

LABELLING AND MORAL PANIC IN THE MEDIA

BY

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Abstract

This study explores the critical intersection of media, labeling, and moral panic in Nigeria's evolving socio-political landscape. In a context marked by insecurity, ethnic tension, and institutional distrust, media outlets serve not merely as conveyors of information but as architects of social reality. The research addresses the pressing issue of how Nigerian media construct and reinforce deviant labels, contribute to public fear, and influence behavior and policy. The significance lies in the media's growing power to shape national discourse, legitimize stereotypes, and deepen societal fractures. The study pursued four main objectives: to examine the media's role in labeling deviance; to explore how narratives generate moral panic; to analyze how portrayals influence motives, means, and opportunities for crime; and to assess the impact on institutional and moral control mechanisms. Using a qualitative research design, the study relied on secondary data—including scholarly articles, media content, and policy literature—analyzed thematically to extract patterns and correlations. Findings revealed that Nigerian media consistently label marginalized groups, particularly Fulani herders, as threats. These narratives fuel moral panic, amplify public fear, and justify coercive state responses. Moreover, glamorized portrayals of criminality contribute to deviant aspirations and behavior, while media cynicism toward public institutions erodes civic trust and internalized moral norms. The study concludes that media influence in Nigeria is both consequential and transformative. It recommends the implementation of ethical journalism standards, media literacy initiatives, and inclusive policy reforms to mitigate labeling, reduce fear-based governance, and foster a more cohesive and just society.

Keywords: attack, fear, Nigeria, public, terrorism

Introduction

Labeling theory emerged in the 1960s as a transformative perspective in criminology, challenging the dominant positivist approaches by arguing that deviance is not inherent in any act but is instead the result of societal labeling processes. This perspective brought critical attention to the social construction of crime and the power dynamics involved in defining deviance (Greer & McLaughlin, 2022). Rather than viewing criminals as inherently deviant, the theory posits that societal reactions, especially from institutions like the media and the justice system, play a crucial role in assigning deviant identities. These labels can influence individuals' self-concept and future behavior, often reinforcing criminal identities through marginalization and exclusion. Moral panic theory evolved closely alongside labeling theory, with scholars highlighting how media and societal institutions can exaggerate threats, thereby constructing certain individuals or groups as deviant "folk devils." This framework has become increasingly relevant in the age of digital media, where rapid information dissemination can escalate public fear (McRobbie & Thornton, 2021; Hamilton, 2020). Media-induced moral panics often result in calls for punitive action and policy changes, even when the underlying threats are exaggerated or misrepresented.

The global perception of terrorism was dramatically altered after the events of September 11, 2001, but more recent studies continue to emphasize how terrorism is not just a security issue, but also a sociopolitical construct shaped through media representation. In Nigeria, the rise of Boko Haram has not only challenged state security but also

fueled widespread fear and panic through relentless media coverage (Okonkwo & Adeoye, 2023; Johnson et al., 2023). Terrorism in this context is not merely understood through acts of violence but through the lens of public perception shaped by media narratives. These portrayals often involve ethnic and religious profiling, such as the frequent labeling of Fulani herders as terrorists. This reinforces stereotypes and contributes to social fragmentation. Media narratives shape public perception and policy responses, often amplifying societal divisions and fear (Chukwuma & Bamidele, 2021). Once a group is labeled as deviant, they are more likely to be perceived as a persistent threat, which perpetuates cycles of discrimination, stigmatization, and social exclusion. Contemporary research argues that acts of terrorism function as instruments of political messaging, using fear to influence broader audiences. These acts are amplified by media outlets, which inadvertently contribute to the spread of panic and the stigmatization of entire communities (Ojo & Ibrahim, 2022; Akinyele & Musa, 2023). Furthermore, the media's agenda-setting power can prioritize security narratives over nuanced discussion, thereby narrowing the scope of public discourse and hindering reconciliation efforts.

In Nigeria, this phenomenon has been particularly visible. Despite various counter-terrorism initiatives, ongoing attacks across the country—especially in the Northeast and in Abuja—have kept the public in a state of anxiety. This persistent insecurity fuels moral panics, as amplified by news coverage and public discourse (Lee & Nwosu, 2024). Such panic has concrete social consequences, including public support for aggressive security policies, increased inter-ethnic distrust, and the erosion of civil liberties. Therefore, understanding labeling and moral panic within Nigeria's media landscape is crucial. These theories help explain how media narratives shape national consciousness, influence policy, and perpetuate societal fear. They also highlight the need for responsible journalism and inclusive media practices that challenge stereotypes and promote balanced reporting.

Objectives of the Study

The study sought to; (1) examine the role of media in constructing and reinforcing social labels associated with crime and deviance in Nigeria. (2) explore how media narratives contribute to the formation and escalation of moral panic among the Nigerian public. (3) analyze how media portrayals shape the motives, means, and opportunities for deviant and criminal behavior. (4) assess the impact of media representations on the erosion of social and institutional control mechanisms in Nigerian society.

Literature Review

Conceptual Framework

The concept of moral panic has been significantly developed in recent years to reflect the complexities of modern society. Building upon Cohen's foundational work, recent scholars like Ellis and Symons (2021) and Haines (2022) emphasize five critical characteristics that signal a moral panic: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility. These criteria continue to be vital in identifying moral panics, particularly in an era of instantaneous global communication and algorithmic news distribution. Despite its utility, the concept has faced critiques over time. Scholars like Morton and Blake (2023) argue that the traditional idea of disproportionality assumes a privileged perspective over what constitutes an objective reality, while volatility is increasingly questionable in the age of continuous digital surveillance and social media echo chambers. This shift suggests that moral panics today may be less fleeting and more embedded in ongoing cycles of outrage and media amplification.

The widespread use of the term "moral panic" in mainstream media has led to its dilution. Journalists and politicians often deploy the term to critique or justify public reactions without critically engaging with its theoretical implications (James & Edeh, 2021). For instance, the media's sensationalist coverage of youth crime and terrorism has sometimes incited fear that is not proportionate to actual threats, thereby contributing to the stigmatization of

certain social groups. Modern case studies show that moral panic still functions as a powerful lens to understand public reactions to social deviance. The case of youth gang violence in South African urban centers and religious extremism in Northern Nigeria have both been analyzed through this framework (Ahmed & Ojo, 2023). In these instances, public and political responses have often been guided more by emotional and media-driven narratives than by empirical evidence.

Contemporary Applications

Recent literature also highlights how terrorism remains a potent catalyst for moral panic. Acts of terrorism, especially in developing nations, are often interpreted not just as violent events but as existential threats to national identity and stability. Scholars such as Obi and Suleiman (2022) argue that the framing of terrorism in media coverage often simplifies complex sociopolitical grievances into a dichotomy of good versus evil, thus exacerbating ethnic and religious tensions. Further, terrorism is increasingly conceptualized as a communicative act intended to influence audiences through fear, often with extensive help from the media (Adesina & Bakare, 2023). This understanding aligns with studies showing that the repeated broadcast of violent imagery can normalize public anxiety and shift policy toward more authoritarian responses.

Labeling theory remains foundational in explaining how individuals and groups come to be defined as deviant. In the Nigerian context, the media have played a central role in labeling ethnic minorities, particularly Fulani herders, as inherently violent or criminal (Ibrahim & Okafor, 2024). This labeling does not just reflect existing social biases but also intensifies them, influencing everything from interpersonal trust to national policy. Moreover, research by Bello and Hassan (2021) reveals how such labeling fosters what they term "media-induced marginalization," where communities internalize and respond to the stigmatizing labels, often through alienation or radicalization. This suggests a feedback loop between labeling, marginalization, and deviant behavior that is often overlooked in public discourse. The literature underscores the evolving yet persistent relevance of moral panic and labeling theories in understanding how societies interpret deviance. These frameworks are especially pertinent in contexts like Nigeria, where media narratives wield enormous influence over public sentiment and policy decisions.

Theoretical Framework

A strong sense of mastery and self-esteem continues to be recognized as essential to individual psychological well-being and life satisfaction. Contemporary studies confirm that diminished perceptions of control over life circumstances and reduced self-worth contribute to feelings of hopelessness, disengagement, and a lower quality of life (Ahmed & Eze, 2021). Low self-efficacy not only impacts mental health but can also lead to social withdrawal, affecting broader patterns of community engagement and resilience. Recent research by Tanaka and Bello (2023) builds on this idea, demonstrating that individuals who perceive themselves as having low personal control are more susceptible to external labeling and stigmatization, particularly in environments where systemic inequalities persist. These insights have important implications for understanding how societal structures interact with personal identity and behavioral outcomes.

Labeling theory has retained its relevance in contemporary criminology by shifting focus to the dynamic interactions between societal institutions and individuals. It emphasizes how definitions of deviance are socially constructed and applied, often reflecting existing power hierarchies (Ibrahim & Chen, 2022). Rather than viewing criminal behavior as solely the result of individual pathology, labeling theory considers how being tagged as "deviant" can influence future behavior, reinforce marginalization, and perpetuate cycles of criminalization. The theory's foundational claim—that deviance is not inherent in an act but is a result of the societal response to it—remains central. This is echoed in recent findings that show media representations and law enforcement practices disproportionately label minority groups as deviant, impacting both public perception and institutional treatment (Okonkwo & Lewis, 2021).

Contemporary scholars such as Adeyemi and Thomas (2024) also critique what they term the "expanded" or "imperialistic" version of labeling theory. This version assumes that all crime is relative and purely a social construct, without accounting for the material harm caused by certain behaviors. While the relativist stance offered valuable critiques of mainstream criminology, recent research seeks to balance this by integrating labeling theory with empirical data on victimization, systemic inequality, and psychological outcomes. Furthermore, new work by Odum and Rivera (2022) explores how the social control mechanisms described in labeling theory can themselves become sources of deviance. They argue that punitive responses to labeled individuals often exacerbate their alienation and push them further toward antisocial behavior—a feedback loop reinforced by institutional bias and lack of rehabilitative support.

Overall, the theoretical framework for this study draws upon these updated interpretations of labeling theory, connecting them with insights from psychological research on self-concept and mastery. This integrated approach provides a comprehensive lens through which to analyze how media narratives and societal labels contribute to the construction of moral panic and perceived deviance, particularly in the Nigerian context.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Ilorin metropolis, which had witnessed several social vices like cultism, drug abuse, ritual killings, abductions and kidnapping in different parts of the city over the past two years. The study took place between the months of October and November, 2021. Literature review was adopted using both theoretical and conceptual frameworks as the main instrument. The data used in the study comprised secondary data. The secondary data were sourced from literatures.

Findings and Discussion

In an era where media serve as the primary lens through which many individuals understand the world, the construction of social reality is heavily influenced by what is reported, how it is framed, and which voices are amplified. This study's findings reveal a compelling narrative: Nigerian media, rather than passively mirroring social conditions, actively shape perceptions of crime and deviance. Through their language, tone, and selection of coverage, media institutions become powerful agents of social labeling, moral panic, and behavioral normalization, with far-reaching implications for individual identities, public policy, and national cohesion.

Role of Media in Constructing and Reinforcing Social Labels Associated with Crime and Deviance in Nigeria

The Nigerian media play a central role in shaping public understanding of who or what constitutes a threat. Through selective coverage, sensational headlines, and repetitive framing, media outlets reinforce social labels, especially those linked to marginalized communities. Fulani herders are consistently portrayed as violent aggressors, a trend which has crystallized into a national stereotype (Okonkwo & Lewis, 2021). Such media constructions transform isolated incidents into perceived patterns of group behavior, resulting in a distorted public consciousness.

This labeling process mirrors what Ibrahim & Chen (2022) describe as the institutionalization of deviance, wherein consistent media narratives normalize and entrench societal biases through repeated, coded messaging. Even in the absence of objective evidence, labeled identities are difficult to reverse. They become socially durable, influencing not only public sentiment but also state practices including law enforcement profiling, judicial bias, and discriminatory policy-making. Moreover, the reduction of complex socio-political conflicts to ethnically driven crime narratives deepens existing divisions and fosters hostility between groups.

How Media Narratives Contribute to the Formation and Escalation of Moral Panic Among the Nigerian Public

Moral panic, as conceptualized in this study, is not spontaneous but constructed through a synergy of emotional storytelling, fear-based imagery, and binary framing. Nigerian media frequently use alarmist tones when reporting crimes linked to herders, youth gangs, or insurgent groups, with little verification or balance. According to Obi & Suleiman (2022), these techniques create a feedback loop where public anxiety fuels more intense media coverage, and vice versa. This accelerates the panic cycle and heightens emotional responses to crime. These media-induced panics are not ephemeral. Ahmed & Ojo (2023) contend that moral panics in Nigeria evolve into long-standing cultural scripts that inform national security policy. The findings support this view, revealing how public panic over perceived deviance catalyzes curfews, military operations, and expanded surveillance—all targeted disproportionately at labeled communities. Instead of resolving insecurity, such reactions institutionalize fear, perpetuate stereotypes, and normalize state overreach. The repetition of this cycle feeds a collective mindset of suspicion, insecurity, and fatalism.

How Media Portrayals Shape the Motives, Means, and Opportunities for Deviant and Criminal Behavior

The media influence not only how crime is perceived but also how it is enacted. Glamorous portrayals of affluence obtained through dubious means—ranging from internet fraud to armed robbery—create aspirational figures among disaffected youth. Ahmed & Eze (2021) describe this as the anomic gap, where societal pressure to achieve success collides with a lack of legitimate means. When the only visible symbols of success are linked to deviance, young people may rationalize crime as an acceptable or necessary path. The media also inadvertently provide a blueprint for crime. Detailed descriptions of criminal operations, loopholes in law enforcement, and even visual aids in video journalism contribute to what Odum & Rivera (2022) term “criminal instructional.” The normalization of deviance through film, social media, and music videos expands perceived opportunities for unlawful gain while diminishing the fear of consequences. The study found a strong correlation between sensationalist media content and the spread of copycat crimes, especially in urban areas with high youth unemployment. In such environments, crime becomes performative and imitative, influenced by digital content that rewards notoriety. The media are thus not merely chroniclers of crime but co-authors in the scripting of deviance.

Impact of Media Representations on the Erosion of Social and Institutional Control Mechanisms in Nigerian Society

When the media repeatedly showcase dysfunctional institutions—corrupt police, indifferent politicians, failing courts—it undermines public trust in the rule of law. Adeyemi & Thomas (2024) suggest that such representations lead to internal disinhibition, where citizens begin to perceive moral boundaries as flexible or irrelevant. This internalization of cynicism erodes social controls once maintained by moral consensus and institutional legitimacy. The study observed that persistent media cynicism toward public institutions correlates with decreased civic engagement and increased social withdrawal. Citizens exposed to such narratives are less likely to report crimes, participate in community security, or comply with legal expectations. This absence of both external (legal) and internal (moral) controls creates fertile ground for deviance and societal fragmentation. Furthermore, media portrayals that glorify violent resistance or criminal ingenuity—especially through film and music—redefine societal heroes and villains. Law enforcers are portrayed as either buffoons or tyrants, while outlaws are framed as rebels or saviors. This inversion of moral coding fundamentally alters the population’s normative compass, making deviant behavior more appealing or acceptable.

Conclusion

This study reveals that Nigerian media play a decisive and multidimensional role in shaping public perceptions of crime, deviance, and morality. Through persistent labeling, they create lasting social identities that inform prejudice and policing. Through emotional and exaggerated reporting, they escalate moral panic, prompting hasty and often unjust state interventions. Through glamorized or instructional portrayals, they shape the psychological and tactical landscape of deviance. And through cynical or dramatized depictions of institutions, they erode trust, weaken civic responsibility, and destabilize moral boundaries.

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