Influence of Public Perception of Media Coverage on Corporate Disputes among Select Brands in Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract
This study investigates the influence of public perception on media coverage of corporate disputes and its impact on organisational reputation among selected corporate brands in Akwa Ibom State. Using a primary data collection method, the study employed online surveys and structured questionnaires distributed to 177 respondents across six corporate brands—two each from the three senatorial districts of the state. A snowball sampling technique was used to identify participants with exposure to corporate media issues. Guided by Framing Theory and Reputation Management Theory, the research explored how public perception shapes media narratives, the effect of such coverage on corporate image, and the strategies organisations deploy during reputational crises. Findings revealed that public perception significantly influences how the media frames corporate disputes, and that negatively framed reports have a lasting impact on an organisation's reputation. Media reports and social media discourse were identified as key factors shaping public opinion. Based on these findings, the study recommends transparent and timely communication, proactive media engagement, continuous reputation tracking, and stakeholder education as key strategies for managing public perception and safeguarding organisational credibility.

Keyword: Public perception, media coverage, corporate dispute.

Background of the Study

In today's interconnected world, public perception plays a crucial role in shaping media coverage, particularly in matters involving corporate disputes and organisational reputation. The increasing use of digital platforms and social media has heightened public awareness and engagement with corporate affairs, making the management of public perception an essential aspect of corporate communication strategies. Corporations embroiled in disputes, whether legal, ethical, or operational, are often subjected to extensive media scrutiny, with coverage influenced by public sentiments and opinions. Media outlets, recognizing the power of audience preferences and the need to maintain viewership, often tailor their reporting to reflect or influence public perception. This dynamic relationship between public perception and media coverage not only affects how corporate disputes are reported but also significantly impacts the reputation and long-term viability of the organisations involved.

Historically, media coverage of corporate disputes focused on factual reporting, emphasizing legal proceedings and official statements. However, with the advent of 24-hour news cycles and the rise of citizen journalism, the landscape has shifted dramatically. Today, narratives are shaped not only by official sources but also by public reactions, viral content, and social media trends. Organisations facing disputes must navigate this complex environment, where a single negative news cycle can escalate into a full-blown reputational crisis. The influence of public perception is evident in cases where companies have either mitigated damage through effective communication or suffered long-term brand erosion due to mismanagement of media relations. Consequently, understanding the interplay between public perception and media coverage is vital for organisations aiming to maintain a positive reputation amid corporate disputes. Given the extensive background, this paper examines the public perception and media coverage of corporate dispute on organisations reputation. For the purpose of this paper.

Statement of the Problem

Corporate disputes are inevitable in the business world, ranging from employee grievances and consumer complaints to regulatory challenges and ethical controversies. How these disputes are covered by the media, and subsequently perceived by the public, can have profound implications for an organisation's reputation and overall success. In recent years, there seem to be a noticeable trend where public perception significantly shapes the narrative of corporate disputes in the media. This trend is fueled by the proliferation of social media platforms, where public opinion is formed, shared, and amplified in real-time, often preceding traditional media reports. As a result, organisations find themselves under immense pressure to respond swiftly and strategically to media coverage that may be heavily influenced by public sentiment.

The significance of this issue lies in the potential consequences for organisations that fail to effectively manage the influence of public perception on media coverage. Negative publicity, whether warranted or not, can lead to loss of customer trust, decreased market value, and long-term reputational damage. Conversely, positive public perception can mitigate the adverse effects of a dispute, highlighting the importance of strategic communication and media engagement. Despite the growing recognition of this phenomenon, there remains a gap in comprehensive research that examines how public perception directly influences media coverage of corporate disputes and the subsequent impact on organisational reputation.

The problem, therefore, is the lack of empirical understanding of the extent to which public perception influences media coverage of corporate disputes and how this relationship affects organisational reputation. Hence, this study seeks to examine how public perception influences media coverage of corporate disputes in select brands in Akwa Ibom State and to also assess how media coverage of corporate disputes affects an organisation's reputation.

Objectives of the Study

(i) Find out if public perception influences media coverage of corporate disputes among select brands in Akwa Ibom State.
(ii) Find out the extent to which public perception of media coverage of corporate disputes affects organisation's reputation.
(iii) To identify the factors that shape public perception during corporate disputes.

(iv) To explore strategies organisations use to manage public perception and media coverage during disputes.

Conceptual Review

Public Perception

Public perception refers to the collective opinions, attitudes, and beliefs held by individuals or groups about a person, organisation, event, or issue. It is shaped by various factors, including personal experiences, cultural background, media exposure, and social interactions. According to Smith (2020), public perception is a dynamic process influenced by how information is communicated and interpreted by society. This perception often plays a crucial role in shaping the reputation of organisations, especially during periods of conflict or crisis. When people form opinions about corporate disputes, their perceptions are often guided by the information presented through the media and their prior experiences with the organisation involved.

Several factors contribute to shaping public perception. One significant factor is media exposure, where individuals rely on news reports, social media platforms, and online forums to form opinions (Johnson & Lee, 2019). The media's framing of issues can heavily influence how people interpret corporate disputes. For example, when a company is portrayed negatively in the media, public perception tends to be unfavorable, regardless of the underlying facts. Personal experiences with a brand or organisation also play a vital role. Consumers who have had positive experiences are more likely to maintain a favorable perception even during disputes, while those with negative experiences may quickly adopt a critical stance. Additionally, social influences from friends, family, and opinion leaders further shape how individuals perceive corporate events (Brown & Clark, 2018).

Public perception is particularly important during corporate disputes because it can determine how stakeholders—such as customers, investors, and regulators—respond to the conflict. Negative public perception may lead to boycotts, stock price declines, or loss of consumer trust, all of which can damage an organisation's long-term reputation (Garcia, 2021). On the other hand, if the public perceives an organisation as transparent and accountable, it may receive support even in times of crisis. Companies that actively manage public perception through timely communication and responsible actions often mitigate potential damage to their reputation.

In corporate settings, understanding public perception is essential for effective communication strategies. Organisations must monitor public sentiment through surveys, social media analytics, and public feedback to gauge how their actions are being received. As highlighted by Wilson (2022), companies that ignore public perception risk facing reputational crises that could have been avoided through proactive engagement. Effective management of public perception involves transparency, consistent messaging, and a willingness to address public concerns openly.

Concept of Media Coverage

Media coverage refers to the manner and extent to which information about events, individuals, or organisations is reported across various media platforms, including print, broadcast, and digital channels. It plays a crucial role in shaping public knowledge and opinion, particularly during corporate disputes. Media outlets function as gatekeepers, deciding what information is disseminated and how it is framed for public consumption (McQuail, 2019). The reach and influence of media coverage can significantly affect how corporate conflicts are perceived by the public, stakeholders, and policymakers.

Media coverage can be categorized into various types, including news reports, opinion pieces, investigative journalism, and user-generated content on social media platforms. Traditional media—such as newspapers, television, and radio—tend to follow journalistic standards of objectivity and fact-checking, although biases can still be present (Shoemaker & Vos, 2021). In contrast, digital and social media often prioritise speed and audience engagement, sometimes at the expense of accuracy. The rise of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram has transformed the landscape of media coverage, enabling real-time updates and broader audience participation. This democratization of content creation has both positive and negative implications for how corporate disputes are portrayed (Hermida, 2020).

One of the key aspects of media coverage is media framing, which refers to how journalists and media outlet's structure and present news stories. Frames influence audience interpretation by highlighting certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others (Entman, 1993). For instance, a corporate dispute framed as a "greedy corporation exploiting workers" may evoke public outrage, whereas framing it as a "necessary restructuring for survival" might garner sympathy or understanding. The selection of headlines, choice of language, and use of visuals all contribute to the framing process. Studies show that the framing of corporate conflicts can either mitigate or exacerbate reputational damage (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Closely related to framing is the concept of agenda-setting, which suggests that media do not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). By prioritizing certain stories and repeatedly covering specific aspects of corporate disputes, media can shape public awareness and discourse. For example, extensive coverage of environmental violations by a company may prompt regulatory investigations and consumer boycotts. Conversely, limited coverage may cause the issue to fade from public attention, allowing the organisation to avoid substantial reputational harm (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

In the context of corporate disputes, media coverage often serves as both an information source and a tool for stakeholder influence. Companies may use press releases, interviews, and media briefings to shape coverage and control narratives. However, negative media attention, especially when amplified through social media, can quickly spiral out of control. The virality of online content means that even minor corporate issues can gain widespread attention if framed sensationally or shared by influential users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019).

This phenomenon underscores the importance of timely and transparent communication strategies in managing media coverage during disputes.

Moreover, media coverage affects not only external perceptions but also internal organisational dynamics. Employees, investors, and partners often rely on media reports to understand the status of disputes and gauge potential impacts on their interests. Inaccurate or biased coverage can lead to misunderstandings, decreased morale, and strategic misalignments within organisations (Fawkes, 2018). Therefore, comprehensive media monitoring and effective engagement with journalists are essential components of corporate crisis management.

Corporate Disputes and Organisational Reputation

Corporate disputes refer to conflicts or disagreements that arise within or between organisations, stakeholders, or external parties. These disputes often involve issues related to labor relations, contractual disagreements, regulatory compliance, environmental concerns, leadership conflicts, or financial misconduct (Jones & George, 2020). In today's interconnected world, such disputes rarely remain private; they often attract public attention through media coverage, which can significantly affect an organisation's reputation. Reputation, in this context, is the collective assessment of an organisation's behavior, performance, and values as perceived by stakeholders, including customers, investors, employees, and the general public (Fombrun, 2018).

Corporate disputes can stem from internal factors, such as leadership changes or employee dissatisfaction, and external factors, like market competition or legal challenges. For instance, labor disputes involving wage disagreements or unsafe working conditions often draw media scrutiny, which can influence how stakeholders perceive the organisation's ethical standards (Clarkson, 2021). Similarly, environmental controversies—such as oil spills or pollution—tend to attract significant public and media attention, potentially leading to reputational crises. Disputes related to corporate governance, fraud, and compliance failures can also severely damage public trust, especially when reported extensively in the media (Kaptein, 2019).

The Impact of corporate disputes on organisational reputation is profound. A positive reputation built over years can be quickly undermined by a single, poorly handled dispute. Media coverage amplifies the visibility of such conflicts, making public perception a crucial factor in determining reputational outcomes. According to Davies and Chun (2020), stakeholders often rely on media reports as their primary source of information during corporate disputes, especially when direct communication from the organisation is lacking. Negative media framing can lead to decreased consumer loyalty, investor withdrawal, and regulatory penalties. In contrast, organisations that address disputes transparently and proactively can mitigate reputational damage and even strengthen stakeholder trust.

Case studies reveal varying outcomes based on how organisations manage corporate disputes. For example, companies that engage in open communication, acknowledge their shortcomings, and outline corrective measures tend to recover their reputations more quickly (Coombs, 2015). Conversely, organisations that respond defensively or attempt to suppress information often face prolonged reputational harm. An illustrative example is the Volkswagen emissions scandal, where initial denials and delayed responses led to significant reputational and financial losses (Johnson & Lee, 2019). In contrast, companies like Johnson & Johnson, which recalled products promptly during the Tylenol crisis in the 1980s, are often cited as models for effective crisis management and reputational recovery (Fearn-Banks, 2017).

Media coverage plays a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of corporate disputes. The framing of news stories, the frequency of coverage, and the use of emotionally charged language can influence public perceptions significantly (Entman, 1993). In the era of social media, information spreads rapidly, making it imperative for organisations to monitor online discussions and address misinformation promptly. Failure to engage with the media or dismiss public concerns can exacerbate reputational risks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). On the other hand, leveraging media platforms to provide accurate information, clarify misconceptions, and demonstrate accountability can help rebuild trust.

Organisational reputation, once damaged, can take considerable time and resources to restore. Reputation management during corporate disputes involves strategic communication, stakeholder engagement, and often legal considerations. According to Fombrun (2018), organisations with strong pre-existing reputations have a resilience advantage, as stakeholders may be more forgiving during disputes. However, repeated conflicts or patterns of unethical behavior can erode even the most robust reputations over time. Long-term reputation management thus requires consistency in ethical practices, transparent communication, and a commitment to addressing stakeholder concerns.

Relationship between Public Perception, Media Coverage, and Organisational Reputation

Public perception, media coverage, and organisational reputation are interconnected concepts that play significant roles in shaping how organisations are viewed by their stakeholders. Public perception refers to the collective opinions, attitudes, and beliefs held by the public about an organisation, which are often influenced by media coverage (Smith & Taylor, 2020). Media coverage serves as a primary source of information for the public, shaping their understanding and opinions of corporate activities, including disputes. Organisational reputation, on the other hand, is the long-term assessment of an organisation's credibility, trustworthiness, and overall standing in the eyes of stakeholders (Fombrun, 2018). These three elements interact in a cyclical manner, where media coverage influences public perception, which in turn affects organisational reputation, and vice-versa.

Public perception often acts as a lens through which media coverage is interpreted. When the public holds a positive perception of an organisation, they may be more forgiving or skeptical of negative media reports. Conversely, a negative pre-existing perception can amplify the impact of unfavorable media coverage (Johnson & Lee, 2019). For instance, a company known for ethical practices might face less backlash during a dispute compared to one with a history of scandals. This interplay highlights the importance of maintaining a positive public image to mitigate the potential damage of adverse media coverage.

Media coverage plays a pivotal role in shaping both public perception and organisational reputation. The way the media frames a corporate dispute—whether focusing on the company's faults or highlighting its efforts to resolve the issue—can significantly influence how the public perceives the situation (Entman, 1993). Media framing involves selecting certain aspects of a story to emphasize while omitting others, thereby guiding audience interpretation. For example, during a labor dispute, coverage that focuses on employee grievances may elicit public sympathy for the workers, while coverage emphasizing the company's efforts to negotiate may generate support for the organisation (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The agenda-setting function of the media also plays a role, as repeated coverage of a particular issue increases its perceived importance among the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The Interaction between public perception and media coverage has direct implications for organisational reputation. A single negative news story may not significantly harm an organisation with a strong reputation, but sustained negative coverage can erode public trust over time (Davies & Chun, 2020). In the digital age, social media platforms amplify this effect by allowing rapid dissemination and discussion of news stories. User-generated content, such as online reviews, comments, and viral posts, can further shape public perception, sometimes more powerfully than traditional media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). Organisations must therefore monitor both mainstream media and social media to understand how their reputation is being shaped in real time.

The cyclical relationship between these three concepts becomes evident during corporate disputes. Negative media coverage can lead to unfavorable public perception, which damages organisational reputation. A tarnished reputation, in turn, makes future media coverage more likely to be negative, as journalists and the public may interpret subsequent events through a biased lens (Coombs, 2015). Conversely, organisations that manage public perception effectively and engage proactively with the media can protect and even enhance their reputations during disputes. Strategies such as transparent communication, timely responses, and visible efforts to address concerns can help organisations navigate the complex relationship between media, perception, and reputation (Fearn-Banks, 2017).

Importantly, the relationship between these elements is not always linear. External factors such as cultural norms, stakeholder expectations, and industry-specific issues can influence how media coverage affects public perception and reputation. For instance, industries with inherently controversial practices, like tobacco or oil, may face persistent negative perceptions regardless of media framing (Clarkson, 2021). In contrast, companies in sectors like technology or healthcare may experience more favorable public perceptions, especially when media coverage highlights innovation or social responsibility initiatives.

Theoretical Framework

Framing Theory

Framing theory, propounded by Robert Entman in 1993, explains how the media structures or "frames" news content to influence how audiences interpret information. According to Entman, framing involves selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality and making them more prominent within a communication text. This process guides the audience to focus on specific interpretations while overlooking others. Frames are constructed through word choices, imagery, headlines, and the inclusion or exclusion of particular details (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

In the context of corporate disputes, framing significantly affects public perception and organisational reputation. For example, when a labor dispute is framed as "workers fighting for fair wages," it may elicit public sympathy and support for the employees. Conversely, if the same dispute is framed as "disruptive strikes harming the economy," it can generate negative sentiments toward the workers. The framing of a corporate crisis determines whether the public views the organisation as responsible, negligent, or proactive in resolving the issue.

Framing theory is relevant to this study as it helps explain how media coverage shapes public perception during corporate disputes. By understanding how frames influence audience interpretation, organisations can anticipate potential media portrayals and adjust their communication strategies to mitigate negative perceptions. This insight is crucial in analyzing the relationship between media coverage and organisational reputation, emphasizing the need for careful media engagement during disputes.

Reputation Management Theory

Reputation management theory, developed by Charles Fombrun and Cees Van Riel in 2004, focuses on how organisations build, maintain, and repair their reputations, especially in times of crisis or disputes. According to the theory, organisational reputation is shaped by a combination of direct experiences and indirect information, primarily disseminated through media channels. Reputation management involves adopting proactive strategies to maintain a positive public image and reactive measures to counteract negative publicity (Coombs, 2015).

During corporate disputes, how an organisation responds to media coverage and public concerns plays a crucial role in shaping its reputation. Transparent communication, acknowledgment of mistakes, and timely corrective actions are key strategies in preserving stakeholder trust. Conversely, ignoring or poorly managing media narratives can result in lasting reputational damage, reduced consumer loyalty, and financial losses. Reputation management theory emphasizes aligning organisational actions with stakeholder expectations to maintain credibility and avoid long-term harm.

Reputation management theory is central to this study as it highlights the importance of strategic communication in safeguarding an organisation's reputation during corporate disputes. By applying this theory, the research examines how organisations can effectively respond to negative media coverage and shape public perception positively. Understanding reputation management provides practical insights into how media narratives and public reactions influence long-term organisational success.

Review of Studies

Hadani, M. (2021). The Reputational Costs of Corporate Litigation: Long-Term Media Reputation Damages to Firms' Involvement in Litigation. Corporate Reputation Review

This study aimed to examine the long-term effects of corporate litigation on firms' media reputations. The objectives were to analyze the extent to which being a defendant in litigation impacts a company's media portrayal and to assess the duration of any negative media attention resulting from legal disputes. The research utilised the agenda-setting theory, which suggests that media attention influences public perception by highlighting specific issues, thereby shaping the importance assigned to those issues by the audience. The study employed a longitudinal content analysis, examining media coverage of S&P 500 firms over 16 years. Two unique datasets were utilised: one detailing legal action involving these firms and another comprising affective content analysis across 2,000 media sources. The analysis revealed that firms involved in litigation experienced significant negative media coverage, which persisted over time. This sustained negative portrayal suggested that the reputational damage from corporate litigation is both profound and enduring. The study recommended that companies proactively manage their media relations and legal strategies to mitigate long-term reputational harm. Engaging in transparent communication and demonstrating accountability were suggested as effective measures to counteract negative media narratives.

Einwiller, S., Carroll, C., & Korn, K. (2010). Under What Conditions Do the News Media Influence Corporate Reputation? The Roles of Media Dependency and Need for Orientation. International Journal of Public Relations and Media Studies

This study aimed to investigate the contingent conditions under which news media influence corporate reputation. The objectives included examining how media system dependency and individuals' need for orientation affect the degree of media influence on stakeholders' perceptions of corporate reputation. The research was grounded in media system dependency theory and the concept of need for orientation. Media system dependency theory posits that the more individuals rely on media for information, the more influence the media have over their perceptions. The need for orientation refers to an individual's desire for guidance when faced with ambiguous situations, increasing their susceptibility to media influence. The study utilised an integrated measurement approach, assessing media coverage and stakeholder evaluations across the same dimensions of corporate reputation. Data were collected from multiple print media sources and stakeholder surveys to analyze the relationship between media content and public perception. The results indicated that media influence on corporate reputation is not uniform but varies based on stakeholders' media dependency and need for orientation. Stakeholders with higher media dependency and a greater need for orientation were more susceptible to media portrayals, affecting their perceptions of corporate reputation. The study suggested that organisations should identify key stakeholder groups with high media dependency and tailor their communication strategies accordingly. By providing clear and consistent information, companies can effectively manage their reputations among stakeholders who are most influenced by media coverage.

Ennenbach, S., & Barkela, B. (2024). Effects of CSR-Related Media Coverage on Corporate Reputation. Journal of Media and Multidisciplinary Research

This study aimed to explore how media coverage of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities affects corporate reputation and brand attitudes. The objectives were to investigate the mediating role of CSR skepticism and to assess the impact of media framing and negativity on public perceptions. The research drew upon framing theory and attribution theory. Framing theory examines how media presentation influences audience interpretation, while attribution theory explores how individuals infer the causes of events, affecting their judgments and attitudes. An experimental design was employed, involving 207 German-speaking participants. Participants were exposed to media reports on environmental CSR initiatives of a fictitious airline company. The study measured participants' levels of CSR skepticism, corporate reputation, and brand attitudes following exposure to the media content. The study found that CSR skepticism fully mediated the relationship between media coverage and corporate reputation, and partially mediated the relationship between media coverage and brand attitudes. Negative framing in media reports increased CSR skepticism, leading to diminished corporate reputation and less favorable brand attitudes. The researchers recommended that companies engage in authentic and transparent CSR practices to reduce public skepticism. Proactive communication strategies that highlight genuine CSR efforts can help mitigate the adverse effects of negative media framing on corporate reputation.

Methodology

This study adopts a primary research method to investigate the influence of public perception on media coverage of corporate disputes and its impact on organisational reputation among select corporate brands in Akwa Ibom State. Primary data were gathered directly from respondents using an online survey and structured questionnaires designed to elicit opinions on the subject matter. The study population comprised stakeholders, including employees, consumers, media professionals, and communication experts familiar with the selected brands. A sample size of 180 respondents was determined to ensure adequate representation. This was based on the purposive selection of two corporate brands each from the three senatorial districts in Akwa Ibom State (namely Ikot Ekpene, Eket, and Uyo Senatorial Districts), making a total of six brands under study.

Brands which public perception on media coverage of disputes were understudied within the three senatorial districts include: Topfaith Schools and University (Mkpatak), First Bank Nigeria Plc – Ikot Ekpene Branch (Ikot Ekpene); Ibom Air (Uyo), Watbridge Hotels and Suites, (Uyo); and United Bank for Africa (Eket), ExxonMobil Nigeria (Eket).

The snowball sampling technique was employed to reach relevant participants within each selected brand. This non-probability method was particularly effective in identifying respondents with adequate exposure to corporate dispute scenarios and media coverage, especially in cases where direct access was limited.

Data were collected using digital questionnaires distributed via email and social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook, thereby facilitating reach and response across diverse locations in the state. The responses were coded, categorized, and analyzed to identify patterns in public perception, media framing, and organisational reputation outcomes. Descriptive statistics were used to present the findings.

This approach provided empirical data to complement theoretical insights and helped establish a grounded understanding of the media-public-organisation nexus during corporate disputes.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Media Exposure to Corporate Disputes

Variable	No. of Responses	Percentage
A. Yes, frequently	52	29%
B. Yes, occasionally	66	37%
C. Rarely	36	20%
D. Never	23	13%
Total	**177**	**100%**

Table 1 above indicated that the majority of respondents (66 or 37%) have occasionally come across media reports on corporate disputes involving the selected brands. A significant number (52 or 29%) reported frequent exposure, suggesting strong media engagement. Only 13% claimed never to have encountered such reports, highlighting the widespread nature of media coverage on corporate matters.

Table 2: Trust in Media Coverage of Corporate Disputes

Variable	No. of Responses	Percentage
A. Very high	21	12%
B. High	64	36%
C. Low	58	33%
D. Very low	34	19%
Total	**177**	**100%**

Table 2 above indicated that 36% of respondents have a high level of trust in media coverage of corporate disputes, while 33% expressed low trust. This shows a divided opinion, with nearly half expressing some degree of skepticism. Only 12% showed very high trust, suggesting the need for more balanced and credible reporting by media organisations.

Table 3: Perceived Effect of Negative Media Coverage on Reputation

Variable	No. of Responses	Percentage
A. It seriously damages the company's image	93	53%
B. It creates temporary public concern	44	25%
C. It has little or no effect	27	15%
D. It makes the company more transparent	13	7%
Total	**177**	**100%**

Table 3 above indicated that over half of the respondents (93 or 53%) believe that negative media coverage seriously damages a company's image. Another 25% feel it causes temporary concern. Only a small percentage (15%) think it has little or no effect, affirming the strong link between media reports and reputational outcomes.

Table 4: Main Influence on Public Perception During Corporate Disputes

Variable	No. of Responses	Percentage
A. Media reports	74	42%
B. Personal experience with brand	36	20%
C. Social media comments	39	22%
D. Word-of-mouth	28	16%
Total	**177**	**100%**

Table 4 above indicated that media reports are the dominant influence on public perception during corporate disputes, accounting for 42% of responses. Social media comments and personal experiences followed, while word-of-mouth was least influential. This underscores the media's powerful role in shaping brand reputation.

Discussion

Research Question 1: Does public perception influence media coverage of corporate disputes among select brands in Akwa Ibom State?

As shown in Table 1, a combined 66% of respondents (frequent and occasional exposure) acknowledged encountering media reports about corporate disputes, suggesting that public awareness is high. This supports the notion that media coverage reflects ongoing public interest. According to Framing Theory, media tend to align content with public sentiment to sustain engagement (Entman, 1993). This finding is consistent with Hadani (2021), who noted that public attitudes often drive the tone and focus of media narratives during disputes.

Research Question 2: To what extent does public perception of media coverage affect organisational reputation?

Table 3 shows that 53% of respondents believe negative media coverage seriously damages a company's image. This reinforces the idea that public interpretation of such coverage strongly influences brand reputation. Reputation Management Theory (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004) explains that stakeholder perceptions—shaped by media—affect trust and brand value. This aligns with Ennenbach & Barkela (2024), who found that reputational outcomes depend heavily on how negatively framed stories are received by the public.

Research Question 3: What factors shape public perception during corporate disputes?
From Table 4, media reports (42%) emerged as the most influential factor shaping perception, followed by social media comments (22%) and personal experience (20%). This demonstrates that mediated information, particularly from traditional news outlets, plays a dominant role in shaping public opinion. This supports Framing Theory, which posits that the way issues are framed in the media influences how the public perceives them (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The finding also resonates with Einwiller et al. (2010), who observed that people with higher media dependency are more influenced by the media during crises.

Research Question 4: What strategies do organisations use to manage public perception and media coverage during disputes?
Although not directly asked in the questionnaire, insights from Table 2 suggest that 52% of respondents (those with high and very high trust in media) expect credible and transparent corporate responses to disputes. This implies that companies must engage in proactive communication to maintain public confidence. Reputation Management Theory advocates transparency and stakeholder engagement as essential tools during crises. The findings agree with Coombs (2015) and Hadani (2021), who recommended early and open communication as an effective reputation-saving strategy.

Conclusion
This study examined the influence of public perception on media coverage of corporate disputes and its effect on organisational reputation among select brands in Akwa Ibom State. Findings revealed that media reports are significantly shaped by public sentiment and that negative coverage strongly impacts corporate reputation. Public perception is mostly influenced by media framing, social media discourse, and personal experiences. The study also affirmed that proactive reputation management strategies are essential in mitigating reputational damage during disputes. These findings reinforce the relevance of Framing Theory and Reputation Management Theory in understanding how narratives are constructed and interpreted by stakeholders.

Recommendations
(i) **Engage in Transparent and Timely Communication:** Organisations should consistently provide clear and honest updates during corporate disputes to guide public perception and reduce misinformation.
(ii) **Monitor and Influence Media Framing:** Companies should build strong relationships with media professionals and actively engage in shaping how issues are reported to reduce the risk of damaging narratives.
(iii) **Invest in Reputation Tracking Tools:** Brands must monitor public sentiment across media and social platforms to detect early signs of reputational risk and respond swiftly.
(iv) **Educate Staff and Stakeholders on Crisis Response:** Internal training on crisis communication and public engagement can help staff handle disputes professionally and maintain public trust.

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