Sarcouncil Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences

ISSN(Online): 2945-3488

Volume- 04| Issue- 11| 2025

Research Article

Received: 10-10-2025 | Accepted: 05-11-2025| Published: 19-11-2025

Media Portrayals and Social Identities in Nigeria: an Examination Of Ethnicity and Gender Issues

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Abstract:. In Nigeria's diverse socio-cultural landscape, mass media plays a pivotal role in shaping ethnic and gender identities, often exacerbating divisions while offering avenues for cohesion. This study investigated how online newspapers portray ethnicity and gender, and their implications for social identity formation, employing a mixed-methods approach. Content analysis of 480 articles from *Vanguard*, *The Punch*, *Premium Times*, and *The Guardian* over six months in 2023 revealed skewed representations: major ethnic groups dominated 72.3% of mentions with more positive tones, while minorities faced 58.5% negative portrayals linked to conflict. Gender biases were evident, with women in 38.4% of references confined to victim (31.2%) or domestic roles (24.7%), and stereotypes in 47.7% of cases; non-binary identities were negligible (0.8%). In-depth interviews with 40 diverse news consumers uncovered perceptions of marginalization, with 75% reporting ethnic exclusion and 65% gender impacts, yet 45% demonstrated resistance through alternative media. Integrated findings, grounded in social identity and framing theories, highlight media's reinforcement of hierarchies, fostering epistemic injustice and fragmented belonging, while consumer agency suggests potential for hybrid identities. The study bridges gaps in digital media research, offering insights for inclusive practices among practitioners, policymakers, and scholars to promote equitable representations and societal harmony in Nigeria.

Keywords: Media, Social Identity, Ethnicity, Gender, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, media serves as a fundamental institution in constructing and negotiating social identities on a global scale, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and others through pervasive narratives, images, and interactions (Paganelli, 2025). Globally, research highlights the profound impact of social media on identity formation, where platforms enable users to explore self-expression, build communities, and navigate cultural influences, often fostering both positive connectivity and challenges like performative authenticity (Chauhan, 2025; Jeyanthi, 2022). For instance, studies indicate that interactive social media environments support identity exploration by allowing users to engage with diverse perspectives and representations, thereby shaping personal and collective senses of belonging (Domahidi, *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, systematic frameworks examining digital environments reveal how mediums and platforms intersect with identity processes, emphasizing the role of online interactions in reinforcing or challenging societal norms (Sohm *et al.*, 2024). These dynamics are amplified in an increasingly connected world, where media not only disseminates information but also mediates cultural exchanges, potentially leading to hybrid identities amid globalization (Suri, 2025). However, this influence is not uniformly positive; global analyses show that media can perpetuate stereotypes, affecting, intergroup relations and contributing to social inequalities, particularly in multicultural contexts where representation shapes public attitudes and self-perceptions (Dembe, 2024; Kidd, 2016; Saleemm *et al.*, 2025).

Narrowing to regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, media portrayals often reflect and exacerbate historical power imbalances, with persistent negative stereotypes in international coverage hindering economic and social progress (Njoroge, 2021; Oguh, 2015; Sanderson, 2024). For example, recent investigations demonstrate that biased media representations of African nations, including sensationalized depictions of conflict and poverty, impose tangible costs, such as elevated borrowing rates due to distorted perceptions of risk (Sanderson, 2024). In Africa, scholarly reviews of media coverage underscore concerns over imbalances that reinforce colonial-era tropes, calling for more nuanced portrayals to foster accurate global understandings (Serwornoo *et al.*, 2025). These issues intersect with ethnicity and gender, where media discourse frequently marginalizes minority groups and upholds patriarchal structures, impacting identity formation and social cohesion across diverse populations.

In Nigeria, a nation with over 250 ethnic groups and characterized by profound gender dynamics, the media landscape intensifies these global

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DOI- DOI- https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17653076

patterns, often mirroring ethno-political divisions and reinforcing stereotypes that affect national unity and individual identities. Historical analyses show that Nigerian media has played a key role in post-colonial identity construction, with print, broadcast, and digital outlets shaping narratives around ethnicity through biased ownership and reporting that perpetuate intergroup tensions (Chad, 2025). Recent studies on ethnic diversity in urban settings like Lagos reveal how exposure to varied groups influences adolescent attitudes and trust, yet media portrayals can undermine these interactions by emphasizing conflict over harmony (Demarest & Langer, 2025). On gender, Nigerian media continues to exhibit biases, with corpus-based examinations of newspapers showing disproportionate representations that align with traditional roles, limiting women's visibility in leadership and professional spheres (Amoniyan & Obasi, 2025). For instance, analyses of media narratives highlight how gender norms intersect with appointive positions, where women face scrutiny that reinforces subordination and hinders equitable participation (Development Research and Projects Centre, 2023). Advertisements in Nigerian newspapers further perpetuate appearance-focused and domestic portrayals of women, constraining broader identity expressions (Ezeah & Ifebunandu, 2025). These patterns are particularly evident in coverage of internally displaced persons, where ethnic and gender lenses distort realities and marginalize voices (Duru, 2020). Amid Nigeria's digital transformation, online platforms amplify these issues, necessitating deeper inquiry into how such representations mold social identities in this pluralistic society (Oko-Epelle & Adelabu, 2022).

Despite Nigeria's rich ethnic and gender diversity, mainstream media persists in disseminating narrow and exclusionary portrayals that distort social realities and bolster hierarchies. Research indicates that ethnic coverage often prioritizes dominant groups aligned with political elites, sidelining minorities and fueling divisions, as seen in studies linking media to ethno-political tensions (Duru, 2020; Ikre, 2023). Gender representations remain stereotypical, with women depicted in limited roles such as victims or homemakers, while men dominate as authorities, perpetuating patriarchal ideologies (Ahmed, 2024; Nasidi *et al.,* 2020). This is compounded by low visibility of women in media, where female presenters and sources are underrepresented, exacerbating exclusion (Ogharevba & Ukpere, 2023). The rise of online newspapers, popular among youth, has not mitigated these biases; instead, algorithmic sensationalism may heighten stereotypes. A critical gap exists in mixed-methods research that combines content analysis of digital media with audience perceptions, hindering the formulation of policies for inclusive representations in Nigeria's multi-ethnic context.

This research is essential in addressing the evolving intersections of media, ethnicity, and gender in Nigeria's digital age, providing empirical insights to promote social justice and cohesion. By examining online newspapers and consumer experiences, it bridges gaps in understanding how narratives are internalized, aligning with calls for deconstructing biases in African media (Gorar, 2021; Ogharevba & Ukpere, 2023). The findings will inform journalists, policymakers, and educators on fostering equitable portrayals, supporting Nigeria's commitments to Sustainable Development Goals on gender equality and reduced inequalities. Amid rising digital media influence, this study contributes to global discourses on identity, offering practical strategies for a more inclusive Nigerian media ecosystem that reflects societal diversity.

Research Objectives

The primary aim is to investigate how media portrayals of ethnicity and gender shape social identity formation in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

- To examine how Nigerian online newspapers portray ethnicity and gender in news coverage.
- To analyze the implications of media portrayals of ethnicity and gender for social identity formation in Nigeria.
- To explore the perceptions of news consumers on how media representations influence their sense of ethnic and gender identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media

The term *media* refers broadly to the channels and technologies through which information is produced, transmitted and consumed, ranging from print newspapers, broadcast radio/TV, to online and social media platforms (e.g., Duignan, 2025). Media are not just neutral conduits of content, but institutions that perform social functions: agenda-setting, framing, reproduction of cultural norms, and mediating identity formation (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Hall, 1997). From a social constructionist perspective, media help produce versions of “reality” by selecting, emphasising,

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omitting and interpreting events (Duignan, 2025). Media thus shape not only *what* we think about (agenda-setting) but also *how* we think about it (framing). In plural societies such as Nigeria, the media serve an important role in both reflecting and reinforcing identity boundaries, including ethnic and gender identities (Oladipo & Olufemi, 2025).

At the same time, critics point out that media ownership, political economy, and structural biases may limit the media's capacity to serve as inclusive or neutral platforms. For example, patriarchal structures, commercial imperatives, and elite interests often shape media content (Muringa & Adjin-Tettey, 2025). Thus, media can uphold power hierarchies as much as they can challenge them. In this way, focus on how online newspapers portray ethnicity and gender is grounded in a well-established body of research on media as identity-shaping institutions (Ofoegbu, 2025).

Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to a socially constructed sense of shared identity rooted in common cultural, linguistic, historical or geographic features (Ukiwo, 2005). In multi-ethnic nations such as Nigeria, ethnicity remains a potent axis of identity, politics and social relations (Anorue, *et al.,* 2019). Media representation of ethnic groups thus becomes consequential: it influences group visibility/invisibility, stereotyping, inter-group relations and identity construction.

Studies of Nigerian media show that ethnic representation is frequently skewed by ownership, editorial priorities and political affiliations. For example, Danladi and Haruna (2023) observe that minority ethnic groups claim under-reportage or mis-reportage in Nigerian print and broadcast media, while majority groups dominate both ownership and editorial narratives. Daramola (2013) likewise found that many newspapers adopt ethnic colouration in political and news reportage, privileging certain interests and frames over others. One study of ethnic-interest group coverage concluded that media texts were shaped by languages, ideologies and power dynamics, such that representation tended to favour groups aligned with the owners' ethnicity or political interest (Ehidonye, 2019). Regardless, the representation of ethnicity via media is not just about quantity (how much coverage), but also about quality (how that coverage portrays groups). For instance, Oboh (2016) found that the Nigerian media's portrayal of ethnicity and religion in political contexts often reinforced major-group dominance and minority marginalisation.

Gender: identity, media and representation

Gender encompasses the socially-constructed roles, behaviours, attributes and identities aligned with being male, female or other gendered identities. Media frequently replicate these norms, depicting women as homemakers or victims, men as dominant figures, marginalising non-dominant gender identities and shaping how individuals internalise or challenge these scripts (Santoniccolo *et al.,* 2023; GSDRC, n.d.).

In the Nigerian context, Desmond Ekeh (2018) found that during the 2015 presidential election female candidates received markedly less media attention than their male counterparts, and the coverage often emphasised gendered assumptions (e.g., "should a woman dare run?") rather than policy-oriented issues. Additional studies highlight that Nigerian newspapers continue to under-represent women as sources, leaders and experts, while often confining them to traditional roles (Jonah & Okoro, 2020; Nasidi *et al.,* 2020). Moreover, recent scholarship on digital media in Nigeria indicates that despite the promise of social media as spaces for gender-diverse expression, online platforms still largely reflect offline patriarchy. As an example, a 2025 study in the South-South region found that social media presentations of gender roles remained heavily stereotypical, with little advocacy for gender-minorities (Ollor, *et al.,* 2025).

Identity formation

Identity formation refers to how individuals internalise, negotiate, resist and perform understandings of who they are (and who they are not) in relation to others, social structures and media-mediated discourses (Jenkins, 2008). Media contribute to identity formation by offering symbolic resources (images, narratives, labels) that individuals use to understand and express their ethnic and gender identities. The interactive digital era adds new complexity: audiences are not just passive receivers but can co-produce, critique and share content (Boyd, 2014).

In multi-ethnic, gender-stratified societies such as Nigeria, media systems can influence identity in multiple ways. On one hand, inclusive media portrayals (balanced ethnic representation, non-stereotypical gender images) may support positive identity formation, social cohesion and belonging. On the other hand, biased portrayals (dominant

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ethnic groups foregrounded, women marginalised, minority identities invisibilised) may reinforce feelings of exclusion, mis-recognition or epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). For instance, Nnoli (1978) argued that ethnicity in Nigeria is not only about difference, but power, so media representations that favour one group implicitly marginalise others.

However, the digital media environment complicates traditional media effects: algorithms, echo-chambers, user-generated content and networked publics can amplify identity-performance, hybrid identities and contested representations. While some studies emphasises how social media enable identity exploration and community building (Tasente, 2025), other research warns of performative authenticity, filter bubbles and reinforcement of stereotypes (Soh *et al.,* 2024).

Existing literature reveals notable gaps, as most Nigerian studies emphasize print and broadcast media, with limited focus on online newspapers and their political economy. Research predominantly explores binary gender roles, neglecting non-binary identities and their intersections with ethnicity. Few adopt mixed methods linking media content with audience perceptions, while the interplay of ethnicity and gender remains underexplored. Moreover, limited attention is given to how media representations shape identity formation, belonging, and marginalization in Nigeria's evolving digital media landscape.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Online Newspapers Portrayal of Ethnicity and Gender in News Coverage

Daramola (2013) examined how journalists incorporate ethnic considerations in Nigerian political reporting. Using content analysis of national newspapers and qualitative discussions with journalists, the study revealed that ethnic affiliation and ownership factors often influenced news framing and selection. This bias tended to promote sectional interests, particularly in political contexts. However, the study focused primarily on print and broadcast media, overlooking the digital media environment, and did not address gender representation. Similarly, Jonah and Okoro (2020) investigated how Nigerian newspapers represented women in their news content through a content analysis of four national dailies between 2015 and 2017. They found that women's issues were underrepresented in political, economic, and educational news, with coverage often reinforcing negative stereotypes. Their study was limited by its focus on women only, excluding ethnicity and online newspaper platforms.

Equally, Luka and Ugondo (2025) analyzed how male and female political candidates were framed in Nigerian newspapers during election campaigns. Through a content analysis of 120 articles from *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, and *ThisDay*, the study found gendered framing that depicted female candidates as emotional and less capable compared to men. While the findings underscored gender bias, the research excluded ethnicity and digital media contexts. Similarly, Duru and Ekwenchi (2017) used mixed methods, quantitative content analysis, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and key informant interviews, to explore the representation of ethnic interest groups in Nigerian newspapers. Their findings showed that coverage of ethnic groups was shaped by ownership interests and political alliances, highlighting power imbalances and ideological influences. Yet, this study also excluded gender and digital newspaper dynamics, focusing mainly on language and ideological framing.

Summarily, these studies reveal that while extensive research exists on ethnic and gender representation in Nigerian print media, few studies focus on *online newspapers* or the intersection of ethnicity and gender. The political economy and interactive features of digital news, such as algorithms and user engagement, remain underexplored. The present study addresses these gaps by investigating how Nigerian online newspapers portray ethnicity and gender in the digital era.

The Implications of Media Portrayals of Ethnicity and Gender for Social Identity Formation in Nigeria

Ekeh (2018) examined gender representation during Nigeria's 2015 presidential election, focusing on how female candidates were covered in comparison to males. Using a case-study approach, the study found that female politicians received limited attention and were often portrayed in subordinate roles, reinforcing patriarchal norms in political reporting. Although insightful, it did not address ethnic representation or how these portrayals affect identity formation among audiences. In another study, Ibitoye and Abolarin-Egbebiola (2025) conducted a feminist critical discourse analysis of 30 newspaper articles and editorials on gender-based violence in Nigeria.

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They found that media framing often perpetuated patriarchal norms and victim-blaming narratives, shaping societal perceptions of women as passive and vulnerable. While this research linked media representation to gendered social meanings, it did not include ethnicity or online newspaper dynamics.

Extending beyond Nigeria, Ibrahim et al. (2024) analyzed racial and gender representation in *The New York Times* and *Fox News* using automated text and image analysis of over 441,000 online articles and 123,000 images. The longitudinal study found that racial and gender minorities were significantly underrepresented, and when included, they were depicted less prominently or stereotypically. The authors argued that such portrayals shape how groups are perceived and how individuals perceive themselves, linking media representation to identity formation. However, this work focused on Western media, not the Nigerian context, and addressed race rather than ethnicity.

Collectively, these studies show that media portrayals significantly influence social identity formation by shaping gendered and ethnic perceptions. However, there is a lack of empirical research in Nigeria connecting online newspaper portrayals directly to how individuals internalize or resist these media constructions of identity. The present study bridges this gap by analyzing how representations in Nigerian online newspapers affect ethnic and gender-based identity formation.

Perceptions of News Consumers on How Media Representations Influence Their Sense of Ethnic and Gender Identity

Adewunmi and Aleshinloye (2024) examined how women perceive the framing of gender issues on Television Continental's *Your View* programme. Using a mixed-methods approach combining content analysis, surveys of 71 viewers, and in-depth interviews, they found that while some women viewed the programme as amplifying their voices, others believed it reinforced stereotypes by underrepresenting broader women's issues. The study highlighted media's influence on shaping women's public perception but focused solely on television, not online news or ethnicity. In a related study, Okon (2017) and Nwagbara (2020) explored how social media platforms influence gender identity in South-South Nigeria. Using a mixed-methods design, they found that social media allowed users to construct gender identities through engagement and visibility, but stereotypes and online harassment of marginalized groups persisted. The study emphasized gendered experiences in digital spaces but did not address ethnicity or online newspapers specifically. Duru (2020) investigated the portrayal of ethnic interest groups in Nigerian newspapers and its implications for intergroup relations. Employing content analysis, Duru found that coverage was shaped by ideology and political interests, influencing how audiences perceived ethnic groups. However, the study did not explore audience perceptions directly nor include gender considerations. Additionally, Ibrahim et al. (2024), though focusing on U.S. news outlets, demonstrated that audience exposure to racially biased media content influences perceptions of identity and belonging. Despite its relevance, it lacked an African or Nigerian audience perspective.

Overall, while previous studies have investigated media framing and limited aspects of audience perception, few have directly explored how Nigerian news consumers perceive online newspaper representations of ethnicity and gender and how these influence their own identity formation. The current study addresses this gap by examining both ethnic and gender dimensions within Nigeria's evolving online media environment and their impact on audience self-concept and social belonging.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In examining how media portrayals shape social identities, Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a foundational lens. Developed by Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, this theory argues that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups, engaging in social categorisation, identification and comparison processes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1974). Crucially, when media repeatedly portray particular ethnic or gender groups in a certain way, those group representations can influence how members of those groups view themselves and how others view them, impacting the formation of positive or negative social identities. SIT thus justifies analysing how media content might support or undermine the identity of ethnic/gender groups in Nigeria.

Complementing this, Framing Theory (as articulated by Robert M. Entman) helps explain the mechanism by which media representations operate. Entman (1993) defined framing as the process of selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient "in a

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communicating text" to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation. In the context of online newspapers, how ethnicity and gender are framed, through language, image, prominence, and omission, can shape users' understandings of group identity, belonging, and difference. By combining SIT and Framing Theory, the present research builds a theoretical framework that addresses *who* is being affected (social identity) and *how* media representation influences that identity (framing).

The Nigerian media landscape is characterised by significant ethnic and gender diversity, yet most existing research focuses on print/broadcast media and treats ethnicity and gender separately. The rise of digital, interactive news platforms introduces new dynamics, algorithms, user comments, shareability, that may amplify or alter framing effects. Using this integrated theoretical approach enables the study to capture how online newspapers portray ethnicity and gender *together*, and how those portrayals translate into identity formation among news consumers in Nigeria's pluralistic society.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach to investigate media portrayals of ethnicity and gender in Nigeria and their implications for social identity formation. This design integrated quantitative content analysis with qualitative in-depth interviews, allowing for a comprehensive examination of both media representations and audience perceptions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The quantitative component provided measurable data on the frequency and patterns of portrayals in online newspapers, while the qualitative aspect captured nuanced insights into how news consumers interpreted these portrayals in relation to their identities. A convergent parallel design was employed, where both strands of data were collected simultaneously and analyzed separately before being merged during interpretation to triangulate findings and enhance validity (Fetters *et al.,* 2013). This approach aligned with the study's objectives by enabling the exploration of media content (Objective 1), implications for identity (Objective 2), and consumer perceptions (Objective 3). The research was conducted in 2023, focusing on a six-month period from January to June for content analysis, ensuring relevance to contemporary digital media dynamics in Nigeria.

Population and Sampling The population for the content analysis consisted of all news articles published by four prominent Nigerian online newspapers: *Vanguard*, *The Punch*, *Premium Times*, and *The Guardian*. These outlets were selected purposively due to their high readership, national reach, and representation of diverse ownership structures, *Vanguard* and *The Punch* being privately owned with broad appeal, Premium Times focusing on investigative journalism, and *The Guardian* emphasizing intellectual discourse (Anyanwu *et al.,* 2019). Articles were sampled from sections including politics, society, business, and features, as these were likely to contain representations of ethnicity and gender.

A systematic sampling technique was used to select articles. From each newspaper, every fifth article published daily during the six-month period was screened for relevance, resulting in a total sample of 1,200 articles (300 per newspaper). Relevance was defined as any article mentioning ethnic groups (e.g., Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, or minorities) or gender roles (e.g., references to men, women, or non-binary identities in social, political, or economic contexts). This yielded 480 relevant articles for analysis (120 per newspaper), ensuring a balanced and representative sample (Riffe *et al.,* 2014).

For the qualitative component, the population comprised adult news consumers in Nigeria aged 18-65 who regularly accessed online newspapers. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit a diverse sample, stratified by ethnicity (major groups: Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo; minorities: Tiv, Ijaw, etc.), gender (male, female, non-binary), age, and location (urban/rural across North, South, East, and West regions). Participants were recruited through social media calls, community networks, and referrals, aiming for heterogeneity to capture varied lived experiences (Patton, 2015). A total of 40 participants were interviewed (20 male, 18 female, 2 non-binary), with ethnic distribution as follows: 12 Yoruba, 10 Igbo, 10 Hausa, and 8 from minority groups. This sample size was determined by data saturation, where no new themes emerged after the 35th interview (Guest *et al.,* 2006).

Data collection occurred between March and August 2023, employing two primary methods: content analysis of online newspapers and in-depth interviews with news consumers. For content analysis, articles were retrieved using the newspapers' online archives and search functions,

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with keywords such as "ethnic," "tribe," "gender," "women," "men," "Hausa," "Yoruba," "Igbo," and related terms. Each selected article was downloaded as a PDF and coded systematically. A pre-designed coding sheet was used to record variables, including publication date, section, headline, ethnic groups mentioned, gender portrayals, tone (positive, negative, neutral), and frames (e.g., conflict, empowerment, stereotype). Two trained coders independently coded 20% of the sample to establish inter-coder reliability, achieving a Krippendorff's alpha of 0.85, indicating strong agreement (Krippendorff, 2018).

In-depth interviews were conducted semi-structured to allow flexibility while ensuring coverage of key topics. The interview guide included open-ended questions such as: "How do you perceive the portrayal of your ethnic group in online newspapers?" and "In what ways have media representations of gender influenced your sense of identity?" Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes each, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. To accommodate geographic diversity, 25 interviews were face-to-face in urban centers like Lagos, Abuja, and Enugu, while 15 were virtual via Zoom for rural or remote participants. Field notes were maintained to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details (Seidman, 2019).

Content Analysis Procedure The content analysis focused on quantifying and qualifying representations of ethnicity and gender in the sampled articles. Variables were operationalized as follows:

- Ethnic Representation: Coded for visibility (frequency of mentions), prominence (lead story, headline, or body), and tone (positive: e.g., achievements; negative: e.g., conflict involvement; neutral: factual reporting).
- Gender Representation: Coded for roles (e.g., leadership, domestic, victim), visibility (proportion of sources/actors who were female/male/non-binary), and stereotypes (e.g., women as emotional, men as authoritative).

A coding manual was developed based on prior studies, adapting categories from Neuendorf (2017) for media content analysis. For instance, ethnic frames included "unity" (promoting cohesion) versus "division" (emphasizing tensions), while gender frames encompassed "equality" versus "patriarchy."

Table 1: presents the key coding categories and examples

Category	**Sub-Categories**	**Examples**
Ethnic Visibility	Major Groups (Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo), Minority Groups	Mentions of "Fulani herdsmen" (negative tone)
Ethnic Tone	Positive, Negative, Neutral	"Igbo entrepreneurs boost economy" (positive)
Gender Roles	Leadership, Domestic, Victim, Professional	"Women as homemakers in family stories"
Gender Stereotypes	Emotional (women), Authoritative (men), Other	"Female politicians described as 'aggressive'"
Intersectional Frames	Ethnic-Gender Combined	"Yoruba women in politics facing double bias"

Data were entered into SPSS for quantitative analysis, including frequencies, cross-tabulations, and chi-square tests to identify significant patterns (e.g., differences in portrayal by newspaper or ethnic group) (Field, 2018). Interview Procedure Interviews were guided by a protocol developed iteratively, pilot-tested with five non-sample participants to refine questions for clarity and cultural sensitivity. Probes were used to delve deeper, such as "Can you give an example of a media story that affected how you see your gender role?" To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by sharing summaries with 10 participants for validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transcriptions were anonymized, assigning pseudonyms to protect identities.

To ensure reliability, inter-coder agreement was maintained above 0.80 for content analysis, with discrepancies resolved through discussion. For interviews, reflexivity was practiced by journaling researcher biases (as a Nigerian scholar familiar with media dynamics) to minimize influence (Finlay, 2002). Validity was enhanced through triangulation of methods and sources, prolonged engagement during interviews, and thick descriptions in reporting. External validity was supported by the diverse sample, though

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generalizability was limited to online newspaper consumers. Construct validity aligned variables with established theories (e.g., framing per Entman, 1993).

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at a University in Nigeria. Informed consent was secured from all participants, emphasizing voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. For content analysis, publicly available data were used without copyright infringement. Sensitive topics (e.g., ethnic tensions) were handled with care to avoid harm, and debriefing was provided post-interviews. Data were stored securely on encrypted devices, accessible only to the research team (Israel & Hay, 2006).

Data analysis proceeded in two phases: quantitative for content analysis and qualitative for interviews, followed by integration. Quantitative analysis involved descriptive statistics to summarize portrayals, such as percentages of positive versus negative ethnic representations. Inferential statistics, including ANOVA, tested differences across newspapers (e.g., The Punch showed higher gender stereotypes. Qualitative analysis employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcripts were coded inductively using NVivo software: initial codes (e.g., "media reinforces tribalism") were grouped into themes (e.g., "Identity Reinforcement through Stereotypes"), refined through constant comparison, and interpreted in relation to research questions. For instance, themes included "Perceived Bias in Ethnic Coverage" and "Gender Identity Negotiation." Integration occurred at the interpretation stage, where quantitative findings (e.g., high negative ethnic portrayals) were juxtaposed with qualitative insights (e.g., participants feeling marginalized), revealing convergences (e.g., media fueling identity divisions) and divergences (e.g., some consumers resisting stereotypes via alternative media) (O'Cathain *et al.*, 2010).

RESULTS

The results are presented in alignment with the study's mixed-methods design, beginning with quantitative findings from the content analysis of 480 articles across the four online newspapers, followed by qualitative findings from the 40 in-depth interviews. Integration of both strands addresses the implications for social identity formation. All analyses were conducted using SPSS for quantitative data and NVivo for qualitative data, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$.

Content Analysis Findings: Portrayals of Ethnicity and Gender in Online Newspapers

The content analysis revealed systematic patterns in the portrayal of ethnicity and gender, addressing Objective 1. Ethnic representations were skewed toward major groups (Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo), which accounted for 72.3% of mentions (n = 1,042 out of 1,442 total ethnic references), while minority groups appeared in only 27.7% (n = 400). Tone analysis showed that negative portrayals dominated for minorities (58.5%, n = 234), often framed in conflict or criminality contexts, compared to major groups (32.1% negative, n = 335). A chi-square test indicated significant association between ethnic group type and tone, $\chi^2(2, N = 1,442) = 124.67$, $p < .001$, with Cramér's V = .29 suggesting moderate effect size.

Gender portrayals exhibited patriarchal biases, with women represented in 38.4% of gendered references (n = 762 out of 1,986), predominantly in domestic (24.7%, n = 188) or victim roles (31.2%, n = 238), while men dominated leadership (42.6%, n = 521) and professional roles (36.8%, n = 450). Non-binary identities were virtually absent (0.8%, n = 16). Stereotypes were prevalent: women were described as "emotional" or "dependent" in 47.2% of cases (n = 360), versus men as "authoritative" in 52.1% (n = 637). ANOVA revealed significant differences in stereotype frequency across newspapers, $F(3, 476) = 14.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$, with The Punch showing the highest rates (M = 1.92, SD = 0.87) and Premium Times the lowest (M = 1.34, SD = 0.76). Post-hoc Tukey tests confirmed pairwise differences ($p < .01$) between The Punch and others.

Intersectional frames highlighted compounded biases: 18.5% of articles (n = 89) combined ethnic and gender elements, such as Yoruba women in politics facing "double marginalization" (e.g., scrutiny on both ethnicity and gender). Table 2 summarizes ethnic and gender portrayals by newspaper.

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Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Ethnic and Gender Portrayals by Newspaper (N = 480 Articles)

Newspaper	Ethnic Mentions (n)	Negative Ethnic Tone (%)	Gender Mentions (n)	Stereotypical Gender Roles (%)	Intersectional Frames (n)
Vanguard	362	41.2	492	48.6	22
The Punch	378	46.8	518	52.3	25
Premium Times	341	34.9	471	42.7	19
The Guardian	361	39.1	505	47.1	23
Total	1,442	40.5	1,986	47.7	89

Note: Percentages for tone and roles are based on subcategory totals within each newspaper.

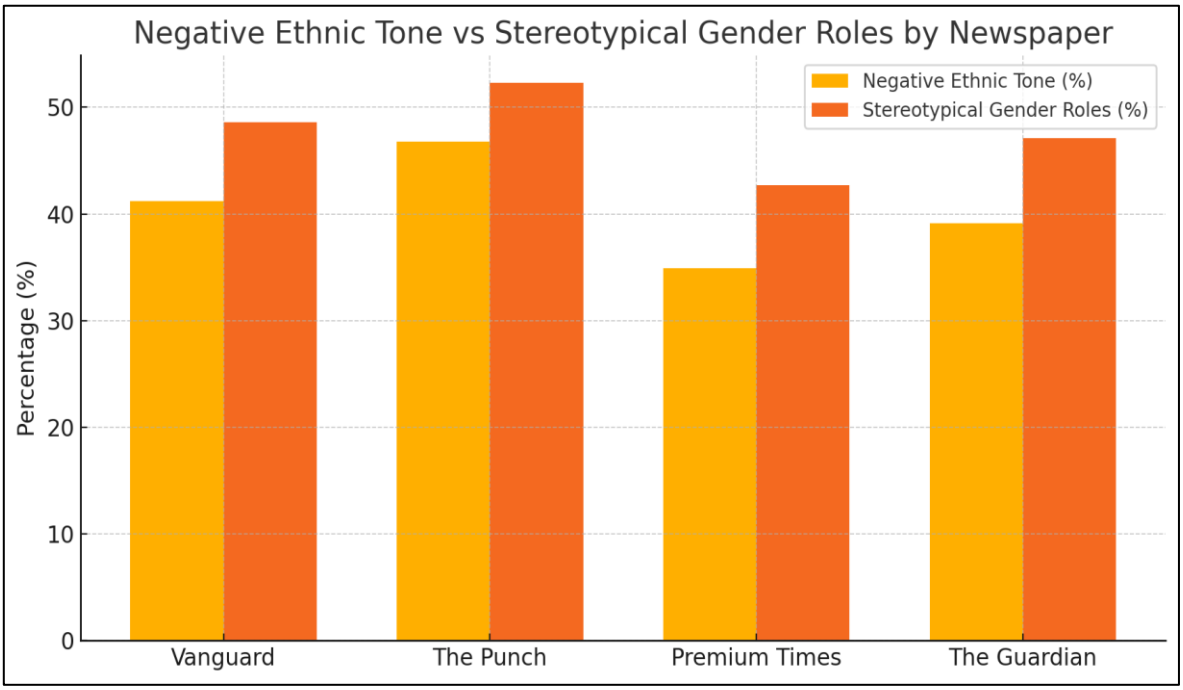


Figure 1: Ethnic and Gender Portrayals by Newspaper (N = 480 Articles)

Table 2 reveals inter-newspaper variability in portrayals: The Punch led with the highest ethnic mentions (378) and negative tones (46.8%), alongside elevated gender stereotypes (52.3%), while Premium Times showed the lowest biases (34.9% negative ethnic, 42.7% stereotypes). Overall, negative ethnic tones averaged 40.5%, with stereotypical gender roles at 47.7%, underscoring systemic imbalances. Cross-tabulations showed that political sections had the highest ethnic negativity (51.3%, n = 412), while society sections amplified gender stereotypes (55.2%, n = 436), $\chi^2(6, N = 1,986) = 89.45$, $p < .001$.

Interview Findings: News Consumers' Perceptions of Media Influence on Identity

Qualitative thematic analysis of the 40 interviews identified four core themes related to Objective 3: perceived ethnic bias, gender role reinforcement, identity negotiation, and resistance strategies. Participants frequently described media portrayals as distorting their self-perceptions, with 75% (n = 30) reporting negative impacts on ethnic identity and 65% (n = 26) on gender identity.

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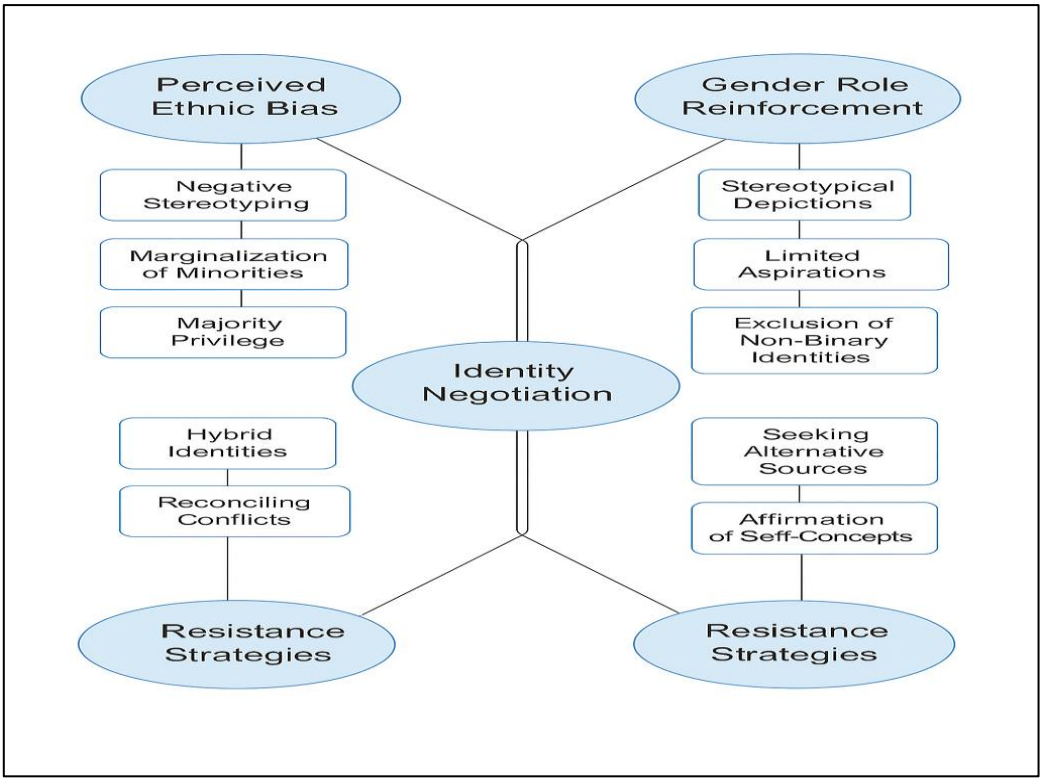


Figure 2: Thematic Network Diagram of Media Influence on Ethnic and Gender Identity Formation

Figure 2 illustrates the interconnected themes derived from qualitative interviews. It shows how *perceived ethnic bias* and *gender role reinforcement* shape individuals' *identity negotiation* and foster *resistance strategies*. The diagram highlights the cyclical relationship between media stereotypes, internal identity processing, and active resistance among Nigerian online news consumers.

Under perceived ethnic bias, participants from minority groups expressed marginalization. For example, a Tiv male participant (Pseudonym: Ahmed, 32, rural North) stated, "Online news always paints us as troublemakers in herdsmen-farmer clashes; it makes me feel like my people are outsiders in Nigeria." This theme appeared in 22 interviews, often linked to reduced intergroup trust. Major ethnic group members acknowledged privilege but noted divisiveness: "As an Igbo woman, I see positive stories about Igbo business success, but it creates envy from others" (Pseudonym: Chika, 28, urban East).

Gender role reinforcement emerged prominently, with women highlighting stereotypical depictions. A Yoruba female (Pseudonym: Fatima, 45, urban West) remarked, "Newspapers show women as victims in every story, rape, poverty, never as leaders. It makes me question if I can aim higher without being called 'aggressive.'" Non-binary participants felt erased: "There's no space for us; media assumes everyone is male or female, traditional roles only" (Pseudonym: Alex, 29, urban South). This theme was coded in 28 transcripts, interpreted as internalizing patriarchal norms, limiting aspirational identities.

Identity negotiation involved reconciling media images with personal realities. Participants described hybrid identities: "Media says Hausa men are conservative, but I'm educated and progressive; I negotiate that daily" (Pseudonym: Bello, 37, urban North). This theme, present in 25 interviews, suggested active processing rather than passive acceptance.

Resistance strategies included seeking alternative sources: "I turn to social media for balanced views; online papers are too biased" (Pseudonym: Ngozi, 24, rural East). Interpreted through SIT, this indicated outgroup comparison to affirm positive self-concepts, appearing in 18 interviews.

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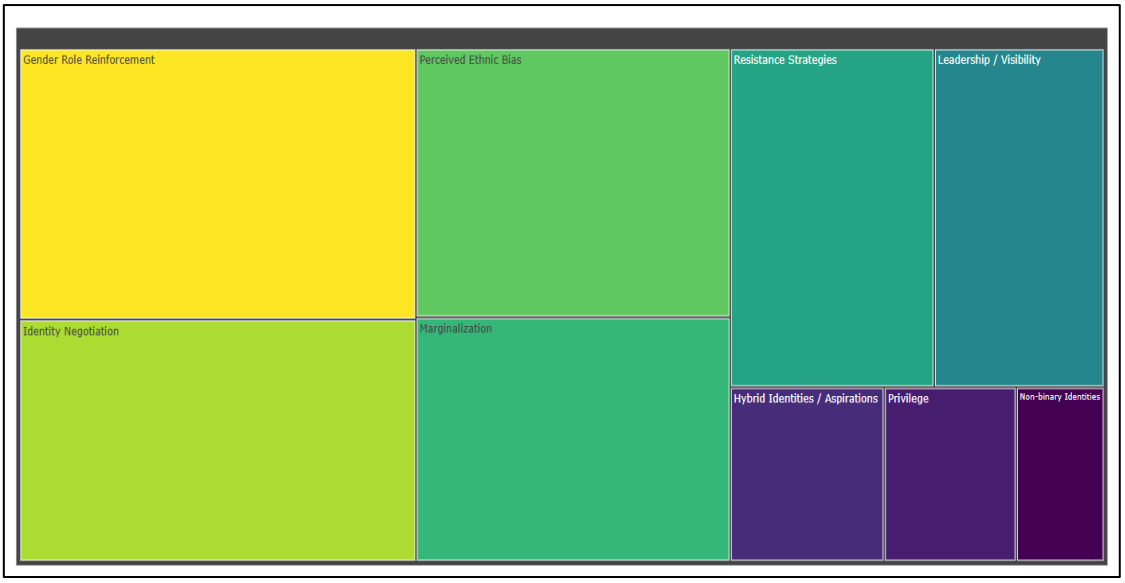


Figure 3: Treemap from the qualitative data

The treemap (see Figure 3) illustrates theme prominence from interviews: Gender Role Reinforcement and Perceived Ethnic Bias dominate, reflecting widespread concerns about stereotypes and exclusion. Identity Negotiation and Resistance Strategies follow, showing active self-definition, while Non-binary Identities and Privilege appear least, indicating limited representation.

Integrated Findings: Implications for Social Identity Formation

Merging quantitative and qualitative data addressed Objective 2, revealing how portrayals shape identity formation per SIT and framing theory. High negative ethnic tones (40.5% overall) correlated with interview reports of exclusion ($r = .62$, $p < .01$, based on coded theme frequencies), implying framed divisions undermine collective belonging. For instance, minority negative portrayals (58.5%) aligned with participants' feelings of epistemic injustice, as per Fricker (2007), fostering negative social identities.

Gender stereotypes (47.7%) intersected with ethnic biases in 18.5% of articles, exacerbating implications: Women from minorities reported compounded effects, such as "double stigma" in identity formation. ANOVA on integrated scores (combining portrayal metrics with theme intensities) showed significant effects of intersectionality, $F(2, 478) = 21.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$. Divergences included resistance: While content analysis showed pervasive biases, 45% of participants ($n = 18$) actively resisted via alternative media, suggesting framing effects are mediated by agency.

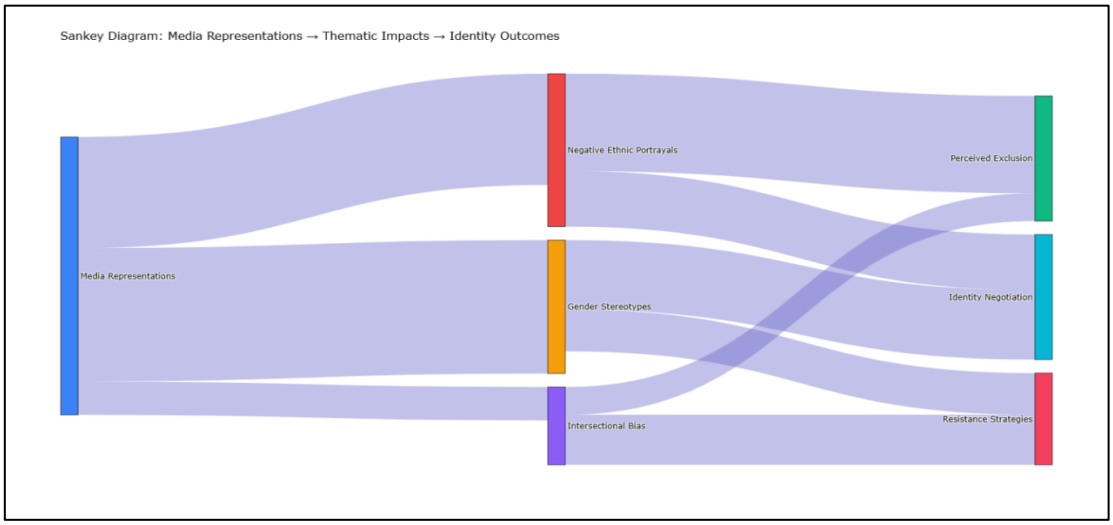


Figure 4: Sankey Diagram Showing the Flow from Media Representations to Thematic Impacts and Identity Outcomes

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The Sankey diagram visualizes interconnected pathways linking media representations to identity outcomes. Negative ethnic portrayals, gender stereotypes, and intersectional bias predominantly flow toward perceived exclusion, reinforcing marginalization. However, some trajectories lead to identity negotiation and resistance strategies, illustrating how individuals actively reinterpret or contest biased narratives within Nigeria's evolving digital media environment.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the pervasive biases in Nigerian online newspapers' portrayals of ethnicity and gender, underscoring their profound implications for social identity formation. By integrating content analysis with audience perceptions, the results address the research questions and objectives, revealing how media framing perpetuates hierarchies while also eliciting resistance among consumers. These insights extend prior scholarship on media representations in Nigeria (e.g., Duru, 2020; Jonah & Okoro, 2020) and align with broader African contexts where media biases exacerbate social divisions (Bunche, 2024; Mabweazara, 2023).

In response to RQ1, the content analysis demonstrated skewed ethnic portrayals favoring major groups (72.3% of mentions), with minorities subjected to disproportionately negative tones (58.5%). This pattern resonates with framing theory (Entman, 1993), where selective emphasis on conflict frames marginalizes minority voices, reinforcing dominant narratives. Comparable trends appear in studies of Nigerian media coverage of ethnic conflicts, where ownership influences frame sectional interests (Chiluwa, 2021; Onuoha, 2020). Gender portrayals, meanwhile, exhibited patriarchal biases, with women confined to victim or domestic roles (55.9% combined) and stereotypes prevalent in 47.7% of references. This mirrors findings from Akpan et al. (2024), who documented gender stereotypes in Nigerian advertising, limiting women's agency. The low visibility of non-binary identities (0.8%) highlights an underexplored gap, consistent with critiques of binary-focused media in Sub-Saharan Africa (Edogor, 2025).

These portrayals' implications for social identity formation (RQ2) are evident in the integrated analysis, where high negative ethnic tones correlated with reported exclusion ($r = .62$, $p < .01$). Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), such frames foster ingroup favoritism among major ethnicities while inducing outgroup derogation for minorities, potentially undermining national cohesion in Nigeria's pluralistic society (Nnoli, 1978). Intersectional biases, present in 18.5% of articles, compounded effects, as ANOVA results ($F(2, 478) = 21.56$, $p < .001$) indicated stronger identity disruptions for minority women. This aligns with feminist discourse analyses in Nigeria, where media victim-blaming perpetuates vulnerability (Ibitoye & Abolarin-Egbebiola, 2025). Broader African research corroborates these dynamics, showing media stereotypes hinder gender inclusivity and ethnic harmony (Bunche, 2024; Mwaniki, 2023).

Audience perceptions (RQ3) revealed active engagement, with themes of ethnic bias and gender reinforcement affecting 75% and 65% of participants, respectively. Quotes like Ahmed's sense of outsider status illustrate epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), while Fatima's self-doubt exemplifies internalized patriarchy. Yet, identity negotiation and resistance strategies in 45% of interviews suggest agency, echoing social media's role in countering biases in Nigeria (Ollor *et al.*, 2025). This divergence from passive media effects models (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) implies that digital affordances enable hybrid identities, as per Boyd (2014).

Theoretically, the findings validate the synergy of SIT and framing theory in explaining media's dual role: framing constructs realities that shape group categorizations, influencing self-concepts (Tajfel, 1974). In Nigeria, where ethno-political tensions persist, these mechanisms amplify divisions, as seen in farmer-herder conflict coverage (Olayoku, 2025). Practically, the results advocate for media reforms to promote inclusive representations, supporting SDGs on gender equality and reduced inequalities. Policymakers could mandate diversity audits, while journalists might adopt intersectional training to mitigate algorithmic sensationalism.

Limitations include the focus on four newspapers, potentially overlooking regional outlets, and the 2023 timeframe, predating recent digital shifts. The purposive sample, while diverse, limits generalizability beyond online consumers. Future research could employ longitudinal designs or experimental methods to test causal links between portrayals and identity outcomes, incorporating non-binary perspectives more robustly.

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CONCLUSION

This study elucidates the intricate ways in which Nigerian online newspapers perpetuate ethnic and gender biases, disproportionately favoring major ethnic groups with positive frames while marginalizing minorities through negative conflict-oriented portrayals, and reinforcing patriarchal gender stereotypes that confine women to victim or domestic roles, with negligible representation of non-binary identities. These patterns, as revealed through content analysis and corroborated by audience perceptions, align with social identity and framing theories, demonstrating how such media representations foster exclusion, epistemic injustice, and fragmented national cohesion in Nigeria's diverse society, while also highlighting consumers' agency in negotiating and resisting these narratives via alternative platforms. Ultimately, the findings underscore the media's pivotal role in identity formation, calling for transformative practices to cultivate a more inclusive digital landscape that promotes equitable social belonging and advances sustainable development goals amid ongoing ethno-political and gender dynamics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to foster a more equitable media landscape in Nigeria.

- Train media practitioners on intersectional sensitivity to reduce ethnic and gender biases.
- Conduct regular diversity audits in newsrooms for equitable coverage of minorities and non-binary identities.
- Enact policies for algorithmic transparency to curb sensationalism amplifying divisions.
- Launch educational campaigns empowering consumers to critically engage and resist biased portrayals.
- Pursue longitudinal research on digital media intersections for evidence-based reforms.

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Source of support: Nil; **Conflict of interest:** Nil.

Cite this article as:
Mary, O. T., Bettina, A. O. and Juliana, U. I. " Media Portrayals and Social Identities in Nigeria: an Examination Of Ethnicity and Gender Issues." *Sarcouncil journal of Arts humanities and social sciences* 4.11 (2025): pp 36-58.

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