

Framing Effects of Political Advertising on Electoral Decision-Making: Evidence from the Ondo State Governorship Election

ADEDOWOLE, I. F

Department of Mass Communication, Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo, Ondo State

Abstract- *This study evaluates how the framing of political advertising shapes voter perceptions and choices in a sub-national Nigerian election. Drawing on framing theory (Entman, 1993) and the agenda-setting framework (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and considering media literacy/political efficacy as moderating factors (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2012), we analyse campaign communication during the Ondo State governorship election. A mixed-methods design combined quantitative content analysis of 120 print advertisements across four newspapers with a survey of 400 registered voters spanning the state's three senatorial districts. Intercoder reliability for content coding was substantial ($\kappa = 0.81$). Regression models indicate that exposure to reform-oriented, experienced-leader, and outsider/challenger frames significantly predicted issue prioritization and candidate evaluations, while negative and emotive appeals increased recall but had mixed effects on trust. Interaction tests show that voters with higher political efficacy and media literacy were less susceptible to manipulative framing, highlighting the buffering function of literacy. The findings extend African political communication scholarship by demonstrating the potency of framing in sub-national contests and underscore implications for advertising regulation, media ethics, and voter education. We recommend stricter enforcement of advertising standards, integrating media literacy into civic curricula, and newsroom commitments to fact-checking campaign claims.*

Keywords: *Political Advertising, Framing; Agenda-Setting, Media Literacy, Electoral Decision-Making, Ondo State, Nigeria*

I. INTRODUCTION

Election campaigns in Nigeria have become increasingly professionalised, deploying sophisticated advertising across print, broadcast, and digital channels (Olorunnisola & Opara, 2020). In sub-national contests, where party loyalty is fluid and local concerns salient, frames embedded in campaign ads

can shape perceptions of candidate competence, integrity, and alignment with voter priorities. Despite the prominence of gubernatorial races, scholarship often concentrates on federal elections (Akinfemisoye, 2020), leaving state-level framing dynamics comparatively underexplored.

This article investigates the Ondo State governorship election to assess how candidate and party advertisements framed issues and identities and how those frames influenced voter attitudes and choices. Integrating framing theory (Entman, 1993) and agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), we posit that frames—operationalised as patterned emphases in campaign messages—organise interpretations and elevate evaluative criteria. We also incorporate media literacy and political efficacy as moderators (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2012), proposing that more knowledgeable voters demonstrate resistance to manipulative frames.

We address three gaps: (1) limited state-level evidence on framing effects in Nigeria; (2) the under-theorised role of media literacy and efficacy in African electoral contexts; and (3) a need for triangulated methods pairing systematic content analysis with individual-level voter data.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Political advertising and voter behaviour in African media systems

Political advertising aims to build candidate image, frame issues, prime evaluations, and mobilise turnout (Kaid, 2012). In hybrid media systems with uneven regulation and variable news access, voters lean on advertising cues such as competence claims, reform promises, anticorruption pledges, and identity appeals

(Okoro & Santas, 2017; Olorunnisola & Opara, 2020). Sub-national elections foreground roads, power, health, education, and local security—terrain conducive to “reform” and “experienced leader” frames. Nigerian studies associate exposure to campaign messages with shifts in perceived salience and candidate favourability, especially among undecided and first-time voters (Uzochukwu et al., 2018; Akinfemisoye, 2020). Comparative African research from Ghana and Kenya similarly shows that targeted radio and outdoor ads complement rallies to shape voter priorities (Asunka et al., 2019; Cheeseman et al., 2020).

2.2 Framing, agenda-setting, and priming

Framing selects aspects of perceived reality and makes them salient to promote a problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or remedy (Entman, 1993). Common electoral frames include reformer, experienced insider, outsider/challenger, anticorruption/clean government, ethnic/region defender, and security (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Akinfemisoye, 2020). Frames work by activating schema-consistent considerations at evaluation time. Agenda-setting elevates topics citizens deem important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), while priming posits that salient issues become the standards against which candidates are judged (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). African election studies find that saturation around anticorruption and service delivery primes performance judgments, sometimes overriding identity cues when credible records exist (Bleck & Van de Walle, 2018; Resnick, 2019).

2.3 Negative advertising, affect, and backfire risks

Meta-analytic evidence indicates negative advertising increases attention and information seeking but yields mixed effects on turnout and can backfire by depressing trust in both target and sponsor (Lau et al., 2007). In hybrid media environments, emotive appeals—fear, anger, hope—circulate widely via radio, television, and messaging platforms, boosting recall yet risking cynicism when claims lack substantiation (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Ojebode, 2013; Olorunnisola & Opara, 2020).

2.4 Media literacy, political efficacy, and heterogeneity of effects

Audience characteristics condition framing effects. Media literacy and internal political efficacy reduce susceptibility to manipulative frames by enabling counter-arguing and source evaluation (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2012; Vraga & Tully, 2019). African studies document that civic and media literacy interventions during campaigns improve claim verification and reduce rumour-driven choice shifts (Stremlau et al., 2018). Heterogeneity also follows demographics, partisanship, and media diets; urban, higher-education cohorts show stronger resistance to negative affect and rely more on cross-channel issue consistency (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011; Resnick, 2019).

2.5 Regulatory frameworks, ethics, and fact-checking

Campaign communication in Nigeria operates under the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) Code and Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria (ARCON) standards, which require balance and prohibit materially misleading claims. Enforcement can be inconsistent, particularly as spending migrates to online video, influencer content, and programmatic ads (ARCON, 2022; NBC, 2023). Independent fact-checking (Africa Check, Dubawa) expands during electoral cycles but faces resource constraints (Adeniran, 2020). Ethical journalism codes emphasise accuracy, harm minimisation, and transparency; newsroom “ad checks” can provide corrective context (SPJ, 2014; Ward, 2015).

2.6 Cross-channel dynamics and microtargeting

Although our content sample focuses on print, cross-channel effects shape exposure and persuasion. Broadcast radio and TV retain high reach, particularly in rural areas, while digital platforms (Facebook, YouTube, programmatic display, WhatsApp) enable microtargeting and personalised frames (Reuters Institute, 2024; Ndlela & Mano, 2020). Studies in Kenya and South Africa show microtargeted messages tailor salience (e.g., security vs. jobs) and segment electorates, complicating aggregate effect measurement (Bossetta, 2018; Gichohi, 2021).

2.7 Identity cues versus performance frames

Classic accounts emphasise ethnicity and region as powerful electoral cues (Bratton et al., 2012). Recent sub-national analyses show performance frames—roads, jobs, anticorruption—can blunt identity appeals when communicated with credible records (Bleck & Van de Walle, 2018; Resnick, 2019). Ondo’s observed dominance of reform/experience frames and limited explicit ethnic appeals in print align with this shift, while not excluding identity-coded messaging in radio or vernacular digital spaces.

2.8 Methodological considerations in African electoral studies

Triangulated designs pairing systematic content analysis with voter surveys or field experiments better capture both message supply and audience effects (Asunka et al., 2019; Cheeseman et al., 2020). Reliability reporting (e.g., Cohen’s κ) and validated scales (efficacy, literacy) enhance comparability. Multi-channel ad capture and geo-tagged exposure proxies improve inference over self-report, which risks recall and desirability bias.

2.9 Theoretical synthesis

We propose a moderated framing model: advertising frames affect issue salience and candidate evaluation (framing and priming), with media literacy/political efficacy dampening susceptibility to manipulative or affect-laden frames. We expect reform/experience frames to positively predict evaluations, while negative/emotive framing increases recall and salience but exerts heterogeneous trust effects.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

We employed a mixed-methods design: quantitative content analysis of newspaper advertisements to quantify frames and a cross-sectional voter survey to test associations between frame exposure and electoral outcomes, moderated by political efficacy and media literacy.

3.2 Content analysis

Sampling frame and outlets We sampled 120 political advertisements from four newspapers—The Nation, The Punch, The Hope, and Nigerian Tribune—covering the three months preceding election day. Constructed-week sampling ensured day-of-week balance.

Coding scheme and reliability Ads were coded for frame type (reform-oriented; experienced leader; outsider/challenger; ethnic/regional appeal; personal attack/negative), tone (positive; negative; neutral), issue focus (economy/jobs; infrastructure; education; health; security; governance/anticorruption), and emotive language (fear; hope; anger; affective imagery/symbols). Two trained coders independently coded 25% of the sample. Intercoder reliability was substantial to almost perfect: $\kappa = 0.81$ (frame), $\kappa = 0.78$ (tone), $\kappa = 0.83$ (emotive language) (Landis & Koch, 1977). Discrepancies were resolved by consensus; remaining ads were coded using the refined codebook.

3.3 Survey

Sampling and participants We surveyed 400 registered voters across Ondo North, Central, and South senatorial districts using multistage sampling: stratification by urban/rural wards, random polling unit selection, and systematic household sampling. Eligibility required age 18+ and state registration.

Instrument and measures the questionnaire measured:

- Exposure to frames: self-reported frequency of ads emphasising reform, experience, outsider challenge, ethnic/regional identity, or negative/personal attacks across channels.
- Political efficacy: internal and external efficacy scales.
- Media literacy: items on recognising persuasive techniques and verification habits.
- Outcomes: issue prioritisation (rank order) and candidate evaluation (favourability, trust).
- Controls: age, gender, education, income proxy, partisanship, media use.

A pretest ($n = 30$) yielded Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$ for multi-item scales; wording was refined for clarity.

3.4 Data analysis

We computed descriptive statistics for frame prevalence and co-occurrence. For survey data, we ran bivariate tests and multiple regressions predicting issue prioritisation and candidate evaluation from frame exposure, with interaction terms for efficacy/media literacy. We checked variance inflation for multicollinearity and inspected residuals for model assumptions.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Framing patterns in political advertising

Frame prevalence

- Reform-oriented frames predominated, tied to infrastructure, job creation, and service delivery.
- Experienced-leader frames highlighted prior governance roles and administrative competence.
- Outsider/challenger frames stressed breaking with entrenched interests.
- Ethnic/regional appeals were relatively rare in print.
- Personal attack/negative frames were a minority by count but overrepresented in premium placements and paired with emotive language.

Emotive appeals Over half of negative ads deployed explicit affect (anger/fear), while positive reform ads used hope-oriented language and development imagery.

Co-occurrence Reform and experience frames often co-occurred, blending change with competence. Negative frames targeted corruption or alleged incompetence.

4.2 Effects on voter attitudes and decision-making

Regression models show:

- Reform frame exposure positively predicted alignment of issue priorities with development

agendas and improved candidate evaluations, controlling for demographics and partisanship.

- Negative frame exposure increased ad recall and issue salience but produced mixed trust effects; some respondents reported reduced confidence in both target and sponsor, indicating backfire risk (Lau et al., 2007).
- Emotive language exposure correlated with higher recall and perceived importance of highlighted issues; trust effects attenuated among high-efficacy respondents.

Moderation by political efficacy and media literacy Interaction terms were significant: higher efficacy and literacy weakened associations between negative/emotive frame exposure and changes in vote intention. Open-ended responses indicated verification behaviours among high-efficacy respondents (“I checked the claims against independent fact-checkers before deciding”), and discounting of ads perceived as manipulative.

4.3 Additional observations

- **Channel differences:** Respondents reported higher exposure to digital and radio ads than print, though the content analysis sample was print-only; future cross-channel capture is warranted.
- **Regional nuances:** Descriptive patterns suggested modest variation by senatorial district in frame resonance (e.g., infrastructure promises more salient where deficits were visible), though interactions were not consistently significant with controls.

V. DISCUSSION

Findings substantiate that framing in political advertising meaningfully shapes voter perceptions and choices in Ondo State. Reform and experience frames—central to competence signalling—were particularly effective. Negative and emotive appeals increased attention and recall but risked trust penalties, consistent with backfire dynamics (Lau et al., 2007). The moderating role of media literacy and political efficacy affirms that audience characteristics condition effects (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2012). In contexts where campaign messaging

can blur with misinformation, literacy functions as a cognitive shield.

Normatively, the prevalence of negative/emotive framing raises concerns about manipulation and informed consent in democratic choice (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). Regulators must deter deception without chilling legitimate contrast advertising. Theoretically, results bridge framing and agenda-setting: frames shape interpretive schemas and elevate evaluative criteria (priming). Effects are non-uniform, contingent on cognition and context.

VI. CONCLUSION

Political ad framing exerted significant influence on voter attitudes and choices in a Nigerian sub-national election. Reform and experience frames predicted favourable evaluations; negative/emotive appeals raised salience and recall with heterogeneous trust effects. Media literacy and political efficacy attenuated susceptibility to manipulative framing. Sub-national dynamics echo global findings but retain local nuances in issue focus and identity cues.

Policy and practice priorities include:

- Clearer advertising standards and enforceable substantiation requirements.
- Integration of media literacy into civic education and community outreach.
- Newsroom obligations to fact-check and contextualise political advertising.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

- Media scope: Print focus limits cross-channel inference; incorporate broadcast, outdoor, and digital (including microtargeted ads) using ad libraries and platform transparency data.
- Causality: Cross-sectional survey constrains causal inference; panel designs and field experiments can strengthen claims.
- Measurement: Self-reported exposure invites recall bias; passive exposure tracking and ecological momentary assessment offer improvements.

- Generalisability: Ondo findings may not generalise across states with different party competition and media markets; comparative multi-state studies are needed.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Regulators and electoral bodies

- Strengthen pre-election substantiation standards; create expedited adjudication channels for ad-related complaints.
- Establish public ad repositories across media with sponsor identity, spend, and targeting criteria.

Media organisations and fact-checkers

- Stand up election ad verification desks; publish accessible “ad checks” explaining context and evidence.
- Avoid uncritical amplification of manipulative ads; pair coverage with expert analysis and links to verified sources.

Campaigns and strategists

- Prioritise evidence-based positive framing; use contrast ads responsibly with verifiable claims.
- Consider long-term trust: emotive negativity can yield short-term attention at the cost of sponsor credibility.

Civic educators and civil society

- Embed media literacy modules in voter education, focusing on evaluating claims, recognising persuasive tactics, and cross-checking.
- Partner with local radio and community groups to disseminate heuristics for ad evaluation during campaign cycles.

Researchers

- Expand to multi-channel designs; test frame effects experimentally with Nigerian samples.
- Analyse heterogeneity by demographics, partisanship, and media diets; examine identity-coded framing in indigenous languages.

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