

Reputation Management in the Public Sphere: Evaluating Media Narratives on the Akpabio-Akpoti-Uduaghan Saga

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Abstract

This study investigates how the Nigerian mass media framed the sexual harassment allegations involving Senate President Godswill Akpabio and Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan, with a focus on the implications for public perception and national reputation. Anchored in framing theory and agenda-setting theory, the study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, examining how various media outlets employed specific narrative frames such as victimisation, political manipulation, gender dynamics, institutional accountability, and sensationalism. The findings reveal a deeply polarised media landscape, where framing choices not only influenced public opinion but also shaped discourse around governance, justice, and gender in the public sphere. Sensationalist and biased reporting were found to exacerbate political tensions and contribute to Nigeria's reputational vulnerabilities both domestically and internationally. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for ethical journalism, balanced reporting, and strategic communication by public officials to mitigate reputational damage and foster trust in democratic institutions.

Keywords: Reputation, reputation management, public sphere, media narratives, Akpabio-Akpoti-Uduaghan's saga.

Introduction

The media serves as a double-edged sword in shaping public perception and national identity. It functions as a crucial pillar of democracy by disseminating information, fostering public discourse, and holding those in power accountable (McQuail, 2010). However, the same media that informs and educates can also contribute to misinformation, sensationalism, and reputational crises, particularly when journalistic ethics are compromised. As Lippmann (1922) famously argued, media representation does not merely reflect reality but actively constructs it, influencing how individuals and institutions are perceived. In an era where mass media, both traditional and digital exerts significant influence on political narratives, reputation management has become an indispensable aspect of governance and public service.

In contemporary Nigeria, political actors are increasingly subject to media scrutiny, often finding themselves at the center of public controversies shaped by media narratives. The case of Senate President, Senator Godswill Obot Akpabio, CON and Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan's sexual harassment allegations exemplifies this dynamic, highlighting the complex interplay between media framing, public perception, and political reputation. The incident, widely reported and debated across multiple platforms, underscores how media

outlets, driven by their editorial leanings and audience expectations, construct differing narratives that shape political discourse and national sentiment. As Entman (1993) posits in his framing theory, the media selectively emphasize certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others, thereby influencing how the public interprets events. Similarly, the agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) suggests that the prominence given to a particular issue by the media determines its perceived importance among audiences.

This study critically examines the framing of the Akpabio-Akpoti-Uduaghan controversy within Nigerian media and its broader implications for political reputation management and national image. By analyzing how different media outlets reported the allegations, the research seeks to understand the extent to which media framing influenced public opinion and political responses. Furthermore, it evaluates the crisis communication strategies deployed by both political figures, drawing insights from best practices in reputation management (Coombs, 2007). The study also situates this case within the broader context of Nigeria's image crisis, considering recent initiatives by the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) to mitigate reputational challenges at the national level. Given Nigeria's ongoing struggle with international perception, often linked to issues of corruption, governance, and human rights (Ogwezzy, 2018)—the role of the media in either exacerbating or mitigating these challenges is of critical importance.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the discourse on media influence, political communication, and national reputation management. By bridging theoretical perspectives with empirical analysis, it provides a nuanced understanding of how media narratives shape political fortunes and national identity in Nigeria's evolving democratic landscape.

Statement of the Problem

In contemporary Nigeria, political reputation management has become increasingly complex due to the pervasive influence of mass media in shaping public narratives. While the media plays a critical role in informing citizens and fostering democratic accountability, it also serves as a platform for framing political controversies in ways that can either protect or damage reputations. The framing of political figures in the media significantly impacts their public perception, electoral viability, and governance legitimacy. However, the extent to which media narratives influence political reputation and national image remains a subject of ongoing debate.

The case of Senate President Godswill Akpabio and Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan's sexual harassment allegations provides a compelling instance of how media framing affects political figures and the broader national image. Different media outlets presented divergent narratives, amplifying public reactions and shaping discourse in ways that reflected ideological biases, editorial policies, and audience interests. Such media coverage not only influenced individual reputations but also contributed to Nigeria's broader image crisis, reinforcing concerns about gender dynamics in politics, institutional credibility, and governance ethics.

Despite the growing body of research on media influence, limited scholarly attention has been given to the intersection of media framing, political crisis communication, and national reputation management in Nigeria. Moreover, while crisis communication strategies are widely studied in Western contexts, there is a dearth of research examining how Nigerian politicians and public relations institutions, such as the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), respond to reputational crises within the country's unique sociopolitical landscape.

This study seeks to address these gaps by critically analyzing how the mass media framed the Akpabio-Akpoti-Uduaghan controversy and evaluating the impact of such coverage on political reputation and national image. It also examines the crisis communication strategies employed by the key figures involved and the broader implications for Nigeria's reputation management efforts. By situating this analysis within the frameworks of agenda-setting and framing theories, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of media influence on political reputation and national identity in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The study will be approached using the following objectives:

- (i) To identify and analyse the framing patterns used by the Nigerian mass media in reporting the Akpabio-Akpoti-Uduaghan saga.
- (ii) To determine the dominant media frames that shaped public perception of the controversy.
- (iii) To evaluate the extent to which media reports adhered to journalistic ethics, including balance, objectivity, and factual accuracy
- (iv) To analyse the implications of sensationalized media narratives on political stability and public trust in governance.
- (v) To assess how media coverage of the controversy influenced Nigeria's national and international reputation.
- (vi) To recommend responsible media practices that can mitigate reputational damage in politically sensitive cases.

Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored on the interrelated concepts of media narratives, reputation management, and the public sphere, particularly within the context of the Akpabio-Akpoti-Uduaghan saga. These concepts collectively form a lens for analyzing how media discourse influences political perception, manages public image, and affects national reputation.

Reputation and Reputation Management

Reputation refers to the collective perception or judgment of an individual, organisation, or nation based on past actions, public discourse, and social values (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). In politics, reputation plays a critical role in legitimizing authority and maintaining public trust.

Reputation management involves deliberate strategies employed to shape, maintain, or restore public perception, especially during periods of crisis or controversy (Argenti, 2007). Politicians often utilise a mix of crisis communication media engagement, and image

restoration tactics (Benoit, 1997) to maintain credibility and manage damage from negative media portrayals.

In the Akpabio-Akpoti-Uduaghan case, reputation management unfolded through official statements, counter-narratives, and selective media engagement—demonstrating efforts to reframe the situation and protect political capital.

Media Narratives and Framing Theory

Media narratives are the constructed stories that emerge from journalistic choices in event selection, language, imagery, and emphasis. These narratives are shaped by media framing—the process by which media outlets organise and present information to guide audience interpretation (Entman, 1993).

The media plays a crucial role in defining the narrative surrounding political figures, often shaping public opinion through agenda-setting and priming techniques. In the case of Senate President Godswill Akpabio and Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan, different media outlets framed the sexual harassment allegations in varying ways, influencing how the public reacted to the controversy. Some media reports may have presented the issue as a politically motivated attack, while others framed it as a gender-based power struggle or a reflection of broader institutional failures. The framing of this controversy determined not only how the public perceived the individuals involved but also how the discourse around political ethics, gender equity, and governance evolved. Studies in political communication have established that media framing is a strategic tool used to shape political narratives.

The controversy between Akpabio and Akpoti-Uduaghan serves as a site where various media narratives competed to define public perception of the events, demonstrating the power of the press in shaping political realities.

In this study, particular attention is given to:

Framing patterns (episodic vs. thematic, conflict vs. morality frames)

Dominant frames used by different media outlets (e.g., political rivalry, gender discrimination, institutional failure).

Public Sphere and Democratic Discourse

The public sphere, as conceptualized by Habermas (1962) is a space where citizens engage in critical discussion about public affairs, ideally free from state and corporate control. The media acts as a gatekeeper and amplifier within this space, influencing which issues are debated and how.

In Nigeria, the public sphere is often fragmented by political partisanship, media ownership, and digital echo chambers. The Akpabio-Akpoti-Uduaghan saga illustrates how narratives in the public sphere can either promote democratic engagement or deepen mistrust in governance, depending on how balanced or sensationalized the reporting is.

National Image and Media's Global Impact

National image refers to the global perception of a country's values, leadership, and institutions (Anholt, 2007). Media coverage of domestic controversies, especially involving gender and leadership ethics, affects how other nations and international stakeholders view Nigeria. Ogwezzy (2018) emphasises that negative political coverage, especially if widely disseminated, reinforces damaging stereotypes and may influence foreign investment, diplomatic relations, and national soft power.

Thus, political controversies framed through ethically charged or sensational narratives, as in the Akpabio-Akpoti-Uduaghan case, are not just internal crises, they become external challenges to Nigeria's national brand.

Integrative Summary

This study integrates the following theoretical lenses:

- (i) Framing Theory: to decode how media constructed competing narratives
- (ii) Reputation Management: to evaluate political responses and public relations strategies
- (iii) Public Sphere Theory: to assess the broader societal engagement and discourse
- (iv) Nation Branding/National Image: to understand the reputational impact on Nigeria's standing

These concepts jointly underpin the research inquiry: How do media narratives about the Akpabio-Akpoti-Uduaghan saga affect public perception, political reputation, and Nigeria's image in the global public sphere.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in framing theory (Entman, 1993) and agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Framing theory explains how media outlets emphasize certain aspects of a story while downplaying others, shaping audience perception and public discourse. The theory further posits that the way an issue is presented (e.g., as a moral failure, political witch-hunt, or gender-based injustice) influences how the audience processes and reacts to it. In the case of Akpabio and Akpoti-Uduaghan, media reports varied significantly, with some outlets portraying the incident as a gender-based power struggle, while others framed it as political manoeuvring.

Agenda-Setting and Media Influence

Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) posits that the media does not tell people what to think but rather what to think about. The prominence given to certain issues over others determines public attention and political discourse. By repeatedly highlighting or downplaying political scandals, the media influences how society prioritises issues and how political figures are perceived.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative framing analysis to examine how the Nigerian mass media constructed narratives around the sexual harassment allegations involving Senate President Godswill Akpabio and Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan. The analysis seeks to identify media frames, assess their dominance, and evaluate their implications for reputation management in the public sphere.

Research Design

Framing analysis, a qualitative content analysis method is employed to interrogate how media outlets select, emphasize, and structure certain elements of the controversy. This design enables a critical look at symbolic representation and ideological framing across media narratives.

Content Formats Analyzed

The study will analyze multiple content types for diversity of narrative expression:

- (i) News reports (straight reporting)
- (ii) Editorials (institutional opinions)
- (iii) Features (in-depth narratives)
- (iv) Opinion columns (commentary and analysis)
- (v) Television segments (news analysis, talk shows)
- (vi) Online/social media posts (Twitter/X, Facebook, blogs)

Framing Categories

Six frame types will guide the analysis:

- (i) Victimisation Frame – Depicts Akpoti-Uduaghan as a target of harassment and bias.
- (ii) Political Manipulation Frame – Casts the allegations as political tools.
- (iii) Institutional Accountability Frame – Focuses on institutional responses and failures.
- (iv) Gender Frame – Interprets the case through gender dynamics in Nigerian politics.
- (v) Power Dynamics Frame – Examines disparities in influence between the actors.
- (vi) Sensationalism Frame – Highlights emotionally charged or speculative reporting.

Media Outlets Studied

Media platforms selected for their national reach and political influence include:

- (i) The Punch (Print/Online)
- (ii) Premium Times (Online investigative journalism)
- (iii) Channels TV (Television broadcast + online presence)
- (iv) Vanguard Newspaper (Print/Online)
- (v) Sahara Reporters (Digital/Activist media)
- (vi) Twitter/X and Facebook public discourse (For public reaction and digital framing)

Media Contents Analysed

For each medium, the following dimensions will be analyzed:

Content formats: Identifying whether the material is a news report, editorial, opinion, etc.

Frame types: Coding the frames used in each content type

Dominant frames: Determining which frame(s) appear most frequently or are emphasized across formats

Data Collection & Sampling

Using purposive sampling, media content between March 10–30, 2025 will be selected, covering the full span of heated public discourse on the issue.

Data Analysis Steps

- (i) Frame Identification – Apply predefined frames using coding and tone/language cues.
- (ii) Thematic Clustering – Group similar codes into thematic categories.
- (iii) Comparative Framing – Contrast framing patterns across media types.
- (iv) Dominance Assessment – Identify the most recurring and emphasized frames.

Presentation of Select Media Reports on the Akpabio-Akpoti -Uduagha Saga and their Implications on National Reputation

Premium Times, March 11, 2025: Framed the allegations as direct misconduct by Akpabio, raising concerns about media-led trial without due process.

Impact: risked undermining public trust in the legal system.

Sahara Reporters, March 12, 2025: Linked Akpabio’s response to Nigeria’s wider culture of political impunity.

Impact: Contributed to international perceptions of endemic corruption in Nigerian leadership.

Daily Trust, March 13, 2025: Focused on Senate divisions and internal disunity.

Impact: Reinforced the image of political instability, a red flag for foreign investors.

The Nation, March 14, 2025: Suggested the allegations were politically motivated, questioning their timing.

Impact: Risked portraying the media as biased and politically manipulated.

City Voice News, March 15, 2025: Covered the Senate’s rejection of the petition, implying institutional bias.

Impact: Created an oversimplified narrative of legislative failure without full legal context.

Daily Post, March 16, 2025: Highlighted how social media was split between support and condemnation, reflecting echo chamber dynamics.

Impact: Showed how digital platforms amplified polarised views and misinformation.

ThisDay, March 17, 2025: Addressed the global reputational implications, especially regarding gender rights and governance.

Impact: Highlighted how media framing affects Nigeria’s international image.

Channels TV, March 12, 2025: Shifted the focus to systemic issues, particularly the silence around sexual harassment in Nigerian politics.

Impact: Demonstrated responsible journalism by broadening public understanding.

The Guardian Nigeria, March 18, 2025: Covered growing public calls for Akpabio's resignation.

Impact: Contributed to accountability discourse but also risked framing the situation as a political crisis.

Discussion of Findings

1. Framing the Akpabio-Akpoti-Uduaghan Saga: A Critical Analysis of Media Narratives and Reputational Implications

This section presents a qualitative analysis of media narratives surrounding the sexual harassment allegations involving Senate President Godswill Akpabio and Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan. The findings are categorized by media format, dominant frame types, and the implications of each frame on Nigeria's national reputation, public perception, and institutional credibility. The analysis draws from a sample of mainstream print media, online platforms, television broadcasts, and social media commentaries.

Media Content Formats and Framing Patterns: Media content analysed comprised a mix of news reports, editorials, features, opinion pieces, and broadcast bulletins. Each format employed distinct framing strategies, often influenced by editorial slants and institutional priorities.

News reports tended to emphasize factual recounts but often reflected underlying biases through source selection and headline framing.

Editorials and opinion pieces were more overtly framed, often advancing political interpretations of the scandal.

Features occasionally contextualised the allegations within systemic issues (e.g., gender and institutional accountability).

Social media and online comments amplified certain narratives, especially those with emotional or partisan appeal.

2. Frame Types Identified and Their Effects

a. Sensationalism Frame

Media Examples: Premium Times, Sahara Reporters, Daily Post

These outlets emphasized the explosive nature of the allegations, often using charged language and speculative tones.

Effect: This framing heightened public outrage but risked undermining due process. It amplified the perception of institutional dysfunction and promoted the idea that scandal defines Nigeria's political landscape.

b. Victimisation Frame

Media Example: Channels TV, The Guardian Nigeria

Framing Akpoti-Uduaghan as a symbolic figure battling systemic suppression of female voices.

Effect: Positively contributed to the discourse on gender equity but, when unbalanced, risked reducing a complex legal-political issue to a gendered binary, affecting perceptions of fairness in governance.

c. Political Manipulation Frame

Media Example: The Nation, City Voice News

Allegations were portrayed as politically motivated, aimed at discrediting Akpabio's leadership.

Effect: Undermined public trust in the authenticity of the claims and painted Nigerian politics as perpetually vindictive, reinforcing narratives of elite power struggles rather than principled leadership.

d. Institutional Accountability Frame

Media Example: ThisDay, Daily Trust

Framing focused on Senate processes, transparency, and ethical responsibility.

Effect: Reflected mature journalism but highlighted institutional inertia. Suggested the need for stronger checks and balances, indirectly affecting Nigeria's democratic image abroad.

e. Gender Frame

Seen in feature articles and op-eds across Guardian Nigeria and Premium Times.

Discussions on power, harassment, and the marginalization of women in Nigerian politics.

Effect: Raised awareness globally about gender disparities, but also flagged the country's slow institutional response to gender-related allegations.

f. Power Dynamics Frame

Media Example: Daily Trust, Sahara Reporters

Framing emphasized how elite privilege and hierarchical structures protect certain actors.

Effect: Deepened perceptions of inequality before the law and painted the Nigerian political system as closed and resistant to reform.

While some media demonstrated ethical awareness and issue-driven framing, others compromised reputational integrity by resorting to sensationalism, political bias, or shallow commentary.

3: Implications for National Reputation

The findings suggest that media narratives surrounding the saga have implications far beyond the immediate scandal. They influence:

- (i) Public trust in journalism and political institutions
- (ii) Nigeria's international image in areas of gender equity, legal transparency, and democratic governance
- (iii) Investor confidence and foreign diplomatic engagement
- (iv) Crisis communication standards within Nigeria's media and political elite

Conclusion/Recommendations

The analysis highlights a fragmented media landscape where framing practices vary widely across platforms and content types. The case illustrates the urgent need for ethical, balanced reporting that respects journalistic integrity and supports reputational resilience. Effective reputation management, whether for individuals or the nation begins with how stories are told.

The study therefore recommends ethical media reporting and national reputation management. To mitigate the negative effects of unguarded media reports on Nigeria's national reputation, the following are proposed:

Strengthening Ethical Journalism Practices

The media to adopt Fact-Based Reporting: Media houses should prioritise investigative journalism that adheres to factual accuracy, ensuring that allegations are thoroughly verified before publication.

Enforcement of Journalistic Ethics: The Nigerian Press Council (NPC) and Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) should impose stricter penalties on media outlets found engaged in biased, misleading, or sensational reporting.

Mandatory Media Literacy Training: Journalists should undergo regular training on responsible crisis reporting, particularly on politically sensitive issues. Organisations such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) should lead these efforts. The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) to collaborate with the media in aligning reporting practices with Nigeria's global image goals. Press freedom must be protected, legal frameworks refined to checkmate defamation, misinformation, and character assassination in political reporting.

Promote Balanced and Responsible Reporting

Media organisations should adopt neutral, non-inflammatory language in political reporting and ensure balanced coverage by granting fair representation to all parties involved. Equal airtime and space for both accusers and accused is essential in upholding journalistic integrity and minimizing public polarization.

Strengthen Digital Media Oversight and Literacy

A coordinated framework involving government agencies, independent fact-checkers (e.g., Africa Check, Dubawa), and media houses should be established to combat misinformation. Simultaneously, national media literacy campaigns should be launched to educate citizens on identifying fake news and resisting disinformation.

Institutionalize Strategic Crisis Communication

Government officials and political actors should undergo crisis communication training to ensure swift, fact-based, and transparent responses to reputational threats. Proactive image management and the establishment of a National Image Task Force under the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) are recommended. Nigerian embassies should also be empowered to engage international media through strategic messaging to counter negative narratives.

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