



**PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF MASS MEDIA
DISCLOSURE OF RANSOM ON KIDNAPPING-FOR-RANSOM
IN SOUTH-SOUTH NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This empirical study interrogates public perceptions of mass media disclosure of ransoms and its impact on kidnapping-for-ransom in South-South region of Nigeria. The study employed the mixed-method research design: the cross-sectional survey design and content analysis. The population of the study for the survey was 28,153,979 (National Population Commission projected population, 2022) drawn from the six states in the South-South region (Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, Cross River, Akwa-Ibom and Rivers) while the content analysis was 6,576 headlines of the six Nigerian daily newspapers - *Punch*, *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *Vanguard*, *Leadership*, and *This Day*, for 3 years (2022-2024). The study anchored its theories on Framing Theory and Priming Theory to systematically explain the phenomenon. The findings showed that the Nigerian mass media disclosure of ransoms paid by kidnapping victims influenced vulnerable Nigerians to indulge in kidnapping-for-ransom. The study recommends that the federal and state governments in the region should reinforce local security measures, including community policing to check the frequency of kidnappings and implores the Nigerian media to focus on reporting broader security and anti-kidnapping efforts rather than prioritising ransom transactions to avert the negative consequences of luring susceptible Nigerians to the reprehensible crime of kidnapping among other recommendations.

Keywords: Mass Media, Public Perceptions, Ransom Disclosure, Kidnapping-for-Ransom, and South-South Nigeria.

Introduction

The Nigerian mass media disclosure of ransoms in kidnapping-for-ransom incidents has attracted some research attention as the action is deemed antithetical to the actual goal of dissemination of news and information to the public. Indeed, the public has the right to know about happenings in society and the media channels are inundated with news stories, struggling to keep up with the fast-paced development of the day. In many democratic societies like Nigeria, freedom of information law is enacted to ensure that citizens can access information held by government bodies, public institutions, and the general public. This fosters transparency and accountability. The mass media channels serve as a crucial intermediary between the government and the public. However, the Nigerian media's incessant reportage of kidnapping-for-ransom with sensational headlines and stories, is concerning and it is perceived as an ethical infraction in disclosing the huge ransoms kidnappers demand or collect from their victims as the action is capable of influencing vulnerable

Nigerians who may be lured to engage in illicit business of kidnapping-for-ransom. Akhabue (2022) believes that the way the media report humongous sums of money that kidnappers demand or receive as ransom creates a glamorous or appealing image of the situation.

This portrayal can have negative consequences, potentially encouraging further criminal activity or desensitising the public to the seriousness of the issue. Besides, the media extensive reports on incidents of kidnapping-for-ransom, may encourage or motivate others to commit similar acts. The media can also contribute to feelings of fear and anxiety. Supporting this idea, Mental Health UK (2023) explains that exposure to negative news (like kidnapping-for-ransom) increases cortisol level in the body. Cortisol is a stress hormone, and elevated levels can lead to heightened anxiety which is not a healthy state for the body to maintain over time. It adds, that prolong exposure to such stress can ultimately result in both mental and physical health issues.

Just as humans have a fundamental need for food and water, they also have a strong desire for information. News reporting serves as a valuable source of information to the public (Ufuophu-Biri, 2006). Such information like kidnapping-for-ransom can help individuals become aware of potential dangers and take necessary precautions to avoid becoming victims of crime. In essence, it emphasises the significance of crime-related news in educating and informing the public about safety measures to protect themselves. The constant coverage of crime news can desensitise the public, making them less emotionally responsive to such stories over time. Additionally, the frequent and repetitive nature of these news reports can have a negative impact on certain vulnerable individuals in Nigeria, potentially leading to anxiety, fear, or a distorted perception of safety and crime in their milieu (Ingram & Estate, 2019). The journalists in carrying out their assigned duty of disseminating news and information, often engage in sensationalising the content to evoke emotions and arouse feelings to attract patronage and generate revenue. Yellowbrick (2023), in supporting the aforesaid, emphasises that the regular demand for attractive headlines, the media outlets incessantly resort to sensationalising news to shore up the audience and enhance profits. Boston (2022) stresses that sensationalism has been etched in society and may not cease to exist because media channels are so immersed in the tradition of exploiting sensational reports to catch attention and boost sales. Sensationalist media coverage of kidnapping-for-ransom can result in trepidation and hysteria among the public (Mental Health, UK, 2023).

Perceptions are indeed, created by the media through sensationalism. According to Hollis, Downy, Del Carmen, and Dobbs (2017), official crime statistics of Australia show that most crimes are non-aggressive but media stories often suggest the contrary. The media tend to highlight rare or unexpected criminal events, which can lead to an exaggerated perception of crime. By concentrating on these isolated incidents, the media may not accurately reflect the broader trends and statistics regarding crime in society. As a result, the public might develop a skewed understanding of crime rates and safety, believing that such unusual events are more common than they actually are (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2014).

The Nigerian media framing of kidnapping-for-ransom has been perceived as a tradition that tends to flaunt the reprehensible and profitable business in a society of millions of unemployed people (Akhabue, 2022). The current trend of media divulging of huge ransoms kidnapping victims pay to get off the hook may do more harm than good as it is capable of influencing susceptible Nigerians who are jobless and faced with the current economic quagmire. Supporting the above, the National Bureau of Statistics (2024), stresses that the unemployment rate in Nigeria increased to 5.7% (Q1,

2024). Extensive media reportage of the large ransoms paid for kidnapping victims can inadvertently increase the risk for those victims. When the public learns about significant sums being paid, it might attract more criminals who see an opportunity to exploit the situation like houseflies are attracted to faeces.

Despite the growing prevalence of both kidnapping-for-ransom and media reportage, there is a dearth of empirical research examining the nexus between the mass media disclosure of ransom and the perpetuation of kidnapping activities in the region. This research gap underscores the need to investigate the prevailing attitudes and perceptions of South-South Nigeria's residents towards the mass media reporting of ransom-related kidnappings.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how mass media disclosure of ransom payments influences the prevalence of kidnapping-for-ransom in the South-South region of Nigeria. By identifying the role of media narratives in escalating or mitigating such criminal activities, the study sought to provide insights that could guide media organisations towards ethical reporting practices and inform policymakers in developing strategies to address the region's kidnapping crisis.

General Objective

The general objectives of the study was to examine public perceptions of mass media disclosure of ransom as a correlate of kidnapping-for-ransom in South-South Nigeria.

The specific objectives for the study were to:

- i. examine the level of public consumption of mass media reports on kidnapping;
- ii. examine the public awareness of ransoms paid on kidnapping through mass media reports;
- iii. examine public perceptions of mass media disclosure of ransoms paid on kidnapping South South region of Nigeria;
- iv. ascertain the correlation between mass media disclosure of ransom and the level of kidnapping-for-ransom in South-South Nigeria.
- v. determine how frequently the Nigerian media disclose ransom amounts in kidnapping-for-ransom headlines; and
- vi. analyse the patterns and variations in the use of ransom figures in kidnapping-for-ransom headlines across selected Nigerian media outlets.

Research Questions

In order to give direction to the investigation, the study was anchored on answering the following research question:

1. What is the level of public consumption of mass media reports of kidnapping incidents?
2. What is the level of public awareness of ransom on kidnapping cases through mass media reports?
3. What are the public perceptions on mass media disclosure of ransom on kidnapping cases in South-South region of Nigeria?
4. How frequently do the Nigerian media include ransom amounts in kidnapping-for-ransom headlines?

5. What are the patterns and variations in the use of ransom figures in kidnapping-for-ransom headlines across selected Nigerian media outlets?

Hypothesis

H₀: There is no significant correlation between the media disclosure of ransom demanded or paid by kidnap victims and kidnapping-for-ransom in South-South Nigeria.

Review of Relevant Literature and Theoretical Framework

This study placed importance on how much the Nigerian public consumes media reports about kidnapping-for-ransom incidents in the country. It aimed to analyse several factors, particularly how often people are exposed to such news coverage. This examination helps to understand the impact that frequent media reporting has on public perception and awareness of the phenomenon. The mass media channels often report kidnapping-for-ransom cases because they attract public interest and are inherently sensational. However, the way these stories are reported differs significantly among media organisations. Some media channels focus on providing accurate and responsible coverage, while others exaggerate the incidents using dramatic images and eye-catching headlines to draw viewers or readers. This variation in reporting can influence public perceptions of the issue and how seriously it is taken.

Nigeria is endowed with a proliferation of both print and electronic media. Broadcasting Board of Governors (United States) confirms a significant majority of Nigerians have access to the mass media and approximately two-thirds (66.6%) of the population actively consume news at least once a day (United States Agency for Global Media, 2018) and this implies that so many Nigerians consume news stories including kidnapping-for-ransom. There are concerns about the potential impact of media disclosures of ransom in South-South region of Nigeria. Stories about kidnapping incidents are capable of causing fears and anxiety among the people leading them to comprehend the threat of kidnapping-for-ransom as ubiquitous than it may actually be (Hollis, Downy, Del Carmen and Dobbs 2017). Besides, the public perceives that media divulging of the ransom kidnapping victims pay could put additional stress on families already traumatised. It may further aggravate the risk to the family if the kidnappers observe that the victim has access to substantial funds. Some scholars argue that knowledge of the amount of ransom paid by victims and the condition under which such ransom was paid can challenge the authority and conceivably inhibit future kidnappings. Yet, others believe that such disclosures could jeopardise security by disseminating information to kidnappers about the financial viability of their nefarious activities (Alenkhe, 2015).

Corroborating the aforesaid, the Nigerian media channels in 2020, reported that a Chinese citizen kidnapped in Ekiti State paid a ransom of one hundred million naira to regain freedom. The ransom was indeed huge, that the news attracted public attention and was swiftly debunked by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Nigeria (CCCN). No doubt, such disclosure of humongous ransom was capable of escalating the incident of kidnapping. The media disclosure of ransom payment whether real or fake is a phenomenon that pundits described as dangerous (Maho, 2020). As long as the media outlets are under obligation to keep the public informed, they must be ethically conscious of the safety and consequences of their reporting. Sensationalism in kidnapping reports could engender more incidents or create false impression among the kidnappers (Akhavue, 2022). The Nigerian

media channels almost on a daily basis, have at least one kidnapping-for-ransom headline and story. The following headlines, justify the aforementioned:

PM News (May 23, 2015) “Police lied, 10 freed Ekiti captives paid N50m ransom to abductors”
Daily Post (January 25, 2016) “Abductors of traditional ruler in Delta abandon N100m ransom”
Punch (September 20, 2017) “Kidnappers collect N10m ransom, kill victims in Port Harcourt”
Daily Post (April 15, 2018) “Gunmen kidnap NURTW chief, demand N5m”
Premium Times (May 28, 2020) “Insecurity: Nigerians pay over N7b ransom to kidnappers in nine months”
Vanguard (November 26, 2021) “Pay N200m in six hours, bandits tell family of abducted orderly police officer”
The Nation (April 25, 2022) “Abductors demand N100m ransom from popular Akwa Ibom cleric”
Punch (October. 7, 2023) “Kidnappers collect N50m ransom, free Ondo choristers”
Punch (February 5, 2024) “Kidnapping epidemic: Fundraising for ransom persists, Ekiti pupils’ families pay N15m”
Vanguard (July20, 2021) “Kidnappers demand N.5m for abducted bread seller”
Punch (January 25, 2021) “Igangan/Fulani Herders crisis: Town presents evidence alleges herders collected N15m ransom, raped 15 women”
Punch (April 11, 2022) “Gunmen storm Ogun Mosque, abduct policeman, two others, demand N15m”
The Nation (September 20, 2022) “Evans jailed 21 years for kidnapping, collecting \$420,000”
The Nation (June 20, 2022) “Abductors of 13 mourners demand N60m ransom in Edo”
The Nation (June 24, 2022) “Gunmen abduct DPO in Nasarawa, demand N50m”
Vanguard (December 5, 2022) “We paid ransom to free abducted Baptist Worshipers – CAN”
Sahara Reporters (April 6, 2022) reported that the family of the abducted Bank of Agriculture Managing Director, ALI-Hassan sold a house in Abuja to raise N100m paid as ransom to terrorists who attacked Abuja-Kaduna train.

The public’s knowledge about ransom payments in kidnapping incidents is largely influenced by the coverage and reporting done by these different media sources in Nigeria. The extensive reporting on kidnapping cases significantly influences how the public views and responds to incidents of kidnapping-for-ransom. As a result of this reporting, the public becomes well-informed about the practice of paying ransoms in kidnapping-for-ransom cases. The manner in which the ransom payments are depicted in the media channels no doubt, influences public perceptions and responses. The manner often occasioned by sensationalism, may glamourise the practice of paying ransoms, possibly exacerbating copycat attitude of influencing perpetrators to target individuals perceived as lucrative or having kidnap ransom value [KRV] (Akhavue, 2022, Okoli & Agada, 2014). Public perceptions of mass media disclosure of ransom paid on kidnapping in Nigerian implies the manners and perspectives held by the Nigerian public regarding the divulging of ransom payments made in cases of kidnapping as reported by the mass media channels.

This study adopted the Framing and Priming theories to explain the phenomenon of media disclosure of the ransom paid by kidnapping victims in headlines and stories. Framing theory explains how the way information is presented (or framed) can influence public’s perception and understanding of a

particular issue. Media channels often employ framing techniques to shape public opinion and discourse. The choices made by journalists and editors regarding what stories to cover and how to present them can significantly impact societal perspectives. So, the choice of reporting kidnapping-for-ransom incidents and disclosing the ransom in headlines exemplifies framing, employing the concept of sensationalism. While Priming theory highlights the subtle ways in which exposure to information can shape perception and behaviours, emphasising the role of context and prior knowledge in human cognition. The incessant priming of huge ransoms in headlines and stories in kidnapping reports can lead individuals to feel more susceptible. The media action could be antithetical to the actual purpose of disseminating news and information to the public, prompting scholars to suggest that the mass media make or mar individual or society. Professor Ralph Akinfeleye of the Department of Mass Communication, University of Lagos once referred to the mass media as the 'Fourth Estate of the Wreck,' when they engage in irredeemable and unethical practices in society. Akhabue (2022) opines, that the media divulging of ransoms can attract new entrants into the reprehensible business of kidnapping.

Methodology

This study employed the mixed-method research design: the cross-sectional survey design and content analysis to investigate how the public perceives the reports of media disclosure of ransom as a correlate of kidnapping-for-ransom in South-South region of Nigeria. The population of the study for the survey was 28,153,979 (National Population Commission projected population, 2022) drawn from the six states in the South-South region (Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, Cross River, Akwa-Ibom and Rivers) while the content analysis was 6,576 headlines of the six Nigerian daily newspapers - *Punch*, *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *Vanguard*, *Leadership*, and *This Day*, for 3 years (2022-2024). The researcher adopted the multistage sampling technique to reduce the large population and the simple random sampling by balloting to select 3 out of the six states – Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, one senatorial district of each of the states, and 3 Local Government Areas (LGAs) in each of the senatorial districts, totalling nine LGAs. Sample sizes of 400 and 377 were considered for both the survey and the content analysis respectively, using Taro Yameni's formula. The structured questionnaires were purposively administered to respondents (both staff and non-staff) in the LGA councils. The questionnaire has two parts: Section one being the demographic data of the respondents while section two contains the thematic and Likert-scaled question patterns. The Cronbach Alpha reliability for instrument scored 0.7645 approximated at 0.8 greater than 0.7 which is a minimum threshold for reliability. The study adopted both the descriptive and inferential statistics technique to analyse data collected with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23 as the statistical package. The level of significance is: $P < 0.5 = 0.5 \leq 0.05$. A coding sheet for content analysis contained the following categories and units of analysis: the media organisations, date of publication, headlines, ransom disclosed in headlines, ransom not disclosed, the tone of the headlines and headline placement (Front Page / Inside Page).

The study adopted the multistage sampling technique for the survey. It was chosen to adequately cover the geographical region in the study. In multistage sampling technique, sample is drawn from a large population using smaller and smaller groups at each stage. In the first instance, the researcher adopted simple random sampling by balloting to select three out of the six states (Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Cross River and Akwa-Ibom) in the South-South Region of Nigeria. At the second

stage, one Senatorial District in each of the 3 states were picked by balloting; 3 Local Government Areas (LGAs) from each of the three Senatorial Districts were also picked by balloting; the researcher further purposively selected the LGAs' Headquarters in each selected LGA. Finally, the research assistants administered copies of the questionnaire to the people available at the LGA councils. Suffice to say, that each LGA Headquarters were allocated 44 copies of the questionnaire except the Headquarters of Oredo, Ikpoba-Okha and Egor which are Benin City, Idogbo and Urelu which were purposively allocated 46, 45 and 45 copies of the questionnaire respectively because they are densely populated. Table 1 below, is explicit on this:

Table 1: Population of the Study/Sample Size

South-South Region of Nigeria	Population of the States	Three Selected States and Population through balloting	One Senatorial District from each State	Three Local Govt. Areas (LGAs) each from the Senatorial District	H/quarters of LGAs purposively selected	Sample Size
Edo	4,461,137	Edo	Edo South	Oredo	Benin City	46
Delta	5,307,543			Ikpoba-Okha	Idogbo	45
Bayelsa	2,394,725			Egor	Urelu	45
Cross River	4,175,020	Delta	Delta Central	Ethiope West	Oghara	44
Akwa-Ibom	4,780,681			Ethiope East	Isiokolo	44
Rivers	7,034,973			Sapele	Sapele	44
		Bayelsa	Bayelsa Central	Yenagoa	Yenagoa	44
				Southern Ijaw	Oporoma	44
				Kolokuma	Kaiama	44
Total	28,153,979	12,163,405	3	9	9	400

Source: Personal Compilation (2024), based on National Population Commission (2022 Projected Population Figure)

For the content analysis, the study adopted purposive sampling technique to select 126 headlines in each of the 3 years totalling 378 (21 headlines of each of the six newspapers). The researcher personally and manually did the coding by getting the soft online and hard copies and extracted the relevant information into the coding sheet.

Out of the 400 questionnaires administered to respondents, 394 questionnaires (98.5%) were returned completely and accurately filled. It was on the basis of the 394 questionnaires that the researcher presented analysed data and discussed the findings of the study.

Table 2 below shows the socio-demographic distribution of respondents. The Age distribution of respondents surveyed shows quite an even distribution. A little less than one-fourth of the respondents were between 28-37 years (24.4%), 22.6 % accounted for 38-47 years. Other age brackets of respondents were 19.5% (48-57 years), 18.8% (18-27 years) and 14.7% (Above 58). On sex distribution, more than half of the respondents were male (52.3%) while the female accounted for 47.7%. The distribution of respondents on education status shows that 8 of every 10

respondents acquired the minimum of secondary education. Specifically, 40.9% of them had tertiary education qualification and 46.2% had secondary education qualification. Only 12.9% of the respondents had primary education qualification. On job status/occupation, 1 of every 2 persons who participated in the survey worked with the public sector (51.3%) while other occupations were farming (8.1%), trading (7.1%) and private sector employees (8.6%). Among those not working were the students (20.6%) and the unemployed (4.3%). In essence, the socio-demographic distribution of respondents shows an even distribution except for education level and occupation which is quite justified because the topic under discourse is more for the enlightened mind and the educated. Secondly, the very fact that those working in the organised public and private sectors form the majority of respondents vis-a-vis the subject of discourse primarily shows that they could relate and respond to questions on the issue of kidnapping-for-ransom.

Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents based on states.

Items		Frequency	Percentage
Age of Respondents	18-27	74	18.8%
	28-37	96	24.4%
	38-47	89	22.6%
	48-57	77	19.5%
	Above 58	58	14.7%
	Total	394	100.0%
Sex of Respondents	Male	206	52.3%
	Female	188	47.7%
	Total	394	100.0%
Educational Level	No Formal Education	Nil	Nil
	Primary Education	51	12.9%
	Secondary Education	182	46.2%
	Tertiary Education	161	40.9%
	Total	394	100.0%
Occupation	Students	81	20.6%
	Farmer	32	8.1%
	Trader	28	7.1%
	Private Sector	34	8.6%
	Public Servant	202	51.3%
	Unemployed	17	4.3%
	Others	Nil	Nil
	Total	394	100.0%

Source: Field work, 2024

Table 3 below shows the response of respondents on the extent the public consumes mass media reports on kidnapping incidents in South-South Region of Nigeria. Frequency of consumption of mass media reports on kidnapping of respondents surveyed shows quite an even distribution. A little less than one-fourth of the respondents maintained that they consume such reports Daily (14.5%),

every other day accounted for (12.2%), Twice a week (32.7%), weekly basis account for (24.9%), fortnightly (10.7%), monthly (4.8%) and never (0.3%) respectively. While respondents survey on those that consume kidnapping report in the last one month shows 1-5 were (10.4%), 6-10 (47.7%), 11-15 stood at (39.6%), 16-20 (2.0%) and those above 20 account for (0.3%). By implication, it shows that there is a high consumption of kidnapping reports of 6-10 times by respondents, which implies the severity and seriousness of the menace under investigation.

Based on research question one, the following items were raised for respondents to provide answers to. Respondents were asked to the extent the public consumes mass media report on kidnapping incidents. Table 3 shows the response of the respondents.

Table 3: To what extent does the public consume mass media report on kidnapping incidents in South-South region of Nigeria?

Items		Frequency	Percentage
Frequency on the consumption of Mass Media reports on Kidnapping	Daily	57	14.5%
	Every other day	48	12.2%
	Twice a week	129	32.7%
	Weekly	98	24.9%
	Fortnightly	42	10.7%
	Monthly	19	4.8%
	Never	1	0.3%
	Total	394	100.0%
Kidnapping Report in the last one month	None	0	0.0%
	1-5	41	10.4%
	6-10	188	47.7%
	11-15	156	39.6%
	16-20	8	2.0%
	Above 20	1	0.3%
	Total	394	100.0%

Source: Field work, 2024

Table 4 shows the survey response of respondents on their level of awareness on media reports on kidnapping for ransom in South-South Region of Nigeria. On how often respondents are exposed to media reports about ransom payments in kidnapping incidents, more than half of majority of the respondents maintained Twice a Week (32.2%), Weekly (23.9%), Daily (15.0%), every other Day (11.2%), Fortnightly (12.2%), Monthly (5.3%) and Never (0.3%) respectively. While on respondents' awareness of media-reported ransom payments over the past month, an even distribution was projected. Those that had 6-10 Reports account for (47.2%), 11-15 Reports (39.8%), 1-5 Reports (11.7%). A smaller portion of respondents (46 individuals) are aware of 1 to 5 incidents. While they are somewhat engaged, they are likely not as exposed to media or perhaps choose to limit their exposure. 16-20 Reports (1.0%), Above 20 Reports (0.3%) and None (Nil) respectively. By implications, a 6-10 high awareness level of media reports of ransom paid in the last

one month among respondents in the area projects the frequency and seriousness of kidnapping within the study areas.

Based on research question two, the following items were raised for respondents to provide answers to. Respondents were asked the extent members of the public are aware of ransom payments made in kidnapping cases through their consumption of mass media reports.

Tables 4: What is the extent of public awareness regarding mass media reports on kidnapping-for-ransom in South-South Nigeria?

Items		Frequency	%
Hear/watch/read about ransom paid for kidnapping	Daily	59	15.0
	Every other day	44	11.2
	Twice a week	127	32.2
	Weekly	94	23.9
	Fortnightly	48	12.2
	Monthly	21	5.3
	Never	1	0.3
	Total	394	100.0
Awareness of media reports of ransom paid in the last one month	None	0	0.0
	1-5	46	11.7
	6-10	186	47.2
	11-15	157	39.8
	16-20	4	1.0
	Above 20	1	0.3
	Total	394	100.0

Source: Field work, 2024

Table 5 shows the mean response of respondents on public perceptions of mass media disclosure of ransom paid by victims of kidnapping in the South-South Region of Nigeria. The mean response shows that respondents rated the items above the criterion mean implying that they agree strongly to all items. Specifically, 89.9% of respondents agreed that the media complicity is escalating the menace of kidnapping with the manner they highlight the money (ransom) kidnappers collect from their victims in the study areas ($4.28 \pm .78$). While 89.6% of respondents believe that the media's style of reporting ransom payments exacerbates the crime in South-South Region of Nigeria ($4.29 \pm .74$). By implication, a larger portion of the respondents maintained that media framing of kidnapping stories significantly influences the spread of this crime in the South-South Region of Nigeria.

Based on research question three, the following items were raised for respondents to provide answers to. Respondents were asked the public perceptions regarding the disclosure of ransom payments made in kidnapping cases by mass media channels in South-South Region of Nigeria.

Table 5: What is the public perception of mass media disclosure of ransom paid by kidnapping victims in South-South Nigeria?

	SD		D		UND		A		SA		Mean±SD	
The media complicity is escalating the menace of kidnapping with the manner they highlight the money (ransom) kidnappers collect from their victims.	4	1.0 %	1 0	2.5 %	2 6	6.6 %	18 5	47.0 %	16 9	42.9 %	4.2 8	.7 8
The mass media is exacerbating kidnapping through their style of reportage of ransom paid.	2	0.5 %	8	2.0 %	3 1	7.9 %	18 6	47.2 %	16 7	42.4 %	4.2 9	.7 4

Source: Field work, 2024

Criterion Mean (3.00)

Test of Hypothesis

The study tested the following hypothesis to find out whether the hypothetical statement is accepted or rejected. This study formulated a hypothesis which was tested using regression analysis technique. The test was conducted with a significant level 0.05 ($P < 0.05$)

H_0 : There is no significant correlation between the media disclosure of ransom paid by kidnap victims and kidnapping-for-ransom in South-South Nigeria.

Table 6:

Model	Coefficient	SE	T	P-value
kidnapping-for-ransom				
<i>Intercept</i>	.458	.052	8.803	.000
<i>Disclosure of ransom paid</i>	.907	.012	75.918	.000
<i>SEE=.17933, R²=.936</i>				
kidnapping-for-ransom				
<i>Intercept</i>	.723	.050	14.324	.000
<i>Non-disclosure of ransom paid</i>	.859	.012	73.039	.000
<i>SEE=.18592, R²=.931</i>				

Source: Fieldwork, 2024, Significant level at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

SEE, Standard error of the estimate

Error of the estimate (SEE) was 17933, with an R-squared value (R^2) of .936, indicating that 93.6% of the variance in kidnapping-for-ransom can be explained by media disclosure of ransom in South-South Nigeria while the intercept of 0.723 ($SE = .050$, $t = 14.324$, $p < 0.001$) with a standard error of the estimate (SEE) of .18592 and an R-squared value (R^2) of .931, shows that 93.1% of the Table 5 shows a test of regression analysis on the relationship between the media disclosure of ransom paid by kidnap victims and kidnapping-for-ransom in South-South Nigeria. The statistical effect was more significant for disclosure of ransom paid ($\beta = .907$, $t = 75.918$, $p < 0.001$) than non-disclosure of ransom paid ($\beta = .859$, $t = 73.039$, $p < 0.001$) in the South-South States of Nigeria. Specifically, the model intercept of 0.458 ($SE = .052$, $t = 8.803$, $p < 0.001$), and the standard variance in kidnapping-for-ransom was accounted for by the non-disclosure of ransom in South-South Nigeria. Thus, the analysis implies that the stated hypothesis was rejected. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between media disclosure of ransom payments and the incidence of kidnapping-for-ransom in South-South Nigeria. This study reveals that media disclosure of ransom payments significantly influences kidnapping-for-ransom cases in the South-South states of Nigeria.

Data Presentation for the Content Analysis

This section covers data presentation for the content analysis. It presented the results for the specific research questions that guided the study. Research questions discussed were based on the specific objectives. The table below, was presented to determine how frequently Nigerian media include ransom amount in kidnapping-for-ransom headlines stemming from **objective one** (to determine how frequently Nigerian Media disclose ransom amounts in kidnapping-for-ransom). It presents 377 headlines out of which 337 headlines of the six newspapers disclosed ransoms. The figures arguably, shows the disparity between the number of headlines that mentioned ransoms as reflected in the frequencies. Ransoms disclosed in the headlines were 337 representing 86% while only 40 or 14% never disclosed ransoms as shown below:

Table 7: Frequency of Nigerian Media Disclosure of Ransoms in Headlines

Items	Frequency	Percentage
1.Ransom Disclosed	337	86%
2.Ransom not Disclosed	40	14%
Total	377	100%

Source: Fieldwork 2024

More so, the tables below, present ransom figures in kidnapping-for-ransom headlines across the selected Nigerian newspapers in alignment with objective two of the content analysis which reflects the patterns and variation in the use of ransom figures in kidnapping-for-ransom headlines across the selected newspapers. Table 8 below, shows that all the newspapers sensationalised their headlines by disclosing ransoms demanded and collected by kidnappers. Specifically, out of the 377 headlines analysed, *The Sun* disclosed ransoms in it headlines, 61 times representing 18%, followed by *This Day*, with 59 (18%), *Punch*, 57 (17%), *Vanguard* 55 (16%), *Guardian*, 54 representing 16% and *Leadership* 51 (15%). This implies that the Nigerian media actually disclose ransoms frequently thus luring susceptible people to the illicit business of kidnapping. This fact corroborates Akhabue (2020) who asserted that media reporting of ransom makes kidnapping sound lucrative and financially

rewarding. In stemming this phenomenon, Ekweme and Obayi (2012) suggested that the choices of words, pictures and language of the reports should be carefully selected so they would not have negative influence on the audience.

Table 8: The patterns and variations in the use of ransom figures in kidnapping-for-ransom headlines across the six Nigeria media organisations

S/No	Newspapers	Headlines Analysed	Frequency of Ransom Mentioned	Frequency of Ransom Not Mentioned
1.	<i>Punch</i>	65	57 (17%)	8 (20%)
2.	<i>The Guardian</i>	61	54 (16%)	7 (18%)
3.	<i>Leadership</i>	60	51 (15%)	9 (23%)
4.	<i>Vanguard</i>	64	55 (16%)	9 (23%)
5.	<i>This Day</i>	63	59 (18%)	4 (10%)
6.	<i>The Sun</i>	64	61 (18%)	3 (8%)
	Total	377	337	40

Source: Fieldwork 2024

One of the notable quirks of contemporary newspaper practice is the frequent use of sensational headlines to attract readers' attention as exemplified on the table below. To further have an insight into the manner the Nigerian newspapers divulge ransoms on kidnapping, the table presents the six selected newspapers' headlines for this study. As shown on Table 4.15 below, 337 headlines representing 89%, while the tone has 277 sensational headlines representing 82% of the entire headlines. On the issue of placement of headlines, all the newspapers displayed ransom in Front Pages with 262 representing 78% of the headlines out of the 377 sampled while 75 headlines representing 22% were in the Inside Pages. It is obvious that these disparities in placement were occasioned by the desire of the media organisations to attract readership and increase revenue generation. The table below is explicit on it:

Table 9: Presentation of Headline Patterns and Variations

S/N	Newspapers	Date of publication	Frequency of Ransom Disclosed (%)	Tone of Headlines			Placement of Headlines	
				Sensational	Factual	Neutral	Front Page	Inside Page
1.	<i>Punch</i>	2022 - 2024	57 (93%)	44	9	4	39	18
2.	<i>The Guardian</i>		54 (85%)	41	10	3	37	17
3.	<i>Leadership</i>		51 (85%)	43	6	2	40	11
4.	<i>Vanguard</i>		55 (88%)	46	9	0	46	9
5.	<i>The Sun</i>		61 (93%)	49	8	4	51	10
6.	<i>This Day</i>		59 (79%)	54	4	0	49	10
	Total		377	277 (82%)	47	13	262 (78%)	75 (28%)

Source: Fieldwork 2024

Discussion of Findings

Findings from this study was presented and discussed with respect to the relevant specific objectives and the tested hypothesis. Findings regarding objective one, on the level of public consumption of mass media reports on kidnapping incidents in Nigeria's South-South States, revealed that the majority of respondents had encountered between 6 and 10 reports of kidnapping in the last month. This suggests a high prevalence of kidnapping incidents in the region, with regular media coverage underscoring the severity of the situation. The frequency of these reports appears to reinforce a growing sense of insecurity among the population. Regular exposure to kidnapping reports likely fuels fears about safety and may contribute to eroding trust in local and national authorities' ability to protect the public.

The study's findings align with the assertion by Mental Health UK (2023) and Ingram & Estate (2019) that crime news is particularly engaging because mass media audiences often seek explanations for why crimes occur and want to understand how similar events could be prevented in their own lives. People need to know how laws are broken and how lawbreakers are apprehended and punished. Similarly, Hollis, Downy, Del Carmen, and Dobbs (2017) supported these findings, maintaining that frequent stories about kidnapping incidents are crucial in educating the public on the prevalence of such crimes in the area, though they may also contribute to heightened fear and anxiety. Based on these scholarly assertions, it is evident that respondents in the South-South Region of Nigeria have encountered or engaged with reports on kidnapping at least seven times in the last month.

The findings concerning objective two highlight the frequency of public awareness about ransom payments related to kidnapping incidents, facilitated through mass media consumption in Nigeria's South-South Geopolitical Zone. Results show that a significant portion of the public regularly hears, watches, or reads about ransom payments for kidnappings, with many encountering these reports twice a week. A substantial majority of respondents indicated an awareness level within the 6–10 reports range, underscoring the frequent exposure to kidnapping-related news in the South-South region. This frequent media coverage reflects the pervasive nature of such incidents and highlights the public's ongoing exposure to ransom-related news in the study areas under investigation. It emphasises the role of social media in enhancing public awareness and facilitating information dissemination. Social media serves as a valuable tool for educating and enlightening the general public about ransom payments made to kidnappers within the study areas. The study findings align with Akhabue (2022), who maintained that the way ransom payments are portrayed in the media can shape public perceptions and responses. Sensationalised reporting may inadvertently glamourise or normalise ransom payments, potentially fuelling copycat behaviour or encouraging criminals to target perceived lucrative individuals or communities.

Although paying ransoms may be illegal, families often feel it is the only means of securing the release of kidnapped relatives. Public awareness of ransom payments involves examining the frequency, tone, and depth of coverage across different media channels, including newspapers, television, radio, magazines, books, and online news platforms (BBC, 21 March 2024). Therefore, it can be deduced that the frequency of mass media disclosures of ransom payments made to kidnappers in Nigeria's South-South Region significantly influences public perceptions and behaviours regarding ransom payments in kidnapping cases. Concerning the negative consequences of mass media framing of kidnapping ransom in news headlines in the South-South Region of Nigeria, the study revealed that a significant portion of respondents believed that framing ransom payments in news headlines

heightened conflict and fostered hostility among the public. Additional findings indicated that educating the public, gaining sensational attention, deterring investors, and evoking conflict and sentiments within society are other outcomes associated with media framing of kidnapping ransom in headlines. In line with this assertion, Adisa and Abduhareem (2012) noted that crime coverage in Nigeria is frequently laden with sensational reports that heighten conflicts and promote hostilities. Thus, one of the main consequences of framing kidnapping ransom in news headlines is that it can amplify conflicts and foster hostilities.

Findings concerning objective three, on public perceptions of the disclosure of ransom payments in kidnapping cases by the mass media in the South-South region of Nigeria, revealed that the majority of respondents believed that the disclosure of ransom payments by victims to kidnappers escalates the kidnapping problem. This style of reporting, by emphasising the financial rewards for kidnappers, could potentially encourage more criminal activity by publicising the financial benefits of such crimes. The study aligns with Akhabue (2022), who argued that while the media has a duty to inform the public, this must be balanced with considerations of safety, ethics, and potential consequences. Sensationalising ransom payments could inadvertently encourage more kidnappings or create false expectations among criminals. Thus, the disclosure of ransom payments by the media in the South-South region often serves as a motivation for others to engage in similar criminal acts, or it raises concerns that extensive media coverage might inadvertently promote more kidnapping-for-ransom by highlighting the prevalence and profitability of ransom payments.

Testing the study's hypothesis which stated that there is no significant relationship between media disclosure of ransom payments and kidnapping-for-ransom in South-South Nigeria, the study revealed a significant relationship between media disclosure of ransom payments and the incidence of kidnapping-for-ransom. The study shows that media coverage of successful ransom payments significantly influences kidnapping-for-ransom cases in the South-South states. Such coverage creates a perception among criminal groups that kidnapping is profitable, potentially incentivising more groups to engage in kidnappings to obtain ransom payments (Akhabue, 2022). Similarly, Ingram & Estate (2019) and Mental Health, UK, (2023) argue, that frequent reports on successful ransom negotiations create fear and insecurity among the population, leading to increased anxiety and potentially motivating more individuals to engage in kidnapping for financial gain. Therefore, there is a clear correlation between media disclosure of ransom payments and the incidence of kidnapping-for-ransom in South-South Nigeria.

Findings from the content analysis show a notable trait of contemporary newspaper practice of the frequent use of sensational headlines to attract readers' attention as seen on Tables 8 and 9 above. The media in a bid to sell rather than tell the news, engage in sensationalising headlines and stories to attract patronage and increase revenue as corroborated by the survey thereby escalating the menace of kidnapping-for-ransom.

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the impact of mass media disclosure of ransom payments on the prevalence of kidnapping-for-ransom in the South-South region of Nigeria. It revealed that the mass media organisations in the region deliberately frame ransom-related narratives in kidnapping cases to attract public attention, boost sales, and increase revenue. This strategic framing often

sensationalises ransom payments, drawing significant focus to the monetary aspect of kidnapping incidents rather than the broader societal implications.

The study found that the disclosure of ransom payments by the media contributes to the escalation of kidnapping-for-ransom cases in the region. By emphasising the amounts paid or demanded in ransom, media channels inadvertently glamourise the financial rewards of such criminal activities. This in turn, motivates potential kidnappers to view ransom-seeking as a lucrative endeavour, exacerbating the already alarming rate of kidnappings in the region. A strong correlation was identified between the media's reporting of ransom payments and the frequency of kidnapping-for-ransom cases. The study highlighted that the sensationalism surrounding ransom figures not only emboldens criminal elements but also fosters a culture of fear among citizens, which can lead to a willingness to comply with ransom demands.

Interestingly, the study suggests that media organisations can still maintain impactful and engaging reporting without disclosing ransom details. By focusing on the human, social, and security aspects of kidnapping cases, the media can help public discourse towards solutions rather than inadvertently fuelling the problem. This approach would prioritise ethical reporting and contribute to efforts aimed at reducing the incidence of kidnapping-for-ransom in the South-South region of Nigeria. Ultimately, the findings underscore the media's role as a powerful agent of social influence, emphasising the need for responsible journalism to address the region's complex security challenges.

Contributions to Knowledge

- i. **Filling a Scholarly Gap:** While previous studies have examined media coverage of crime in Nigeria, limited attention has been paid to how the public perceives the disclosure of ransom payments in the media and how such perceptions relate to the growing incidence of kidnapping-for-ransom. This study bridges this gap by exploring the correlation between mass media disclosure of ransom and the public's interpretation of kidnapping events, especially within the under-researched South-South geopolitical zone.
- ii. **Contextual and Regional Relevance:** By focusing on South-South Nigeria, a region increasingly affected by kidnapping-for-ransom, this study provides a contextual understanding of how media reporting shapes societal responses to insecurity. It offers region-specific data that enrich national discourses on media practices and public safety.
- iii. **New Empirical Insights:** The study provides fresh empirical evidence on how mass media narratives influence public perceptions and potentially impact criminal behaviour. It found that repeated media disclosure of ransom payments encourages the crime of kidnapping, thereby introducing a new dimension to debates on media responsibility and crime reportage.
- iv. **Methodological Contribution:** The study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative survey and content analysis techniques to assess public opinion and media content simultaneously. The development of a customised coding sheet and questionnaire instrument provides a framework that can be replicated or refined for future studies in related areas.
- v. **Implications for Media Ethics and Policy:** The findings of this research have practical implications for media regulatory bodies, journalists, and policymakers. It calls for a review of editorial policies concerning the reporting of ransom figures and suggests the development of ethical guidelines to balance public right-to-know with national security interests.

- vi. **Theoretical Enrichment:** By applying and extending communication theories such as Priming Theory and Framing Theory, this study contributes to theory-building in mass communication by illustrating how specific media practices influence public fear, opinion formation, and potentially, criminal behaviour.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, below are some recommendations to check the challenges of media reportage, public perceptions and the pervasiveness of kidnapping-for-ransom cases in South-South Nigeria.

- i. The Federal and State Governments in the region should reinforce local security strategies, including community policing to address the high-rate kidnapping. There should be a collaboration between the security agencies and the media in information sharing about kidnapping that raises public awareness without engendering fear.
- ii. There should be a strong regulatory structure to discourage media channels in the region from framing kidnapping headlines and stories to generate income. The journalists should imbibe and inculcate the ethics of journalism profession and know the implications of sensationalising ransom payments that could have negative impact on the public.
- iii. Governments of the region should set-up a task force made up of media practitioners, security agencies, and government officials to monitor and assess the impact of media disclosures on kidnapping trends and regularly modifying policies when necessary.
- iv. News channels should adopt conflict-sensitive journalism practice to ensure that kidnapping reportage does not ignite or inflame public sentiments or escalate existing tensions in South-South region of Nigeria.

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