

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF BROADCAST MESSAGES ON CHILD ABUSE IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

As a fundamental institution in any structured society, the mass media have a critical responsibility in shaping public awareness and attitudes. Their persuasive power significantly influences audiences, playing a key role in altering perceptions and behaviors. Given this impact, the media serve as essential instruments in the fight against child abuse in Nigeria. Recognizing this, media organizations dedicate substantial airtime and publication space to educate the public on the dangers of child abuse. This study, grounded in the selective perception theory, aimed to evaluate public opinions regarding the effectiveness of the mass media in fulfilling their social duty of informing, educating, and raising awareness about child abuse. A survey methodology was employed, with three states selected at random. A total of 300 respondents were chosen using the Australian online calculator. The collected data were analyzed and presented in the form of percentages, text, and tables. Findings indicate that while the media play an active role in combating child abuse, public adherence to media messages remains low. Based on these insights, it is recommended that media organizations intensify their advocacy efforts, develop more community-focused programs, and advocate for the inclusion of children's rights in educational curricula from primary to tertiary levels.

Keywords: media broadcasts, child maltreatment, public awareness, South East Nigeria.

Introduction

Children are often regarded as invaluable blessings, yet paradoxically, many of them suffer from abuse and neglect. Globally, childhood is recognized as a crucial developmental stage that demands special care, protection, and attention. Acknowledging this, the international community has prioritized children's rights for decades. In 1979, the United Nations declared it the International Year of the Child and outlined fundamental rights essential for every

child's well-being. These include the right to love, care, proper nutrition, healthcare, free education, recreation, identity, and special support for children with disabilities—regardless of their race, gender, religion, nationality, or social background (Gershoff, 2017; Frechette, 2017).

Despite the establishment of children's rights, awareness of these protections remains low, contributing to the widespread prevalence of child abuse in Nigeria today. Abuse and neglect are not only global concerns but also deeply ingrained issues in African societies, particularly in Nigeria. Corporal punishment is commonly administered as a disciplinary measure, with practices such as caning being widespread. In some Nigerian communities, extreme punishments including the application of pepper to sensitive areas—are still inflicted on children.

Efforts to combat child abuse in Africa gained momentum with the establishment of the African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) in 1984. Founded by several African nations, including Nigeria, the organization was created to address child abuse from a regional perspective. Nigeria subsequently launched its own chapter in 1986, which has since organized conferences and initiatives aimed at identifying and addressing the various forms of child abuse present in society.

Research by MacMilliam (2017), Durrants (2017), and Miller-Perrien (2017) emphasizes that children's rights establish the minimal requirements for their welfare, which include everything from the basic right to life to the chance for complete personal growth. A critical aspect of these rights is ensuring that children receive the care, support, and resources needed to grow into confident and well-adjusted adults. Essential elements such as love, nurturing, discipline, and encouragement play a crucial role in shaping a child's overall development. The National Information on Child Abuse (2003) defines child abuse as "any behavior directed toward a child by a parent, guardian, or other family member or adult that endangers the child's physical or emotional health and development." In reality, child abuse encompasses a broad spectrum of both physical and emotional mistreatment. Several factors contribute to its prevalence, including poverty, level of education, cultural practices, family dysfunction, religious beliefs, and early marriage.

Child abuse has far-reaching consequences, often leading to anxiety, agitation, feelings of guilt, and even neurotic disorders. According to Davies (2015) and Devadas & Ravi (2013), children who experience abuse frequently develop maladaptive behaviors, including antisocial tendencies, self-destructive actions, and depression. Beyond its impact on individual victims, child abuse poses a significant threat to national development. The level of leadership that Nigerian children will possess in the future is contingent upon the education and social support they receive today. When children are subjected to abuse, it undermines their potential and, by extension, weakens the foundation of the nation's progress. Since children represent the continuity of human existence, neglecting their welfare jeopardizes the country's future by depriving them of their fundamental rights, education, and aspirations—key factors essential for Nigeria's development.

In response to the growing concern over child abuse, Nigeria and the Rights of a Child, a non-governmental organization, has continued to advocate for children's welfare. The

Organization of African Unity (OAU) reinforced this cause by declaring the 1990s as the "Decade of the African Child" during a summit in Abuja in 1991. Furthermore, June 16th was designated as the "Day of the African Child," while Nigeria instituted May 27th as "Children's Day," a day dedicated to recognizing and celebrating children. Legal frameworks also exist to safeguard children's rights. Section 34(1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, titled "Right to Dignity of the Human Person," explicitly prohibits all forms of torture, inhumane and degrading treatment, slavery, and forced labor. Similarly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child outlines international protections against child exploitation. However, despite these legal provisions, many Nigerian children continue to endure cruelty, abuse, forced labor, inhumane treatment, and, in some cases, even coerced prostitution.

The media serve as powerful tools for influencing public perception and driving societal progress, particularly in the fight for human rights and self-development. Among their many functions, the media play a crucial role in raising awareness about child rights, with television being a particularly effective platform for advocacy. Recognizing the media's potential, organizations such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) collaborated to produce *I Need to Know*, a drama series aired weekly on several Nigerian television stations. In Oredo Local Government Area, Edo State, for instance, the program is a regular feature on Edo Broadcasting Service (EBS), Nigeria Television Authority (NTA), and Independent Television (ITV). The series tackles critical issues related to child abuse, rights, welfare, and overall development.

Similarly, the Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF) founded under the initiative of Mrs. Titi Abubakar, wife of Nigeria's former Vice President sponsored the production of *Izozo*, a drama series focused on the realities of child labor and its devastating effects. This program is broadcast weekly on NTA Network Service, further reinforcing the media's role in advocating for children's rights and protection. Also, 'news line' on NTA, every Sunday night 9.00pm report cases of child abuse and the condition of the victims. "Straight talk" on Cosmo Fm, Enugu creates a forum for debate and discussion every morning on issues concerning child's rights.

These television programs, along with extensive coverage in print media, are intended to increase knowledge of children's rights and the risks associated with child maltreatment. Additionally, they serve to encourage public discourse on these critical issues, leveraging the mass media as a platform for debate and societal engagement. Hence, these media programs and articles on child abuse are understood and applied differently by the public, given to the fact that some people perceive media messages targeted to them in different ways. Individuals tend to engage with messages that align with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. Some interpret information in a way that reinforces their established perspectives, while others selectively retain content that resonates with their personal interests and viewpoints. However, Nigeria is not the only country afflicted with the plague of child abuse, rather the issue is a global phenomenon, and there are lots of efforts made by government and various organizations to eradicate child abuse.

Statement of the Problem

Human society is a multifaceted system where various social challenges persist, hindering progress and overall development. One of the most pressing social issues is child abuse, which has remained a significant concern over the years. This issue has drawn the attention of both governmental and non-governmental organizations in Nigeria, prompting efforts to reshape public perception, raise awareness, and educate citizens about the fundamental rights of children. The mass media have been central to these education and enlightenment efforts. How effective these efforts have been is still open to question. This study is aimed at establishing whether the public has been influenced in any positive sense by the media messages against child abuse.

Literature Review

The mass media perform a number of functions in any society. As they perform their functions in the society, they do not work in isolation, but operate in conjunction with other social institutions like the family, school, church, peer group and political institutions, yet, its prominent role in shaping the perception, behaviour and attitudes obtainable in the society cannot be over emphasized, as it supersedes other social institutions, as McQuail (2007) further explains the pivotal place of the media in any society thus: The key idea to highlight is the extent to which various forms of media have positioned themselves as intermediaries between individuals and their perception of the world beyond their immediate surroundings and direct sensory experiences. The mass media serve as a constant bridge, maintaining continuous engagement between individuals and the core institutions that shape society. He further observed that society relies heavily on the media for both survival and a comprehensive understanding of its surroundings. In a secular society, the media often assume the role traditionally played by early influences such as schools, parents, religion, siblings, and peers in shaping values and ideas. As a result, individuals become significantly dependent on the media for much of their broader symbolic environment, despite their ability to construct personal interpretations of the world. (*National Association of Adult Survivors of Child Abuse, 2016*).

The media serve as one of the most powerful communication tools, playing a crucial role in promoting timely and relevant information. It provides mass audiences with valuable exposure to societal issues, helping to shape perceptions of what is right and wrong. While the media are sometimes associated with the rapid spread of misinformation, they also play a vital role in disseminating factual information and raising awareness about important realities (Meree, 2017).

Despite these challenges, the media have a constructive role to fulfill in society. Today, television and print media act as platforms for addressing social issues, offering insights into real-life experiences. Recognizing the media's significance, Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, titled "Obligation of the Mass Media," explicitly states that "the press, radio, television, and other mass media agencies shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in Chapter II and ensure the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people." In response to this section, the mass media perform certain functions in the society, which without the media the society cannot exist and also the media cannot exist without the society.

The importance of the mass media cannot be exhausted in this work, it is pertinent to note at this juncture that the mass media has become an integral part of every human being and the society at large which has attracted lots of names as the fourth estate of the realm, voice of the voiceless, watchdog of the society, conscience of those without conscience, mouthpiece of the people etc. Children's rights seem possible on paper, but how would they be put into practice? For example, how many Nigerian children have access to school, healthcare, or even leisure, particularly when states are tasked with coming up with policies to support and protect child welfare? It follows that, given the issues of extreme poverty and dysfunctional democratic ideals that hinder the progress of Nigerian children, it may not be too quick to denounce the benefits of child labor and abuse as a means of survival for certain children who have no support from the state, their community, or their parents. Batasikos (2010) and Pell (2013). Unfortunately Nigerians view child abuse as a culture practiced by parents and guardians like the female genital mutilation etc. Child trafficking remains a prevalent issue both within and beyond the country's borders. This practice starkly contrasts with the traditional custom where children from financially struggling families were entrusted to more affluent relatives. In the past, this arrangement functioned as an informal barter system—children contributed to household chores while receiving education and opportunities for a better future in return. However, the situation today has taken a troubling turn. Due to widespread poverty, many rural parents relinquish their children to urban residents, expecting them to be cared for and educated. Unfortunately, rather than fulfilling this obligation, many of these children are exploited as unpaid domestic workers or forced into street hawking, depriving them of their right to education and a secure future. (AFROL Gender Profile-Nigeria 2002; Dorfman et al 2012; Cheit et al 2010; fang 2012; Afifi et al 2017).

This theory is commonly known as the 'perception theory' which explains how individuals interpret media messages directed at them. In communication terms, perception is discussed in this theory within the framework of "selective". They include selective exposure, selective perception, selective retention and selective attention. These selection works in whole not in isolation of each other. The concept of selectivity can be categorized as follows: Selective exposure refers to the tendency of individuals to engage with messages that align with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs while avoiding information that contradicts their viewpoints. This preference influences their choice of newspapers, television channels, and specific programs they choose to watch or ignore.

Due to the fact that the human eye consumes information faster than the brain can understand it, selective attention develops. To prevent sensory overload and confusion, the brain prioritizes certain pieces of information while disregarding others. Selective perception suggests that media consumers interpret messages based on their prior experiences, current emotional states, personal needs, memories, and existing dispositions. This means individuals often perceive information in a way that aligns with their perspectives. Selective retention acknowledges that it is impossible for individuals to remember every message they encounter. However, some information is retained longer, while others are quickly forgotten, depending on personal relevance and emotional impact. The idea is that people remember messages that are in tune with their interest.

The cardinal ingredients of this theory which is the most relevant aspect of this study: Perception is influenced by a range of factors, including psychological disposition, past

experiences, cultural expectations, and social relationships. These elements, along with language limitations and the "limited experience factor," contribute to the process of selective perception, which operates in a sequential manner progressing through selective exposure, attention, perception, and retention. In essence, individuals must first receive a message before they can focus on it; they need to pay attention before they can understand what it means, and perception must occur before the message can be retained for future recall. Communication scholars refer to this theory by different names. Lazarsfeld, Klapper, and Defleur identify it as Cognitive Consistency Theory, while Baran and Dennis describe it as Attitude Change Theory.

This study therefore, adopts this theory to explain public perception toward media initiatives in Nigeria that oppose child abuse in light of the presumptions of this hypothesis that people believe, expose, attend and retain messages that are in line with their beliefs culture and experience. Hence, various movies drama series, discussion programmes, news, articles etc. are aired or published for the masses to consume and for a desired effect to be achieved. That desired effect is to change people's perception towards child maltreatment, but some of these messages are effective while some are not, reason could be due to selective exposure, retention and perception.

Methodology

Data collection

This study adopts a survey research design, as it is the most suitable approach for measuring public opinion, attitudes, and orientations prevalent among a large population at a specific time. This design enables an in-depth examination of the role and contributions of broadcast media as a social institution in combating child abuse. The questionnaire used for data collection is divided into two sections. Section A focuses on the demographic characteristics of respondents, while Section B consists of psychographic questions designed to address the research objectives. The instrument includes both open-ended and close-ended questions to provide a structured frame of reference, ensuring clarity and enhancing the specificity of responses.

Table 1: Description of selected location for this study

S/No.	State	Selected LGAs	Towns/Village	No. of Respondents
1.	Anambra	Awka	Ebenebe	25
			Nise	25
			Onitsha town	25
			Fegge	25
2.	Enugu	Enugu North	Agbani	25
			Trans-Ekulu	25
			Nsukka	25
			Obukpa	25
3.	Imo	Ikeduru	Inyishi	25
			Atta	25
			Orodo	25
			Mbieri	25

Quantitative and qualitative was applied. In the quantitative aspect, statistics and numeric table was used to derive answers to whatever questions the researcher posed. The researcher equally made use of simple tables in presenting results. Responds were presented in number (frequency) and percentage format. Demographic characteristics of the respondents were analyzed first, followed by the analysis and interpretation of research questions.

Results

Table 2: Have you been exposed to any mass media programme/campaign against child abuse?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	236	78.6	78.6	78.6
No	64	21.4	21.4	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 shows that 236 (78.6 percent) of the respondents have been exposed to media programmes/campaigns against child abuse while 64 (21.4 percent) are not exposed to media campaigns against child abuse.

Table 3: Do you think those messages/programme influence your perception of child labour and other abuses on children in the society?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	199	66.3	66.3	66.3
No	101	33.7	33.7	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

The above table shows that 199 (66.3 percent) of the respondents agreed that those media campaigns/programmes that they are exposed to influenced their perception on child abuse while 101 (33.7 percent) said that they are not influenced by those media campaign/programmes. This shows that a greater number of the public are influence by media programme especially as regards Child abuse.

Table 4: Do you think the mass media are the appropriate means to reach the Nigerian publics in this kind of campaign?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	188	62.3	62.3	62.3
No	38	12.7	12.7	75.0
Not sure	74	25.0	25.0	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

This table shows that 188(62.3 percent) of the respondents thinks that the mass media are the appropriate means to reach Nigerians in this campaign. 38(12.7 percent) said that the media are the appropriate means while 74(25.0 percent) are not sure of the appropriate means. A greater number of the respondents agreed that the mass media are the most effective means to reach the Nigerian public in this kind of campaign.

Table 5: What is your opinion on the issue of child abuse in Nigeria?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid common	169	56.3	56.3	56.3
Rare	117	39.0	39.0	95.3
Does not exist	14	4.7	4.7	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

The above table show that 169 (56.3 percent) of the respondents agreed that child abuse is common in Nigeria because it's an everyday experience on streets, homes and rural areas. (39.0 percent) sees child abuse as a rare experience because they hardly happen without a good reason while 14 (4.7 percent) said it does not exist.

Table 6: In what ways do you think the media have helped in the fight against child abuse?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Creating awareness	142	47.3	55.7	55.7
Education on ills of abuse	94	31.3	36.6	92.5
Use of bill boards	19	6.3	7.5	100.0
Total	255	85.0	100.0	
Missing	45	15.0		
Total	300	100.0		

The table presents the response to an open-ended question which was analyzed based on those that have similar answers. A total of 142 respondents (47.3%) acknowledged that the media have played a significant role in combating child abuse mostly by creating awareness of campaigns, conference, organizations and seminars that are responsible for child rights in Nigeria 94(31.3 percent) said the media have also helped by educating and sensitizing people on the ills and dangers of child abuse to children and the nation at large 19 (6.3 percent) went further to mention ways which they have helped through their programmes, bill boards, jingles against child abuse, news reports etc. But 45 (15.0 percent) of the respondent did not give any to this question.

Table 7: Do you think any success has been recorded so far with the use of media in the campaign against child abuse?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
No success	78	26.0	26.0	26.0
Little success	124	41.3	41.3	67.3
Great success	98	32.7	32.7	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

This table shows that 78 (26.0 percent) of the respondent said that the media have not achieved any success in eradicating child abuse in Nigeria. And a greater number 124 (41.3 percent) agreed that the media has achieved little success while 98 (32.7 percent) agreed that they have achieved great success in eradicating child abuse in Nigeria.

Table 8: From the look of things, would you conclude that Nigerians have known much about the dangers of child abuse?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	163	54.3	54.3	54.3
No	102	34.0	34.0	88.3
Not sure	35	11.7	11.7	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

The table above indicates that **163 respondents (54.3%)** believe that a majority of Nigerians are well-informed about the dangers of child abuse. And 102 (34.0 percent) said that many are still ignorant of the dangers of child abuse while 25 (11.7 percent) are not sure whether Nigerians know the dangers of child abuse or not.

Table 9: Which medium will you recommend for use, to effectively curb child abuse in Nigeria?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Radio	43	14.3	14.3	14.3
Television	70	23.3	23.3	37.6
Magazine	20	6.7	6.7	44.3
Newspaper	30	10.0	10.0	54.3
all	137	45.7	45.7	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

According to the preceding table, 43 respondents, or 14.3%, stated radio will be appropriate for this campaign. 70 (23.3 percent) recommend television. And 20 (6.7 percent) choose magazine while 30 (10.0 percent) said newspaper will be appropriate. But a greater number of the respondents 137 (45.7 percent) recommend the use of all the media. This indicates that the combination of all the option will be very effective in curbing child abuse.

Table 10: In your own opinion do you think the mass media in Nigeria has made any contribution towards the eradication of child abuse in Nigeria?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	194	64.7	64.7	64.7
No	106	35.3	35.3	100.0
Total	300	100.0	100.0	

The table shows that 194 (64.7 percent) of the respondents agreed that the mass media have contributed to the eradication of child abuse in Nigeria while 106 (35.3 percent) said they have made no contribution. This has shown to a large extent that The mainstream media have fulfilled its the expectations of Nigerians in discharging the educational, awareness creation, sensitization and mobilization duty as an institution that are responsive to the society where they operate.

Discussion

These responses are clear indication that the mass media have been able to sensitize Nigerian public on the ills and dangers of child abuse as majority of the participants agreed that they

know much about the dangers of child and are influenced by media programmes/campaigns against child abuse.

The response elicited from the participants proved with a greater percentage of 64.7 representing 194 respondents out of 300 that in their own opinion, the mass media in Nigeria has made enormous contributions towards the eradication of child abuse in Nigeria. Further responses in the questionnaire give credence to the fact that the mass media have helped in the fight against child abuse. 142 participant representing 47.3 percent said they have helped through creating awareness about conference, seminars etc on child abuse and 94 respondents said they have helped by educating the public on the ills and dangers of child abuse through their programmes, jingles, bill boards, news reports, etc. from the responses gathered from the respondent, the mass media has always liaised with organizations and institutions that are responsible for protecting children and ensuring their welfare. The media have always been useful in carrying out the duties and achieving their aims and objectives. Also, the media on their own allocates lots of air time and space on magazines and newspapers to report and analyze issue on child rights, welfare and human dignity. All these and more are the clear indication of the continuous contributions of the mass media in fighting child abuse.

Based on the findings, greater number of the respondents said yes, that the mass media are the appropriate means to reach the public in this kind of campaign. Also, 124 respondents representing 41.3 percent out of 300 participants accepted that the mass media have achieved some amount of success in eradicating child abuse in Nigeria. This is to prove that media programmes on child abuse are effective to some extent in changing the attitudes of some people towards children and enlighten Nigerian citizens on existing rights of every Nigerian child.

It was also gathered from the public that the use of all the media (Magazine, newspaper, television and radio) and some also advised that the use of traditional media (market place, church, town criers etc) will make significant impact in curbing child abuse in Nigeria as this will help reach most rural areas where child abuse is common.

However, the findings of this work are in consonance with Awosola and Omoera (2008) research on the influence of the media, in creating awareness among the public on child rights. The research was concerned with the effectiveness of media campaigns against child abuse in Oredo L.G.A in Edo State.

Conclusion

This study has made some useful revelations and also confirmed some existing beliefs on how the public perceives media messages. It was confirmed by the public that the mass media has contributed significantly in fighting child abuse in Nigeria through its numerous programmes. This significant success is achieved through its ability to educate, sensitize, enlighten, inform, mobilize and influence people's perception towards child abuse. Relying on the selective processes theory, this study has been able to establish a link between effective media programming and awareness against child abuse. This study tries to elicit information through the use of adequately structured questionnaire and carefully selected population to answer the important questions raised by the researcher. The simple percentage analytical

method was applied to analyze the information gathered and the findings carefully presented in tabular forms.

According to the study's findings, television in particular has been crucial in bringing attention to children's rights and the risks of child abuse in society. However, the challenge that remains is translating this awareness into concrete actions that ensure better treatment and protection of children. Furthermore, research indicates that child abuse has a detrimental effect on mental development and self-esteem, which affects society and impedes the growth of nations. When children grow up in unfavorable conditions, their ability to function as future leaders is compromised, often due to socio-economic and educational disadvantages. To effectively combat child abuse, the government must complement media efforts by improving living conditions, creating employment opportunities, and enhancing the working environment. Furthermore, the provision of basic amenities such as clean water, quality education, accessible healthcare, and security is essential to safeguarding children's well-being and future prospects.

Recommendations

Broadcast media should advocate collaboration of pertinent governmental organizations and non-governmental organization in charge of child welfare to set up and fund child right association and they should also, be more public oriented in their programmes. The paucity of phone-in programme on child abuse is a major handicap. Through such audience-participatory programmes, they should be able to gauge public opinion and views on the issue and thus equip themselves on how to tackle the problem. In addition to improving living conditions, creating jobs and a better working environment, and providing Nigerians with basic necessities like water, education, health care, and security, the government should seek to lower the rate of child abuse.

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