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Sahara Reporters and *Premium Times* online coverage of the Russia–Ukraine war

Abstract

Purpose: The mass media have continued to be significant news sources for human society, particularly during conflict and war. The media dependency theory posits that during crisis or instability, society relies more on traditional and new media to help it understand the developments in the war. This article investigated the frequency of the coverage of the Russia–Ukraine War by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times*, ascertained the most dominant tone used by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* in the reporting of the Russian–Ukraine War, and unfurled the frame of coverage of Russian–Ukraine War by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times*.
Theoretical and Methodical Considerations: Anchored in Robert Entman's Framing Theory, online publications of *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* from March 2022 to September 2022 served as the population of the study and the census sampling technique was used to draw a sample for the study. The explanation-building model was the method of data analysis.
Findings: Results showed that *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* reports on the 2022 Russian–Ukraine War were frequent. Also, they paid more attention to the impacts of the war on Nigerian emigrants or students overseas in Russia and Ukraine.
Implications: Our findings suggest that online newspapers mostly toned the Russian–Ukraine War in negative slants and framed the stories highlighting the impact of the war on Nigerians, especially Nigerian students in Russia and Ukraine.
Value: The article brings a new perspective to the Russian–Ukraine War in media scholarship by examining Nigeria's online news reporting of the Russian–Ukraine conflict. It is, therefore, recommended that Nigerian online newspapers not solely focus on negative reports of the war and its implications for stakeholders in Nigeria.

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They should adopt a more diverse range of frames and tones in their coverage, to influence stakeholders to take action to prevent wars and hold the Nigerian government accountable for providing adequate infrastructure and human capital that discourages emigration in search of a better life both academically and otherwise.

Keywords: crisis; framing theory; mass media; Nigeria; Nigerian emigrants; online news reporting; *Premium Times*; Russia–Ukraine war; *Sahara Reporters*

1 Introduction

Online newspapers have continued to be significant news sources for society, particularly during conflict and war. This is because, as the media dependency theory suggests, during crisis or instability, members of society rely more on traditional and new media to help them understand the causes, implications and probable solutions to the crisis (Omoera 2010). Melki and Kozman (2021) claim that during crisis or war, society relies on the media to provide information about their safety, ability to survive and comprehension of the situation. This suggests that media has the power to enlighten the public and mould their ideas, opinions and perspectives on social disputes via the employment of news frames. Shalvee and Sambhav (2020) state that this is because the mass media is a dominant tool for educating the public about an issue and influencing their perception of it by highlighting some aspects of it over others, especially through the use of frames which makes it possible for media messages to be deduced by the public in the manner that the media desires. Somerville (2016) contends that the media aid in placing narratives into perspective so that the general public may understand them in line with pre-existing beliefs and moral standards. This implies that online media coverage of wars or war zones for the public with a certain objective or agenda can help victims of the war as well as its stakeholders enlightened about the war and its implications. This article considered the *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* online coverage of the Russia–Ukraine War, with a specific reference to Nigeria.

Sahara Reporters (2022) reported that Erudera, an education search platform, released data indicating that before the Russian–Ukraine War, approximately 4379 Nigerian students enrolled in various academic programmes such as bachelor's, master's, preparatory courses, postgraduate studies, and academic mobility programmes in Russia. Roohi and Manuela (2022) reported that there were approximately 4000 Nigerian students in the country before the war started. In the same way, because of the parlous state of affairs in political, social, and economic spaces of Africa today (Omoera 2023), it is suspected that hundreds of thousands of diaspora Africans, particularly Nigerian emigrants or students are stuck in many Ukrainian cities and towns where they sought better life academically and

otherwise. Hence, online news sites such as *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* can help diaspora Nigerians or Nigerian students stay connected to what is happening in their home country and vice versa. By reading online news, they can keep up with current events, trends, and developments in Nigeria, even if they are physically located in another country.

Online news sites provide diaspora Nigerians and Nigeria students with access to diverse perspectives on issues impacting Nigeria about the international community. They can read news from a range of sources, including mainstream media, alternative media, and independent journalists, which can provide a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues. Online news sites can be beneficial for diaspora Nigerians and Nigerian students who may prefer to read news in their native language. Many online news sites offer news in multiple languages, allowing individuals to access news in the language they are most comfortable with. They are easily accessible and can be read at any time, from any location. This is mostly convenient for diaspora Nigerians and Nigerian students who may have busy schedules or limited access to traditional news sources of radio and television. Also, online news sites can provide educational value for Nigerian students studying abroad. By reading news from their home country, they can expand their understanding of Nigerian culture, politics and society, which can be beneficial for their academic studies and future career prospects.

This study focuses on the 2022 Russian–Ukrainian War which broke out on February 24, 2022, when Russian soldiers invaded Ukraine as a result of their seemingly unresolvable disputes. The struggle between Russians and Ukrainians was brought on by divergent national ideologies, political influences, complicated historical backdrop, political power structure and the process of forging a national identity and claims (Cenciarini 2020). Ukraine gained its independence in 1991 after the disintegration of the United Social Soviet Republic (USSR), even though there are certain historical and cultural ties between the two nations as a result of their shared membership in the Soviet Union. Cenciarini (2020) citing Menkiszak (2016) added that since then, Ukraine has worked to overcome Russian political and cultural influence to cultivate a genuine feeling of nationalism and self-determination.

Before the Russian–Ukrainian War, Russia and Ukraine had several confrontations and disagreements that resulted in the deaths of over 3000 people, the displacement of over 850,000 people from their homes and the need for humanitarian help for around 3 million people (Global Conflict Tracker 2022). Fitzgerald and Davis (2022) point out that some of the past conflicts or disagreements include Russia's April 3, 2008 opposition to Ukraine joining NATO as a nation by asserting that Ukraine was not a real nation-state and the Euromaidan protest that took place in Ukraine between 2013 and 2014 to overthrow the government that cooperated with Russia and resulted in the deaths of over 130 Ukrainian civilians.

The February to March 2014 conflict, which resulted in Russia seizing and annexing Crimea as part of Russia after several people were killed, was also mentioned by the International Rescue Committee (2022) as part of the conflicts that led to the Russian–Ukraine War. The December 2021 disagreements were also noteworthy because Putin demanded that NATO and the United States of America refuse to admit Ukraine as their member as he sent thousands of Russian troops to the Russian–Ukrainian border (Fitzgerald & Davis 2022). According to BBC (2022), the Russian president invaded Ukraine to de-Nazify the country and maintain its neutrality. Many international organisations and nations have, however, denounced and criticised Russia's actions. Ukraine in particular has been in shambles since the war began.

Online media coverage of the war is typically based on the idea that society views conflict as having news value. Since the start of the Russian–Ukrainian War in 2022, online media platforms have been covering the war, not only as part of their social responsibility to the general public but also because the war is an international issue that the general public around the world wants to be fully informed about. A quick search of the keywords "Russia–Ukraine War" in any Nigerian online newspaper such as *Premium Times* can validate this. It is within this context that this study examines *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times'* online coverage of the Russia–Ukraine War to determine the Nigerian perspective of the conflict. There have been several studies on the Russian–Ukraine War some of which include Woolley's (2022) "Ukraine and Putin's post-Soviet imperialism," Howorth's (2022) "The EU's chair was Missing at the Ukraine Table," Minzarari's (2022) "Failing to deter Russia's war against Ukraine: The role of misperceptions" and "Interim security insights and implications from the first two months of the Russian–Ukraine War" by Gilliam and Van-Wie (2022).

The aforementioned studies chiefly focused on the failure of the West – the US and the EU – to deter Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and how the war has resulted in significant human suffering, including displacement, casualties and human rights abuses. This study addresses the media's framing of the Russian–Ukraine War with a specific focus on how Nigerian online newspapers, *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times*, gave the stories national/local angles as well as the impact of the stories on the international community, particularly diaspora Nigerians in Russia and Ukraine. In this study, we showed the political relationship between Nigeria, Russia and Ukraine and how media framing of wars could exacerbate or mollify wars. We also unfurled how media tone affects the public perception of wars and hinged the study on the Framing Theory put forward in 1993 by Robert Entman. The research questions for the study were to find out the frequency of the coverage of the Russia–Ukraine War by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times*; ascertain the most dominant tone used by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* in

the reporting of the Russian–Ukraine War, and unfurl the frame of coverage of the Russian–Ukraine War by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times*.

2 The Russian–Ukrainian war

Asemah-Ibrahim et al. (2022) claim that since Ukraine got its independence in 1991, there has been a clear escalation in the tensions that exist between the country and Russia even though Ukraine had been one of the most powerful Russian satellite republics and its politics, oligarchs and companies have been heavily affected by Russian institutions. Ukraine, however, started trying to institutionalise its democracy in later years and the Orange Revolution which took place in Kyiv between 2004 and 2005 was one of the protests to oppose the influence of Russian politics on a legally independent Ukraine (Fengler 2020).

The first point of tension between the Ukrainian public and the political pressure exerted by Russia was sparked in 2013 by the choice of the President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, who was opposed to entering into an alliance agreement with the European Union (Abiodun and Nwaoboli 2023; Asemah-Ibrahim et al. 2022; Higgins 2014). The Russian military involvement in Crimea in 2014, however, became the spark that ignited the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine on the world stage, and the interests of international players such as the European Union (EU), the United States (US) and the United Nations (UN) in the rift showed the difficulties in settling the dispute as a direct result of Vladimir Putin's hard neo-imperial foreign policy (Pifer 2016).

Splidsboel (2015) argues that the invasion and annexation of the Crimea peninsula in 2014 led to the beginning of a full-blown conflict between the two countries, and the Crimea annexation was made official through a referendum that was slanted toward the propaganda of *demonisation* of the Ukrainian authority and the control of the voting process. In 2021, without providing any explanation, Russia started moving troops and military equipment (including armour, missiles, and other heavy weaponry) near its border with Ukraine, and on the 24th of February 2022, Russia began its invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and this invasion has led to a full-scale ongoing war between the two countries.

According to International Rescue Committee (2022), more than 6.5 million people have been displaced inside the country, with over 4 million people being compelled to leave for neighbouring countries and over 700 Ukrainian residents having allegedly been murdered in the Russian strikes. Additionally, due to inaccessible roads and bridges, thousands of people are now without access to essential water, heat, power and medical services. Similarly, BBC (2022) reports that the war has resulted in hundreds of deaths and that cities like Mariupol are already in ruins.

The conflict jeopardised worldwide commerce and economic development harmed world peace and caused global fuel and food problems.

3 *Sahara Reporters*, *Premium Times* and the political relationship between Nigeria, Russia and Ukraine

Sahara Reporters is a news agency founded in 2006 by Sowore Omoyele. It is headquartered in New York City and focuses on promoting citizen journalism by encouraging everyday people to report stories about corruption, human rights abuses and other political misconduct in the world and Africa, with a special focus on Nigeria. It has become one of the most influential news sources in Africa, with a focus on investigative journalism and human rights reporting. In recent years, the online newspaper has become increasingly focused on covering the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, with a particular emphasis on the human rights violations occurring in the region. *Sahara Reporters* has consistently exposed violations of international law by both sides, including allegations of war crimes by the Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine. It has also reported on the international response to the crisis, and the political negotiations that are taking place.

On the other hand, *Premium Times* is a Nigerian news website founded by two Nigerian journalists, Dapo Olorunyomi and Musikilu Mojeed in 2011. Like *Sahara Reporters*, it has become one of the leading news sources in the country, with a focus on investigative journalism and human rights reporting (PMLiVE 2022). It has been closely covering the Russia–Ukraine conflict since it began in 2014, with a particular focus on the humanitarian consequences of the war. *Premium Times* has reported on the human rights abuses committed by both sides, such as the shelling of civilians in eastern Ukraine. It has also highlighted the political negotiations that have been taking place and kept readers updated on the latest developments in the conflict.

Nigeria has a long history of diplomatic relations with both Russia and Ukraine. It has also been a vocal supporter of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russian aggression. In the early 2000s, Nigeria and Russia began to strengthen their ties. In 2003, the two countries signed a cooperation agreement on defence and security. In 2006, Nigeria and Russia signed a free trade agreement. In 2010, both countries signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the oil and gas sector and in 2021, Nigeria signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia (Reuters 2021). According to the available data, the total value of Nigeria's exports to Russia in 2021 amounted to $38.8 million. Nigeria's primary exports to Russia comprised cocoa beans, valued at $29.5 million, followed by perfume plants,

which amounted to $3.55 million, and cut flowers, which accounted for $1.5 million. Over the past quarter century, Nigeria's exports to Russia have demonstrated an annualised growth rate of 6.36 %, rising from $8.3 million in 1996 to $38.8 million in 2021 (OEC n.d.). Correspondingly, the total value of exports from Russia to Nigeria in 2021 amounted to $1.25 billion. Russia's primary exports to Nigeria comprised refined petroleum, valued at $503 million, wheat, valued at $493 million, and potassic fertilisers, valued at $71.4 million. Over the past 25 years, there has been a notable increase in the annualised rate of exports from Russia to Nigeria, with a growth rate of 16.5 %. Specifically, the value of exports has risen from $27.3 million in 1996 to $1.25 billion in 2021 (OEC n.d.). The data shows that Russia is a significant trading partner of Nigeria, with substantial volumes of trade occurring between the two countries. The data also suggests that there is a diverse range of products being traded between the two countries, showing that the trade relationship is not limited to a few specific industries or products.

Nigeria's relationship with Ukraine is also strong (Abiodun and Nwaoboli 2023). In 2014, Nigeria condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea and called for the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity. In 2015, Nigeria voted in favour of a United Nations Security Council resolution that condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine and 2016, Nigeria provided $1 million in humanitarian aid to Ukraine (OEC n.d.). However, Nigeria's relationship with Russia has come under strain in recent years due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In March 2022, Nigeria voted in favour of a United Nations General Assembly resolution that condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Agbelusi 2022). It has provided further humanitarian aid to Ukraine and called for a peaceful resolution to the conflict (Erezi 2022). It is unclear how the ongoing conflict in Ukraine will impact Nigeria's relationship with Russia. However, Nigeria will likely continue to support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and this is mostly supported by the way Nigerian newspapers, especially *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times*, cover issues about the war as well as the Nigerian government's comments and attitude to the war.

4 The media framing of war

One of the distinguishing features of war journalism is the focus put on military strategy, professionalism and technology, as well as military victories and the fatalities incurred by the enemy. The reason for this is that media frames are used to show conflict and its explanations (Voltmer 2013). For instance, even though these things hardly reflect the facts on the ground, the United States military's early Vietnam War actions were frequently depicted on television as setting the pace of the war (58 % of the time) and assessments of their overall war efforts were positive

(79 % of the time) (Hallin 1986 cited by Sakwa 2015). Research has also shown that the media tends to withhold information on the negative effects of war on people and other aspects, such as the deaths of civilians and military personnel and the inevitable loss of material things that follows (Sharaf 2013). In support of Sharaf's (2013) claim, Sakwa (2015) noted that during the 1991 Iraq War, the American media provided a 'clean' depiction of the conflict and seldom depicted war victims.

With the use of instruments like satellite videophones, reporters now have substantially greater access to the battlefield as a consequence of technical improvements. As a result, the media may provide their audiences with a more complete image of warfare, including information about its effects on people and other factors. However, in recent years, the media's coverage of wars has become even more one-dimensional and "sanitised" than in the past, omitting the immense human misery and significant property devastation that go along with them (Suslov 2022). Tarrow (2011) in a study on the Iraq War in 2003 claimed that American electronic media presented its viewers with a bloodless and action-packed depiction of the conflict. In rare instances, the media has displayed photographs of those who have died and focused on showing civilians recovering in hospitals, but most of the time, images of the dead are shown from a distance or via a substitute, such as a coffin (Tarrow 2011).

Carruthers (2011), while reporting on wars, argues that the media of various countries often adopts the perspective of the country from whence the conflict started. The national media also tends to adopt a patriotic or nationalist stance to express support for the armed forces of the country and the operations they carry out, so limiting the space for valid criticism of the government policies. Prior wars and their role in the construction of national identities are often mentioned when portraying historical events in the media. For instance, the Vietnam War was predominantly depicted in American media as a national endeavour, especially in the early phases of the fight and news anchors often used the term "our" war (Carruthers 2011). This was particularly true early in the war since there were times when media portrayals of the battle brought up memories of the Second World War. Additionally, the same repeating motifs showed up in the coverage of the 1991 Iraq War much more so than they did in the early years of the Vietnam War's coverage (Robinson et al. 2012). The internal critique of a conflict, however, may not be documented at all or may be misconstrued when it is exposed as a consequence of framing in how it is presented. For instance, during the first two weeks of the 1991 Iraq War, barely 1.5 % of the news sources used by the three main commercial television networks in the United States were anti-war demonstrators.

Photographs of the protests were often contrasted in the media with pictures of the American flag being burnt during anti-American demonstrations in Arab countries, all to highlight the absurdity of anti-war protesters in the United States

(Samuel-Azran and Pecht 2014). When it came to American media coverage of the 2003 Iraq War, the space for anti-war protest remained mostly unchanged, although it somewhat expanded in British and Al-Jazeera media (Samuel-Azran and Pecht 2014). Even though United Kingdom's entry into the war was vigorously contested in the political sphere by the media and initial public opinion was largely against military involvement in the war, the United Kingdom media demonstrated that critical voices immediately restrained their positions and returned to supporting the official policy of the country once a war starts. This is reflected in how the media covers any conflict because, even while public opinion and the media are initially mostly opposed to military action in the manner suggested by the government, they come to support the nation once the war begins (Ojala et al. 2017). The Nigerian media in framing wars highlight the sufferings of the people affected by the war. This often comes as reports of human rights abuses, displacement and poverty. The Nigerian media regularly highlight the lack of government resources available to address the conflict, as well as the need to strengthen security and counter-terrorism efforts. They also emphasize the need for a peaceful end to the wars. This has typically been done through interviews with political leaders, security personnel, humanitarian workers and community members as these perspectives seek to underscore the need for dialogue and inclusive solutions to wars.

5 Influence of media tone on public perception of wars

Tone, also known as valence, can be seen as a crucial component of media coverage and media tone is an analytical technique that is utilised in understanding the mood of the press in terms of war coverage. Brunken (2006) as cited by Florine (2016) contends that when applied to the idea of frames, media contents are defined by tones that denote the components of a good, neutral, or negative dichotomy. Florine (2016) asserts that media tone affects how audiences perceive the reported problem, arguing that if media information is unfavourable in tone, the public will also see the issue adversely. In summary, this fact implies that if media coverage of the current Russian–Ukrainian War in 2020 is positive, people will likely see the conflict favourably.

According to Sheafer (2007), the media manipulates the public perception of problems via the employment of emotive rhetorical devices known as tones. By using tones that let the public ascribe emotive qualities or opinions to the subject, the media triggers a certain judgement regarding topics (Sheafer 2007). This implies that individuals respond badly to situations when they have a negative connotation or

tone and this applies to online media coverage of the Russia–Ukraine War. Bleich et al. (2022) remark that media reports of a specific tone impact the attitudes of social groups on the matter just like the media's reporting of Muslims has influenced the public's impression of Muslims through time. In sum, media tone, which may be positive, negative or neutral, always reflects the attitude and opinion of the media about the subjects being covered.

6 Mass media in conflict and war times

Adegbonmire (2015) claims that conflict is a normal and unavoidable aspect of human existence that develops from struggles over social, ethnic, economic, or political issues and if poorly handled, may lead to war. Conflicts and wars may also arise when individuals, organisations or bodies have divergent aims, ways of thinking, feeling or behaving (Adegbonmire 2015). War is a characteristic of the world that must be covered by the media. The Napoleonic War, American Civil War, Israel–Palestine War, Rwanda Conflict, Congo War, Syria War, Iraq War, Afghanistan War, Yemeni Civil War, Nigerian Civil War as well as the ongoing Russia–Ukraine War are just a few of the well-known hostilities that have arisen throughout history.

Several individuals have suffered, millions have been displaced and many more have died as a result of these wars. Puddephatt (2006) avows that in the last 10 years, more than two million children have perished in hostilities, over one million have become orphans and more than six million individuals have been handicapped or gravely wounded as a result of conflicts. Rathi (2016) adds that wars and conflicts have a detrimental emotional and physical impact on those involved via fatalities, injuries, starvation, disease, sexual assault, injuries, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and other bad outcomes. In the essay, "Voices of War: Conflict and the Role of the Media," Puddephatt (2006) makes the case that media involvement in conflicts typically results in increased violence and that media independence and neutrality often aid in conflict resolution and the reduction of violence. Puddephatt (2006) supported his claim by arguing that the mass media's contribution to the outbreak of the Rwandan genocide, which resulted in the death of more than five million people, was harmful.

The independence of the mass media during times of war may help to hasten the resolution of the war (Abiodun and Nwaoboli 2023). Also, reports from a media organisation reporting biased incidents of the war can easily incite its audience and stakeholders to escalate the war. In addition, the role of the media in every conflict depends on the relationship the said media has with the actors in the conflict. The way the media covers wars has an impact on how the world reacts to such wars as

well (Puddephatt 2006). In other words, how much a dispute is reported in the media affects how the international community, stakeholders of the war and the media audiences react to it. This implies that if a problem is not prominently included in online media reportage, it may not be given any attention.

Puddephatt (2006) adds that the media is often used to support or facilitate wars and conflicts and that those involved in them frequently utilize it to create the political circumstances for their wins. For instance, the media helped lay the groundwork for the former Yugoslavia conflict and was essential in swaying public opinion in favour of the combatants. When it sides with one of the parties in a battle, the media particularly contributes significantly to conflict resolution. This action promotes the role of peace journalism and aids the media in maintaining their professional independence during times of conflict and war (Puddephatt 2006). Instead of becoming engaged by choosing sides in the fight, the media can make an effort to uphold its ethics and professionalism by focusing on informing the public about the truth about conflicts or wars. The differing views of each media institution, as well as the disparities in their financiers and owners who would each want to project their thoughts or perspectives regarding the conflict or war, may make this task challenging for media companies (Humprechtt 2019).

Szwed (2016) examined the "framing of the Ukraine-Russian conflict in online and social media." The objective of the study was to reconstruct frames and representations of the Ukrainian–Russian conflict found in online discussion forums and social media posts, as well as to explain and reconstruct the online information campaign launched by Russia and pro-Russian activists. Textual and visual studies were used to demonstrate the methods and strategies pro-Kremlin pundits used to create representations of the takeover of Crimea and the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. The research focused on how the Russian conflict was framed between 1 April and 31 December 2014 in online portals (DELFI, korrespondent.net, pravda. com.ua, kyivpost.com, and onet.pl) and social media (Facebook, Vkontakte). It found that the content of articles is significantly influenced by the comments posted on them and that the images of the warring sides are continually being created. For instance, Russia is seen as a superpower that can accomplish its goals by using both political and military methods. The country is peaceful and resistant to aggressive Western agendas. Ukraine is an adrift fascist country that cannot survive on its own. It recommended that the command structures of NATO and its allies should regularly monitor and examine in-depth Russia's use of social media for military purposes and that it is essential to utilise network analysis and evaluate the effects of different pieces of information on the targeted audiences to determine the impact and effectiveness of Russia's propaganda activities on social media.

Lichtenstein et al. (2019)'s "Framing the Ukraine Crisis: A Comparison between talk show debates on Russian and German Television" examines the extent to which constructive and destructive frames were used in the framing of the Ukraine crisis. The qualitative content analysis research design was used to analyse 20 stories and their findings showed that constructive frames were more used in television shows than destructive frames. This implied that television stations in Russia and Germany reported the Ukraine war majorly in ways that do not facilitate the escalation of the war but rather, de-escalate it. It was, therefore, recommended that, if the media must contribute positively to curbing the Russian–Ukraine War, they must continue to report the issue constructively.

Nahed (2015) examined how BBC and Al-Jazeera reported the 2011 Libyan uprising and the ensuing NATO invasion of the country. Through a Ukraine comparison of Al-Jazeera Arabic, Al-Jazeera English, BBC Arabic, and BBC World News, the study evaluated the impact of the two networks' political origins on their reporting. The study sample, which covered four weeks, was examined using a framing analysis. The presentation, organisation and narrative of a news piece are all examples of framing. Ultimately, the study found that both networks' news agendas were primarily influenced by their political environments since their coverage of the local and foreign policy interests of their home countries. The sample's news frames demonstrated coverage that was mostly supportive of the opposition's and the intervention's goals. The review of the above-mentioned analysis showed that content analysis was predominantly used for the studies which were related to framing as a whole. This study aimed at finding out the frequency of coverage, most dominantly used tone and frame of coverage of the 2022 Russian–Ukraine War by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times*.

7 Theoretical framework

7.1 Framing theory

This study is anchored in Robert Entman's Framing Theory. The theory suggests that the media selectively impacts how people see reality (Asemah et al. 2017). The Framing Theory explains how the media organizes and disseminates information to a broad audience (Entman 1993). The argument makes the claim that some events are promoted by the media and then placed in certain situations to support or refute particular views. Framing is also known as second-level agenda-setting because of its close links to agenda-setting theory. The theory assumes that: journalists decide what stories to write about and how to present them. This has an impact on the subjects and methods in which the audience sees them. The theory also assumes that

audiences perceive information based on their frameworks. The viewers' frames may diverge from or encroach on the media and a frame is reinforced each time it is used, whether it is positive or negative.

Asemah et al. (2017) add that the Framing Theory explicates how media personnel describe events to their audience by consciously using certain adjectives, pictures, words, headlines, or message tones to incite the audience's thoughts in a way that is favourable to the media. This is done by highlighting certain aspects of an issue and obscuring other parts to define the issue, diagnose its causes, make moral judgments about it and suggest remedies for the issue. Framing can also affect some policy responses in society. This implies that the framing theory explains how the mass media make use of news frames to shape opinions and determine what individuals in society think to be essential or irrelevant.

Sakwa (2015) affirms that framing can be categorized into episodic (generic frames) and thematic (issue-specific) frames while explaining that the generic frame can be used for a wide range of topics, while the thematic frame focuses on specific and underlying issues. Sakwa (2015) claims that whenever a news event is being covered, the event is often reframed as often as possible to keep the event's narrative 'fresh' and maintain audience interest in the event. This theory is, therefore, relevant to this study because it suggests that the way *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* frame stories of the 2022 Russia–Ukraine War could influence or shape people's attitudes, views, opinions and perceptions of the war just like the framing theory states that how messages are packaged and conveyed have an effect on how listeners of communications interpret and assess those contents.

7.2 Methodology

The researchers made use of quantitative content analysis in this study because it enabled them to look at existing contents, portray them quantitatively and arrive at conclusions on online newspaper coverage of the Russian–Ukraine War, emphatically those of *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* which are daily online newspapers. The population of this research was all editions of *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* between March 2022 to September 2022 which is 428 (214 each). The choice of *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* for this research can be justified on several grounds. Firstly, they are both widely read and respected in Nigeria and beyond, and their coverage of the war is likely to be influential in shaping public opinion and political discourse around the war. Secondly, they have a track record of providing in-depth coverage of complex issues, including human rights abuses, corruption, and political crises, which suggests that their reporting on the Russia–Ukraine War is likely to be nuanced and well-informed. Also, by

including *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* in the study, researchers can gain insights into the diversity of perspectives and opinions on the war in Nigeria and the wider African region.

Furthermore, the two newspapers were selected for the study rather than traditional Nigerian newspapers because of their digital accessibility and unlimited geographic boundaries. Access to the selected online newspapers is not restricted by geographic location; they can be accessed from anywhere with an internet connection. This feature of the selected online newspapers can enable individuals studying the Russia–Ukraine War in Nigeria or elsewhere to obtain information without being limited by physical access. This is particularly relevant for individuals located in remote areas, Nigerians in the diaspora, the international community and those who have limited access to traditional newspapers. Given that the conflict is international in scope, relying solely on traditional newspapers, which are geographically bound, may be limiting. While traditional newspapers may have websites where they publish news, the depth and comprehensiveness of the coverage may be limited in comparison to the selected online newspapers.

To arrive at stories related to the Russian–Ukraine War, keywords such as 'Russia,' 'Ukraine,' and 'Russia–Ukraine War' from March 2022 through September 2022 were respectively searched for in the two online newspapers. From this, the researchers arrived at eighty stories in *Sahara Reporters* and 99 stories in the *Premium Times*. Due to the small sample size, the researchers used the census to study the whole population. Based on this, the population for the study was 179. Individual news articles and reports, the frequency and timing of the stories and the tone used in the two newspapers on the Russia–Ukraine War served as units of analysis. The researchers identified five distinct frames for their analysis by closely examining the coverage of the Russia–Ukraine conflict in *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* online newspapers. Through a systematic analysis of key themes and perspectives utilized in the coverage, we were able to synthesize these elements into five over-arching frames, which comprehensively encapsulated all other perspectives observed in the reporting of the war. More so, Pearson Chi-square at a significance level of 0.05 was used to measure the significance level of difference/correlation of reports between the two online newspapers.

7.3 Coding

Four coders were utilized in this study. This included the two authors of this research and two graduate students from the University of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria. To code the data from the newspapers, we devised a coding system that allowed us to track how *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* covered the Russia–Ukraine War. The

first step was to decide which variables we wanted to track. These included the tone used (positive, negative, critical, neutral, and descriptive), the frames used and the frequency of the stories in each month within the scope of the study. In the next stage, we assigned numerical codes to each type (e.g., 1 for positive news, 2 for negative news, etc.). Thereafter, we coded the data. To do this, we read through the news and articles and identified relevant themes and variables. The coders then assigned each piece of content to one or more categories based on the coding scheme. The results of the coding process were analysed using SPSS which allows researchers to identify patterns and trends in the contents studied. The reliability of the coding process was assessed using the level of agreement between different coders on the same content. The frequency percent agreement was 89.0 %. The tone of coverage's coder agreement was 83.0 % and the framing percent agreement was 84.0 %.

7.4 Findings

Table 1 showed that *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* highly covered the Russian–Ukraine War. The coverage of the war was higher ($n = 99$) in *Premium Times* and unlike *Sahara Reporters* whose frequency of reportage kept declining as the war prolonged, the frequency of reportage of the war in *Premium Times* was still high. The high coverage of the war by both newspapers highlights the importance of this conflict as a global event with significant implications for international relations, human rights, and regional security. The fact that both news outlets allocated substantial resources to covering the war suggests that they recognized its significance and the potential impact it could have on their readership.

The data also suggest that both news outlets recognised the importance of reporting on the experiences of Nigerians living abroad and the potential impact that

Table 1: Frequency of coverage of the Russia–Ukraine war by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times*.

Month	*Sahara Reporters*	*Premium Times*	Total
March	22(27.5 %)	15(15.2 %)	37(20.6 %)
April	13(16.3 %)	19(19.2 %)	32(17.9 %)
May	13(16.3 %)	12(12.1 %)	25(13.9 %)
June	8(10 %)	7(7.1 %)	15(8.4 %)
July	10(12.5 %)	16(16.2 %)	26(14.5 %)
August	5(6.3 %)	18(18.2 %)	23(12.8 %)
September	9(11.3 %)	12(12.1 %)	21(11.7 %)
Total	80(100 %)	99 (100 %)	179(100 %)

Source: Authors' computation.

the conflict could have on this community. This is particularly significant given that neither *Sahara Reporters* nor *Premium Times* is a Russian or Ukrainian newspaper, and the conflict was not directly related to Nigeria.

Also, the higher frequency of reportage of the war by *Premium Times* compared to *Sahara Reporters* may indicate differences in editorial priorities and resources between the two news outlets. It could be that *Premium Times* had more reporters on the ground in the region or a larger editorial team dedicated to covering the conflict, which allowed them to sustain a higher level of coverage over time. The declining frequency of reportage by *Sahara Reporters* as the war prolonged may reflect changes in the news cycle or the availability of newsworthy events related to the conflict. It could also suggest that *Sahara Reporters* was prioritizing other stories or topics during this period, or that they faced resource constraints that limited their ability to sustain coverage of the war.

Using a chi-square at a significance level of 0.05, we find that the critical value is 11.070. Since our calculated chi-square value of 3.527 is less than the critical value of 11.070, we fail to reject the null hypothesis of independence. Therefore, we can conclude that there is no significant difference between the month and the frequency of reporting by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* on the Russian–Ukraine War.

Table 2 showed that there were various frames used by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* in the reporting of the Russian–Ukraine War. However, reports on the effects of the war on diaspora Nigerians or Nigerian students had the highest frequency.

The high frequency of reportage on the effects of the war on Nigerians in the diaspora may reflect an editorial decision to prioritise stories that have a direct impact on their readership. As many Nigerians have family members living or studying in Ukraine or Russia, reporting on the impact of the conflict on this community may have resonated with their readership on a personal level. Similarly, the fact that this frame had the highest frequency in both *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium*

Table 2: Frames used by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* in the reporting of the Russian–Ukraine war.

Frame	*Sahara Reporters*	*Premium Times*	Total
Diplomatic efforts made to curb the war	5(6.3 %)	8(8.1 %)	13(7.3 %)
Economic impacts of the war	14(17.5 %)	23(23.2 %)	37(20.7 %)
Casualties of the war	22(27.5 %)	15(15.2 %)	37(20.6 %)
Nigerians in diaspora affected by the war	33(41.3 %)	46(46.5 %)	79(44.1 %)
Probable solutions to end the war	6(7.5 %)	7(7.1 %)	13(7.3 %)
Total	80(100 %)	99(100 %)	179(100 %)

Source: Authors' computation.

Times could indicate a lack of diversity in the frames used by the two news outlets. While reporting on the impact of the war on Nigerians in the diaspora is important, it is also essential to consider other frames, such as the geopolitical implications of the conflict or the human rights violations committed during the war. Overall, the calculated chi-square value of 9.08 indicates that there is a statistically significant difference in the reporting of the frames between *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times*.

Table 3 showed that the coverage of the Russian–Ukraine War by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* was primarily negative (*N* = 61, 34 %). This implies that they reported the war in ways that campaigned for an end to the war. A neutral tone involves reporting the facts of the war without taking a clear position on the conflict or expressing a particular opinion or bias. An objective tone involves reporting the news in a fair and balanced manner, presenting multiple perspectives on the conflict and allowing readers to form their own opinions. A critical tone involves highlighting the negative aspects of the war or criticizing the actions of one or both sides involved in the conflict. A positive tone means expressing support for one side of the conflict or highlighting the positive aspects of the conflict from that perspective while a descriptive tone would involve providing a detailed and comprehensive account of the conflict without expressing a clear opinion or stance on the conflict.

The chi-square value for the data on the tones of coverage of the Russian–Ukraine War by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* is 1.32. This value is less than the critical value for the degrees of freedom (4) and has a significance level of 0.05, which is 9.488. This means that we that there is a lack of significant difference between the ways the two news sources reported on the conflict in terms of tone.

Table 3: Tones of coverage of the Russian–Ukraine war by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times*.

Tone	*Sahara Reporters*	*Premium Times*	Total
Positive	9(11.3 %)	14(14.1 %)	23(12.8 %)
Neutral	9(11.3 %)	11(11.1 %)	20(11.2 %)
Negative	28(35 %)	33(33.3 %)	61(34.0 %)
Critical	15(18.8 %)	12(12.1 %)	27(15.1 %)
Descriptive	19(23.8 %)	29(29.3 %)	48(26.8 %)
Total	80(100 %)	99(100 %)	179(100 %)

Source: Authors' computation.

8 Discussion of findings

The researchers' analyses of news coverage of the Russia–Ukraine War by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* indicate that the reportage of the war was frequent when compared to other stories such as political news that the two newspapers report from both countries at war. This high frequency is relevant in drawing the attention of stakeholders in Nigeria and the diaspora to the need to make effort at saving Nigerians that are trapped in the countries by providing measures to repatriate them or keep them safe. Besides, this high degree of reportage of the conflict connotes the proximity of interest in the conflict to Nigerians. On the whole, the framing of the news reports tended to align more closely with the principles of peace journalism than those of war journalism, as evidenced by the tone score (*n* = 23, 12.8 %) assigned to the latter. Asemah-Ibrahim et al. (2022) study also agreed with the above findings when they stated that peace journalism is a corporate relations strategy the media used in the coverage of the Russia–Ukraine War. However, the researchers indicated that the corporate relations were chiefly to gain goodwill from Ukraine as more support was tilted towards Ukraine than Russia just like many other countries like the United States of America, United Kingdom, France, and Germany, among others.

Although the aforementioned study failed to cite examples to back up their findings, a good example is *Sahara Reporters'* March 1, 2022 story with the headline: "We're Ready To Impose Sanctions On Russia For Invading Ukraine – Nigerian Government" and more emphasis was made in the lead of the story which reads thus "The President Muhammadu Buhari's government has said Nigeria is ready to sanction Russia for invading Ukraine in line with the United Nations' resolution to "adopt and impose sanctions" on the country". The story showed that the Nigerian government also called on the United Nations to sanction Russia. This was quite surprising as we expected the media to report the news more objectively rather than siding with one party in the war. Conversely, considering that Nigeria and Ukraine have some economic ties coupled with the fact that most nations, well-revered ones at that, did not support Russia for the war, Nigeria and its media would want to follow suit in order not to get condemnation or criticism from the anti-Russia nations. Hence, we can see that criticism was one of the tones the online newspapers used in the reportage of the war and the tone was mostly anti-Russia.

The study also found that the online newspapers studied principally reported the Russian–Ukraine War in a negative slant. This implies that the newspapers reported the stories in ways that showed they were not in support of the war and hoped for an end to it. The war was also reported in neutral form by stating the possible benefits of the war as well as its implications on the Nigerian economy and

all stakeholders in the war. This is evidenced in *Premium Times*' March 11 story with the headline "Russia–Ukraine: Expect food crisis in three months, Dangote tells Nigerians" and also in an April 11 story titled "How Russia–Ukraine war ends, and implications for Africa." The finding is consistent with Robert Entman's Framing Theory which postulates that how the media frames certain issues affects the audience's perception of the issues and can as well affect their attitudes toward such issues. The way *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* newspapers framed the Russia–Ukraine War thus has an impact on their readers' views and dialectics of the war.

To emphasize how much damage the war was causing to Nigeria and Nigerians in Russia and Ukraine, the online newspapers framed stories by highlighting the impacts of the war on Nigerians in the diaspora especially on Nigerian students in Russia. For instance, an excerpt from *Premium Times*' September 11, 2022 story titled "Russia–Ukraine War: Nigerian students lament plights seven months into conflict" reads: "Almost seven months after the Russia–Ukraine War began, Nigerian students affected by the war have yet to find their way around the uncertainties brought about by the war. The situation has led many Nigerian students to continue to wander around Europe in search of opportunities to continue their study programmes." This story critically shows us the extent Nigerian students have been displaced by the war and the frame used makes the story more emotional. Little wonder, in a sequel to these stories, the Nigerian government made efforts to evacuate its students from Ukraine.

Data from the study also showed that *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* similarly framed the Russia–Ukraine War. It is possible that *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* similarly focused on the impact of the Russia–Ukraine War on Nigerian students and Nigerians in the diaspora because they recognized the significance of this issue for their readership. Many Nigerians, both at home and abroad, have family and friends who are affected by the conflict, and there may be a sense of concern and interest in understanding the impact of the war on the Nigerians living in the war zones. As news outlets that prioritize investigative journalism and critical reporting, *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* may have recognized the importance of highlighting the impact of the conflict on Nigerians as part of their broader mission to hold those in power accountable and bring attention to under-reported issues. At any rate, focusing on the impact of the Russia–Ukraine War on Nigerian students and Nigerians in the diaspora may have been a strategic choice for *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times*, as it is a specific angle that sets their reporting apart from other news outlets. By providing unique and insightful coverage on this issue, they may have been able to attract and retain a dedicated readership, which could be beneficial for their business model.

When compared to previous similar studies on the framing of disputes, the results of this research support certain past conclusions and refute others. Nahed (2015), for instance, found that Al-Jazeera and BBC mostly depicted their messages of the Libyan uprising by using the humanitarian frame, which is a frame that captures news items that emphasize the losses incurred due to violence. This conclusion agrees with the results of the research since *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* mostly analyzed the effects of the 2022 Russia–Ukraine War on Nigerians in the diaspora. Similar to the findings of this study, Kumer and Semetko (2009) found that news from Croatia, Germany, South Africa, America, and the United Kingdom on Al-Jazeera was primarily reported under negative slants during the framing of the Iraq War.

9 Conclusions

This study concludes that *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* highly covered the Russian–Ukraine War because of its negative impact on Nigerian students in Russia and Ukraine. It shows that the use of media tone was evident in the selected online newspaper reports on the 2022 Russian–Ukraine War and that the frame used in the reportage mainly focused on the impacts of the war on diaspora Nigerians in Ukraine and Russia. Also, as against some researchers' claims that the media can facilitate wars through its framing, this study showed that online newspapers chiefly toned the Russian–Ukraine War in a deleterious slant in a bid to help curb the war. Based on the findings, it was recommended that Nigerian online newspapers should not solely focus on negative reports of the conflict and its implications for stakeholders in Nigeria. They should adopt a more diverse range of frames and tones in their coverage, to influence stakeholders to take action to prevent wars and hold the Nigerian government accountable for providing adequate infrastructure and human capital that discourages emigration in search of a better life both academically and otherwise.

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