteristics mentioned which are of interest to the researcher.



Second, the 144 issues that formed the sample size for this study were selected using stratified sampling technique. This was because this technique ensures that different strata (groups) in the population were adequately represented (Asemah et al 2012). To arrive at this sample size, the days of the week were stratified into two days for each of the newspapers used for the six months. Therefore, Mondays and Wednesdays were selected for *The Sun* which amounted to 48 issues, Tuesdays and Fridays were selected for *The Punch* which amounted for 48 issues while Thursdays and Saturdays were selected for *The Guardian* which also amounted to 48 issues totaling 144 issues of the three newspapers studied.

Units of analysis

The units of analysis for this study were: straight news stories, editorials, features, opinion articles and illustrations.

Content Categories

In this study, the units of analysis were coded into categories based on the following:

Media: These are the newspapers that the researcher studied with reference to economic crises in Nigeria. The media used in this study were: *The Sun*, *The Punch*, *The Guardian*.

Frequency: This refers to the number of times each story on economic crises appears on the pages of the newspaper studied. In this study, the frequency is measured from one to twenty (1-20) times in each of the newspapers.

Prominence/Story Placement: This is the position or placement of news stories on the pages of the newspapers. It is used to know the importance attached to the story in by the newspaper studied. The importance identified by the story placement found in Front page. Back page, Centre spread and Inside page.

Slant/Direction: This refers to the direction the story takes in terms of favourable, unfavourable and neutral stories. Favourable stories are stories that praise the actions of government with regards to economic crises. In this study, these are stories that presents the government in positive light or stating the efforts of Nigerian government in curtailing ending the economic crises caused by fuel subsidy removal. Unfavourable stories are stories that condemn the actions of the government regarding economic crises. It highlights the weaknesses or non-challant attitudes Nigerian government towards curbing or ending the current economic crises caused by fuel subsidy removal. Neutral stories are stories that neither praises (favourable) nor condemns (unfavourable) the actions of government towards the subject matter.

Story Genre: This refers to the form or way in which the story appeared. These forms are straight news, editorials, features, opinion articles and illustration (photographs and cartoons).

Month: These are the months in 2023 and 2024 that were selected and studied. These months were: October, November, December, January, February and March.

Validity of the Instrument

To ensure validity of the study instrument, effort was made to examine only stories related to economic crises in Nigeria (in the three selected newspapers) to achieve the study objectives. Because the process involved in preparing the code sheet was very demanding and laborious., the instrument was presented to professional in the field of Mass Communication for strict examination and analysis. These professionals ensured that all the necessary processes were duly observed to achieve high validity of the instrument.



Reliability of the Instrument

To ensure reliability of the coding instrument, the Holsti's inter-coder reliability formula was used to calculate the inter-coder reliability for this study. Thus, two coders were trained and asked to code the January edition of *The Sun newspaper*. They judged a sample of 21 editions (7 editions for each of the three newspapers) and agreed at 12. Using, Holsti's formula, inter-coder reliability for this study is calculated thus:

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{2M}{N_1 + N_2}$$

Where: M = number of coding decisions on which two independent coders agree

N₁ = number of coding decisions by the first coder

N₂ = number of coding decisions by the second coder

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{2(12)}{16+15} = \frac{24}{31} = 0.77$$

Therefore, the inter-coder reliability is .77, which implies that the instrument was reliable.

Method of Data Collection

Data for this study was collected with the help of two trained coders. The coders were trained for two weeks on how to code the stories related to economic crises caused by fuel subsidy removal in the three selected Nigerian newspapers.

Method of Data Analysis

To analyse the data, the coded information generated from the manifest content of the newspapers were presented in figures, frequency table and simple percentages. The analysis and interpretation were done in line with the research objectives.

Findings

The studied newspapers published a total of 613 stories on economic crises within the study period of six months. *The Sun* published a total of 215 stories, *The Guardian* published a total of 207 while *The Punch* published a total of 191 stories on the subject matter.

Table 1: Frequency of coverage of economic crises in Nigeria by the selected newspapers

Months	The Sun	The Punch	The Guardian	Total	Percentage (%)
October	30	34	20	84	14
November	32	36	38	106	17
December	24	32	30	86	14
January	48	29	34	111	18
February	39	33	47	119	20
March	42	27	38	107	17
Total	215	191	207	613	100

Data in Table 1 showed that the newspapers reported the issue frequently within the study period with a total of 613 reports. However, *The Sun newspaper* had the highest number of coverage (215) than *The Guardian* and *The Punch*. Also, the subject matter was mostly reported in the months of January and February 2024 which recorded 18% and 20% respectively. The implication is that economic crises issues were reported frequently.

Table 2: Level of prominence given to economic crises in Nigeria by the selected newspapers

Level of Prominence	The Sun	The Punch	The Guardian	Total	Percentage (%)
Front Page	61	67	72	200	33
Back Page	48	53	44	145	24
Centre Spread	1	0	1	2	0
Inside Page	105	71	90	266	43
Total	215	191	207	613	100

Result in table 2 showed that the highest percentage (43%) of stories on economic crises appeared on the inside pages of the newspapers. This implies that the selected newspapers did not give adequate prominence to economic crises in Nigeria within the study period. However, *The Guardian* gave more prominence to economic crises with 72 stories on the front page, than *The Sun* and *The Punch*.

Table 3: Direction of stories on economic crises in Nigeria by the selected newspapers

Story Direction	The Sun	The Punch	The Guardian	Total	Percentage (%)
Favourable (promising/encouraging)	98	81	79	258	42
Unfavorable (discouraging/hopelessness)	72	70	75	217	35
Neutral (neither encouraging nor discouraging)	45	40	53	138	23
Total	215	191	207	613	100

Data in table 3 revealed that a greater number 258(42%) of the stories on economic crises were favourable. compared to stories that were unfavourable and neutral. The implication of this result is that the direction of stories reported by the selected newspapers were mostly favourable on economic crises issues.

Table 4: Story genre mostly used in the reportage of economic crises by the selected newspapers

Units of Analysis	The Sun	The Punch	The Guardian	Total	Percentage (%)
Straight news stories	84	66	83	233	38
Editorials	2	3	2	7	1
Features	45	51	50	146	24
Opinion Articles	37	25	28	90	15
Letters to the Editor	20	30	24	74	12
Illustrations (photographs and cartoon)	27	16	20	63	10
Total	215	191	207	613	100

From the data in table 4, stories on economic crises in Nigeria occasioned by fuel subsidy removal was mostly reported as straight news stories in the three selected newspapers, with a frequency of 38%. The selected newspapers reported economic crises more as straight news stories than editorials. However, editorials were the least reported genre.



Discussion

This study examined newspapers framing of economic crises in Nigeria occasioned by fuel subsidy removal by President Bola Amed Tinubu's Administration from October 2023 to March 2024 with a view to ascertaining the frequency of the reports, the level of prominence given to the reports on economic crises, the direction of the story used and the story genre that was mostly used by the selected newspapers.

It is believed that the importance people attach to issues of economic concern depends on the extent of media coverage and the agenda set by the media on such issue. Hence, the study found that economic crises in Nigeria were adequately and frequently reported by the selected newspapers within the study period, with a total of 613 stories. The subject matter was mostly reported in the months of January and February 2024 which recorded 18% and 20% respectively. This finding was in line with the tenets of the agenda setting theory used in this study which states that the more attention the mass media give to an issue the more likely the media audience will consider that issue very important. From this result however, *The Sun newspaper* had the highest number of coverage (215) than *The Guardian* and *The Punch*. This finding corroborates the finding of Ihediwa and Ishak (2015) which revealed that Nigerian newspapers have significantly reported more political, economic and environmental crises while Malaysian newspapers have reported more health crisis.

Story placement is used by newspapers to indicate the importance attached to stories, as news stories presented in the front page of newspapers are regarded as more important than those presented at the back pages and inside pages. Hence, Ibrahim et al. (2017) opined that "the interest of media organisation determines what to be emphasised and what not to. Therefore, placing news stories either on the front- or back-page highlights importance on relevant issues and draws attention of the readers quickly than when placed inside of the pages of the newspapers.

Regarding the level of prominence given to economic crises in Nigeria, result showed that the highest percentage (43%) of stories on economic crises appeared on the inside pages of the studied newspapers. This implies that the issues were not given adequate prominence by the three newspapers studied. However, *The Guardian* gave a little prominence to economic crises with 72 stories on the front page, more than *The Sun* and *The Punch*. This finding was contrary to the postulations of agenda setting theory used in this study which posits that people not only learn about public issues and other topics from the media, but they also learn how much significance to attach to an issue or subject based on how much focus the media place on it (Iheanacho, et al., 2021). This finding was in line with that of Ekwueme (2017) which revealed that low significance was given to the coverage of the economic recession as most of the stories by both newspapers appeared in the inside pages of the newspapers studied.

Further finding revealed that the highest percentage of the stories on economic crises were favourable with a total of 258(42%). The implication is that the three studied newspapers most gave favourable (promising/encouraging) direction of coverage to stories on economic crises issues. Some of the promising/encouraging (favourable) stories on economic crises include Christmas: Tinubu promises more interventions to ease hardship (*The Punch*, December 24th, 2023). Tinubu orders immediate review of N8,000 cash transfer palliative to Nigerians to cushion the pains of the removal of payment of subsidy on petrol (*The Guardian*, January 2024).

It was equally discovered that the story genre mostly adopted by the three selected newspapers in their reportage of economic crises was straight news, with a total of 233 stories (38%). This was followed by features with a total of 146 (24%) stories. However, editorials were the least reported genre with only 7(1%) stories. Although the newspapers used other story genres in reporting economic crises in Nigeria, their predominant use of straight news implied that they did only peripheral reporting of the issue rather



than doing in-depth reporting and analysis of it. This finding agreed with the finding of Ogunshola and Adegboyega (2018) which showed that the selected newspapers focused on breaking the news on any development regarding the economic crisis the country is facing as 69.4% reported stories on economic crisis were straight news articles.

However, it is appalling that the three newspapers reported minimal stories on editorial, given that editorial which is the newspaper's stand on an issue have not adequately stated their views on economic crises in Nigeria. This means that the newspapers have not been carrying out their social responsibility roles adequately, especially through their editorial contents. This confirms the opinion of Nwabueze (2017) when he stressed that by exposing some current issues for public debate and discussion, the editorial sets the agenda for the public. The good and bad ideas as well as harsh and people-oriented policies and other current issues are brought-up for discussion on the editorial page as matters for general debate in the society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings, the researchers concluded that Nigerian newspapers gave adequate coverage to economic crises in Nigeria by frequently reporting this issue, its impact on Nigerians and the assurances of the President Tinubu's administration towards cushioning the effect of the crises on Nigerians, especially through the newspapers' adoption of straight news stories. The study also concluded that much prominence was not given to the subject matter, as a greater percentage of the stories published appeared on the inside pages of sampled newspapers. The researchers also concluded that the newspapers did not adequately present the stories on economic crises in their editorials, which is the newspapers' viewpoint on such issue of national concern. Consequently, the following recommendations were made:

1. There is need for further study to be conducted to ascertain the extent of implementation of the palliative promises of Tinubu's administration as a way of cushioning the effect of economic crises. This will help to know the relationship between what the newspapers reported as favourable (encouraging) stories and what Nigerian perceived from the promises.
2. Although the sampled newspapers gave adequate to coverage economic crises in Nigeria, much of these reports were presented as straight news stories. Therefore, efforts should be made by Nigerian newspapers to give more in-depth and background information on the subject matter through features and opinion articles.
3. The sampled newspapers did not adequately report economic crises in their editorials. It is therefore, recommended that subsequent stories on economic crises and similar issues of public concern should be reported in the newspapers editorials to help sensitize the readers on such issues for their proper decision-making.

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