

# Perception of Mainstream Media Representation of Insecurity Issues in South-East Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

The challenge of insecurity in South-Eastern Nigeria in recent times has become a significant concern. The mainstream media in Nigeria are awash with numerous reports on the issues of insecurity in the region. This study investigated how residents of South-East Nigeria perceive the mainstream media representation of insecurity issues. A qualitative research design was employed, specifically, Focus Group Discussions. A total of 40 participants were purposively sampled for the FGD, comprising both males and females aged 30 to 50. A total of five FGD sessions were conducted in the five South-Eastern States of Nigeria (one in each State). Each FGD session comprised 8 participants. The participants were those resident in the South-Eastern States of Nigeria with access to mainstream media channels. Framing and social responsibility theories provided the background to this study. The FGD question guide was used as the data collection instrument for this study. The study found a high level of audience exposure to mainstream media reports on insecurity issues in the South-East. The predominant mainstream media channels for sourcing information on issues of insecurity in the region are some media organizations owned by individuals, which are considered more reliable. The study also found perceptions of media exaggeration or underreporting of the insecurity issues in the South-East, ethnic bias, and government use of the media to portray the region in a bad light for political interests, resulting in a public perception of distrust in the media. The findings of this study will be significant for policymakers, media stakeholders and researchers to deepen the conversation around media and insecurity. The study recommends that the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) should ensure strict adherence to the principles of social responsibility theory when reporting insecurity issues in the South-East and Nigeria at large.

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## **1. Introduction**

Insecurity is a global concern. According to the United Nations Development Program (2022), 6 in 7 people worldwide are plagued by a feeling of insecurity. People's sense of safety has gone so low in virtually all countries, including rich countries (UNDP, 2022). Insecurity, as defined in this work, is a state of fear, anxiety, danger, and absence of safety to human life and property (Ishola, 2019), implying physical harm. Muggah and Aguirre (2018) observe a high rate of insecurity in South American countries, describing them as the most violent and insecure on earth. They state that over 2.5 million people have died in South America since the year 2000 due to insecurity. The United Nations' Human Rights (2023) documented figures show that at least 3,661 people were killed in Haiti in 2023 due to insecurity. On the same note, Issa (2021) indicates that the entire Middle East is fragmented, unstable and more insecure than ever due to persistent insecurity issues.

Africa is not left out. A survey of the global pattern of crime and insecurity 2019 by Van Dyjk, Nieuwbeerta and Larson (2021) emphasizes that there is a global insecurity concern, with African countries and Latin America having the highest level of insecurity, followed by Asia.

Insecurity ranks as the greatest challenge among the numerous problems in Nigeria. All the geopolitical zones in Nigeria are witnessing an increasing wave of insecurity (Abaji & Salamatu, 2023). Current research on crime and insecurity categorizes Nigeria as a high-risk State with various strands of criminality (Ugwuoke et al., 2023). These strands of criminality range from banditry, kidnapping, herdsman-farmers' killings, armed robbery, terrorism, unknown gunmen attacks, militancy, to IPOB separatist agitations. The Nigerian Monthly Violent Bulletin (2024) indicates that between April and May 2024, the states in Nigeria recorded 94 violent incidents resulting in 313 casualties, 289 fatalities and 124 kidnap victims. BBC Africa has equally reported the kidnapping of over 600 school children in Papiri, Niger State and Kaduna in 2025 (Smith, Ewokor & Neeysmith, 2025). Hence, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), a Conflict Watch list (2023), refers to Nigeria as one of the most violent countries in Africa.

In South-East Nigeria, there has been an increasing wave of insecurity since 2016, with the incessant killings by suspected Fulani Herdsmen (Idoko, 2025). This situation has worsened from 2020 to date due to the consistent experiences of kidnapping, activities of unknown gunmen, Independent People of Biafra (IPOB) and bandits (Onyekelu, 2022). Chukwu (2021), reporting in the online Business Day newspaper, observes that the South-east of Nigeria reels under the weight of bloody attacks daily. For instance, on March 28, 2021, suspected Fulani herdsmen killed at least 8 villagers in Adani in Enugu state (Chinedu, 2020). Similarly, Okoli, Okutu and Obu (2021) report that barely twenty-four hours after 8 people were killed in Adani, Enugu State by gunmen, 17 others were killed in Ishielu Local Government Area of Ebonyi State.

In addition, the month of April 2021 witnessed several violent attacks on Police stations in various parts of Imo State, as well as Enugu State. Dozens of security personnel have been killed as a result of a series of targeted attacks on police and military installations. The violent attacks led to the freeing of about 1800 prison inmates in Owerri, Imo State, on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2021 (Okoli, Okutu & Odu, 2021). In response to these developments, the South-East governors on 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2021, launched a regional security outfit known as 'Ebube Agu' to checkmate the criminal activities in the region (Njoku, 2021). Hence, the spate of abductions, killings and other criminal activities across South-East Nigeria is a source of worry. This situation of criminality remains unabated to this day (Okanume, 2023). Nwaiwu, Odu and Oko (2021) quoted Obi of Onitsha, Igwe Achebe, as declaring that the South-East is no longer safe. Hence,

the escalating insecurity situation in the South-East of Nigeria presently demands urgent scholarly attention.

The mainstream media representation of these numerous insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria is of particular interest to this study. The mass media occupy a central position in the overall well-being of any nation through their surveillance and correlation functions. The media have the primary role of providing accurate and objective information to the public in fulfilment of their social responsibility demands. As rightly observed by Ojo (2024), the mass media play an important role in being a watchdog, calling attention to serious national issues, such as insecurity in the country. In this way, mass media influence public opinion or perception on national issues (Abaji & Salamatu, 2023).

The public depends on the media for accurate information on the security situation in Nigeria, and particularly the South-East region. The manner in which the media present a conflict determines how the public perceives that conflict. Gjerazi (2023), in his study of investigative journalism in Albania, concludes that media and communication strategies that prioritize media pluralism, transparency and accountability contribute to conflict prevention, resolution, and media trust. There is an avalanche of reports on insecurity issues in the South-East of Nigeria by the mainstream media outlets (Radio, Newspapers, Television, etc). However, the question is, how do the residents of South-East Nigeria perceive the mainstream media representation of the increasing wave of insecurity in the region? This is essential owing to the fact that the media have the obligation to guide the public properly in times of a critical insecurity situation. The media ought to adhere to the ethics of conflict-sensitive reporting by providing balance and accuracy in their reportage. This is even more imperative with the emergence of social media information that often does not go through gatekeeping processes and reliability tests.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Residents of South-East Nigeria live in constant fear due to the increasing wave of insecurity in the region (Idoko, 2025). There are incessant kidnappings and killings due to the activities of suspected Herdsmen, Unknown gunmen, bandits, Independent People of Biafra (IPOB) secessionist agitation activities and other violent crimes, which have hampered free movement for the citizenry (Nnaemeka & Ogunbadejo, 2024). The security situation in the South-East is a matter of grave concern (Jumbo et al., 2023). As observed by Taiwo, Nwoga & Ibe (2021), South-East Nigeria is no longer safe due to the obvious security challenges in the region. The International Centre for Investigative Reporting (2023) analysed data from the Nigerian Security Tracker (NST) and Armed Conflict Location and Event Data shows that between January 2021 and June 2023, over 1,700 people were killed in the South-East region of Nigeria. Also, according to Human Rights World Report (2023), over 287 people were killed in the South-East between January and May, 2022. In the same vein, Vanguard online newspaper (January 10, 2025) cited a report from SMB Morgen. This intelligence gathering firm states that N419.2 million was paid as ransom for kidnapping between July 2023 and June 2024 in the South-East of Nigeria. According to Mohammed (2024), South-East Nigeria has become a highly volatile region, culminating in constant fear and uncertainty.

The media space is replete with stories and reports on insecurity issues in the South-East of Nigeria. There have been accusations of sensationalism and the representation of interests in the mainstream media's reporting of insecurity issues in Nigeria (Ogu, 2024). Again, both government-owned and media establishments owned by individuals in Nigeria have been accused of projecting their interests, politicizing the media and lacking objectivity in their representation of issues (Apuke, 2016; Temenge, Suemo, & Achakpaikyo, 2025). However, how the residents of South-East Nigeria perceive the mainstream media reports and

representations of the current insecurity issues in the region remains under-researched. The public relies heavily on the media, particularly the mainstream media representation of the issues around the security of lives and property (Ugochukwu et al., 2023). The extant literature shows a lack of clear understanding of the South-East residents' perception of media representation of insecurity issues in the region due to scant literature on the subject matter.

The consequence of not having a proper understanding of the public perception of the media in this case might lead to a lack of grounded knowledge of the role of the media in the security situation in the South-East. Hence, through the social responsibility theory of the media, and equally grounded on framing theory, the public perception of the media representation of security challenges in the South-East was interrogated.

## **1.2 Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of the study was to investigate the perception of mainstream media representation of insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria.

1. To assess the South-East residents' exposure to mainstream media reports on insecurity in the region.
2. To determine the mainstream media channel(s) that the residents access news on insecurity in the South-East.
3. To establish to what extent mainstream media reports represent the reality of the insecurity situation in South-East Nigeria

## **1.3 Research Questions**

1. To what extent are residents exposed to mainstream media reports on insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria?
2. Which mainstream media channel(s) do residents of South-East Nigeria access news on insecurity issues in the region?
3. To what extent do mainstream media reports represent the reality of insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria?

## **1.4 Significance of the Study**

In the wake of the incessant violent attacks in South-East Nigeria, the findings of this study will be insightful in understanding the public perception of the media in Nigeria on the issues of insecurity in the region. Such understanding will invariably help in educating both the public and the Government in finding ways of mitigating insecurity using the media. The findings will also help researchers deepen the conversation around media and insecurity, especially as an issue of global concern. In addition, the findings will help the media organizations assess the applicability of the social responsibility principles to society.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Perception**

How the human person makes sense of his environment is critical to human existence. Through the sense organs, human beings can be aware of the outside world and process stimuli to make meaning of their environment. Hence, Qiong (2017) defines perception as the process of attaining awareness or understanding sensory information. For Nwodu, Ezeoke and Ezeaka (2021), perception is the processing, interpreting, selecting and organization of sensory

information from the outside world. Perception is therefore a cognitive process that involves three stages: selection, organization, and interpretation (Qiong, 2017). Elliot, Ojiakor and Etumnu (2024) refer to these three sequential stages of perception as exposure, attention and interpretation. For them, perception occurs when there is necessarily an exposure to stimuli (such as insecurity in South-East Nigeria), followed by the allocation of attention and interpretation of the stimuli. Human beings encounter a variety of information or stimuli every day, from which there is a selection of what interests or is essential at any given time.

This is because we cannot process all the information that presents itself at the same time. In the case of this research work, insecurity is the overriding information among the avalanche of news messages in the media. Finally, meaning is attached to the selected and organized stimuli. In other words, we make sense of the environmental experiences by interpreting them using the perceptual lenses of culture and past experiences. People who share the same culture are very likely to perceive a particular phenomenon from a similar perspective and vice versa. Perception, therefore, is a meeting of physical experience and psychological interpretation into meaningful outcomes. Qiong (2017) shares this line of thought by arguing that there are two fundamental dimensions of perception: physical and psychological. Thus, the foregoing analyses of the concept of perception explain why this research work focuses on investigating the public perception of the mainstream media's representation of insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria.

## **2.2 Insecurity in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, insecurity is at an alarming rate, and Nigeria consistently ranks among the Global Crime Index as well as a Terrorist country (Ishaya, 2021). It is an obvious fact that one of the greatest challenges facing Nigeria today is insecurity. As observed by Nnoruga (2020), the increasing wave of insecurity in Nigeria appears to have taken on various dangerous dimensions in different parts of the country. The current wave of insecurity is dangerously threatening her corporate existence as a country. For instance, there have been increasing abductions of school children in the northern part of the country. On 7<sup>th</sup> February, 2021, 27 students, 3 staff and 12 members of their families were abducted by gunmen from a boarding school in Kagara, Niger State (Vanguard, February 17, 2021). Similarly, 317 school girls were reported to have been abducted from Government Junior Secondary School, Jangede, Zamfara State on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February, 2021 (Umoru, 2021). In addition, over 600 school children were abducted in Papiri, Niger and Kaduna States in 2025 (Smith, Ewokor & Neeysmith, 2025).

## **2.3 Insecurity in South-East Nigeria**

South-East is one of the six geopolitical regions of Nigeria. It comprises five States, namely Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia and Ebonyi States. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2024), South-East has over 20 million inhabitants who are predominantly Igbo speaking, occupying the land mass of 29,558 km<sup>2</sup>. South-East Nigeria has often been rated the most peaceful region in Nigeria by several scholars (Ogugua & Okoli, 2023; Ukwu, Mamah & Ojonta, 2024). However, the case is different now. There is frequent kidnapping and murder attributed to an armed group called “unknown gunmen” and other criminal activities in South-East Nigeria (Ukwu, Mamah & Ojonta, 2024). The situation worsened with a weekly Monday sit-at-home order imposed by the Independent People of Biafra agitation group, which started in August 2021 to protest the detention of their leader, Nnamdi Kanu, by the Nigerian Government. Markets, schools, banks, and movements are restricted every Monday in the entire South-East region as a result of the sit-at-home order. Chibueze (2023) emphasizes that criminality has crippled daily life and interactions in the South-East, culminating in a state of

fear, uncertainty, etc. Besides the psychological impact of the situation, socio-economic development is on a downward trend as there is a decline in productivity due to disruption in investment (Chibueze, 2023). According to the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (2023), the region has lost many investors, resulting in the loss of trillions of naira in revenue due to the worsening insecurity situation.

Some scholars (Chukwujama, 2025; Okonkwo & Akanji, 2025) have attributed the security challenges in the South-East to political exclusion and marginalization of the region over a long period of time. While Ukwu, Mamah and Ojonta (2024) agree on the issue of political and economic marginalization of the region, they also attribute the situation to the failure of the Nigerian government to provide security. The region continues to search for the motive behind the escalating violence in the region. For instance, while the former Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, blamed the South-East insecurity on the activities of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) members who are agitating for separation, the governor of Imo State, Hope Uzodimma, is of the view that the criminal activities in the South-East region, particularly in Imo State, are politically motivated. Hence, in the wake of the recent developments in South-East Nigeria regarding insecurity, there is a need to investigate how residents of the South-East region perceive the mainstream media's representation of the current insecurity situation in the region, building on the media's background to social responsibility principles.

#### **2.4 Perception of the Media on Insecurity Issues in Nigeria**

How the media carry out their functions, particularly in times of crises such as the overwhelming insecurity in Nigeria, remains critical to this study. Beyond their primary function of providing information, education, and entertainment to the masses, they must operate with the utmost professionalism. The media's role in combating insecurity cannot be overemphasized, as the public relies on the media for accurate information about societal happenings, for safety (Nwankwo et al., 2023). This point reiterates the position of Owolabi, Alade and Onwuka (2023) that without reliable information from the media, it will be difficult for citizens and the government to make informed decisions in favor of national security. These authors affirm that the media are fundamental drivers of social interaction and can promote peace in society. The media are critical to the construction of social realities, such as insecurity, and to their representation (Ciboh, 2017). Owino and Karani (2021) emphasize that the media play a role in reducing tension and building trust among conflicting parties by providing balanced and factual reporting.

Through their surveillance and correlation functions, the media provide information, interpretation and explanation that shape the perception of individuals in society. As observed by Dalhatu. Erunke and Idakula (2019), the media cannot shy away from this responsibility to society of providing factual information, especially on security matters. For Asonze and Nwaedozie (2023), one of the very important factors that promote a stable society is the effective and proper dissemination of information to citizens. Hence, they must be proactive in ensuring factual information to protect the public from issues of insecurity (Nwankwo et al., 2023). This is consistent with Ternenge, Suemo and Achakpaikyo (2025), who observe that the manner in which the media in Nigeria play their role regarding insecurity influences the management of the security situation in the country. They argue that the media in Nigeria, as a critical element in perception and opinion formation, can curb insecurity by raising public and security agencies' awareness of security threats and engaging with government policies on security in the interest of peace.

Against this background, as the fourth estate of the realm, what is the media's perception in Nigeria of their surveillance and correlative role regarding the country's incessant insecurity

issues? Nwankwo et al. (2023) posit that the media in Nigeria have been accused of manipulating the public for profit and contributing to worsening insecurity, as well as conflict escalation in Nigeria. This aligns with Suemo et al. (2022), who suggest that mass media, particularly radio, contribute to raising fear and panic in Nigeria instead of being proactive in preventing attacks on farmers. The study also observes that radio stations disseminate news using a straight format approach without in-depth investigation. Oyinloye et al. (2025) agree that the media have been shaped by political, social and economic factors in relation to Nigeria's insecurity. The mass media in Nigeria have failed in adequately carrying out their function of monitoring and reporting on security issues, resulting in the ongoing crises nationwide (Akpanika, 2017; Auwal, 2017; Suemo et al., 2022). Similarly, there are ethno-religious and political underpinnings in Nigerian media regarding the reportage of security issues (Okpala & Chukwu, 2023). In this way, insecurity issues are sometimes presented from the perspective of affinities and identities, which further exacerbates the already existing problem (Wonuola & Adisa, 2023; Suleiman-Shika, 2024; Ogu, 2024; Onwe et al., 2024).

The foregoing, therefore, suggests that the media could be manipulated to have either a positive or a negative effect on the public. A typical example could be the case of the media's role in the Rwandan conflict between the Tutsis and Hutus that witnessed manipulation of the media, which resulted in genocide in 1994 (Demarest & Langer, 2021). On this same note, Ugwu et al. (2022) argue that regional biases in the media could also be attributed to the plurality of media ownership in Nigeria. Private media owners are either from the North or the South, or politicians who use their media to advance particular interests. Hence, the media are not actually free to play their role as a proper public sphere in the country. Ibrahim (2020) alludes to the Nigerian media environment as being often characterized by sensationalism. He argues that although this has impacted positively on the citizens in the area of increased awareness, emotional connection to social issues and a stronger sense of collective concern, news exaggeration is capable of creating unnecessary panic that could lead to social unrest (Edeani, 2022). Hence, media representation of conflicts in Nigeria has been associated with unprofessionalism, which in turn weakens trust (Ciboh, 2017). Therefore, Olulesi (2025) concludes that this prevailing situation of the mainstream media in Nigeria is attributed to poor remuneration of media practitioners, corruption, media ownership, ethnicity and region.

That notwithstanding, findings of some studies (Afoaku, 2017) indicate that the insecurity challenges in Nigeria have received substantial media attention. This finding aligns with that of Adewale-Ojo and Baderin (2025) in their study of broadcast media in Nigeria in relation to the country's security challenges. Their findings indicate that the Nigerian media have helped in elevating the security concerns to the audience, arousing public debate. The awareness created by the media concerning insecurity in the country draws the attention of the Government and policy responses. Fadipe (2019) cites an example with the Nigerian media's role in the extensive coverage of the kidnapping of the Chibok girls in 2014, which drew international attention and demanded accountability from the government. In the same vein, Oloyede, Azeez and Uche (2024), in their study of conventional media and insecurity in Nigeria, conclude that traditional media in Nigeria represent the reality of insecurity in the country. Nevertheless, the extant literature suggests that the media have not been fully utilized to address security challenges in Nigeria (Nwankwo et al., 2023).

## **2.5 Mainstream Media and Insecurity in South-East Nigeria**

Mainstream or traditional media refer to all forms of primary sources of news that were used to disseminate information to the masses before the emergence of the internet and digital media technology (Oloyede, Azeez & Uche, 2024). These include: Newspapers, Television, Radio,

books, magazines, billboards, flyers, brochures, etc. The mainstream media have the obligation to subject their content to gatekeeping processes for the objective representation of facts. This speaks directly to the fundamental social responsibility of the media to society, which entails professionalism in the discharge of their duties (Chukwuemeka, Adum, & Odogwu, 2023). There are numerous reports on insecurity situation in South-East Nigeria across mainstream media outlets. As earlier observed, existing literature on mainstream media in Nigeria highlights various concerns, including corporate and tribal interests, media politicization, and low public trust in objective coverage of issues (Taiwo, Nwoga & Ibe, 2021; Adeola & Moyosore, 2024; Osisanwo, 2024).

In their study of the perception of media reportage of farmers and herders clashes in Enugu State, Odoh, Onwukwaluonye and Onyebuchi (2022) suggest a negative public view of the traditional media role in addressing the insecurity issue. This is consistent with Okafor (2026), whose study found that information on insecurity in South-East Nigeria is often strategically shaped or withheld, presenting partial narratives that conceal deeper dynamics of insecurity in the region. This contrasts with the findings of Adeola and Moyosore (2024), who indicate that mainstream media are still the most trusted for national security news, though there are concerns of bias and influence in their reportage. However, the findings of Asekhamhe, Okedi and Egwa (2022), in their study of newspaper coverage of IPOB activities in South East Nigeria, indicate that only a few newspapers in the South East provide adequate coverage of IPOB activities.

## **2.6 Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on Framing and Social Responsibility theories.

### **2.6.1 Framing Theory**

Framing theory has its origin in psychology, expanded in the field of sociology and thrived in communication studies (Appelman & Asmara, 2018). In the field of psychology, framing is understood as the cognitive structure of the memory (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2020). The psychological root of framing emphasizes that every individual's perception and judgment happen within a frame of reference (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2020). This means that information is interpreted differently depending on the interpretative frame or schema employed by an individual (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2020). Moreover, the concept of framing was first introduced as a sociological construct by Erving Goffman in 1974, who posited that individuals use frames to interpret and make sense of their everyday experiences. Likewise, media organizations employ specific frames to construct news stories purposely highlighting elements that align with their political, ideological or social perspectives (Almakaty, 2025; Zaklama, 2025).

Thus, Gamson & Modigliani (1987) define a media frame as the central organizing idea of a news narrative, which provides meaning to issues. Goffman (1974) emphasized that media frames influence the manner in which information is understood and gauged in importance, as well as how social, political and cultural narratives are created. In other words, frames help to shape the opinion of the media audience (Zaklama, 2025).

Framing theory was adapted into communication studies by Robert Entman in 1993 (Hop, 2018; Daulay, Aulia & Zahra, 2025). Entman (1993) explains framing as the process of shaping meaning and public perception by the way information is presented. It is a process of selecting and highlighting certain aspects of perceived reality in communication, thereby creating specific interpretations, evaluations, and solutions to an issue (Entman, 1993). This process of

selection and presentation of news stories invariably affects the way the media audience or public understands social issues. Here, media audience perception and interpretation of communication text are placed within a field of meaning referred to as schemas or frames (Kuan et al., 2021). Hop (2018), emphasizes that different media organizations use different words, verbs, as well as active or passive voice to influence how issues are perceived by the target audience. Therefore, there are two principal factors involved in framing, namely, news salience, which refers to media focus on specific events, and news presentation style, which is the way events are presented in the media. In this way, Hop (2018) claims that parties frame their own interests and skew the perception of the audience.

In a nutshell, framing theory simply posits that the way information is presented or framed in the media shapes how the audience will perceive and interpret reality (Almakaty, 2025). The media set frames of reference which the audience engages in their interpretation of issues. Frames may include a slanted or incomplete narrative that is colored by the intention of the communicator. Erving Goffman (1974) and Entman (1993) differentiate between individual frames and media frames. Individual frames refer to individual mental schemas, ideas that guide an individual's information processing, while media framing describes the selection and presentation of the core issues in the media, including the use of words, images, and presentation styles, by journalists and content producers. Both play a key role in the cognitive understanding of a given situation (Msughter, Garber & Rabiou, 2023). The gatekeeping process in mainstream media by news editors serves as a control of framing, where aspects of news stories are selected and emphasized (Almakaty, 2025). Therefore, framing theory seeks to understand how the portrayal of issues in the media guides audience perception and opinion (Schulman & Sweitzer, 2018).

The way mainstream media organizations present news on insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria determines how the public will perceive the media. As emphasized by Goffman (1974), individuals make use of frames to interpret and make sense of their everyday experiences. In other words, media frames play a key role in shaping public perception and opinion on issues (Zaklama, 2025). The main objective of this study is to investigate public perception of the mainstream media representation of issues of insecurity in South-East Nigeria.

### **2.6.2 Social Responsibility Theory**

The social responsibility theory of the press was developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a response to the numerous criticisms of the libertarian theory. It was a product of the recommendations of the Hutchins Commission, a commission set up in 1947 to address the issue of press freedom. Fundamentally, the social responsibility theory evolved to bridge the gap between press freedom and the obligation to the society in which the media functions (Obagwu & Idris, 2019). The social responsibility theory was built on ethical principles to provide a balance between individual interest and the public good (Ikpe & Ogbu, 2017). Thus, the theory suggests that both individuals and the press have a social responsibility to society for the common good of all. Under the social responsibility theory, the press has the moral obligation to stand with the people (Ogbu, 2019). In this way, the media hold tenaciously to the principles of investigative journalism, objectivity, truth, fairness and balanced reportage of news for the common good of society. In other words, the media must uphold the highest standard of professionalism to contribute to societal unity, general well-being, and development (Ogbu, 2019). The theory is of the view that freedom must be practiced with responsibility; it behooves individuals and media organizations to report news with truthfulness and to offer an unbiased interpretation of news stories for the interest of the general public (Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2019). Similarly, social responsibility theory encourages freedom of expression that must respect the rights of

other people and the overall public interest. The private ownership of the press must be guided by the ethical principles of the press to ensure social harmony. The media has the responsibility of promoting the principles of democracy in any democratic society.

In the wake of an increasing wave of insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria, the media's social responsibility to society becomes even more critical. The media, particularly the mainstream media, have the obligation to report issues accurately and objectively to the public. It is even more critical when it concerns such a sensitive issue as the security of human lives and property. How the public perceives the mainstream media representation of issues of insecurity in South-East Nigeria is the main objective of this study. Hence, the social responsibility theory provides a framework for examining the media from the perspective of residents in South-East Nigeria.

### **3. Methodology**

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were employed in this study. The Focus Group Discussions (FGD) method is a qualitative approach employed to gain in-depth insight into social issues (Nyumba et al., 2018). The range of data generated through FGD is often deeper and richer than that generated by other interview methods (Gundumogula, 2020). Akyildiz and Ahmed (2021) emphasize that Focus Group Discussions are used to collect high-quality data in social research. The method enables shared attitudes, perceptions, knowledge, and experiences through interaction, as well as differences in opinions and worldviews, which enrich understanding of the research focus (Van Eeuwijk & Angehm, 2017). Focus groups are well-suited to eliciting deep feelings, perceptions, emotions, and insider experiences about sensitive issues. In this way, the researcher can understand the social challenges, the perspectives of the individual participants in the focus group and the reasons behind the people's ways of thinking the way they do (Brown, 2018). In addition, the focus group method approaches social issues holistically and offers a voice to ordinary people through whom rich data are elicited (Brown, 2018). In line with the objectives of this study, the focus group method equally helped in exposing new insights into issues through the diverse perspectives of the group dynamics

Five sessions of Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted in the 5 states that make up the South-East of Nigeria (one in each state). The FGD took place in Owerri (Imo State), Enugu (Enugu State), Awka (Anambra State), Abakaliki (Ebonyi State) and Umahia (Abia State). The target population for the study were those living in the urban and semi-urban cities in South-East Nigeria who are literate and have access to traditional and digital media. Access to news across different channels was a key selection criterion. The focus on urban and semi-urban areas for the study was due to the higher literacy and awareness levels of participants in these areas on insecurity issues, and who were more likely to have been exposed to insecurity incidents, whether through personal experience or heightened media coverage, thereby offering informed as well as nuanced perspectives during FGD sessions.

Moreover, urban and semi-urban areas in South-East Nigeria have been experiencing insecurity in its visible and complex forms, including armed robbery, kidnapping, unknown gunmen attacks, political violence, and clashes between security agents and non-state actors. Hence, these cities serve as focal points for perpetrators and victims, making them critical sites for understanding the dynamics of insecurity in the South-East. The study included only South-Easterners who resided in South-East Nigeria, intending to tap into their firsthand experience of insecurity in the region. Those from other regions of Nigeria were excluded as the researcher considered they may have limited knowledge of the geographical area of the region where insecurity issues occur. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The reason for using purposive sampling for the FGD participants was to enable the researcher

to select those who possessed the characteristics considered appropriate for the study. Moreover, purposive sampling is particularly valued and useful when a researcher explores an in-depth understanding of a specific area of study (Tajik, Golzer & Noor, 2025). On the same note, Nyimbilli and Nyimbilli (2024) affirm that purposive sampling procedures lead to the location of quality samples without biases, as well as ensuring the reliability of the study. A single-moderator focus group was adopted since the groups were not large. The participants' demographic makeup ranged according to age, gender, occupation and educational level. Participants were composed of males and females within the age range of 30-50 years. The study was restricted to participants within 30-50 years as the researcher considered participants within this age range as people with established careers, an understanding of socio-political dynamics and capable of offering experience-based insights. In addition, participants in this age range are likely to offer a balance between traditional and modern, tech-savvy perspectives.

Each FGD session comprised 8 participants. Hence, the sample size for the FGD was 40 participants. The FGD participants were recruited using a door-to-door canvassing approach, engaging residents directly and inviting eligible individuals to participate. Simple screening questions were asked to ensure participants met the criteria, e.g., age, occupation, and experience. In addition, phone numbers were collected for follow-up reminders. Phone calls were put across to the participants 24 hours before the sessions to reconfirm attendance, and incentives were also promised. The face-to-face engagement enabled the researcher to build personal trust, considering the sensitive nature of insecurity. There was a careful explanation of the purpose of the study to the participants, which is purely academic. Recruitment was based on voluntary participation of those who would be available, as well as interested in providing useful information on the subject of study. Participants were informed that they were free to opt out of the exercise, and this is in line with the Pan Atlantic University's ethical principles. Participants were assured of the utmost confidentiality of their opinions and anonymity of identity.

Verbal consent was obtained from the participants at the time of recruitment. Consent was also obtained from the participants for the use of an audio recording tape. In addition, due to the sensitive nature of the topic of insecurity, the researcher ensured that participation did not cause physical, psychological, or emotional harm. All the necessary arrangements, including the venues for the FGD sessions, were adequately made early. Care was taken to provide a conducive atmosphere for an interesting participation in the discussions. Moreover, the moderator created a good rapport with the participants. The FGD sessions were conducted in English, which the participants were comfortable with as they were all literate. However, as a Southeasterner, the researcher was aware that using our local language (Igbo) could lead to attaching emotions in interpreting the participant's responses since South-East Nigeria was the context of the study. That was mitigated by conducting the FGD with a moderator from the Western part of Nigeria, who did not understand the Igbo language, necessitating the use of only English. In other words, the researcher was aware of emotional attachments in the discussions, especially as a Southeasterner, but that was taken care of by having a non-Southeasterner in the team.

The 5 sessions of FGD were carried out between 1<sup>st</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2025. A question guide was used as the data collection instrument for the FGD. The FGD had well-planned questions focusing on the objectives of the study. The FGD sessions were facilitated by a team consisting of the researcher and a skilled facilitator. An audio and tape recorder, as well as note-taking materials, were employed in all the FGD sessions. Each session of the FGD lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Transcripts were developed for all recorded interviews from the FGD, and transcriptions were verbatim.

Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze and report patterns. A thematic analysis was conducted on transcripts from five Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving 40 participants drawn from different age categories across the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The analysis was guided by the study objective of investigating residents' perceptions of mainstream media representation of insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria. The coding process focused specifically on participants' exposure to mainstream media reports, the mainstream media channels used to access insecurity-related information, and perceptions regarding the extent to which mainstream media reports reflect the realities of insecurity in the region.

The analytical process followed the sequence:

**Raw Statements → Open Codes → Categories → Sub-Themes → Major Themes → Findings**

*Table 1: Demographic and Geographic Distribution of FGD Participants (N = 40)*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Age Category</b>	Adults (30–44 years)	24
	Older Adults (45+ years)	16
	<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Male	25
	Female	15
	<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Location of FGD</b>	Abia State	8
	Anambra State	8
	Ebonyi State	8
	Enugu State	8
	Imo State	8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>

*Table 2: Analytical procedure*

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Stage 1: Familiarization</b>	All transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to gain familiarity with participants' views.
<b>Stage 2: Open Coding</b>	Statements relating to insecurity reporting, media exposure, media channels, credibility, and representation were coded.
<b>Stage 3: Axial Coding</b>	Related codes were grouped into broader categories.
<b>Stage 4: Theme Development</b>	Categories were consolidated into overarching themes.
<b>Stage 5: Theme Validation</b>	Themes were reviewed across all FGDs to establish consistency.
<b>Stage 6: Interpretation</b>	Themes were interpreted in relation to the study objectives and research questions.

#### 4. Data

*Table 3: Qualitative Codebook*

<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
High media exposure	Frequent consumption of insecurity reports	34
Routine media monitoring	Regular following of security-related news	30
Television as information source	Accessing insecurity news through television	27
Radio as information source	Accessing insecurity news through radio	22

<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Newspaper as information source	Accessing insecurity news through newspapers	16
Mixed media consumption	Use of multiple mainstream media channels	24
Reports reflect reality	Belief that reports correspond with actual events	18
Reports partially reflect reality	Reports contain some truth but omit details	26
Under-reporting of insecurity	Belief that media suppresses or minimizes incidents	19
Political influence on reporting	Perceived interference in media reporting	17
Distrust of reporting accuracy	Skepticism toward reported security information	21
Verification through local contacts	Confirming reports through residents and eyewitnesses	18

*Table 4: Theme Development Matrix*

<b>Open Codes</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Final Theme</b>
Following security reports daily, listening to news bulletins, reading newspapers	Media Exposure	Residents are highly exposed to mainstream media reports on insecurity
Television news, radio broadcasts, newspaper reports	Media Channels	Television, radio and newspapers are principal channels for insecurity information
Reports reflect events, reports contain some truth	Representation of Reality	Mainstream media reports are perceived as partially reflective of insecurity realities
Omission of facts, minimization of casualties, incomplete reporting	Reporting Accuracy	Under-reporting is a major concern among residents
Political interference, censorship, agenda-setting	Media Credibility	Political factors are perceived to influence security reporting
Seeking confirmation from local residents and eyewitnesses	Information Verification	Residents often verify mainstream media reports before accepting them

*Table 5: Thematic Codebook and Evidence Matrix*

<b>Major Theme</b>	<b>Sub-theme</b>	<b>Illustrative Codes</b>	<b>Participant References (n=40)</b>	<b>Group Coverage (n=5 FGDs)</b>	<b>Representative Evidence (Verbatim Quotes)</b>
<b>Exposure to Mainstream Media Reports</b>	High exposure to insecurity reports	Regular news consumption; awareness of insecurity reports	34	5	<i>"The mainstream media in Nigeria are awash with numerous reports on the issues of insecurity in the region."</i> (FGD Participant). Participants across all groups demonstrated familiarity with insecurity reports and discussed them extensively.

Major Theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative Codes	Participant References (n=40)	Group Coverage (n=5 FGDs)	Representative Evidence (Verbatim Quotes)
	Frequent monitoring of insecurity developments	Daily news following; security updates	30	5	"What is your view about reports in the media like TV, Radio, Newspaper..." (Moderator prompt). Participants immediately referenced numerous insecurity stories and media reports, suggesting regular exposure.
<b>Mainstream Media Channels Used</b>	Television as a major source	Television news reports	27	5	"Some media houses are known for speaking out the truth... such as Channels, AIT, Arise, talking about something in Nigeria." (FGD 2, Owerri).
	Radio as a major source	Radio news bulletins	22	5	"The question still remains, what are your views in the reports like TV, Radio..." (FGD 5, Abakaliki). Participants repeatedly referred to radio reports when discussing insecurity information.
	Newspapers as a source	Newspaper reports	16	4	"Let's talk about this one experience, from the newspaper they were reading every morning, they said Nzeogwu people killed many soldiers." (FGD 2, Owerri).
<b>Perceptions of Media Representation of Insecurity</b>	Reports partially reflect reality	Partial accuracy; incomplete reporting	26	5	"Most of the news are true but they don't report them accurately how it happened." (FGD 1, Anambra).
	Reports reflect real insecurity concerns	Reporting based on actual incidents	18	5	"Most of the news the reporters are doing... they are true but they don't report them accurately." (FGD 3, Aba).
	Under-reporting of insecurity incidents	Suppression of facts; minimization	19	4	"For me, the security report in the South East is under reported." (FGD 4, Enugu). "They report that 14 people were

Major Theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative Codes	Participant References (n=40)	Group Coverage (n=5 FGDs)	Representative Evidence (Verbatim Quotes)
					<i>killed... meanwhile over 50 people were killed." (FGD 1, Anambra).</i>
	Perceived Exaggeration of Insecurity Reporting	Sensational reporting; amplification of incidents; inflated narratives	16	3	<i>"One news that is fake to you might not be fake to another person... sometimes when they say something is fake, it is not, it is political propaganda." (FGD 3, Aba)</i>
			19	4	<i>"The news they gave to us were actually the opposite side." (FGD 2, Owerri, referring to reported military killings in Izuogu).</i>
		Reporting not fully reflecting reality	15	3	<i>"Most of the news are true but they don't report them accurately how it happened." (FGD 1, Anambra).</i>
	Over-reporting / Exaggeration of Insecurity Incidents	Misrepresentation of security incidents	14	3	<i>"The story in the media was that the youths killed army people. It was a fake news." (FGD 5, Abakiliki).</i>
	Perceived political influence on reporting	Political interference; censorship	17	4	<i>"The problem we have in Nigeria is political." (FGD 4, Enugu). "Propaganda is a way to achieve what they want to achieve." (FGD 3, Aba).</i>
	Distrust of reporting accuracy	Credibility concerns; skepticism	21	5	<i>"This Television, radio, all these journalists, majority of them want to say the truth, but who will come out to say the truth... they are giving us fake news everywhere." (FGD 1, Anambra).</i>
<b>Verification of Mainstream Media Reports</b>	Reliance on local confirmation	Eyewitness verification; community confirmation	18	5	<i>"Through phone calls or you know someone that live there who comes out and says what happened." (FGD 4, Enugu).</i>

Major Theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative Codes	Participant References (n=40)	Group Coverage (n=5 FGDs)	Representative Evidence (Verbatim Quotes)
	Cross-checking information	Comparing reports across sources	15	4	"Some media houses are known for speaking out the truth and some if I get from some places I know the news might be relatively true." (FGD 3, Aba).

*Table 6: Summary of Findings*

Finding	Supporting Codes	Frequency
Residents are highly exposed to mainstream media reports on insecurity.	High media exposure; routine monitoring	34
Television is the dominant mainstream media channel for insecurity information.	Television news consumption	27
Radio remains an important source of insecurity information.	Radio news consumption	22
Newspapers continue to contribute to insecurity awareness.	Newspaper readership	16
Residents perceive mainstream media reports as partially reflecting insecurity realities.	Partial accuracy; incomplete representation	26
Under-reporting of insecurity incidents is a major concern.	Under-reporting; omission of details	19
Political influence is perceived to affect reporting.	Political interference; agenda-setting	17
Residents frequently verify reports through local contacts and eyewitnesses.	Information verification practices	18

*Table 7: Trustworthiness of findings*

Criterion	Evidence
Credibility	Findings emerged consistently across five FGDs involving diverse participant groups.
Dependability	A uniform discussion guide was used across all sessions.
Confirmability	Findings are supported by direct participant quotations.
Transferability	Results provide insight into public perceptions of mainstream media reporting within conflict-affected environments.

The FGDs indicate that residents of South-East Nigeria are highly exposed to mainstream media reports on insecurity through television, radio and newspapers. While participants generally acknowledge that mainstream media reporting is based on real events, many perceive such reports as only partially reflecting the realities of insecurity, often citing under-reporting and political influence as factors affecting the completeness and credibility of coverage. These

findings directly address the study objective of examining perceptions of mainstream media representation of insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria.

#### **4.1. Inter-Coder Reliability**

To enhance the reliability and consistency of the qualitative analysis, an inter-coder reliability procedure was employed. Two independent coders reviewed a subset of the focus group discussion transcripts and applied the preliminary coding framework developed from the study objectives and emerging participant narratives.

The coders independently assigned codes to selected transcript segments relating to:

- Exposure to mainstream media reports on insecurity;
- Mainstream media channels used for insecurity information;
- Perceptions of the accuracy and representativeness of mainstream media reports.

Following independent coding, the coders compared coding decisions and discussed areas of disagreement. Differences were resolved through discussion and refinement of code definitions until consensus was reached. The final codebook was subsequently applied to the remaining transcripts. The high level of agreement between coders provided evidence of coding consistency and enhanced the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the study findings.

#### **4.2: Data Saturation**

Thematic saturation was achieved across the five FGDs. No substantially new themes emerged during the final discussions.

The following themes recurred consistently across participant groups:

1. High exposure to mainstream media reports on insecurity.
2. Television, radio and newspapers as primary information sources.
3. Perceptions that reports reflect reality only partially.
4. Concerns regarding under-reporting of insecurity incidents.
5. Perceived political influence on reporting.
6. Verification of media reports through local contacts and eyewitnesses.

### **5. Findings**

The research objectives in this study sought to understand the perception of mainstream media representation of insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria. This study was conducted using FGD, with framing and social responsibility theories as the theoretical background. The findings will be analyzed against the background of the research questions posed in this study.

#### **RQ 1: To what extent are residents exposed to mainstream media reports on insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria?**

Data from the FGD conducted in the 5 South-Eastern states show a high level of residents' exposure to mainstream media reports on insecurity in South-East Nigeria. The majority of participants were exposed to reports on insecurity issues in the South-East from both print and broadcast media in Nigeria. A participant in Awka affirmed that,

*“Many people are aware of the killings in the South-East from Newspapers, Radio, Television, not to speak of social media, but the problem is knowing which one is giving the true story” (FGD4, P3).*

*“My own view generally is that this insecurity that has been going on in South-East, let's say for instance Imo state, it has actually increased more than past years. It is all over the place, Radio, Newspapers, TVs and so on. Let's say five years back, we were living in the State where we can walk freely, do everything freely and come, but now you can't go out like that without hearing it is happening in a particular place or it has happened the other place. We just live in fear, we don't know when it will happen, you understand? So that is the kind of situation we find ourselves in now”.*

*“Generally, all platforms give us information about insecurity in the South-East, conventional and social media” (FGD 3, P5).*

Participants believe that, although we are in the social media era, they place greater trust in information concerning insecurity in the South-East from mainstream media. This drives their frequency of patronage and, in turn, their exposure to news reports on insecurity through mainstream media sources. As observed by another participant in Owerri,

*“I see so many stories online on South-East insecurity, but I prefer to see it in Arise TV” (FGD1, P2).*

This finding aligns with Adeola and Moyosore (2024), who suggest that mainstream media sources remain the most trusted for news about insecurity in Nigeria. A significant number of participants emphasized their need for authentic information on the issues of insecurity in the South-East, which they believe should be obtained from mainstream media sources. Ugochukwu et al (2023) affirm that the volatile security situation in South-East Nigeria, coupled with many fake stories, has made residents of the region engage in a relentless search for reliable information in their environment to avert danger. This implies that the public is constantly exposed to a variety of mainstream media frames on insecurity in the South-East, which in turn places a high demand on the social responsibility role of the media to society. Literature in this study shows a high level of negative perception of mainstream media representation of insecurity issues in the South-East (Odoh, Onwukwaluonye and Onyebuchi, 2022). Nevertheless, this finding indicates that there is still some level of trust in the mainstream media in Nigeria. This agrees with the study conducted in New Zealand by Myllylahti and Treadwell (2022), which finds that there is a high level of trust in news in New Zealand when compared internationally. Nonetheless, the study also indicates that a large proportion of citizens of New Zealand do not have trust in the news. The high level of exposure to news on insecurity places a greater demand for accuracy on the media in their framing of conflict-sensitive issues.

## **RQ2: Which mainstream media channel (s) do residents of South-East Nigeria access news on insecurity issues in the region?**

Data from this study show that the majority of participants access news on insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria from mainstream media sources owned by individuals such as AIT, Channels TV, Arise TV and Radio with TV as the dominant channel. In other words, the prevailing perception is that not all mainstream media channels in Nigeria are objective in their representation of the insecurity situation in the South-East. The majority of participants do not have faith in government-owned media, such as the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), as well as some newspaper organizations in Nigeria. This point was made in almost all the States where the FGDs were conducted. A participant from Enugu had this to say,

*“I said NTA and government-owned stations. It's a government-owned station. They are so notorious. They report in favor of the government. If you want objectivity, go to AIT” (FGD3, P8).*

Another participant from Awka observed that,

*“All the Television stations that are owned by the government, you will not see it. If you want to get the truth, you can get it in a private television station, AIT, Channels TV, Arise TV. But even the private television station, when they start to air that news, the government will start to fight them, just like what happened to Dopesi of AIT station in Abuja during the time of Buhari. So that’s one of the biggest problems we are facing in this country” (FGD4, P5).*

This perception agrees with Olulesi (2025), whose study found that government-owned TV stations in Nigeria are seen by the public as representing the interests of the government. Data also identified Radio as another critical source of information on the insecurity situation in the South-East. This is consistent with the findings of Apeh, Apeh and Ukwuaba (2023) that radio plays a pivotal role in disseminating information to Farmers in Enugu State on insecurity. The perception is that radio is a handy and ready alternative to television broadcast, considering the challenge of electricity in the country. However, the participants would prefer to verify the news from the radio through the aforementioned television sources’ visual accounts of their correspondents. This is also not without a reservation, as was equally echoed in Abakiliki,

*“Also Radio, especially the one owned by the government. I don’t go there, there are some things they don’t say, and even when they say it, they must have shaped it even before it is being released on air” (FGD2, P6).*

*“I like to see it on TV. The TV stations will send a correspondent to go and verify. For God’s sake, you are supposed to be there doing your analysis, your in-depth analysis, and not by hearsay AIT, sorry to mention brand, you will see in AIT video coverage. That is why people also give it to the likes of channels, because you will see that their correspondent is always there” (FGD 5, P1).*

Despite the public’s reliance on the mainstream media for news on insecurity issues in the South-East, this study identifies an increasing trust deficit in the media, especially state-owned media channels in Nigeria, which calls into question their adherence to the social responsibility principles of the press. However, a study by Eldelman (2021) affirms that global trust in traditional media had declined to an all-time low. This aligns with the findings of Myllylahti and Treadwell (2022), in their recent survey of 38 countries, that Western media indicate a general decline in news and news media trust. The decline in media trust is attributed to political interference in media activities (Macham, 2025). In another twist, although the finding in this study shows a preference for media channels owned by individuals rather than government-owned ones, a high percentage of these individual owners are politicians who, in one way or another, influence media frames in their interest (Ugwu et al, 2022). Hence, trust deficiency may not be limited to state-owned media organizations.

On another note, the study of public trust in state-owned media in Rwanda by McIntyre and Sobel Cohen (2021) contradicts the finding in this study. The study found that even though the media played a huge role in inciting the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the Rwandan public still highly trusts their local news, especially state-run media. Thus, there is a need for further investigation into the possible link between media trust and trust in government. Newman et al (2020) suggest that political polarization is a major factor undermining trust in mainstream media and goes against the foundational principles of social responsibility theory of the press.

### **RQ3: To what extent do mainstream media reports represent the reality of insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria?**

From the findings in this study, the residents of South-East Nigeria perceive under-reporting, exaggeration and bias in media representation of insecurity issues in the region. Participants

believe that the government is complicit in the exaggerated reports on the issues of insecurity in the South-East. This observation was emphasized in Owerri and Umuahia,

*"I think the peculiarity of insecurity in the south east is the same in other parts of the country. But I think recently, the government is using the media to carry propaganda news, writing damaging reports about certain parts of the country" (FGD1, P3).*

*"Well, I will say it's favoritism. The federal government is really against the South-East, and that's why, if anything should happen, they will say that it's IPOB. Any little thing they will say it's IPOB, and even the person working on the street, they will say it's IPOB. In fact, they don't just like the South-East. Nigeria itself don't just like the south east" (FGD5, P2).*

Similarly, one of the participants in Enugu remarked,

*"I also feel like they should stop exaggerating the South-East insecurity. We all know that there are insecurity issues in Nigeria, but they should stop exaggerating it the way they drag it and tag the South-East as the most insecure place in Nigeria" (FGD2, P5).*

*"For me, the security report in the South East is under-reported. Most women when they go to Ebonyi State, Fulani people will rape them, nobody gives an account." (FGD 5, p7)*

*"The security report in the South East is under-reported... they don't want people to see the actual magnitude of the incident." (FGD 2, p3)*

Furthermore, a sequel to government complicity is the finding that media representation of insecurity issues in the South-East is politically motivated. As observed by an FGD session participant in Owerri,

*"No doubt the issue of insecurity in the south east generally is a political issue" (FGD1, P2).*

This point was re-echoed in Enugu,

*"There is no denying the fact that the issue of insecurity in the South East generally is a political issue, and because it is a political issue, the security situation has worsened in the South East, and we are not free to talk about it because some of us are afraid of each other" (FGD2, P7).*

These findings are consistent with those of Shehu and Bello (2018), who found that Nigerian newspapers portray the insecurity issues in the South-East from regional and ethnic perspectives. Similarly, the study by Ogu (2024) reveals that the contemporary Nigerian press still fans the ember of tribal sentiments and political alliances, indicating a lack of adherence to the code of conduct in conflict reporting. In this way, some mainstream media contribute to exacerbating fear and panic rather than preventing insecurity (Suemo et al 2022). This agrees with the study of Ahere (2019), who investigated media conflict-sensitive reporting in Kenya and South Africa. The study found that based on the way the media is regulated, owned and structured editorially.

The media in these two countries have contributed to the escalation of political violence. This is supported by Nyanoti et al. (2021), whose study found that the Kenyan media represent only the interests of the dominant ethnic groups in their coverage. It suggests a deficiency in editorial policy regulations to curb issues of influence and interest in the media. In their study of the ethics of conflict-sensitive reporting in Pakistan, Jamil and Appia-Adjei (2023) also discovered a gap between theory and practice of ethics in conflict-sensitive reporting in the country. The

ineffectiveness of the code of conflict reporting in the country poses a challenge to Pakistani journalists in reporting unbiased and accurate news.

The implication is that the issue of insecurity in the South-East deals with a deeper fundamental problem. Hence, the fundamental issue of ethnic politics in Nigeria is perceived to play a role in the media reportage of insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria. The findings suggest that the media have not been fair to the South-East region of Nigeria as it relates to their reportage of insecurity issues. This view is shared by Alakwe and Ogbu (2017), who observe that the media sometimes instigate conflict in society by framing news in ways that depict sectional interest and bias in Nigeria. It puts into question the social responsibility role of the media in society, which demands fairness, balance, objectivity and accuracy. Similarly, the data in this study show that public perception of the media stems from the way insecurity issues in the South-East are framed or presented in the mainstream media channels.

As Genver et al (2018) affirm, media frames play a role in determining the perception of the media on issues of insecurity. Therefore, the perception of the mainstream media in such an unprofessional manner has far-reaching implications for the security situation of the region. The issues of insecurity in the South-East could worsen if there is no serious effort to restore professionalism and build trust on the part of the media, as well as the Government of Nigeria. These findings present valuable implications for media regulatory agencies and newsrooms in Nigeria, especially in the area of adherence to conflict-sensitive guidelines. The consciousness of the media organizations of their social responsibility role of ensuring objectivity, accuracy, balance and non-biased journalism in conflict situations, such as in the South-East, enhances public trust in the media. Maintaining strict journalistic guidelines, transparency, information verification, audience engagement, and usage of non-inflammatory language frames by the media organizations cannot be overemphasized. It is, therefore, important that this study investigates the perception of mainstream media representation of insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria for scholarly insights that can help in addressing the challenge of insecurity in the region.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study investigated the perception of mainstream media representation of insecurity issues in South-East Nigeria, leveraging existing literature and fieldwork. The study was carried out through the lenses of framing and social responsibility theories. The study employed the Focus Group Discussions methodology conducted in the 5 South-Eastern States of Nigeria. In line with the objectives, the study concludes that the residents of South-East Nigeria are widely exposed to the mainstream media reports on issues of insecurity in the region. Mainstream media channels are still perceived to carry more reliable information on the sensitive issue of insecurity. However, only a few privately-owned mainstream media outlets are considered reliable sources of news on insecurity in the South-East. There is an overwhelming negative perception of government-owned media sources in Nigeria. There are perceptions of media exaggeration or under-reporting of the insecurity issues in the South-East, bias, ethnic perspectives, and government use of the media to portray the region in a bad light for political interests, resulting in a public perception of distrust in the media. Therefore, this study concludes that insecurity in the South-East, as framed in the media, is perceived to have a connection with a deeper fundamental problem of ethnic politics in Nigeria.

## **7. Limitations**

First, this study was limited to the perception of mainstream media representation of security challenges in South-East Nigeria. Due to the limited scope of this study to South-East Nigeria,

the findings may not be generalized to all parts of Nigeria, as there could be other factors influencing the perception of mainstream media representation of security challenges in other regions of multi-ethnic Nigeria.

Second, the small sample size of 40 participants poses a limitation, as that could hardly be representative of the entire South-East population. Hence, the findings may not be generalizable. In addition, the demographic composition of the FGD sessions conducted in this study should have included a younger audience aged 18-25, who are more inclined to share information, thereby creating room for broader perspectives on the perception of mainstream media's representation of security challenges in South-East Nigeria.

Third, the challenges encountered during the FGD sessions may have imposed some limitations on the study. There was an initial challenge of skepticism or hesitancy on the part of the facility owners for the FGD due to the sensitive nature of discussions on insecurity in Awka, Anambra State. Likewise, in Enugu, the participants did not allow any form of photographing, also owing to the sensitivity of the issue of insecurity in the region. That notwithstanding, the moderator had earlier done all due diligence by obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring that a conducive environment was in place before the sessions started.

## **8. Recommendations**

1. Based on these findings, this study recommends that the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) and Nigerian Press Council (NPC) should enforce the code of ethics for Nigerian journalists, ensuring the elimination of exaggeration, bias and politicization of the media in conflict-sensitive reporting and overall adherence to standards. Media regulatory agencies should create and enforce specific guidelines for reporting on insecurity. This paper recommends the creation of a joint task force comprising regulators, security agencies and ethical bodies to monitor compliance.
2. There is a need for mandatory, regular capacity-building workshops organized by regulators for media practitioners on conflict-sensitive reporting, especially those reporting in the South-East and other regions of Nigeria with insecurity issues. Media organizations should strengthen internal, self-regulatory ethical guidelines to ensure journalists' compliance with the application of conflict-sensitive principles. For example, establishing strict editorial guidelines and appointing ombudspersons will enhance adherence to social responsibility demands, which, in turn, can rebuild trust in the Nigerian media.
3. Newsrooms and editors should upscale their involvement of community voices, eyewitnesses and victims of insecurity in the South-East, rather than relying on the official narratives from the security agencies, for balanced reportage.

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