

Coverage of Cult-Related Killings in South-South, Nigeria by Selected Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

The worsening wave of cult-related killings in South-South Nigeria makes it a major media issue. The consequences of cult clashes and other violent acts associated with cultism are too many to be ignored by newspapers. This study sought to discover the extent of coverage, the prominence given to reports; and factors that prompted news editors of five selected Nigerian newspapers in reporting cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria in 2019. The selected newspapers were: The Nigerian Observer, The Tide, The Pioneer, Daily Sun and The Guardian. Content analysis and survey research designs were adopted for the study and a sample of 302 issues were determined from a population of 1,407 editions. The study made use of code guide and interview guide as instruments for data collection and findings of the study showed that Nigerian newspapers did not adequately cover cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria in 2019. They did not also give prominence to the incidents of cult-related killings in the region in their reports due to the consequence of such reports on the economy of the region and the interest of their owners in promoting the good image of the region. The study recommended that Nigerian newspapers should investigate and report cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria and give it prominence with a view to exposing and curbing its menace in the region.

Key words: Newspaper coverage. Cult-related killings. Nigerian newspapers.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The South-South region of Nigeria is rich in oil, mineral and other natural resources. The region, described by Ashong & Udouo (2007) as physiographic (core) Niger Delta, comprises Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers States, and is part of the oil-producing Niger Delta States of Nigeria. The oil and gas resources from the region account for over 80% of Federal Government revenue and approximately 95% of Nigeria's export earnings (Francis, Lapin & Rossiasco, 2011). The region's fertile agricultural land, extensive forests resources and abundant fisheries and other aquatic resources are sources of food and means of livelihood for many communities in the region and the country at large. Ashong and Udouo (2007) again note that "the waters and the tropical rain forests of the region provide the country with fish and wood for domestic consumption" (p. 195).

The region has however witnessed several cult-related killings and other violent crimes. From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, a wave of militarization occurred among confraternities (cult groups) against the backdrop of a broader militarization of the society, particularly in Rivers and other key South-South States (The Fund for Peace, 2015). Report by *The Fund for Peace* (2015) further states that in July 2015, there was a major clash between rival cult groups, *Deywell* and *Deebam*, in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, which led to the killing of 16 people. There was also a reported clash between rival cult groups, *Greenlanders* and *Icelanders* in Degema; and political intimidation by cult groups such as the *Icelanders* and *Greenlanders* between January and April in Port Harcourt and Andoni (The Fund for Peace, 2015). Similarly, a report by Amnesty International (2020) on cult-

related killings in Rivers State states that at least 60 people were killed in 2019 alone in various communities of the State, especially; Khana and Gokana Local Government Areas.

Cultism denotes something hidden, occultic, concealed, enigmatic, mysterious, mystical, etc. It is the deadly engagement in ritual practices. Ekeanyanwu&Igbino (2007) cite Ajakaiye (2002) as saying that “cultism may be viewed as a system of beliefs binding together people of the same interest for the purpose of promoting and defending the common pursuit” (p. 34). The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, in Section 318 (4), bans any secret society, which is defined as a society or an association not being solely a cultural or religious body, that uses secret signs, oaths, rites or symbols; whose meeting or other activities are held in secret; and whose members are under oath, obligation or other threats to promote the interest of its members or to aid one another under all circumstances without due regard to merit, fair play or justice, to the detriment of the legitimate expectation of those who are not members”.

The emergence, growth and spread of cultism and cultic groups in South-South Nigeria have severely challenged traditional values, morality and social order in many communities in the region. With the spate of killings and reprisals, many cult groups have threatened the social order, cultural values and norms of the people of the region. Worse still, many parents have lost their undergraduate children in tertiary institutions, as a result of cult-related killings. Nigerians have suffered terribly in the hands of cult gangs. People have been brutally murdered while properties worth millions of naira have been destroyed in cult clashes. Innocent people residing in cult-infested areas live in perpetual fear, not knowing when the hoodlums would strike (*The Guardian*, July 18, 2018).

The worsening wave of cult-related killings in South-South Nigeria makes it a major media issue. The consequences of cult clashes and other violent acts associated with cultism are too many to be ignored by newspapers. Zhang, Huang & Li (2017) have also noted that “cults constitute a regular topic for contemporary journalists to write about”, (p. 203). Given the failed efforts by government to stem the tide of cult-related killings in the country, and the inability of religious organizations to successfully carry out anti-cult campaigns to their faithful, the media are expected to contribute optimally to the campaign against cultism in Nigeria.

It is in view of the foregoing, this study pays attention to how newspapers covered cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria in 2019. It seeks to discover the extent of coverage, the prominence given to reports; and factors that prompt news editors of five selected Nigerian newspapers in reporting cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted content analysis and survey as research designs. Nwosu (1996) explains that analyzing the quality of coverage of an event by a newspaper is as important as the analysis of its quantitative coverage. This helps to give a balanced analysis of the way the media report issues. McTavish and Loether (2002) point out that using qualitative and quantitative methods of research provide a way of assessing the accuracy of findings. The combination of these two methods of research helps to create room for comparison of findings from both, thereby making for acceptability of findings.

Population, sample size and sampling technique

The selected Nigerian newspapers for this Study are: *The Nigerian Observer*, published daily by the Edo State Government; *The Tide* published thrice a week by the Rivers State Government, and *The Pioneer* also published thrice a week by the AkwaIbom State Government. These newspapers are among the oldest government-owned newspapers in the South-South Region. They are printed and circulated mainly within the states in South-South, Nigeria. Other newspapers used for the study are: *Daily Sun* and *The Guardian*, which are printed in Lagos, Nigeria and circulated all over the country.

The second level of population for the content analysis was the total number of issues that were obtained when the number of selected newspapers to be studied was multiplied by the number of days involved within the period of the study. In this regard, three of the five selected newspapers, which publishes daily, has 365 issues for the period under study, while the other two newspapers which publish thrice a week will have 156 issues (3 editions per week x 52 weeks) in a year. In effect, 365 issues multiplied by the three newspapers (*Daily Sun*, *The Guardian*, and *The Nigerian Observer*) will give 1,095 issues a year, while the other two newspapers (*The Pioneer* and *The Tide*) which publish thrice a week will have 312 issues. The population of the study is therefore 1,407 (1,095 + 312) issues of the five selected newspapers.

Table 1 showing population of selected newspapers (Jan. 1 – Dec. 31, 2019)

s/no.	Newspaper	Total issues per year	Percentage
1	<i>The Nigerian Observer</i>	365	25.942
2	<i>The Guardian</i>	365	25.942
3	<i>Daily Sun</i>	365	25.942

4	<i>The Pioneer</i>	156	11.087
5	<i>The Tide</i>	156	11.087
	Total	1,407	100

For the human population, the study (for the interview) comprises all the News Editors of the selected newspapers, which is 5 in number.

This study determined the sample size of the 1,407 (population) newspaper issues with the Krejcie & Morgan (1970) sample size table. For a population of 1400, a sample representative of 302 is recommended, while for a population of 1500, 306 is the recommended sample. Given that the population of 1407 falls within the range for a sample of 302, it was considered appropriate for study.

Furthermore, quota sampling technique was applied to determine percentage and apportion number of issues to each of the five selected newspapers according to their contribution to the population of the study.

Table 2 shows the sample size of the selected newspapers by proportion

S/No.	Newspapers	Calculation for proportionate sample	Proportionate sample size
1	<i>The Nigerian Observer</i>	$25.942 \div 100 \times 302$	78
2	<i>The Guardian</i>	$25.942 \div 100 \times 302$	78
3	<i>Daily Sun</i>	$25.942 \div 100 \times 302$	78
4	<i>The Pioneer</i>	$11.087 \div 100 \times 302$	34
5	<i>The Tide</i>	$11.087 \div 100 \times 302$	34
	Total		302

Furthermore, the purposive sampling technique was applied in selecting the issues whose contents were analyzed for this study. Purposive sampling is sometimes useful in content analysis. Riffe & Freitag (1997) note that purposive sampling is important in content analysis and found out that “68% of all content analyses in *Journalism Quarterly* from 1971 to 1995 used a purposive sampling” (p. 158).

In applying the purposive sampling technique in selecting the newspaper issues to be studied, the researcher will sight all the 365 and select the number of editions that contain stories, opinions, editorials, etc. about cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria.

For the survey, the researcher purposively selected one News Editor per newspaper organisation (making a total of five journalists) for interview.

Instruments for data collection

Instruments for data collection in this study were the coding sheet/guide for content analysis and interview guide for the survey.

Data Analysis

Data gathered for this study were analyzed using simple frequency counts and percentages. They helped in measuring the extent of coverage and prominence given to reports on cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria by the selected newspapers..

In addition, the Constant Comparative Technique was used in analysing qualitative data elicited from the interview. Features of this technique include comparative assignment of incidents to categories, elaboration and refinement of categories, searching for the relationship and themes among categories, and simplifying and integrating data into a coherent theoretical structure (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Therefore, the qualitative data in this study were interpreted with reference to the specific research question that they were designed to answer.

III. RESULTS

Table 3: Extent of reports on cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria by the selected Nigerian newspapers

Units of analysis	Newspapers					Total	Percentage (%)
	The Guardian	Daily Sun	The Nigerian Observer	The Pioneer	The Tide		
Straight news stories	22 (20.9%)	22 (20.9%)	11 (10.5%)	26 (24.8%)	16 (15.2%)	97	92.4
Features	2 (1.9%)	0	0	0	0	2	1.9
Editorials	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cartoons	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Photographs (Cutlines)	2 (1.9%)	0	0	0	0	2	1.9
Opinions	0	2 (1.9%)	1 (0.9%)	0	1 (0.9%)	4	3.8
Letters to the Editor	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	26 (24.8%)	24 (22.9%)	12 (11.4%)	26 (24.8%)	17 (16.2%)	105	100
Proportionate sample size	78 (25.8%)	78 (25.8%)	78 (25.8%)	34 (11.3%)	34 (11.3%)	302 (100%)	34.8

Table 3 above shows the extent of coverage and reporting of cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria by the selected Nigerian newspapers. Out of the 234 (78 x 3) samples proportionately allocated to *The Guardian*, *Daily Sun* and *The Nigerian Observer*, the newspapers had 62 (26, 24 and 12) reports respectively on cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria in 2019. This represents a total of 20.2 per cent of the reports examined. Similarly, out of the 84 sample editions allocated at 42 issues each to *The Tide* and *The Pioneer* newspapers, 43 reports were published on cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria by the two newspapers in 2019, representing 14.1 per cent of the reports examined.

In other words, a total of 105 reports on cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria were published in 2019 by the 5 selected newspapers out of the 306 samples allocated to them. This represents 34.3 percent. *The Pioneer* newspaper which publishes three times in a week had 26 reports, being the highest number of reports about cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria, among the newspapers studied. *The Nigerian Observer* newspaper which publishes daily had 12 reports, being the least number of reports among all the editions examined.

Furthermore, the table shows that *Daily Sun*, *The Nigerian Observer*, *The Pioneer* and *The Tide* newspapers did not use features, editorials, photographs or cartoons at all in reporting cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria. Similarly, there were no letters to the editor on cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria in all the selected Nigerian newspapers studied. The implication of the data on 1 above is that selected Nigerian newspapers did not adequately report cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria in 2019.

Table 4: Number of reports on cult-related killings in each State in South-South, Nigeria by selected Nigerian newspapers

States in South-South, Nigeria	Newspapers and number of their reports per state					Total	Percentage (%)
	The Guardian	Daily Sun	The Nigerian Observer	The Pioneer	The Tide		

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AkwaIbom	2 (1.9%)	1 (0.9%)	1 (0.9%)	3 (2.8%)	0	7	6.7
Bayelsa	0	0	0	2 (1.9%)	1 (0.9%)	3	2.8
Cross River	4 (3.8%)	1 (0.9%)	0	4 (3.8%)	3 (2.8%)	12	11.4
Delta	1 (0.9%)	1 (0.9%)	0	3 (2.8%)	1 (0.9%)	6	5.8
Edo	6 (5.7%)	7 (6.7%)	10 (9.5%)	6 (5.8%)	1 (0.9%)	30	28.6
Rivers	13 (12.3%)	14 (13.3%)	1 (0.9%)	8 (7.6%)	11 (10.4%)	47	44.7
Total	26 (24.8%)	24 (22.8%)	12 (11.4%)	26 (24.8%)	17 (16.2%)	105	100

As shown in Table 4 above, the number of reports per State by each of the selected Nigerian newspaper indicated that Rivers State had the highest numbers of reports of cult-related killings than any other State in South-South, Nigeria at 44.7% while reports on cult-related killings in Bayelsa State were the least reported at 2.8%. *The Guardian*, *Daily Sun* and *The Nigerian Observer* newspapers did not publish any report on cult-related killings in Bayelsa State in 2019.

Table 5: Placement of stories on cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria in selected Nigerian newspapers

Placement of story in newspaper	Newspapers					Total	Percentage (%)
	The Guardian	Daily Sun	The Pioneer	The Nigerian Observer	The Tide		
Front page	0	0	1 (0.9%)	3 (2.9%)	0	4	3.8
Back page	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Editorial page/Centre Spread	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Inside page	26 (24.7%)	22 (20.9%)	25 (23.8%)	9 (8.6%)	16 (15.2%)	98	93.3
Opinion page	0	2 (1.9%)	0	0	1 (0.9%)	3	2.9
Total	26 (24.8%)	24 (22.9%)	26 (24.8%)	12 (11.4%)	17 (16.2%)	105	100

Data in the Table 5 above show that the highest number of reports representing 93.3%, were placed in the inside pages of the newspapers while only four stories, representing 3.8% were placed on the front pages. *The Pioneer* newspapers had the most (25 of its 26) stories in the inside pages and 1 story on the front page. *The Nigerian Observer* newspaper had the least number of reports in the inside pages but had 3 stories representing 2.9% on the front pages. The implication of the data displayed in Table 5 is that the five selected Nigerian newspapers did not give prominence to their reports of cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria.

Table 6: Length of story on cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria by selected Nigerian newspapers

Length of story	Newspapers					Total	(%)
	The Guardian	Daily Sun	The Pioneer	The Nigerian Observer	The Tide		
Full page	4 (3.8%)	-	-	1 (0.9%)	-	5	4.8
Half page	2 (1.9%)	1 (0.9%)	3 (2.9%)	2 (1.9%)	3 (2.9%)	11	10.5
Quarter page	17 (13%)	18 (18%)	13 (13%)	6 (6%)	10 (10%)	64	60.9
Tiny mention	3 (2%)	5 (5%)	10 (10%)	3 (3%)	4 (4%)	25	23.8
Total	26 (24.8%)	24 (22.8%)	26 (24.8%)	12 (11.4%)	17 (16.2%)	105	100

The length of stories on cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria as shown in data Table 6 above further explains the prominence given to reports on cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria by the five selected Nigerian newspapers. Data in the Table show that most stories, 64 (60.9%) were published in quarter pages, while the least number of reports, 5 (4.8%) were in full pages.

Presentation of transcribed interviews with News Editors of the selected newspapers

News Editors of the five selected newspapers for this study were interviewed and they expressed their views on questions regarding newspaper reporting and framing of cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria. On their coverage and reporting of cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria, the News Editors of *The Tide*, *The Pioneer*, *Daily Sun* and *The Guardian* newspapers claimed that their newspapers covered the Region effectively and reported incidents of cult-related killings as they unfolded. The News Editor of *The Nigerian Observer* however, said the newspaper’s focus was primarily on Edo State rather than the entire South-South, Nigeria. He also said the newspaper does not have the manpower and resources to cover the entire region. According to the News Editor of *The Nigerian Observer*, the newspaper “as you know, is owned by the Government of Edo State. Our focus is on Edo State, and not really the South-South. It is manpower shortage, funding and government policy”.

Further on effective coverage or otherwise of cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria, and whether location of the selected newspapers helped their coverage and reporting of incidents of cult-related killings in the Region, the News Editors of *The Tide*, *The Pioneer*, *Daily Sun* and *The Guardian* newspapers claimed that their newspapers covered the Region adequately, giving that they had reporters in all States in the Region. The State government-owned newspapers, particularly *The Tide* and *The Pioneer* newspapers said their location in the Region as well as a good understanding of the terrain helped their coverage and reporting of incidents in the Region. According to the News Editor of *The Tide*, thenewspaper was “primarily established not only to cover Rivers State as the publisher, but also to speak for the southern minorities across the country. Yes, to an extent, as a government paper, we have effectively covered the cult-related killings within the State and the South-South by extension. Our paper covers Cross River, Delta, Edo as well as Rivers and Bayelsa States. These are our major area of coverage as far as reportage is concerned”. The News Editor of *The Pioneer* also noted that the newspaper has “office in Port-Harcourt which also covers Bayelsa; we have office in Benin; we have office in Calabar. So we have people who are trained; people who are knowledgeable in what news and news gathering is all about”. This was not the case with *The Nigerian Observer*, which has office and correspondents only in Warri and Port-Harcourt. The privately-owned national newspapers, *Daily Sun* and *The Guardian*, also claimed to have adequate coverage of South-South, Nigeria and that they reported cult-related killings as they get to know about them.

There were, however, a number of factors, other than location, that determined how the newspapers reported cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria. The News Editors of the government-owned newspapers, including *The Tide*, *The Pioneer* and *The Nigerian Observer*, revealed that both economic consequence of such reports on the Region as well as ownership interest were considered. For example, the News Editor of *The Tide* said:

You can agree with me that because of influx of oil related businesses in the Region, the supremacy of tradition institutions and leadership tussle, which to an extent the root of cultism for who controls the proceeds of oil. So there are tussle for supremacy between two prominent cult-groups, *Deybamand Deywell*, and in the riverine area, you have the *Icelanders*. These are the three prominent cult groups in the State. Now as a government newspaper, our primary aim is to propagate the image of government and to make sure that the policies of government are taken to the grassroots and to receive feedback from there. So having this in mind, no government will allow its system to be run down with negative reportage. You can agree with me that cult-related incidents can as well detract investors from coming to invest in the Region.

Similarly, the News Editor of *The Pioneer* said that that ownership of newspapers also played a major role in how the newspapers reported cult-related killings. According to him,

The Pioneer is a government medium and this ownership influence is also there. It is also applicable to even the privately-owned newspaper houses. There was a government in our State that said it does not want to hear that anything bad happened. It wanted to only hear that *Akwabom* is very peaceful. So when government says this, there is nothing you can do. So sometimes you kill the story because the authority said that story should be played down. I am very sincere to you.

In the views of the News Editor of *Daily Sun*, the newspapers considered the economic impact which reporting cult-related killing could have on the Region in publishing the incident. He said “if reporting a particular incident will spark more problems or lead to reprisal, more security breach and all of that, we consider playing the story down because we are sensitive too. You will agree with me that first of all, we need to have a stable environment to be able to sell our papers”.

The News Editors also stated that their newspapers were guided by some other factors, other than the influence of ownership and economic considerations, in reporting cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria. According to them, these include the media philosophy of informing the public or their rights to know, and other newspaper functions of educating and mobilizing the people, etc. Specifically asked what influenced *The Guardian's* report of cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria, the News Editor said it was “purely news value. There couldn't have been any issue of bias for a cult group or its rival like it would have been said if it was some national or political issues”. He also said, the elements are always the same, the 5Ws and H. So for reports of cult related stories, the Where, Who, When, What and How is highly crucial. Going further, we look at background of the perpetrators, modus operandi, recent clashes involving the alleged culprits and involvement of the victim if it was fallout of rival cult clashes or just victim of being at the wrong place at the wrong time

In their response to whether there had been times they were not allowed to publish stories on cult-related killings in the South-South Region, the News Editors said that their newspapers were guided by the social responsibility of the press in their report. For example, the News Editor of *Daily Sun* said “No, no, no. Our responsibility is to our readers. Like I told you, if reporting an incident of cult-related killings may jeopardise the society, we may not kill it but we may not give it prominence. Once we have our facts, and considering other variables, we go to town with the story”. The News Editor of *The Nigerian Observer* also said that “we have our social responsibility, so we weigh our report based on the effect. We look at any report and weigh it to see if it capable of causing more damage; that is if a story is capable of inciting others, we try to play it down. Sometimes we deliberately put away our report for the purpose of making the society safer”.

When asked specifically if the way they presented reports on cult-related killing helped to escalate or de-escalate the incidents in South-South, Nigeria, the News Editors said they did write with the intention to escalate cult-related killing. The News Editor of *The Nigerian Observer* however said he could not say exactly whether the way the newspaper presents reports cult-related killing helped to escalate it or not. According to him:

It is two ways. First, when we report cult-related killings, we might be telling one cult that seems to be on the losing side that so and so number of their members were killed. This can lead to reprisal because as you may know cultists believe in retaliation. On the other hand, for parents, they can read the news and call their children to order, saying, “Did you see what is happening, somebody has died. I have told you not to be involved in all these things”. Those are the two ways I am looking at it from. In practical instance you can pass it to your children, wards or relations that what they can see that can dissuade them from participating in something that will kill them.

His colleague at *The Pioneer* also said he could not say whether the way the newspaper reports cult-related killing helped to escalate it or not. According to him, “no, we can't report stories to escalate the killings, because if you report story to escalate it, you are not also performing the function of a newspaper. We try to tell the people that cult-related killing is not good and is not helping the society. So, it should not escalate. But I cannot say exactly whether it escalates or not, all I know is that from our standpoint, we do not report for it to escalate”.

IV. DISCUSSION

The prominence given to a story in a newspaper depends on the placement of the story in the newspaper. Nwosu (1996) notes that “the position in which a newspaper places a story (front page, back page or inside back page) indicates the kind of emphasis and importance it places on that story and this helps to determine the amount of readership the story gets” (p. 81). More so, placement of any story on front page indicates high prominence, while back and editorial pages indicate medium prominence. Stories placed in the inside pages indicate low prominence.

Data in Table 2 above shows that 98 or 93.3% of all the reports on cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria in selected Nigerian newspapers were placed in the inside pages. Only four stories, which represented 3.8%, were placed on the front page while three reports or 2.9% were found in the opinion page. There were no stories on cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria on the back pages of the selected newspapers, just as there were no editorials.

These data show that the selected Nigerian newspaper did not give cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria prominence in their reports in 2019. The News Editors interviewed however explained that the level of prominence used in the publications was to avoid reprisals and escalation of the incidents. The News Editor of *The Guardian* admitted that the newspaper may not have given cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria the same coverage and attention it gave to the *Badoo* cult-killings in South West Nigeria. Other News Editors, especially those of *The Pioneer*, *The Nigerian Observer* and *The Tide* newspapers clearly stated that placement of stories of cult-related killings mostly in the inside pages was one way of not promoting cult-related incidents.

The views of the News Editors on the prominence they placed on cult-related reports are in tandem with the findings of the study with regard to the number of reports found in the inside pages of the newspapers. The News Editor of *The Pioneer* newspaper said “we do not glorify cultism. When you give prominence to such incidents, you are inadvertently promoting it. Secondly, our newspaper has editorial policy. If you check all our editions, you will discover that our front-page stories are largely on government. It is a matter of policy because we want to let the people know what the government is doing. Thirdly, we do not place stories of cult-related killings because we do not want people to think it is a good thing. But then, I know that if we place such stories in the front page, people will read, but as a matter of policy we do not”.

Most of the reports were tucked inside the pages of the newspapers or had tiny mentions. This finding is also in agreement with that of Amenaghawon (2002) with regard to the prominence given to reports on Niger Delta conflicts. The study found out that that most stories on the Niger Delta conflict were placed in the inside pages, due to the commercial interest of media houses that depend on adverts to sustain their production.

The issue of prominence could also be related to the length of the stories on cult-related killings. This study, in addition to the findings of placement of stories on cult-related killings, discovered that most of the reports were in quarter pages and tiny mentions, while a few were in full pages. This implied that there were not many detailed reports on cult-related killings by the five selected Nigerian newspapers.

Furthermore, from the interviews with the News Editors of the selected newspapers, when asked what they looked out for in their coverage and reporting of cult-related killings, some of the factors that prompted their reporting of cult-related killings were the basic news judgment of 5 Ws and H, that is, What, Where, Who, When, Why and How. The News Editor of *Daily Sun*, said the basic principle of news reporting which is answering questions guided the newspaper’s reports on any conflict and incidents including cult-related killings. The News Editor of *the Guardian* also said that what prompted their framing of cult-related killings was “purely news value. There couldn't have been any issue of bias for a cult group or its rival like it would have been said if it was some national or political issues”

This study found out that the editorial policy and in-house style of the selected Nigerian newspapers were part of the factors that guided their placement of cult-related stories. For instance, the government-owned newspapers like *The Pioneer*, *The Tide*, and *The Nigerian Observer*, prioritized government activities more than any other events.

The study also found out other factors that prompted editors of the selected Nigerian newspapers in their reports of cult-related killings to include: the need to launder the good image of the State, social responsibility of the media in terms of safety of the community and society, and economic consequences. The News Editor of *The Pioneer* newspaper said in an interview:

The Pioneer is a government medium and this ownership influence is also there. It is also applicable to even the privately-owned newspaper houses. There was a government in our State that said it does not want to hear that anything bad happened. It wanted to only hear that *Akwabom* is very peaceful. So when government says this, there is nothing you can do. So sometimes you kill the story because the authority said that story should be played down. I am very sincere to you.

Similarly, the News Editor of *Daily Sun* said that “if reporting a particular incident will spark more problems or lead to reprisal, more security breach and all of that, we consider playing the story down because

we are sensitive too. You will agree with me that first of all, we need to have a stable environment to be able to sell our papers”.

In the views of the News Editor of *The Tide*:

Now as a government newspaper, our primary aim is to propagate the image of government and to make sure that the policies of government are taken to the grassroots and to receive feedback from there. So having this in mind, no government will allow its system to be run down with negative reportage. You can agree with me that cult-related incidents can as well detract investors from coming to invest in the Region.

V. CONCLUSION

Although there may not have been too many incidents of cult-related killings in 2019 compared to 2014, 2015 and 2016 as one of the News Editors claimed, the newspapers admitted to have deliberately played down some reports on cult-related killings to avoid reprisal attacks and presenting the Region in bad light, especially to prospective investors.

Nigerian newspapers are sensitive to the social responsibility of the media in their coverage and reportage of criminality and conflicts such as clashes among cult groups and the killings that follow. This sensitivity is manifest in the reduced prominence given to cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria by the selected Nigerian newspapers. It is also safe to conclude that giving prominence to cult-related killings could have contributed to the escalation of such in the communities. It could lead to reprisals and more bloodshed.

Ownership of newspapers, particularly by State governments in the South-South Region influenced the newspapers’ framing of cult-related killings. The newspapers used more of the *intervention frame* to report incidents of cult killings, thereby presenting what their owners did to curb the menace of cult-related killings. Again, location of the selected newspapers contributed to how they framed cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations were considered necessary:

1. Newspapers should investigate and report cult-related killings in South-South, Nigeria in details with a view to exposing operations of cultism and the dangers they pose to families and societies. Such detailed investigative reports should be given editorial attention as it is done to other national issues.
2. Newspapers should give prominence to cult-related killings by placing them on the front pages where many readers could find them. The idea of hiding such incidents in the inside pages indicated the low value placed on such heinous crimes.

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