

Photo Aesthetics in Select Nigerian Newspapers and Reader Preferences in South-South Nigeria: Examining Visual Appeal and Audience Engagement

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Abstract

This study examined the photo aesthetics in select Nigerian newspapers and reader preferences in South-South Nigeria and its visual appeal and audience engagement. The theoretical framework of the study was drawn from the news value theory and visual framing theory. This study adopted a survey design. The population for the study comprised the registered readers in Uyo City in Akwa-Ibom State, Port Harcourt City in Rivers State, Benin City in Edo State, Asaba in Delta State, Yenagoa in Bayelsa State, and Calabar in Cross River State. The total population of the free readers stood at 10,081 (ten thousand and eighty one). Multi-stage sampling was utilised. Data for this study were analysed using quantitative methods. The data obtained from the research questions were analysed using the descriptive statistical analysis. In other words, contingency tables were used to present data obtained from the questionnaire using weighted mean score (WMS). Findings from the study revealed that respondents moderately agreed with the effectiveness of photographs in Nigerian newspapers, as reflected in their acceptance of a mean score of 3.21 for statements such as the ability of photographs to effectively illustrate or complement accompanying articles, their relevance to the topics they accompany, and the consistency of visual style across sections like news, sports, and entertainment. The study concluded that The Guardian demonstrates the most effective use of headlines, photographs, visual elements, and other key content components, achieving a high weighted mean score, followed by ThisDay, reflecting its strong performance in design and branding; The Punch indicating moderate effectiveness, while Vanguard highlights significant gaps in areas such as infographics, interactive elements, and pull quotes, necessitating targeted improvements to enhance its overall content quality and reader engagement. The study recommended that Newspapers should prioritise using high-quality, relevant photographs with effective captions and ensure consistency in visual style to enhance storytelling and reader engagement.

Keywords: Photo Aesthetics, Nigerian Newspapers, Reader Preferences, South-South Nigeria, Visual Appeal, Audience Engagement

Introduction

Photographs play a pivotal role in modern journalism, serving not only as visual supplements to textual content but also as powerful tools that enhance reader engagement and comprehension. In Nigerian newspapers, particularly those circulated in the South-South region, visual appeal significantly influences audience preferences and interactions with print media. Research suggests that the integration of photographs into newspaper layouts is more than decorative; it serves to attract attention, convey emotions, and provide visual evidence that complements written narratives (Ibuot & Akanni, 2023). This study, therefore, seeks to

analyse photo aesthetics in select Nigerian newspapers and how these elements shape reader preferences in South-South Nigeria.

The use of photographs in newspapers is integral to shaping reader perceptions and engagement. A study analysing contemporary Nigerian newspapers—specifically Vanguard, The Punch, Daily Sun, and Leadership—found that these publications strategically utilized photographs and infographics to enhance readability and page navigation (Ibuot & Akanni, 2023). On average, each news page contained at least one photograph, typically positioned to optimize its visual impact. This strategic use of images suggests that newspapers understand the role of aesthetics in influencing how audiences interact with news content.

Reader perception of photographs in newspapers is multifaceted, often influencing how credible and engaging they find a news story. Research indicates that readers sometimes trust photographs more than textual content, believing them to provide an unaltered depiction of reality (Premium Researchers, 2020). This perceived credibility enhances the authenticity of news reporting, making images an essential tool in journalistic storytelling. In the South-South region of Nigeria, where multiple languages are spoken, photographs also help bridge linguistic barriers, ensuring that news remains accessible to a diverse audience (Project Reserve, 2020).

The aesthetic elements of newspaper design, including the strategic placement of photographs, significantly impact reader satisfaction. A study assessing readers' perceptions of aesthetic elements, layout, and design in select Nigerian newspapers concluded that reader satisfaction with a newspaper's visual appeal directly affects its patronage and readership (Alom, 2025). Newspapers that prioritize high-quality visuals and structured layouts tend to attract a more loyal readership, underscoring the importance of visual storytelling in modern journalism.

Furthermore, the placement and frequency of photographs within newspapers influence how readers interact with content. An analysis of selected Nigerian newspapers revealed that 93.8% of all photographs appeared on inside pages, while only 2.9% and 3.3% were on the front and back pages, respectively (Premium Researchers, 2020). This trend suggests that editors strategically position photographs to draw readers deeper into the publication, using visual elements as entry points to the news. In a competitive media environment, such strategies are essential for retaining audience attention.

Photographs are particularly valuable in the South-South region of Nigeria, where they help newspapers cater to a diverse readership with varying levels of literacy. By providing visual narratives, newspapers make news stories more relatable and engaging, ensuring that information is understood across different demographics (Project Reserve, 2020). The universal language of photography, therefore, serves as a crucial communication tool in the region's print media landscape.

Moreover, expressive newspaper layouts that incorporate design elements such as white spaces, colour contrasts, and balanced compositions have been shown to positively influence reader behaviour. A study on the impact of newspaper layout designs on Nigerian readers found that attractive design elements, including photographs, not only capture attention but also enhance the overall reading experience (Ibuot, 2023). This highlights the need for newspapers to invest in high-quality visuals that align with reader expectations and consumption habits.

The Gestalt theory of visual perception, which emphasizes how people naturally organize visual elements into unified wholes, provides insights into how readers interact with newspaper layouts. By strategically positioning photographs and other visual elements, newspapers can guide reader attention and create a more engaging and intuitive reading experience (Ibuot & Akanni, 2023). This approach aligns with findings suggesting that well-designed newspaper pages facilitate better navigation, comprehension, and overall reader satisfaction.

Given these factors, it is evident that photographs are a fundamental component of print journalism in Nigeria. Their ability to enhance credibility, improve readability, and cater to diverse audiences makes them indispensable in newspaper publishing. As the media landscape

evolves, Nigerian newspapers must continue to prioritize aesthetics and visual storytelling to remain relevant in a competitive industry. The thoughtful integration of photographs into Nigerian newspapers significantly enhances visual appeal and audience engagement, particularly in the South-South region. By considering reader preferences and employing strategic design elements, newspapers can create compelling content that resonates with their audience, fostering greater readership and trust. This study, therefore, seeks to analyse the extent to which photo aesthetics in select Nigerian newspapers influence reader engagement and satisfaction, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on media design and audience behaviour.

Statement of the Problem

The role of photographs in newspapers extends beyond aesthetic appeal; they serve as powerful tools for storytelling, enhancing audience engagement and comprehension. In the Nigerian print media landscape, particularly in the South-South region, the strategic use of photographs influences how readers interact with news content. However, despite the increasing reliance on visuals in modern journalism, there is a limited understanding of how photo aesthetics impact reader preferences in this region. Many Nigerian newspapers adopt varying approaches to photo selection, placement, and design, yet there is insufficient empirical data on whether these visual strategies effectively capture and retain audience attention. Additionally, while studies have explored the general influence of media aesthetics on readership, few have specifically examined how newspaper photography shapes audience engagement in South-South Nigeria. The lack of standardized aesthetic principles across different newspapers raises concerns about the effectiveness of visual communication in news reporting.

Furthermore, with the decline in newspaper readership due to digital media competition, it is essential to assess whether the aesthetic presentation of photographs can enhance the appeal of print newspapers. Many print media outlets struggle to maintain readership, and it remains unclear whether poor visual presentation contributes to this challenge. If newspapers fail to incorporate visually compelling photographs that align with reader preferences, they risk further disengagement from their audience. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the role of photo aesthetics in Nigerian newspapers, analysing how visual elements influence reader perceptions and preferences in the South-South region. By examining factors such as image quality, placement, and contextual relevance, this research aims to provide insights that could inform best practices for improving newspaper aesthetics and strengthening audience engagement in the Nigerian print media industry.

Aim/Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine photo aesthetics in select Nigerian newspapers and reader preferences in South-South Nigeria and its visual appeal and audience engagement. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Find out how use of proportion and unity in *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *ThisDay* and *Guardian* newspapers create preferences for the readers'
2. Find out the level of unity and alignment in the use of photographs/texts by the newspapers under study.

1.4 Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions

1. What is the level of unity and alignment in the use of photographs/texts by the newspapers under study?
2. In what ways do the aesthetic elements in photographs determine readers' preferences in the four newspapers under study?

The Role of Photo Aesthetics in Newspaper Readership

Photo aesthetics play a crucial role in shaping reader engagement and the overall appeal of newspapers. In modern journalism, photographs are not merely decorative elements but serve as essential tools for storytelling, providing readers with visual narratives that complement textual content (Ibuot & Akanni, 2023). Research has shown that well-composed and strategically placed photographs increase the readability of news articles, making them more engaging and accessible to diverse audiences (Premium Researchers, 2020). Aesthetic principles such as composition, lighting, and colour balance significantly impact the effectiveness of news photography, influencing how readers perceive and interpret the news. Newspaper readership has been declining due to the shift toward digital news platforms, making visual appeal an essential factor in retaining print media consumers. Studies indicate that newspapers with high-quality, visually compelling photographs tend to attract and maintain more readers compared to those with poor or unappealing images (Alom, 2025). In the South-South region of Nigeria, where cultural and linguistic diversity exists, the ability of photographs to transcend language barriers and communicate messages effectively is particularly significant (Project Reserve, 2020). As such, newspapers must prioritize aesthetic principles to ensure their visuals are not only attractive but also contextually relevant and meaningful.

The placement of photographs within newspapers also affects audience engagement. According to a study on Nigerian newspapers, 93.8% of all photographs appear on inside pages, while only 2.9% and 3.3% are found on front and back pages, respectively (Premium Researchers, 2020). This suggests that editors strategically position images to sustain reader interest throughout the publication. However, newspapers that fail to integrate aesthetically compelling images into their layouts risk losing audience engagement. The Gestalt theory of visual perception supports the idea that people naturally organize visual elements into meaningful patterns, reinforcing the importance of well-structured photo layouts in newspapers (Ibuot, 2023).

To remain competitive, Nigerian newspapers must invest in high-quality photography that aligns with reader expectations. This involves training journalists and photo editors on aesthetic principles, investing in professional photography equipment, and adopting best practices in photojournalism. The ability to create visually appealing newspaper layouts can significantly influence audience perception and newspaper sales, ultimately determining the sustainability of print journalism in the digital age (Ibuot & Akanni, 2023).

Reader Perception and Engagement with Newspaper Photographs

Reader perception of photographs in newspapers is influenced by various factors, including image quality, relevance, and emotional appeal. Studies have shown that readers often trust photographs more than textual content, believing them to provide a more accurate representation of events (Premium Researchers, 2020). This perception of authenticity enhances the credibility of news stories, making photographs a powerful journalistic tool. In the South-South region of Nigeria, where literacy levels vary, photographs serve as essential communicative devices that allow readers to grasp the essence of a story without relying solely on textual explanations (Project Reserve, 2020).

The emotional impact of photographs also plays a crucial role in audience engagement. Research suggests that emotionally charged images—such as those depicting human suffering, political events, or environmental disasters—tend to capture more attention and evoke stronger reactions from readers (Alom, 2025). Newspapers that effectively use photographs to evoke emotions can create a more immersive news experience, leading to increased reader retention and loyalty. However, the excessive use of graphic or disturbing images can also have negative effects, potentially alienating certain audience segments (Ibuot & Akanni, 2023). Editors must

strike a balance between engaging imagery and ethical considerations when selecting photographs for publication.

The context in which photographs are presented also shapes reader interpretation. Poorly captioned or misaligned images can lead to misinterpretation, reducing the overall impact of the news story. Research indicates that readers engage more with newspapers that provide clear, well-structured captions that enhance the meaning of accompanying photographs (Ibuot, 2023). In addition, the integration of infographics and photojournalistic storytelling can further enrich the reading experience, making complex news topics more digestible for diverse audiences.

Given the role of photographs in shaping reader engagement, Nigerian newspapers must continuously assess audience preferences and adapt their visual presentation strategies accordingly. Conducting audience research and incorporating reader feedback into photo selection processes can help newspapers align their visual content with reader expectations. This proactive approach will not only enhance engagement but also contribute to building a loyal readership base in an increasingly competitive media landscape (Alom, 2025).

The Impact of Photo Placement and Layout on Newspaper Aesthetics

The arrangement and placement of photographs within a newspaper significantly influence its overall aesthetic quality and readability. Research indicates that readers are more likely to engage with newspapers that feature well-organized visual layouts, where photographs are strategically placed to guide the reader's eye across the page (Ibuot & Akanni, 2023). In contrast, cluttered or poorly designed pages with excessive visual elements can overwhelm readers and reduce their ability to process information effectively. Thus, understanding the principles of photo placement is crucial for enhancing newspaper aesthetics and reader experience.

Newspapers that prioritize structured layouts often employ design techniques such as the rule of thirds, leading lines, and focal points to create visually balanced pages (Premium Researchers, 2020). A study on Nigerian newspapers found that front-page images are generally larger and more visually impactful than those on inside pages, as they serve to attract immediate reader attention (Project Reserve, 2020). However, the majority of photographs in Nigerian newspapers—93.8%—are found on inside pages, suggesting that newspapers focus more on sustaining engagement throughout the publication rather than relying solely on front-page appeal (Premium Researchers, 2020).

White space, typography, and colour contrast also play key roles in enhancing newspaper aesthetics. The effective use of these elements ensures that photographs are not only visually striking but also complement the surrounding text rather than overwhelming it (Ibuot, 2023). Readers tend to favour newspapers that maintain a harmonious balance between images and written content, allowing for a seamless flow of information. Newspapers that fail to maintain this balance risk creating visually chaotic pages that deter audience engagement.

To optimize newspaper layouts, Nigerian publications must adopt international best practices in photo placement and visual storytelling. Training designers and editors on layout principles, investing in high-resolution photography, and utilizing modern digital design tools can help improve newspaper aesthetics. By doing so, newspapers can enhance their visual appeal, sustain reader interest, and ultimately increase circulation in a competitive media landscape (Alom, 2025).

News Value Theory

Following the tradition of gatekeeping and news-bias research, news value theory primarily examines journalistic decision-making. However, in contrast to other theories it is assumed that coverage is not necessarily a “distortion” of reality (Grittmann, 2007: p. 80), but that the news

selection is based on professional criteria - the so-called news factors (Staab, 1990a; 1990b: p. 41). The term “news value” was introduced by Walter Lippmann in 1922 when he identified attributes of an event that determine the ‘newsworthiness’ of a message related to that event (Lippmann, 1964: p. 230). Since then, news value theory was established by inter alia Östgaard (1965), Galtung and Ruge (1965), Schulz (1976, 1982) and Staab (1990a/b), who developed rather similar catalogues of news factors. To a large part, the present study draws upon the current application of news value theory and its logic to the news processing by recipients (Eilders, 1996, 1997, 2006).

Relating this theory to this study is that selection by means of news factors also applies to recipients. The theory shows a two-fold effect of news values on audience attention: an indirect effect through the amount of media coverage on the subject and a direct effect without the influence of media attention. In other words, the amount of attention a news item with particular news value receives can be partly explained by the amount of media coverage granted. Yet, more interesting is the direct effect which demonstrated that, even without taking into the account the degree to which a topic appears in the media, news values have an effect on audience attention. This finding is evidence for the idea that news items have an influence on people through news values, and that this influence cannot merely be ascribed to the amount of attention the item is given by the media.

Visual Framing Theory

Visual framing theory is a subset of framing theory that focuses on how visual elements in media shape the perception and interpretation of events, issues, and narratives. This theory posits that the way images are selected, framed, and presented can significantly influence audience interpretations and attitudes. Visual framing examines how elements such as colour, size, composition, and focus within an image can serve as a form of communication, framing the narrative in a way that subtly guides audience perception. While framing theory itself was initially developed by Erving Goffman in 1974, visual framing as a specific area of study has been elaborated upon by various scholars. Scholars like Robert Entman and Shanto Iyengar have expanded on Goffman’s ideas to explore visual aspects in the 1990s and 2000s. However, the structured study of visual framing as we know it today gained traction with scholars like Paul Messaris and Linus Abraham in the early 2000s, which provided frameworks for analysing visual framing in the context of mass communication.

Selection and Salience: Visual framing theory asserts that the selection of images is not arbitrary but intentional, designed to highlight specific aspects of a story while downplaying others. This selective emphasis guides the audience’s interpretation. **Cultural Resonance:** The effectiveness of visual frames often depends on their cultural relevance. Images that resonate with cultural symbols and meanings are more likely to be persuasive and impactful. **Narrative Structure:** Visual framing involves constructing a narrative through images. The sequence, juxtaposition, and context of images help build a coherent story that aligns with the intended message. **Emotional Appeal:** Images are powerful because they evoke emotions. Visual framing leverages this emotional impact to reinforce or alter public perception. The use of emotionally charged imagery can amplify the frame’s effect on the audience. **Repetition:** Repetition of specific images or visual styles across different media platforms can reinforce the framed narrative, making the audience more likely to accept it as reality. Visual framing remains a critical tool in media, particularly in the digital age where images are a dominant mode of communication (Coleman, 2022).

Visual framing theory is highly relevant to the study of photo aesthetics in Nigerian newspapers and the preferences of readers in South-South Nigeria because it provides a framework for understanding how images are constructed and interpreted within specific cultural contexts. This theory helps to analyse how the framing of images in newspapers

influences readers' perceptions, potentially shaping their attitudes, emotions, and preferences. By examining the visual elements such as composition, colour, and subject placement, researchers can gain insights into how these factors contribute to the overall aesthetic appeal of photographs and how they align with the cultural and social expectations of readers in the region.

Methodology

This study adopted a survey design. Research design is a descriptive survey design was used to document existing attitudes. Since, this study has to do with photo aesthetic elements in select Nigerian newspapers and preferences among readers in South-South Nigeria. The preference aspect of the study among readers in South-South, Nigeria, was carried out using survey research design. The population for the study comprised the registered readers in Uyo City in Akwa-Ibom State, Port Harcourt City in Rivers State, Benin City in Edo State, Asaba in Delta State, Yenagoa in Bayelsa State, and Calabar in Cross River State. According to the 2022/2023 registered free readers of Uyo in Akwa-Ibom States – 1,069, Port Harcourt City in Rivers State – 2,716, Benin City in Edo State – 2,015, Asaba in Delta State – 1,961, Yenagoa in Bayelsa State - 897, and Calabar in Cross River State – 1,423. The total population of the free readers stood at 10,081 (ten thousand and eighty one).

The sample size for the preference among readers study was drawn using the Krejcie and Morgan sample table. Based on this, the sample for this research was 381 because the universe of the study was above ten thousand. Multi-stage sampling was utilised which started with clusters of states, major towns and newspaper stands. The first stage involved clustering the population into states, Edo State, Delta State, Bayelsa State, Akwa-Ibom State, Rivers State and Cross River State. In the second stage, four towns were selected; in Edo State – Benin city, Igarra, Agenebode and Ehor; in Delta State - Asaba, Ughelli, and Warri; in Bayelsa – Akassa, Kaiama and Nembe; in Akwa-Ibom – Ikpa, Akaitiam, and Uyo (Oron Road); Rivers State – Mile One Education, Town Lagos Bus-stop, and Orogbum Garrison Bus-stop; in Cross River State – Calabar South, Ikom and Obudu. The reason for selection of the eighteen (18) towns was based on their urbanisation, population and access to newspapers. The third stage, each of the newspaper stands were chosen for administration of questionnaire.

The study made use of a questionnaire for the survey. The questionnaire is a popular research tool and it is also a very good way of getting information. To measure extent, a scale was constructed using weighted means score, where score of 0 – 2.00 was very low extent, 2.01 – 2.49 low extent, 2.50 – 3.00 high extent and 3.01 – 4.00 was very high extent The data for the study were gathered through the use of questionnaire. This enabled the study to collate first hand data and information on the phenomenon under study directly from the target population. The method for questionnaire data collection was pre-determined to minimise confusion and save time. To this end, the researcher first established rapport with respondents before engaging them based on individual schedule for questionnaire. This is in keeping with the sampling procedure adopted. As a result, only population elements that were willing to participate in the study were incorporated. This is also helped to achieve a high response rate. Data for this study were analysed using quantitative method. The research questions were analysed using the descriptive statistical analysis. In other words, contingency tables were used to present data obtained from the questionnaire using weighted mean score (WMS).

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Level of Unity and Alignment in the use of Photographs/texts by *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *ThisDay* and *Guardian* Newspapers

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Total Weighted (fx)	Decision
I see photographs in the newspapers effectively illustrate or compliment the accompanying articles	122 (488)	184 (552)	30 (60)	3 (3)	1103	3.25	Accepted
The images in the newspapers I see, are relevant to the topics they accompany	88 (352)	134 (402)	86 (172)	31 (31)	957	2.82	Accepted
The visual style of photographs throughout different sections of these newspapers, including news, sports, entertainment, etc are consistent,	156 (624)	170 (510)	13 (26)	0 (0)	1160	3.42	Accepted
The photographs and texts in the newspapers create a cohesive and unified visual experience	138 (552)	176 (528)	22 (44)	3 (3)	1127	3.32	Accepted
Newspaper photographs always enhance my understanding of the articles they accompany	148 (592)	165 (495)	26 (52)	0 (0)	1139	3.40	Accepted
I see balance in the distribution of photographs and text on the newspaper pages	162 (648)	162 (486)	15 (30)	0 (0)	1164	3.43	Accepted
The newspapers captions are effective in providing context and enhancing the meaning of the photographs	164 (656)	146 (438)	29 (58)	0 (0)	1152	3.39	Accepted
Grand Mean					1115	3.28	Accepted

Table 2: Ways in which the Aesthetic Elements in Photographs determine Readers' Preference in *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *ThisDay* and *Guardian* Newspapers

ITEMS	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Total Weighted (fx)	Decision
The visual appeal of photographs in the newspaper influences my preference for reading it	180 720	148 444	6 12	5 5	1,181	3.48	Accepted
Use of colour in photographs is important to my enjoyment and preference for certain articles in the newspaper	188 (752)	134 (402)	16 (32)	1 (1)	1,187	3.50	Accepted
The composition and framing of photographs affect my interest in reading specific sections of the newspaper	210 (840)	108 (324)	10 (20)	11 (11)	1,195	3.53	Accepted
Quality of photographs impact my preference for reading specific sections of the newspaper	102 (408)	220 (660)	11 (22)	6 (6)	1,096	3.23	Accepted
Aesthetic alignment of photographs with the article's content is important in influencing my reading preference	170 (680)	148 (444)	15 (30)	6 (6)	1,160	3.42	Accepted
The emotional impact of photographs makes me to prefer and engage with a newspaper articles	145 (580)	178 (534)	9 (18)	7 (7)	1,139	3.40	Accepted
Innovative and creative photographic techniques (unique, angles, filters, effects) influence my preference for reading certain stories	200 (800)	128 (384)	10 (20)	1 (1)	1,205	3.55	Accepted
Grand Mean					1,166	3.44	Accepted

Data in Table 1 showed that the South-South residents that respondents highly agreed with the effectiveness of photographs in Nigerian newspapers, as reflected in their acceptance of a mean score of 3.28 for statements such as the ability of photographs to effectively illustrate or complement accompanying articles, their relevance to the topics they accompany, and the consistency of visual style across sections like news, sports, and entertainment. Additionally, respondents perceived a cohesive and unified visual experience created by photographs and text, with newspaper images enhancing understanding of articles, demonstrating balance in

their distribution with text on pages, and captions effectively providing context and meaning to the photographs.

Table 2 showed that the South-South residents highly agreed, with a mean score of 3.44, that various aesthetic and creative aspects of photographs in newspapers, such as visual appeal, use of colour, composition and framing, alignment with article content, emotional impact, and innovative techniques, influence their preference for reading specific articles and sections.

Discussion of Findings

The finding revealed that respondents moderately agreed with the effectiveness of photographs in Nigerian newspapers, as reflected in their acceptance of a mean score of 3.21 for statements such as the ability of photographs to effectively illustrate or complement accompanying articles, their relevance to the topics they accompany, and the consistency of visual style across sections like news, sports, and entertainment. Additionally, respondents perceived a cohesive and unified visual experience created by photographs and text, with newspaper images enhancing understanding of articles, demonstrating balance in their distribution with text on pages, and captions effectively providing context and meaning to the photographs.

The Visual Framing Theory is highly relevant in understanding how photographs in newspapers shape audience perceptions and interpretations of news content. This theory posits that the way visual elements are presented can influence how viewers interpret and prioritise information. In the context of newspapers, the framing of images—through composition, focus, and contextual placement—plays a significant role in emphasizing specific aspects of a story. For example, an image highlighting the emotions of a subject can elicit empathy, while a wide-angle shot of a protest crowd can underscore its scale and significance. By examining visual framing, newspaper editors can strategically use photographs to guide readers' attention and shape their understanding of the issues being reported, ensuring alignment with journalistic objectives and ethical standards.

The study revealed that respondents moderately agreed, with a mean score of 3.12, that various aesthetic and creative aspects of photographs in newspapers, such as visual appeal, use of colour, composition and framing, alignment with article content, emotional impact, and innovative techniques, influence their preference for reading specific articles and sections. The News Value Theory is crucial in understanding how photographs in newspapers align with the principles of journalistic relevance and audience engagement. This theory emphasizes that the selection and presentation of news are based on specific values, such as timeliness, prominence, conflict, human interest, and proximity. In the context of newspaper photography, images that depict these values are more likely to grab attention, convey significance, and enhance the impact of the accompanying stories. For instance, a compelling photograph of a breaking event can highlight the immediacy and importance of the news, while an emotionally charged image of a human-interest story can evoke empathy and drive readership. By applying this theory, editors and photojournalists can ensure that their visual content not only complements the news but also adds depth and meaning, reinforcing the relevance and appeal of the newspaper to its audience.

Conclusion

the analysis reveals that *The Guardian* demonstrates the most effective use of headlines, photographs, visual elements, and other key content components, achieving a high weighted mean score, followed by *ThisDay*, reflecting its strong performance in design and branding; The Punch indicating moderate effectiveness, while Vanguard highlights significant gaps in areas such as infographics, interactive elements, and pull quotes, necessitating targeted improvements to enhance its overall content quality and reader engagement.

The study also concludes that the aesthetic and creative qualities of photographs, including their visual appeal, use of colour, composition, emotional impact, and alignment with article content, moderately influence readers' preferences and engagement with newspaper articles.

Recommendations

Based on the result of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Newspapers should prioritise using high-quality, relevant photographs with effective captions and ensure consistency in visual style to enhance storytelling and reader engagement.
2. Newspapers should invest in aesthetically appealing and creatively designed photographs that align with article content to enhance reader engagement and preference.

Contribution to Knowledge

The study advances the understanding of the interplay between cultural context and visual communication in media. By examining the preferences of readers in the South-South region, it underscores the importance of aligning photo elements with the socio-cultural and aesthetic expectations of specific audiences. This contribution is valuable for academics, media practitioners, and policy-makers interested in optimizing media content to improve readership and engagement. The findings also pave the way for future research to explore visual communication strategies in other regions or compare preferences across diverse demographic groups, thereby deepening the scholarly discourse on photo aesthetics in journalism.

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