



Political cartoons as a means of setting the social and political agenda in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

While political cartoons play a significant role in shaping public perception and opinion, they have been underutilized in addressing social and political issues in Nigeria. Therefore, this study aims to determine the popularity of political cartoons in Nigeria, identify the most prominent frames among the seven generic frames in Nigerian political cartoons and determine the extent to which political cartoons shape public attitudes and perceptions. The study employed qualitative content analysis and in-depth interviews that were guided by the agenda-setting and framing theory. The study identified and analysed 100 political cartoons, published in the *Guardian* and *Vanguard* newspapers from 2015 to 2019. Subsequently, 29 cartoonists were interviewed and the data were analysed. The results show that political cartoons are less popular with less educated and politically conscious people. However, they are more popular with well-educated people who have knowledge of contemporary issues. Also, the study reveals that issues, actions, choices, situations and responsibilities are the most prominent frames used among the seven generic frames. The media, through political cartoons, influence public attitudes toward social and political issues, events and people in Nigeria. Thus, political cartoons promote accountability and good governance by framing issues in specific ways that shape public interpretation and opinion. However, cartoonists who are too critical of the authority usually suffer harassment or arrest in Nigeria. This study contributes to political communication by revealing the persuasive power of political cartoons in conveying political messages and campaigns in mass media.

Keywords: ***Political cartoons, political issues, social issues***

INTRODUCTION

Political cartoons have long been a powerful medium for commentary, thereby shaping public opinions and influencing policy debates. In the realm of public discourse, political cartoons have emerged as a potent tool for critique and agenda-setting (Najjar, 2016). With their unique blend of art, humour and commentary, political cartoons not only reflect but also shape our understanding of the world, inspire critical thinking as well as influence societal attitudes and opinions on pressing issues. By distilling complex ideas or issues into simple yet impactful visuals, political cartoons can bring attention to specific topics, evoke emotions and spark public discourse. As agenda-setting tools, political cartoons play a significant role in highlighting social and political issues, hold government accountable, sway attitudes and inspire action.

Political cartoons can effectively set social and political agendas by raising awareness (i.e., cartoons bring attention to specific issues, thereby influencing public discourse), shaping public opinion (i.e., cartoons shape public opinion by presenting issues in a certain light) and policy agenda (i.e., cartoons influence policymakers by highlighting issues and sparking public debate) (Okemwa et al., 2025). Further, recent research has explored the use of visual rhetoric in creating narratives of inclusiveness within sensitive cultural contexts (Azman et al., 2024).

However, the extent to which political cartoons influence public perception and policy agenda remains a topic of debate. Besides, despite the widespread presence of cartoons in media, they have been underutilized in addressing pressing contemporary social and political issues like insecurity, economic challenges and corruption in Nigeria. While a number of studies in Nigeria have examined political cartoons from different perspectives, including construction of satire (Sani et al., 2016), semiotic (Ifechelobi & Winifred 2021), visual representation of power (Makinde, 2023) and multimodal metaphorical representation (Makinde, 2024), none of these studies have examined the current political situation in Nigeria from the perspective of the agenda-setting and media framing theory. Therefore, there is a need to critically examine the role of political cartoons in setting social and political agendas in Nigeria. Thus, this study aims to determine the popularity of political cartoons in Nigeria, identify the most prominent frames in Nigerian political cartoons, among the seven generic frames and determine the extent to which political cartoons shape public attitudes and perceptions. By addressing the identified gaps, the study offers a deeper understanding of political cartoons' role in shaping social and political agendas in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of political cartoons and agenda-setting

Political cartoons are graphics that express an artist's opinion, which include caricature of public figures. Based on this definition, political cartoons usually combine artistic skills, satire and hyperbole to either question a government and its policies or draw attention to social issues, such as political violence, corruption or other ills. Knieper (2017) explained that political cartoon is an artistic drawing aimed at communicating an editorial commentary on politicians, politics and contemporary issues or events and such cartoons play a role in the political discourse of a society that promotes freedom of

speech and of the press. According to this perspective, political cartoon is an artistic work that comments on current social and political issues. Knieper further maintained that political cartoons are primarily an opinion-oriented medium and they are usually seen on the editorial pages of magazines or newspapers and other media outlets, either in the print or electronic media.

According to Knieper, the subject matter of political cartoons is usually of current and newsworthy political issues and it is expected that the readers have some basic background knowledge about the subject matter conveyed in the cartoons in order for them to be understood. This is because cartoonists often use satirical and metaphorical language that may be difficult for less educated people to understand or comprehend. Similarly, Al-Momani et al. (2017) argued that the humour present in political cartoons portrays strong messages that require an ideal viewer who is equipped with a relevant socio-cultural background to enable him or her to process and interpret the meaning behind the images.

However, Garcia (2018) claimed that political cartoons are rhetorical artifacts where journalism and popular culture intersect. Through the use of words and images, fictions and facts, political cartoons provide their readers with a certain point of view, being a single frame loaded with vivid images and concise meaning. Nevertheless, the differing viewpoints agree that political cartoons are journalistic tools whose subject matter is usually current and newsworthy issues. Thus, political cartoons are an artistic vehicle characterized by both metaphorical and satirical language aimed at pointing out the problem, contexts and discrepancies of political and/or social situations. Political cartoons encourage the process of opinion formation and decision-making while offering entertaining perspectives on an event or issue.

Agenda-setting is the process by which certain issues or topics are prioritized and emphasized in public discourse, media coverage and policy debates. This can shape public opinion, perceptions and eventually impact policy decisions (Makinde, 2024). Key aspects in agenda-setting are issue selection (i.e., agenda-setting involves certain topics or issues for emphasis and attention), prioritization (i.e., agenda-setting prioritizes certain issues over others, thereby shaping public perception of their importance) and media influence (i.e., media shape public discourse and policy debates).

Significance of studying political cartoons in agenda-setting

The study of political cartoons in agenda-setting is significant for several reasons. First, it helps to understand media influence. Political cartoons communicate complex topics in a concise and impactful way, thereby shaping public opinion and policy agendas. Cartoonists selectively emphasize certain topics, drawing attention to their relevance and influencing public discourse. Second, it offers insights into public opinion. Political cartoon reflects and shapes public sentiments, offering insights into the public's attitudes and opinions. Also, cartoons indirectly shape policy debates and the process of decision-making by influencing public discourse and opinions.

Third, it analyses media and politics. The study of political cartoons offers insights into how media represent politics and politicians and the way this representation shapes public opinion. Lastly, political cartoons have cultural and social significance. Political cartoons provide insights into the values of a particular place and time. Also, cartoons serve as a social commentary, critiquing societal issues and conveying political messages

(George et al., 2023; Okemwa et al., 2025). In conclusion, the study of political cartoons in agenda-setting enables researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between media, public opinions and policy agendas.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Agenda-setting theory

Overview of the theory

The agenda-setting theory posits the ability of news media to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda. When a news item is covered frequently and prominently on the media, the audience will regard the issue as more important. The agenda-setting theory was formally developed by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw in a study on the 1968 American presidential election. As far back as 1922, the newspaper columnist, Walter Lippman, was concerned that the media had the power to present images to the public. McCombs and Shaw investigated presidential campaigns in 1968, 1972 and 1976. In the research done in 1968, they focused on two elements: awareness and information. Investigating the agenda-setting function of the mass media, they attempted to assess the relationship between what voters in one community perceived as important issues and the actual content of the media messages used during the campaign.

McCombs and Shaw concluded that the mass media exerted a significant influence on what voters considered to be the major issues of the campaign (George et al., 2023; McCombs, 2005; Yan, 2022). Thus, agenda-setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the media. Two basic assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: (1) the media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it; (2) media concentration on issues leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues (George et al., 2023).

Application to political cartoons

The agenda-setting theory proposes that media influence public opinion by selectively emphasizing certain topics, thereby shaping the public's perception of what is relevant. This theory can be applied to the study of political cartoon in several ways, including issue selection and emphasis, influencing public opinion, visual communication and agenda-setting effects (Ifechelobi & Winifred, 2021; Makinde, 2024). Thus, by applying the agenda-setting theory to political cartoons, both scholars and practitioners can better understand the role of visual media in influencing public perception and shaping policy agenda.

Framing theory

Overview of the theory

The framing theory is a set of concepts and theoretical perspectives on the way people and societies perceive, organize and communicate realities. It proposes that the way an issue is presented to the audience determines or shapes the choices and decisions people take concerning how to process the information. Thus, framing is the abstraction that works to organize the meaning of messages. There are seven items in the framing theory: news, issues, actions, choices, situations, attributes and responsibility (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2014).

News: The issue here is whether political cartoons can be considered as newsworthy items. This item defines how news media coverage shapes public opinion concerning issues (Brewer et al., 2013; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2014). Since political cartoons attempt to address societal ills, they command significant media attention.

Issues: This item attempts to identify the issues and challenges faced by cartoonists in Nigeria. The review of the literature revealed that the major issues faced by political cartoonists is the strong negative reaction by government and other public officials, especially if the cartoon in question attempts to expose or reveal wrongdoings or point out societal ills such as bad governance and poor government policies.

Actions: This variable attempts to determine the main task of the media (Brewer & Gross, 2005). Political cartoonists act as a watchdog. This indicates that cartoonists strategically use cartoons and their journalistic drawings to portray social evils, corrupt practices and criticize poor policies. However, cartoonists are supposed to maintain a balanced reporting of political cartoons in Nigeria (Nda-Isaiah, 2023).

Choices: This aspect attempts to determine the level of freedom and autonomy of cartoonists to perform their job (Druckman, 2001). Cartoonists have the freedom to write and publish their works. This indicates that there is some level of press freedom in Nigeria, even though journalists and cartoonists sometimes experience harassment and intimidation for their work.

Situations: This determines the conditions that motivate cartoonists to do their job. A number of conditions can motivate a cartoonist to portray a politician or public official on a negative light. For example, cartoonists may portray any politician or government official who engages in questionable behaviour on a negative light in hopes of holding them accountable to the people.

Attributes: Political cartoons exert enormous influence in Nigeria. Cartoonists, just like journalists, keep public officials in check and prevent them from engaging in illegal or unethical behaviour. This is because political cartoons convey diverse messages, especially commentary on current events or a satirical take on a political figure or policy.

Responsibilities: The main goal or responsibility of political cartoonists is to inform, educate and entertain the target audience through images and texts. They enlighten, persuade and entertain the target audience and make the audience think about current events and sway the audience's opinion toward the cartoonist's point of view.

Application to political cartoons

Framing is significant in political communication. The analysis of political cartoons through the lens of the framing theory offers insights into the ways in which media influences public discourse. Framing serves as a lens that shapes the way people perceive the world. For example, media frames can challenge or reinforce dominant ideologies, influencing public support for certain candidates or policies. This is because cartoons can frame issues in certain ways that shape public attitudes toward such issues. Wong and Lean (2023) found that the media played a vital role in shaping public agenda during the Malaysia 2008 election campaign period. The study revealed that voters were influenced to vote for certain candidates based on the news coverage. Also, political cartoons use multimodal metaphors to combine verbal and visual elements to convey meaning (Makinde, 2024).

Historical development of political cartoons

The evolution of political cartoons spans centuries, adapting to technological advancements, changing societal values and reflecting shifting political landscapes. Political cartoons can be traced to ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, where illustrations and caricatures critiqued deities, rulers and their policies. During the renaissance period, humour was used to challenge authority and provoke thought. However, the emergence of mass media in the 18th and 19th centuries enabled cartoons to reach wider audiences. Notable cartoonists like Thomas Nast used satire to critique policies and societal norms, advocating for transparency, equality and justice (Borg, 2023).

Early cartoons depended greatly on symbolism and caricature to communicate messages due to limited printing technology and literacy rate. However, cartoonists experimented with simpler and more impactful designs over time. The rise of the internet and social media changed cartoons, allowing instant sharing and global reach. Further, digital tools enable artists to efficiently create high-quality illustrations (Borg, 2023).

Political cartoons as agenda-setting tools

Political cartoons serve as a powerful tool for setting social agenda, influencing public discourse and rallying support for causes. Political cartoons use several mechanisms for agenda-setting, including framing (i.e., cartoons frame issues in a certain way that draws attention to specific aspects in order to shape public perception about such issues), selective depiction (i.e., cartoons selectively depict current social issues, shaping public opinion), symbolism and metaphor (i.e., cartoons utilize symbols and metaphors to communicate complex issues, making them more relatable), satire and irony (i.e., cartoons use sarcasm, humour and irony to critique societal issues, policies and politicians), visual storytelling (i.e., cartoons tell compelling stories through images, making complex ideas more accessible and engaging) (Borg, 2023; Makinde, 2024; Okemwa et al., 2025).

Impact of political cartoons on public opinion

Several studies have examined the influence of political cartoons on public opinion. Connors (2017) examined the popular culture surrounding political campaigns using political cartoons while Valenzuela and McCombs (2007) studied the influence of news coverage of political candidates on voters' voting choices. Connors' study revealed that political cartoons are tools used by politicians to manipulate the opinions of the public concerning their favourite candidates. Similarly, Valenzuela and McCombs showed that greater use of political cartoons in support of a favourable candidate generated a higher percentage of public acceptance. Thus, political cartoons shape public opinion by telling the audience what to think of political figures.

Also, Wong and Lean (2023) concluded that voters were influenced by news coverage during Malaysia 12th general election campaigns. This is evident from the winning candidates being depicted more frequently and favourably by the media as compared to the losing opponents. Also, Makinde (2024) demonstrated that Nigerian newspapers have used political cartoons to reorient and influence public opinion on current socio-political issues. While these studies offer insights on how political cartoons influence public

sentiment, none of these studies have examined the current political situation in Nigeria from the agenda-setting and media framing perspectives.

METHODS

Research paradigm

The interpretivist research paradigm was employed for this study. It asserts that reality is subjective, focusing on understanding phenomena from the perspective of individuals (Tenny et al., 2022). The interpretivist paradigm was used because it allows the researcher to explore the subjective experiences and interpretations of different cartoonists and political cartoons as well as determine cartoons' ability to draw people's attention to issues and the mobilizing effect of cartoons that may lead to important changes in the society through criticisms and sarcasms.

Research philosophy and design

The qualitative approach was used to explore the agenda-setting role of political cartoons, gaining in-depth insights. Moser and Korstjens (2017) asserted that a qualitative method allows for a detailed exploration of participants' experiences and thoughts, offering rich and contextual data.

Data collection

Both primary and secondary data were used. Primary data were collected through interviews while cartoons published on newspapers were content-analysed. The interview questions were designed based on the research questions. Interview was the method used because it helps to collect detailed data by probing and clarifying the interviewees' responses (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010).

Coding reliability and validity

To ensure coding reliability and validity, a clear and detailed coding scheme was developed. The coding scheme captured the full range of concepts and meanings relevant to the study questions. Also, pilot testing and experts review were conducted to identify and resolve any issues with the coding scheme.

Triangulation

First, data sources were identified. A sample of cartoons from Nigerian newspapers was collected and interviews were conducted with cartoonists to gain insights into their creative process and intention. Second, data analysis methods (i.e., content and thematic analysis) were chosen. Third, data were analysed using content and thematic analysis methods. Finally, the findings were triangulated. The data from the different sources and methods were compared, identifying divergence and convergence.

Data analysis

The study used content and thematic analysis. Content analysis was employed to assess the textual and visual elements of the cartoons, thereby identifying symbols, themes and messages. Content analysis was selected because it allows the researcher to systematically

analyse large amounts of data, identifying themes or patterns that may not be immediately clear. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and patterns in the interview with cartoonists. This method was selected because it prioritizes participants' perspectives, allowing the researcher to gain insights into cartoonists' experiences and meanings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Popularity of political cartoons in Nigeria

Results demonstrated that political cartoons are popular with Nigerians, especially the young adults, because they expose and critique societal ills. This finding reflects the agenda-building role of the media through cartoons. Makinde (2024) argued that the media play a role in building the public agenda by choosing and framing certain issues for coverage. Therefore, cartoons have become prominent features of newspapers and magazines. Nigerians love political cartoons because they either draw attention to social issues or challenge the authority concerning their poor policies.

With regard to how political cartoons nowadays differ from political cartoons five years ago, results show that cartoons nowadays are more sophisticated than previous ones due to the deployment of advanced technology. Some interviewees indicated that the only way to make cartoons some years ago was manually, frame by frame. But cartoons, nowadays are made with 3D software, flash, after effects and other software with interpolation features. Another group of interviewees claimed that nowadays cartoons focus on trying to tell a good solid story that is not afraid of pushing the audience to think outside their comfort zones. According to this viewpoint, recent cartoons offer a lot more depth and freedom with the more simplistic art style and they are far more willing to tackle much tougher themes, even though today's cartoons may not be animated the way older cartoons were.

Most prominent generic frames in Nigerian political cartoons

The generic frames identified were news, issues, actions, choices, situations, attributes and responsibilities. The results obtained for these issues are analysed next.

The news items of political cartoons

There appears to be a consensus among the participants on the writing process and publishing of news items using cartoons. The results indicate that most of the interviewees believe that the production and publishing of political cartoons involve three main stages such as planning, creating and publishing. It was found that cartoonists satirize politicians through their cartoons by poking fun at people, situations and events. The goal is to expose and criticize politicians by using ridicule, humour, or exaggeration. An interviewee said "*Political cartoons can be used to expose or criticize foolishness, corruption or poor decisions made by politicians*".

On the issue of how Nigerian politicians are portrayed, there seems to be a similar view from most of the participants. Majority of the participants indicated that while most western politicians are portrayed as patriotic because they mostly work for the interest of the public, Nigerian politicians and public officeholders are portrayed as incompetent, corrupt, unpatriotic, selfish and greedy. Most of the Nigerian politicians seek public office

in the hopes of enriching themselves and their families while ignoring the sufferings of the public. One interviewee lamented, “*Nigerian politicians only care about themselves and this influences cartoonists to portray them as selfish and unpatriotic*”. Similarly, another interviewee said “*There are many corrupt and greedy Nigerian politicians because they always crave for more money meant for the provision of public services, even when they have enough to meet their needs*”.

However, the results indicate that significant social and political changes have occurred in Nigerian news space since the new administration. One of the major changes in Nigerian news in recent years is the growing focus on the political awareness and participation of the young demographic in Nigerian politics. The growing interest of young Nigerians on politics is driven by the desire to correct the wrongs done by the older generation who have been in power since Nigerians gained independence from Britain.

Another recent issue that has attracted media attention is the removal of fuel subsidy and the loosening of the regulations on foreign exchange trading by the Bola Tinubu administration and the subsequent nationwide strike initiated by the Nigerian Union of Labor due to high fuel price and rising cost of living.

Issues

The major issue faced by political cartoonists is the strong negative reaction by the authorities, especially if unethical practices are exposed. An interviewee shared, “*A major issue faced by Nigerian cartoonists is harassment or intimidation from government for being critical*”. Another interviewee added, “*Cartoonists are often arrested in Nigeria for pointing out the shortcomings of public figures*”. Thus, cartoonists are threatened or harassed for their visual communication.

Actions

Political cartoonists act as a watchdog. This means that political cartoonists make sure that governments, companies and other parties are not doing anything illegal or wrong. One interviewee explained, “*The goal of cartoonists is to serve as a Watchdog to wrong doers*”. Similarly, another interviewee said “*Cartoonists strategically use cartoons and their journalistic drawings to portray social evils, corrupt practices and criticize poor policies*”. However, another interviewee argued that cartoonists are supposed to maintain a balanced reporting through political cartoons in Nigeria, “*Cartoonists must convey a stand on social and political issues and stimulate a call to action*”. This is because cartoonists set the public agenda in the Nigerian context by shaping public opinions and determine which issues should be given the most attention by placing them on front pages.

Choices

Cartoonists have the freedom to write and publish their works. This indicates that there is some level of press freedom in Nigeria, even though journalists and cartoonists sometimes experience harassment and intimidation for their work. For example, an interviewee said “*Cartoonists do not necessarily need approval from the government before publishing political cartoons*”. Another interviewee concurred, “*As long as the Editor or the Publisher is not partisan, cartoonists are not instructed or told on what to write or portray in their cartoons*”. This indicates that cartoonists are allowed to do their job as long as they maintain objectivity and impartiality in the course of doing their job.

Situations

Several conditions can motivate a cartoonist to portray politicians in negative light. Cartoonists may portray politicians who engage in questionable behaviour negatively in the hopes of holding them accountable. Both journalists and cartoonists exist to scrutinize and question deviations, monitor governance and hold state and non-state actors accountable as well as probe questionable reputation and integrity. Example, a cartoon produced by Gbenga John in 2019 showed a government that combines the work of two people. In the cartoon, the president was depicted as someone who carries excess loads as he performs both the role of head of government and minister of oil resources and this was portrayed as excess luggage in the cartoon, which causes citizens to suffer undue issues.

Attributes

Political cartoons exert enormous influence in Nigeria. Cartoonists, just like journalists, keep public officials in check and prevent them from engaging in illegal or unethical behaviour. As explained by an interviewee: *“Cartoonists and political cartoons have the power to hold government and public officials accountable to the people by probing questionable behaviour and ridiculing bad policies and programs with a view to making the society a better place for everyone to live”*. This is because political cartoons convey diverse messages, especially commentary on current events or a satirical take on a political figure or policy. One interviewee said *“In overall, the message of a political cartoon may be critical, supportive or simply meant to provoke thought or discussion”*.

Responsibility

The majority of the participants indicate that cartoons have the responsibility of shaping public opinion and influencing the agenda-setting process. One interviewee said, *“Political cartoons sway the audience’s opinion toward the cartoonist’s point of view and make them think about current events”*. Another interviewee added, *“A major responsibility of cartoons is to reflect the activities of public officeholders to ensure that they are within the scope of the law”*. Similarly, another interviewee agreed, *“Cartoons play significant role in political discourse by presenting complex ideas in a thought-provoking way”*. However, one interviewee cautioned, *“Cartoonists have a duty to exercise their freedom of expression responsibly, avoiding damage to people”*. Thus, cartoonists should strive to accurately reflect reality, avoiding distortion or misrepresentation. This is aligned with Okemwa et al. (2025) who concluded that while drawing the public’s attention to pressing concerns, cartoonists must strive for truthfulness and accuracy in their works, avoiding propaganda or misinformation.

How political cartoons shape public perceptions

In regard to the extent to which political cartoons shape public attitudes and perceptions towards issues in Nigeria (RQ3), the majority of the participants believe that political cartoons can influence public opinion by shaping perceptions and attitudes on important issues in Nigeria. By using satire and exaggerations, cartoons can provoke anger or laughter, thereby shaping the way people think about politicians and their policies. This reflects the agenda-setting power of political cartoons and the framing theory, which posits that the media frame issues in a certain way that draws attention to specific aspects

in order to shape public perception about such issues. This finding concurs with Makinde (2024) who argued that Nigerian newspapers have used political cartoons to reorient and influence public opinion on current socio-political issues.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study's contributions revolve around the main objectives of the study, which are to determine the popularity of political cartoons in Nigeria, to identify the most prominent frames among the seven generic frames in Nigerian political cartoons, and to examine how political cartoons influence public opinion about Nigerian politicians.

Popularity of political cartoons

The study examined how the publication and readership of political cartoons have changed over the years in Nigeria, that is, increased or reduced over the years. It also discussed other potential changes in the publication and readership of political cartoons. The results from both the content analysis and the thematic analysis revealed that the publication of political cartoons has changed over the years in Nigeria due to the increase in socio-political issues and rise of digital platforms. This aligns with Borg (2023) who revealed that changes in the techniques and popularity of cartoons reflect a shift in societal values and technology. For example, digital tools and software allow cartoonists to create and distribute high-quality illustrations more efficiently and flexibly.

Prominent generic frames

The study revealed that issues, actions, choices, situations and responsibilities are the most prominent frames used in political cartoons. Cartoons mostly relate issues that involve making choices based on a situation. Cartoonists have the responsibility of identifying societal issues, drawing attention to such issues and pressuring the government to take the necessary actions to address them. This finding is supported by Nda-Isaiah (2023) who reported that cartoonists have the power to initiate public discourse and hold policymakers accountable.

How political cartoons shape public perception

Political cartoons influence the way the public view Nigerian politicians and their policies. Cartoons hold government responsible by creating awareness about certain issues or exposing corrupt and unethical practices in the public sectors using imagery and text. Cartoonists use humour and exaggeration to make their point, thereby effectively communicating complex issues in a visual form. Balakrishnan et al. (2025) revealed that visual contents significantly shape people's perceptions and reactions because it transcends language barriers and resonates globally. This reflects the agenda-setting theory, which proposes that media have the power to shape public opinion and policy agendas by prioritizing certain issues over others.

However, cartoonists who are critical of government suffer negative consequences. This view aligns with Opara (2023) and Amnesty International (2023) who reported that Nigerian journalists have been harassed or arrested while doing their job in Nigeria.

Implications of the findings

Since political cartoon is less popular with the less educated and politically conscious people, cartoonists can make their cartoons more accessible and popular by simplifying their graphic illustrations and texts on the cartoons. This will enable even the less educated individuals to be able to read and understand cartoons. It is further proposed that readers of political cartoons should acquire some basic background knowledge of the cartoon's subject matter to effectively understand the issues being conveyed by the cartoons.

Cartoons constitute a sophisticated multimodal genre that comprises linguistic and non-linguistic devices to convey meaningful messages. While cartoons can hold government accountable by critiquing their actions and policies, cartoonists should exercise their freedom of expression responsibly, thereby avoiding harm to people's reputation. Also, cartoonists should be sensitive to the perspectives and feelings of their audience in order to avoid reputational damage in their agenda-setting process. Furthermore, cartoons should pay more attention to issues, actions, choices, situations and responsibilities since they are the most prominent frames used among the seven generic frames.

Suggestion for future research

The identified limitations provide an inspiration for further research which might further the theoretical and analytical understanding of political cartoon genre, which has become a vital medium of communication in diverse social and political contexts. Future studies should consider more newspapers and magazines as well as consider different countries, instead of just Nigeria. Future research directions could also include broader cross-cultural comparative studies, in-depth exploration of the role of political cartoons in non-Western cultures and further development and application of interdisciplinary approaches. This will help to enrich the theoretical understanding of political communication as well as help to enhance the validity and generalizability of this study.

CONCLUSION

Political cartoons play an important role in enlightening readers on public issues while revealing the wrongdoings of individuals, corporations and governments through satire. Further, they play a key role in the political discourse of societies that creates room for freedom of speech and the press. Although political cartoons help to set public agenda and reveal wrongdoings of public office holders, it has thus far been underutilized in addressing social and political issues in Nigeria because people are often scared of vilifying the government. The contention of this perspective is that political cartoons are deserving of a broader, more critical role in research about African political issues.

While it was initially believed that political cartoons are largely read by the lowly educated, it was found that the readership of cartoons mainly consists of the educated and politically conscious readers. The study revealed that issues, actions, choices, situations and responsibilities are the most prominent frames among the seven generic frames. This is because political cartoons mostly relate to social and political issues that require making choices and taking actions based on the situation. In summary, political cartoons influence the way the public view Nigerian politicians and their political parties.

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