

# NIGERIAN NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF CULT-RELATED CRISES IN NIGER DELTA, OCTOBER 2023 – MARCH 2024

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## Abstract

The study was undertaken to analyse the newspaper coverage of cult-related crises in Niger Delta. The objectives were to ascertain the frequency of reportage of cult-related crises in Niger Delta by *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *The Guardian* and *ThisDay* newspapers and determine the depth of coverage given by the four newspapers to Niger delta cult-related crises. The agenda setting theory and social responsibility theory were adopted by the study. The population of the study consisted of 728 editions of the newspapers published between 1<sup>st</sup> October 2023 to 27<sup>th</sup> March 2024: A study period of six months. Using the standard set by Stacks and Hocking (1992), for every population size of 700, a sample size of 248, that is, 11.36% at 95% level of confidence was selected. Data were presented in tables and analysis done using simple percentages. Findings of the study reveal that, *Vanguard* newspaper carried the greatest number of stories on the cult-related crises in Niger Delta. This was followed by *The Punch*, *The Guardian* and *ThisDay* newspapers respectively. Another finding shows that news content on the cult-related crises in Niger Delta lacked depth as editorial treatment of the subject matter was abysmal. The study concluded that, the four newspapers under study did not draw enough public attention to the cult-related issues in Niger Delta region using advocacy tools such as feature stories, opinion pages and editorial comments. It was, therefore, recommended that, the Nigerian newspapers should make concerted efforts to give detailed news on the various aspects of regional or communal crises, with adequate eyewitness and expert accounts. Also, that the Nigerian newspapers should go beyond the use of straight news in reporting communal or regional issues since straight news lack the potential to take readers beyond the level of ordinary knowledge about crisis.

**Keywords:** Nigerian Newspaper, Coverage, Cult-related Crises, Niger Delta

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## Introduction

The Niger Delta region, as now defined officially by the Nigerian Government, extends over 70,000 square kilometres or 27,000 square miles and makes up 7.5% of Nigeria's land mass. Historically and cartographically, it consists of the present day Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers States. In 2000, however, the Obasanjo administration included Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Cross-Rivers, Edo, Imo and Ondo States in the region. The Niger Delta, therefore, comprises the nine oil-

producing states, drawn from the South-South, South-East and South-West zones, while the South-South which consists of only six states, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross-River, Delta, Edo and Rivers States, is a geopolitical zone. The Niger Delta region is therefore, different from the South-South Zone. The two entities are not synonymous with each other.

However, in spite of many years of exploration and exploitation of petroleum, the oil-rich Niger Delta region has suffered neglect by multi-national oil companies and successive government

administrations (Anasi, 2010). The Niger Delta crisis, therefore, revolve around oil and development because despite its many oil wells, the region is underdeveloped. Cult-related crises in Niger Delta have been important issues in recent times. There has been an increase in the occurrence of acts of violence and lawlessness, like hostage-taking of prominent citizens and expatriate oil workers, as well as oil bunkering, arms insurgence, cultism, rape, drug abuse among other social vices. Cult-related crises are not recent phenomenon. Various forms of cult-related crises that are economically, politically or religiously motivated have existed for a long time (Anasi, 2010).

Niger Delta is a region that is endowed with multifarious and multitudinous resources both human and material. However, due to gross mismanagement, profligate spending, kleptomania, and adverse policies of various government of Nigeria, these resources have not been optimally utilized; these resources have not been adequately channelled to profitable investments to bring about maximum economic benefits. As a result of the foregoing, Niger Delta region has been bedevilled with cult -related crises (Jokumbo, 2015). The issue of cultism has for several decades, becomes fundamental global phenomena which have militated against human development of Niger Delta. It is an epidemic affecting majority of the people in the region.

In defining cultism, Azelama, Alude and Imhonda (2000) noted that cult is an assemblage of people united by certain ideas or symbols and whose rites and ceremonies of veneration are unique and shouted in mysteries with a secrecy that cannot be broken. Maxey (2004) traced the meaning of cult from the Latin word 'cultus' which means to worship or give reverence to a deity. Thus, in its original usage, it was simply applied to a religious worshipful group of people regardless of the object or person they venerated.

Furthermore, Rotimi (2005) cited the anthropological definition of 'cult' by Oxford Concise Dictionary of Sociology (1996) as 'a set of practices and beliefs of a group in relation to a local god. The same dictionary gives a sociological definition of a cult as a small group of religious activities whose beliefs are typically secret, esoteric, and individualist, Langone (2008) indicates that, cult leaders have absolute control over the members of the movement and as such they use force to subdue them under their command. The author concluded that because cults tend to be leader centred, exploitative and harmful, they come into conflict with and threatened by the rational open and benevolent system of members' families and society at large and that is an exploitatively manipulative and abusive group in which members are induced to serve the group leader (s).

Prior observations have shown that, there is a very high impacted of restiveness which leads to cult-related crimes. This is one of the social vices that leads to unrest and pose security challenges in the area. It is shocking to note the rate at which crime such as cultism has been increasing in Niger Delta region, this cultism rate has been alarming and unbearable (Iwarimie-Jaja, 2012). The situation has become so bad that people are afraid at nights, especially business people within the region. Cultism has crippled social and economic activities in the society (Iwarimie-jaja, 2012). Today there are more than one hundred modern secrets cults including the pirate confraternity in Nigeria (Rotimi, 2005). Some of these secret societies/cults are as follows: Pirate confraternity, the Buccaneer confraternity, the Eiyee confraternity, the Vikings, the Mafia, Black axe, Rainbow, Brother Cobra, Kukux, Musketeer, Degbam, Dewell, Amazon pink ladies, Daughters of Jezebel, Marauders etc (Rotimi, 2005).

Conversely, the Nigerian mass media have often come into focus when issues relating to the Niger Delta crisis are being discussed. Akowe (2010) agrees with this assertion that, the media have played a significant role in national development and have constantly brought into public discourse the raging crisis in the Niger Delta. Interestingly, the media and the larger Nigerian society have said so much about the crisis in the Niger Delta region and its actual causes. Newspapers are expected to serve as the sources of information needed to advance knowledge through rational discourse. Daramola (2004) as cited in Omego (2013) states that, "newspapers and magazines are huge media of mass communication they are the most versatile and resilient of all media of communication" (p.118). Newspapers are, therefore, naturally positioned to illuminate perspectives on topical issues and events using features stories, editorials and opinion pages as tools of interpretative and advocacy journalism.

Through their surveillance function of keeping up all the happenings in the world and providing information to the human society, the mass media help to meet the information needs of every individual towards enabling the individual to adapt knowledgeably to the society and also to react intelligently to the environment. For Okon (2013) "the news and information role of the mass media makes them the watch dog and sentinel of society" (p. 2). While Niles (2011) asserts that, the only way by which journalists can serve the community better as watch dog, "is to become advocates for the truth and this entails calling attention to absurdities in the society" (p.27), using editorials and opinion pages as communication strategies.

Newspapers are expected to educate and

enlighten their readers on what happened, those involved or affected, where, when, why and how a regional cult-related crises such as that of the Niger Delta region occurred. Okon (2013) agrees with the assertion by stating that:

when news is properly reported in the order of the 5Ws & H, - what, why, when, where, who and how, the reader does not only stand to benefit from the on-the-spot assessment of the situation but also stands to gain a full understanding of the ultimate meaning and significance of events (p. 2).

Thus, the mass media are vehicles for mass communication, with the potential for generating and disseminating development ideas, values and strategies, articulated and highlighted through effective communication (Anorue, 2007). This View by Anorue is supported by a recommendation by Wilson (2005):

Communication for development and self-reliance should form the philosophical underpinning of the new African Communication Policy... the purpose of communication in Africa is to educate in order to mobilize and liberate; to inform in order to democratize and thereby bring about self-actualization for society (pp.6-13).

Through its agenda-setting and social responsibility functions, the press can call public attention to and provoke public dialogue on regional and communal crisis in Nigeria. Using development communication and ethical media as strategies, the press can mobilize efforts through advocacy journalism towards preventing regional crises from occurring, relapsing or escalating. This is because the news media have tremendous potentials for directing public attention (Roberts, 1971 as cited in Anibueze, 2008). According to Anibueze, "we tend to assume that the events they cover are important if only because they are reported in the media" (p. 189).

It is important, therefore, to ascertain whether the newspapers highlighted the development issues underlining the Niger Delta crisis or the press just

reported only the violence, militancy, cult-related in the crisis in line with government's position. It is important to ascertain the pattern of coverage in order to infer the disposition of the newspapers concerning the crisis. The strength of the foregoing argument lies in the assertion of Okon (2013) that, "the coverage given to an issue by the mass media, especially the print, gives an insight into the disposition of the media concerning that issue (p. 3). Therefore, media coverage of regional conflicts requires a high level of social responsibility, and this explains why the media should operate with a sense of responsibility so as not to sacrifice public service at the altar of profit making (Omego & Ochonogor, 2012). In the same vein, "the press should balance freedom with responsibility to ensure that the society does not disintegrate under its operation" (Ndimele & Innocent, 2006 as cited in Omego et al. (2012: p.22).

In addition, "the cultural norms typology enjoins the mass media to give an account of the day's events in a context that gives them meaning" (Okon, 2013, p.2). In the same vein, Adamu (2013) elicits that, "in crisis situation, the print media have the task of avoiding taking sides, inflaming the crises or posing a security threat to the nation" (p. 83). As part of journalism ideals, it is important that advocacy should be made concerning the effective management of regional and communal crises. His is the beauty of journalism when viewed within the context of pointing out needs and proffering solutions. The main thrust of this study, therefore, is to ascertain the newspaper coverage of cult-related crises in Niger Delta. In other words, this study is to ascertain through content, the disposition of the press towards cult-related crises in Niger Delta using the frequency of coverage as a parameter for measurement.

### Statement of the Study

In recent times, the Niger Delta region has been a hotbed of conflict and violence. The problems are acute and complicated because of recurring citizenship contestation and youth violence characterized by large scale cult killings and destruction of property (Agah, 2012). The cult-related crises in Niger Delta have recently escalated and it is now known for criminality and cult related killings with devastating socio-economic consequences for both the region and the entire country. The cult-related crises were covered and reported by the Nigerian media including newspapers. The question is what was the frequency of reportage of cult-related crises in Niger Delta by *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard* and *ThisDay* newspapers?

Cultism in Nigeria's society has reportedly killed hundreds of people in the past two decades most

especially in Niger Delta and its' environ. This has created anxiety as no one knows who the next victim will be. The alarming rates of cultism attacks have created much deeper ruins in the lives of the people. Both old and young, government and nongovernmental officials, including the rich and poor, employed and the unemployed are simultaneously affected. It is a daily occurrence in Niger Delta (Nigeria Police Force Annual Report, 2005-2016).

The strategic position of Niger Delta has imposed a lot of challenges to policy makers especially in the security and economic sections. Governments have adopted measures including anti-crime patrol, the hunter squad vigilante groups, swift operation squad (SOS) and other private outfits to combat the menace of cultism but it has not been abated. Social life in the region keeps depreciating day in and out due to the causing decay in the region life and an embarrassment to the citizenry and the government.

Meanwhile, Weje and Alikor (2010) in their evaluation of the role of the mass media in conflict management - the Niger Delta experience, posit that some media practitioners played useful conflict management roles in the region, meaning that they adopted a developmental frequency of coverage, while others blew mere misunderstanding and misconception of issues into a hotbed of crises, indicating that such newspapers were not developmental in their frequency of coverage. The double-barrelled argument of Weje and Alikor above puts the two scholars on both sides of the academic divide thereby further complicating the debate among media scholars on the frequency of newspaper reportage of regional crises in Nigeria. This has provided the springboard to ascertain the newspaper coverage of cult-related crises in Niger Delta, such as environmental degradation, poverty, and conflicts between local communities and the oil companies operating in the area.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study is to assess the newspaper coverage of cult-related crises in Niger Delta: A study of select Nigerian newspapers from October 2023 to March 2024. Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. Ascertain the frequency of reportage of cult-related crises in Niger Delta by *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *The Guardian* and *ThisDay* newspapers.
2. Determine the depth of coverage given by the four newspapers to Niger delta cult-related crises.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What was the frequency of reportage of cult-related crises in Niger Delta by *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *The Guardian* and *ThisDay* newspapers?
2. What was the depth of coverage of cult-related crises in Niger Delta by the four newspapers?

### **Review of Related Literature**

#### **Concept of Cultism**

It has never been easy to give a comprehensive definition of the term 'cult'. This is because the term cultism could be applied to a wide range of groups and could convey different meaning by different users. Okwu (2006) cited Denga (1991) where the author defined cultism as a system of religious belief and practices or ideology. Also, Orukpe (1998) noted that, cults are a group of people who share and propagate peculiar secret beliefs divulged only to member. Occultism or possession of mystical power is often associated with cults. Cultism refers to the formation and activities of secret societies or groups that engage in various illegal and unethical practices. Cultism is a significant social problem in many parts of the world, particularly among youth and young adults (Owoaje & Olusola, 2010). Cultism is often characterised by the use of initiation rites, oaths of secrecy, and the promotion of loyalty to the group above all else (Ajayi & Ekundayo, 20210). Cult members may engage in criminal activities, such as extortion, violence and drug trafficking, to maintain their power and influence within the group (Abayomi, 2016).

#### **Cult-related Crisis in Niger Delta**

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been plagued by various forms of cult-related crises, which have had a devastating impact on the social, economic, and political landscapes of the area (Omokhunu, 2015). Cultism in the Niger Delta is often linked to the struggle for the control of resources and the influence of political power (Obadare, 2016). The activities of cult groups in the Niger Delta have been characterized by violence, kidnapping, and the disruption of economic activities (Omokhunu, 2015). Rival cult groups have engaged in violent clashes, resulting in the loss of lives and the displacement of communities (Adebayo, 2019). These conflicts have also led to the destruction of property and the disruption of essential services, such as the supply of electricity and water (Obadare, 2016). The proliferation of cult groups in the Niger Delta has been attributed to various factors, including the high

rates of unemployment, the perceived marginalization of the region, and the lack of effective social services (Adebayo, 2019). The presence of these groups has also been linked to the activities of political actors, who have been accused of using them to secure political power and influence (Omokhunu, 2015). Addressing the cult-related crisis in the Niger Delta requires a comprehensive approach that involves the implementation of social, economic, and political interventions (Obadare, 2016). This may include the provision of employment opportunities, the improvement of social services, and the effective enforcement of laws against cultism and related crimes (Adebayo, 2019). Additionally, the involvement of community leaders and the promotion of dialogue and reconciliation between rival groups may be crucial in resolving the crisis (Omokhunu, 2015).

### Newspaper and News Coverage

The term newspaper covers significantly broad range of publications. It includes the small weeklies in which every task is done by a handful of people and the huge metropolitan dailies with larger staff and daily circulation of thousands of copies. Between the smaller and larger newspapers are many other daily and weekly newspapers of many sizes and degrees of prosperity. No matter what their circumstances, according to Agee et al (1979), all newspapers are alike in the sense that they are made of type, ink, and newsprint. It is a print media form (printed publication) usually issued daily or weekly consisting of folded unstapled sheets and containing news, articles, advertisements, and correspondence. Newspapers have consistently remained useful resources in society since their inception in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Tom, 2012). As a medium of mass communication, newspapers serve as tools for shaping thoughts, and means of controlling economic and political powers (Copeland, 2003). Newspapers also provide an essential forum for public discussions and debates, thereby providing guidance for society (Copeland, 2003). Newspapers are regarded as courtrooms, where judgments are passed against societal ills through editorials.

### Newspaper development in Nigeria

A brief historical development of newspaper in Nigeria is considered relevant to this study because, newspaper as a medium of mass communication and a channel of health communication and desirable behaviour campaigns is central to the subject of this study. Also the historical development of newspaper in Nigeria shows that the early newspapers in Nigeria gave coverage of health and social issues a good measure of reportage (Aina, 2007, Oladosu, 1993). Therefore, newspapers have been major sources of health

information to the Nigerian populace.

Hence, Nigeria has a relatively rich tradition in its press history. Beginning from 1859, when *IweIroyin*, the first newspaper was established in the country, newspapers had played very important roles and made significant contributions in the history of the nation (UNDP, 2012). The UNDP also believes that from agitating for self-rule in colonial Nigeria to keeping post-independence regimes on their toes and challenging the various military rulers, the newspaper has remained an active institution in the country's development process. Thus, "the sector has experienced sustained growth and development in all ramifications reflecting socio-economic as well as political developments in the country" (P8).

In Nigeria, the birth of the newspaper having been pioneered by a private individual in 1859 through the establishment of *IweIroyin*, today in the country majority of national newspapers are owned by private individuals. Unlike many years past when most of the newspapers were owned by the government and outnumbered the privately-owned newspapers, no newspaper of consequence is today owned by any government in Nigeria (Oso, 2012). In Nigeria, there are over 150 newspapers, most of which are not daily publications and are regional in coverage and circulation (Dragomir & Thompson, 2012; Nigeria Press Council, 2009). They range from the seriously performing ones to the adventurously erratic. According to (UNDP, 2012), they are in all shapes and sizes and for various reasons. Some appear and disappear, many struggled for a year or two and fewer survive as regular publications. Generally, there is no consensus among scholars and researchers and even regular and professional bodies in Nigeria as to the exact number of newspapers in the country.

### Theoretical Framework

#### Agenda-Setting Theory

The agenda-setting theory as propounded by McCombs and Shaw (1972) posits that, the mass media do not instruct what people think but what they should think about. Due to the gate keeping function of the media, they determine and direct public attention to issues considered more important, by the emphasis and prominence given to the issues in the media. It is to this end that the theory maintains that the issue or message that constantly features in the media becomes the public agenda of the people (Coffman, 2002). There is wide agreement that awareness leads to knowledge, and knowledge leads to behaviour modification (Rimal, 2000). Various theories and models acknowledge the importance of the mass media in creating awareness in the society. Agenda-setting theory holds that the media

have the ability to advise or tell audiences what issues are major and relevant, thus setting the agenda. They can achieve this by choosing what stories to consider newsworthy and how much prominence and space they give those stories (Folarin, 1998).

The agenda setting function of the media portrays the media as capable of setting agenda for flood discussion and this plays a key role in determining the direction of floods issues. In support of this, Okunna (1999) notes that “the power of the media to determine the topics for political debates and discussion in the society helps to build and mould flood issues opinion by defining the boundaries which people think about issue in the media” (p.212).

Relating this theory to the study, the theory helps elucidate how the media influence public discourse and policymaking regarding these complex social issues. It allows researchers to analyse the salience and prominence of cult-related crises in Nigerian newspapers, shedding light on which aspects of these events are highlighted or downplayed in media coverage. This analysis can provide insights into the role of the media in shaping public discourse, shaping policy priorities and influencing efforts to address cult-related violence in the Niger delta.

### **Social Responsibility Theory**

This study also anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory, this theory was propounded by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1963 also provides a work for this study. It underscores the need for the media to accept and fulfil obligations to the society. The theory came into being in the 20<sup>th</sup> century following concerns that the Libertarian Theory had serious shortcomings that were already hurting the society. The theory sees the media as very powerful and so important to the continuance of modern society that they must be made to render some obligations to the society (Isichei, 2007).

The social responsibility theory postulates among other things that the press should serve the political system by making information, discussion and consideration of public affairs generally acceptable, inform the public to enable it take self-determined actions and protect the rights of the individuals by acting as watchdog over the government (Anaeto et al., 2008). McQuail (1987) as cited in Ojobor (2002) discusses the principles of the social responsibility theory and states that through professional standards of truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance, media should accept and fulfil certain obligations to society and that media should regulate themselves within the framework of law and established institutions to be able to carry out their responsibilities.

This theory is related to this study as it

emphasises the role of journalists and news organisations in promoting the public good and fostering societal wellbeing through their coverage. The theory becomes pertinent as it underscores the ethical obligation of the media to provide accurate, balanced and informative reporting on issues that affect the public. By adhering to this theory, journalists can contribute to raising awareness, facilitating dialogue and ultimately fostering positive change in addressing the complex socio-political and cultural dynamics surrounding cult-related crises in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

### **Empirical Review**

Okon (2013) carried out a study on “Nature of coverage given to the Augusta 109 naval helicopter crash by The Tide, The Punch and The Nation newspapers” The thrust of this study was predicated on the need to analyse the nature of coverage given to the Augusta 109 naval helicopter crash by The Tide, The Punch and The Nation newspapers with a view to streamlining depth and pattern. The primary objective was to infer the disposition of the newspapers towards the crash, in the light of inexplicable air crashes in Nigeria, as highlighted through news contextualization within the parameters of advocacy journalism. The study necessitated content analysis. Fifteen (15) issues of the newspapers were selected and studied using the constructed calendar as a frame. Inter-coder reliability showed a correlation of 0.82. Quantitative analysis was done using news-hole as measured in column centimetres while qualitative analysis was done using the Constant Comparative Technique. Findings revealed that, out of a total news-hole of 829,783 col. cms, the papers allotted only about four per cent to the incident.

Alikor (2023) conducted research on “newspaper reportage of cult related activities in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State.” The objectives of the study are to determine the degree of prominence given to the cult related stories in Emohua Local Government Area, and to ascertain how cult related stories are being framed and reported by Nigerian newspapers. The study employs quantitative content analysis. The population of this study is limited to the publications of three national newspapers in Nigeria: *The Punch*, *The Guardian* and *The Nation*. The period covered is from June 1st, 2021, to April 30th, 2022. Within these eleven months, these newspapers had three hundred and thirty-five (335) publications apiece making a total of one thousand and five (1005) publications. Purposive sampling was employed while the unit of analysis for this study consisted of news stories, editorials, advertorials, columns/opinions, interviews, feature stories and

others focusing on cultism as published by the three newspapers being studied. These newspapers were chosen due to their ownership structure, area of coverage and frequency of publication. The findings reveal that cult related stories were not given prominence as was supposed to be.

### Scope of the Study

This study is restricted to the news reports on cult-related crises in Niger Delta published by *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *The Guardian* and *ThisDay* newspapers in the critical period (October, 2018 to March, 2019). The four national dailies were purposively selected to represent the Nigerian press with a view to reducing the study to a manageable scope related reports of other print media which covered other years before and after the critical period of study however, reviewed in chapter two to show up the study content and enrich its scope.

### Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive analysis of the news content of *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *The Guardian* and *ThisDay* newspapers from October 2018 to March, 2019. The period of the study was purposively chosen based on timeliness as a core news value. This was the critical period when the cult-related crises in Niger Delta assumed a more attention with devastating effects for the region. The time frame for the study is equal to six months, there are approximately 182 days in six months and each of the four select national newspapers will publish equal number of issues within six (6) months. For the six (6) months period, each newspaper will publish 182 issues. Therefore, the four dailies will publish 728 editions. This figure formed the population of the study. The constructed calendar began from 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2018 and ended in 27<sup>th</sup> of March, 2019. With the aid of the constructed calendar, the researcher sampled the dates on which to pick editions of the four newspapers, representing 12.6 % of the population size. Using the standard set by Stacks and Hocking (1992), for every population size of 700, a sample size of 248, that is, 11.36% at 95% level of confidence should be selected. Therefore, a sample size of 12.6% that was selected for analysis was considered representative. The inclusion of a constructed calendar in this study, hence, increased the randomness of the sample. Twenty-three (30 and 31) issues of each of the four newspapers were systematically sampled, using the constructed calendar as a frame, bringing the total sample size to 62 issues as shown in the constructed calendar (see Appendix).

In this study, the **Straight News Reports**: these were pieces of information about significant and current events that were written and published in Niger

Delta region about cult-related crises. Feature stories, opinion pages and editorial comments are better tools than straight news reports, when measuring depth. **Frequency of Coverage**: this is the number of times which the newspapers reported the cult-related crises in Niger Delta within the period under study (October 2018- March 2019). It is measured by percentages. **News-hole**: this refers to the amount of space used up by stories on the Niger Delta as measured in column centimetres (col.cm). It helps in determining the extent (volume) of media coverage. **Time Frame**: this is the six-month calendar year from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2023 to 27<sup>th</sup> March 2024, from which the editions of the four newspapers were sampled for analysis.

The units of analysis used were straight reports, feature stories and opinion/editorials. These were assigned to the categories and counted. To ensure reliability of the instrument used for this research as well as researcher non-bias, and to reduce the margin of error, a professional coder was employed to assist the researcher in coding the content categories. In order to ensure the reliability of the coding process, two coders- the researcher and a research assistant were involved in the coding. Therefore, to calculate the reliability of the coding process, Holsti formula, as cited in Wimmer and Dominick (2000) was adopted thus:

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{2M}{N_1 + N_2}$$

Where M = the number of agreed items by the two coders

N1 = the total number of items coded by coder 1

N2 = the total number of items coded by coder

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Reliability} &= \frac{2 \times 176}{176+183} \\ &= \frac{352}{359} \\ &= 0.97. \end{aligned}$$

Therefore, 0.97 indicated a high level of inter-coder reliability. The data obtained from coding of newspaper contents were arranged in tabular format. This format made presentation clear and calculation of percentage scores feasible. The data were then described and interpreted in the light of objectives and research questions set at the onset of the study.

### Results

The results of the analysis are presented in table below:

**Research Question 1:** What was the frequency of reportage of cult-related crises in Niger Delta by *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *The Guardian* and *ThisDay* newspapers?

**Table 1: Frequency of Cult-related Issues in Niger Delta Items in Newspapers**

Newspapers	No. of Editions Coded	No. of Items on Cult-related Issues	Percentage
<i>The Punch</i>	62	44	25
<i>Vanguard</i>	62	50	28
<i>The Guardian</i>	62	42	24
<i>ThisDay</i>	62	40	23
Total	248	176	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

The data presented in this table above indicate that the newspapers carried the most number of stories (28%) on the Cult-related issues in Niger Delta region.

**Research Question 2:** What was the depth of coverage of cult-related crises in Niger Delta by the four newspapers?

**Table 4.2: Content (genre) Distribution among Newspapers in Column Centimetres**

Units of Analysis	NEWSPAPERS				
	<i>The Punch</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>ThisDay</i>	Total
Straight news	14,731	21,736	9,971	15,468	61,906
Feature stories	2,718	5,633	1,536	12,482	22,369
Editorial/opinion pages	2,591	3,336	1,705	1,477	9,109
Total	20,040	30,705	13,212	29,427	93,384

Source: Field Survey, 2019.

Table 4.2 shows that of a total news hole of 93,384 column centimetres, the four newspapers devoted a whopping 61,906 column centimetres (66%) to the straight news genre, only 22,369 column centimetres (24%) to feature stories, while an abysmal 9,109 column centimetres (10%) was allotted to opinion pages and editorial comments (Op.ed)

**Discussion**

The result of research question 1 showed that, *Vanguard* newspaper carried the greatest number of stories on the cult-related crises in Niger Delta. This was followed by *The Punch*, *The Guardian* and *ThisDay* newspapers respectively. The finding agrees with the result of the previous studies conducted by Ahrf (2013) when stressed that, the media play a crucial role in shaping a healthy democracy and ensuring good governance. Ashraf added further that, in their watchdog role, the media can play an important role to promote transparency, accountability and public scrutiny of decision makers. The finding also disagrees with the agenda setting theory, which proposes that the idea or information which people have on such issues tend to be proportionate to the amount of emphasis

place on such issues by the media. This implies that the way the media see and regard issues is the same way the masses would regard such issues.

The result of research question 2 analysis showed that of a total news hole of 93,384 column centimetres, the four newspapers devoted a whopping 61,906 column centimetres (66%) to the straight news genre, only 22,369 column centimetres (24%) to feature stories, while an abysmal 9,109 column centimetres (10%) was allotted to opinion pages and editorial comments (Op.ed). This finding agrees with that of Okon (2013) which revealed “a complete absence of advertorials in the form of public service announcements geared towards sensitizing the public on vital issues that may illuminate or ventilate the subject matters” (p.22). The relevance of the social responsibility theory as giving backing to this finding becomes evident as it x-rayed the imperative for media outlets to uphold their ethical obligation by providing in-depth, comprehensive coverage of cult-related crisis in the Niger Delta, thereby fostering public awareness, facilitating informed dialogue and ultimately contributing to positive societal change in the region.

**Conclusion**

Based on the results and findings of the study it is concluded here that *Vanguard* newspaper led in reporting the cult-related crises in the Niger Delta, indicating a strong focus on this critical issue. *The Punch*, *The Guardian* and *ThisDay* newspapers followed, but with significantly less coverage. The surveillance function of the media gives newspapers the leverage to provide in-depth analysis and investigative reports to highlight the underlying causes and potential solutions for cult-related crises. Apart of *Vanguard* newspaper, the other three newspapers could collaborate on special reports or series to bring greater attention to the crisis and its impact on the region, promoting informed public discourse and policy action.

The study equally established the critical need for Nigerian media outlets to enhance their editorial treatment of cult-related crises in the Niger Delta, ensuring that coverage is not only comprehensive but also reflects a commitment to social responsibility, thereby fostering greater public understanding and engagement with the complex issues at hand. Also, the majority of the news coverage in the four newspapers under study focused on straight news, with limited space given to feature stories and even less to opinion pages and editorial comments. The current allocation of column space indicates a strong emphasis on straight news, potentially limiting readers' exposure to in-depth features and diverse opinions.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Nigerian newspapers should make concerted efforts to give detailed news on the various aspects of regional or communal crises, with adequate eyewitness and expert accounts.
2. The Nigerian newspapers should go beyond the use of straight news in reporting communal or regional issues, since straight news lack the potential to take readers beyond the level of ordinary knowledge about crisis.

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