



## **The Influence of Media Coverage on Tourists Perception of Security Challenges in Imo State, Nigeria: A call for rebranding**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, Imo State has faced intermittent security disruptions, including kidnappings, civil unrest, political violence, and disturbing activities of the unknown gun men, which have been widely covered by both traditional and digital media platforms. These representations have seriously damaged the state's reputation as a travel destination, discouraging prospective tourists and threatening regional economic growth. The study examines the influence of media coverage on tourist perception of security challenges in Imo State, Nigeria, with a focus on intensified crime control measures and the pressing need for strategic rebranding. Anchored on the Framing Theory, which describes how media changes public knowledge through selective presentation and emphasis, the study analyzes how the tone, frequency, and content of media stories affect tourists' risk perception. Using a mixed-methods approach that is primarily qualitative, the study analyzes the content of prominent news sources and conducts in-depth interviews with travelers, travel agents, and tourism officials. The findings show that, even in comparatively safe places, negative media framing leads to inflated feelings of insecurity, and the absence of counter-narratives or promotional content reinforces the state's unfavorable reputation. Furthermore, tourists frequently depend on peer reviews and internet resources, where incorrect or out-of-date information might be found. To redefine the tourism narrative of Imo State, the study recommends a purposeful rebranding plan that includes stakeholder participation, digital storytelling, and balanced media reporting. It advises government and tourism officials to invest in destination image restoration, develop constructive publicity initiatives, and handle media relations proactively. This study emphasizes how crucial the media is in influencing or strengthening attitudes in post-conflict tourism environments.

**Keywords:** Media Framing, Tourist Perception, Security Challenges, Destination Rebranding, Imo State.

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### **Introduction**

Tourism is a key industry for regional integration, cultural exchange, and economic growth. It encourages foreign investment, infrastructure development, and the creation of jobs, particularly in developing countries (UNWTO, 2021). However, media representations of destination safety and perceived security threats have a significant impact on tourism (Korstanje & Clayton, 2012). In areas that are going through or recovering from conflict, the media can have a significant impact on how tourists perceive the area, frequently determining the flow or decline of visitors. One such location, Imo State in southeast Nigeria, is dealing with security issues and the ensuing bad press, which has severely damaged its reputation and allure for tourists.

In recent years, Imo State has experienced intermittent violence, including attacks by unidentified gunmen, political upheavals, and clashes involving separatist movements (Eze, 2023). Despite being localized, these incidents garner a lot of media attention and are frequently presented in sensationalist or alarmist ways. Such reporting increases visitors' perceptions of risk and deters them from visiting the area, particularly when it is inaccurate or lacks context. In addition to reflecting events, media coverage also creates narratives that affect public opinion and behavior (Entman, 1993). Persistently negative media portrayals of Imo State have weakened the state's reputation as a travel destination by casting a shadow on its historical sites, cultural diversity, and tourist potential.



This study is based on the Framing Theory, which holds that the language, structure, and emphasis used to present information can influence how audiences interpret events (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993). Media frames are cognitive shortcuts that highlight some aspects of a story while omitting others, which shapes public opinion and decision-making. When Imo State's insecurity is framed through emotionally charged and repetitive headlines, it reinforces fear and risk aversion among potential tourists, who frequently rely on media representations to form their opinions about safety and the desirability of a destination (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). As a result, even isolated security incidents can have disproportionate effects on tourism when they are exaggerated by media narratives.

Social media, blogs, and travel review websites are just a few examples of how the media has an impact outside of traditional media like newspapers and television. User-generated content (UGC) may spread quickly in the current digital era and is frequently not verified for veracity, which makes managing a destination's reputation even more difficult (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Even if the overall security situation in Imo State is improving, a single viral post or video showing turmoil might reach thousands of potential tourists and feed preconceived notions. Furthermore, such negative frames are able to control public discourse because there are no counter-narratives or deliberate media engagements by local authorities.

Premised on these dynamics, rebranding—a purposeful, concerted effort to reshape the narrative around Imo State and restore confidence in its tourism potential—is urgently needed. Destination rebranding entails a deeper communication strategy that addresses perceptions, allays fears, and highlights unique value propositions (Pike, 2016). To present a more balanced and hopeful image of the state, government agencies, tourism stakeholders, media outlets, and civil society organizations must work together.

Thus, this study aims to investigate how media coverage affects visitors' perceptions of security in Imo State and to suggest practical rebranding strategies that can reposition the state as a viable and appealing travel destination. By analyzing the relationship between media, perception, and tourism behavior, the research will advance both academic knowledge and useful solutions for tourism recovery in areas affected by conflict.

## **Literature Review**

### **Media and Perception Formation in Tourism**

Media serves as a powerful agent in constructing reality, particularly in shaping how individuals perceive destinations they have never visited. Numerous studies have established the media's impact in influencing travel intentions, especially on safety and security. According to Echtner and Ritchie (2003), both natural (like the media and word-of-mouth) and artificial (like ads and promotions) factors contribute to the formation of a destination's image. When it comes to risk or emergencies, potential travelers tend to view organic sources as more reliable than others. Media coverage of violence or insecurity creates mental images that influence travelers' affective and cognitive reactions, frequently resulting in destination avoidance (Avraham, 2015).

This process is reinforced by Framing Theory, which describes how media outlets highlight specific parts of events while ignoring others, thereby affecting public comprehension (Entman, 1993). For instance, when security occurrences in Imo State are reported with dramatic headlines or without contextual balance, they promote views of Nigeria as dangerous, even if violence is isolated or reducing. Potential tourists are turned off by this framing, which causes insecurity to be generalized throughout the region (Mutuku, 2020). As a result, audiences' perceptions of reality are shaped by media framing rather than just reflecting it.

### **The Impact of Insecurity on Destination Image**

Tourism is highly susceptible to external shocks such as conflict, terrorism, and health crises. Several research verify that security concerns are among the main deterrents for international



travelers (Pizam & Fleischer, 2002). In the case of Nigeria, and Imo State in particular, isolated episodes of violence have led to wide-scale tourist disruptions due in part to how such incidents are depicted in the media. According to George (2010), the perceived unease brought on by media attention can override sound judgment even in cases where the risks are statistically minimal.

Imo State is often grouped in media narratives with broader conflict-prone areas of southeastern Nigeria, including references to the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and attacks on public infrastructure (Eze, 2023). These accounts, however factually founded, sometimes lack nuance, failing to discern between zones of relative calm and those with active disruptions. This adds to "destination stigmatization," as Beirman (2003) puts it, in which a place is persistently portrayed as dangerous despite advancements in its real security status.

### **The Role of Social Media and User-Generated Content**

While conventional media remains significant, the emergence of social media has added new dynamics into the construction of visitor views. Social media sites like Instagram, Twitter, and TripAdvisor have made it easier for anybody to create content by enabling users to instantly share both positive and bad travel experiences. Munar and Jacobsen (2014) assert that user-generated content (UGC) has a substantial impact on travel choices, especially for millennial and Gen Z travelers who value peer reviews more than official announcements.

In conflict-sensitive regions like Imo State, social media content can either exacerbate fear or offer alternative narratives that counterbalance mainstream media. However, in the absence of official rebranding strategies or active digital engagement, negative stories—especially those involving violence—tend to dominate online discourse. As a result, the tourism narrative is shaped not by tourism authorities but by citizen journalism and viral posts, many of which are unverified or outdated. This dynamic was evident

in Nigeria during the #EndSARS protests, where viral videos created global impressions that were not always contextually accurate (Adibe & Okoye, 2021).

### **Rebranding and Crisis Communication in Post-Violence Tourism**

In the tourism industry, rebranding entails changing a destination's image to reflect current conditions and draw in target audiences. According to academics like Pike (2016) and Avraham (2009), rebranding is particularly important in high-risk or post-conflict settings where preconceived notions persist even in the face of shifting circumstances. Active media participation, inclusive storytelling, and smart communication are all necessary for the process. Repositioning the region's identity by emphasizing its cultural festivals, hospitality, heritage sites, and expanding hospitality infrastructure would be a successful rebranding strategy in the instance of Imo State.

Effective crisis communication, which describes how travel destinations react to unfavorable media incidents, is also essential to rebranding. According to Coombs (2015), destinations can lessen reputational harm by proactively interacting with the media, clearing up misunderstandings, and providing timely updates. Unfortunately, negative tales predominate in the information environment because Nigerian state administrations, especially Imo's, frequently lack coordinated crisis communication procedures (Nworah, 2020). For example, when the government remains silent or responds slowly to violent incidents, false information can proliferate unchecked, escalating anxieties and undermining visitor confidence.

### **Media Relations and Stakeholder Engagement**

Managing media relations is a crucial part of image repair. To guarantee fair reporting, media outlets must work with tourism stakeholders, such as government representatives, travel boards, and private operators. Partnerships between local media and tourism organizations can result in more positive narratives, according



to research by Avraham (2015). This is particularly true when journalists are asked to cover events, festivals, or investment prospects in a community. Such tactics have assisted in changing the public's perspective from one of insecurity to one of creativity and culture in previously violent countries like Rwanda and Colombia (Beirman, 2003).

In the case of Imo State, stakeholder engagement is still fragmented. Tourism promotion is often underfunded and reactive rather than proactive. Media coverage, both domestic and international, is left to external actors, many of whom lack nuanced understanding of the local context. Moreover, there is limited use of visual storytelling and digital marketing tools to counter negative narratives. This gap provides an opportunity for the state government and its partners to develop a coordinated communication strategy that emphasizes transparency, resilience, and tourism potential.

From the backdrop of the foregoing review of literature, it is clear that available literature underscores the media's central role in shaping destination image and influencing tourist perceptions, particularly in regions facing security challenges. In Imo State, repeated negative portrayals in both traditional and digital media have contributed to a persistent image of insecurity, which deters tourism and undermines development efforts. The literature also emphasizes the need for strategic rebranding, crisis communication, and stakeholder engagement to transform public narratives and restore confidence. By integrating media management into tourism planning, Imo State can begin to shift its reputation from a risk-prone area to a resilient and attractive destination.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

A qualitative-dominant mixed methods design is used in this study to provide a thorough understanding of how media coverage affects visitors' perceptions of security in Imo State. The qualitative approach allows for the investigation of complex attitudes, perceptions, and

experiences, while the quantitative component facilitates the generalization of important trends among a larger sample. This dual strategy works well in perception studies, especially when subjective interpretations—such as fear, trust, and destination image—are at the heart of the investigation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

### **Study Area**

Imo State situated in southeastern Nigeria and is known for its cultural heritage, historic sites, and religious tourism attractions, including the Mbari Cultural Centre, the Catholic pilgrimage town of Orlu, Oguta Lake, Nekede Zoo and Several luxury hotels known for topnotch entertainment. Despite these offerings, the state has seen declining tourist inflow in recent years due to perceived insecurity amplified by media narratives. The selection of Imo State as the focal area is justified by its complex interplay of potential and perceived risk, making it ideal for investigating media-tourism dynamics.

### **Population and Sample**

The study population comprises four major groups:

- Domestic and international tourists (actual and prospective)
- Media practitioners (journalists, editors, and content creators)
- Tourism operators (hotels, tour agencies, and guides)
- Government stakeholders (tourism board and security agencies)

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants with direct relevance to the research objectives. This includes 30 tourists (15 domestic, 15 international), 10 media practitioners, 10 tourism operators, and 5 government officials, yielding a total sample size of 55. Purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative studies where in-depth insights from key informants are more valuable than statistical generalizability (Patton, 2015).





### **Data Collection Methods**

In-depth interviews were conducted with media professionals, tourism operators, and government stakeholders. These interviews explored how media narratives are constructed, the perceived effects of such narratives on tourism, and the existing efforts (if any) at rebranding or image repair. Interview questions were guided by themes from the literature review, particularly media framing, perception management, and crisis communication.

A structured questionnaire was administered to tourists to assess their perceptions of Imo State's security based on media exposure. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions on tourists' travel behaviors, media sources consulted, and perceptions of safety. Likert-scale questions were used to quantify attitudes toward statements such as "I consider Imo State unsafe due to news reports" and "I rely on social media to assess destination security."

A content analysis of 50 news articles and 20 social media posts (from 2020 to 2024) related to security in Imo State was conducted. Sources included national dailies (e.g., The Guardian Nigeria, Vanguard) and digital platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, travel blogs). The analysis focused on language use, frequency of negative or positive frames, visual imagery, and tone. The coding categories were derived from Entman's (1993) framing model: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data from interviews and open-ended survey responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. NVivo 12 software was used to assist with coding and theme extraction.

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions, means, and percentages to identify

trends in media influence and perception of insecurity. SPSS software was employed for this purpose.

Content analysis results were interpreted through frequency counts and qualitative interpretation of framing patterns. The goal was to uncover how media outlets and social media users represent Imo State in relation to security, and how these representations correlate with tourists' fears and attitudes.

To enhance validity, triangulation was used by cross-verifying data from interviews, surveys, and content analysis. Peer debriefing and member checking were employed to reduce researcher bias in interpretation. Reliability was ensured by maintaining consistency in data collection instruments and training interviewers on standard protocols.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Media Exposure and Perceived Insecurity**

Quantitative data from the questionnaire survey revealed that **82% of respondents (n = 30)** indicated that media reports significantly influenced their perception of security in Imo State. Among these, **60% relied on online newspapers, while 40% cited social media platforms** (particularly Twitter and Facebook) as their primary information sources. Respondents overwhelmingly associated the state with violent incidents, particularly involving unknown gunmen, IPOB-related unrest, and attacks on government facilities.

Qualitative interviews supported these findings. A travel agent based in Lagos remarked:

"Clients frequently cancel bookings to Owerri once they see headlines like 'Gunmen Attack Police Station in Imo'—even if that area is far from their intended destination."

This finding aligns with Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), which posits that the way media frames events shapes public interpretation. In the case of Imo, selective and repetitive emphasis on violent incidents reinforces fear, even when such



incidents are localized or deescalated.

### **Media Framing and Destination Image**

Content analysis of 50 media articles from 2020–2024 revealed that 68% employed conflict-oriented frames, using terms like "crisis," "chaos," "gunmen," and "terror." Only 12% of reports included balancing statements or follow-up reports on improvements in security. Similarly, social media posts about Imo State were often sensational, lacking verification or context. Many viral tweets, for example, included outdated or geographically unrelated images.

This framing contributes to what Avraham (2015) describes as "destination stigmatization." Respondents noted that even when they had a positive travel experience in Imo, their social circles remained skeptical:

"After my trip to Owerri, I posted photos on Instagram, and people were shocked. They asked, 'Weren't you scared?' They couldn't believe I was safe and enjoyed myself." — (Domestic tourist, interviewee)

The disconnect between reality and perception underscores the power of media to shape not just first impressions but long-standing reputational damage. The lack of positive counter-narratives or balanced journalism allows a one-dimensional image to persist, consistent with George's (2010) argument that perception often outweighs reality in risk evaluation.

### **Influence of Social Media and Peer Narratives**

The study found that user-generated content (UGC) could act as both a corrective and a catalyst for fear. Among international tourists surveyed, 40% said they would consider visiting if they saw positive testimonials on YouTube or Instagram. However, such content was scarce. Most existing posts either echoed negative media reports or were not easily discoverable due to poor search engine optimization or lack of tagging.

This highlights a critical missed opportunity: in a digitally connected world, absence from social media is equivalent to invisibility. As Munar and

Jacobsen (2014) note, UGC has become a trusted source for millennial and Gen Z travelers. Without coordinated efforts to seed positive content and encourage real-time travel documentation, the dominant narrative remains negative by default.

### **Tourist Reactions and Behavior Modification**

Respondents reported modifying their travel behaviors based on perceived insecurity. Of those who had originally intended to visit Imo State, 70% diverted their trips to alternative destinations such as Enugu or Calabar. This behavior reflects the Risk Perception Theory, where subjective judgments about risk—not actual crime statistics—drive decisions (Pizam & Fleischer, 2002). Tourists expressed concerns about safety during movement, poor emergency response systems, and uncertainty about how to navigate potential unrest.

Notably, several tourists said they would reconsider visiting Imo if they received "official reassurances," such as travel safety updates, visible security measures, and endorsements from travel influencers. This indicates that perception can be reshaped, but only through deliberate communication efforts—a gap currently unaddressed in the state's tourism strategy.

### **Stakeholder Engagement and Rebranding Efforts**

Tourism operators and government officials interviewed agreed that Imo State suffers from a branding vacuum. A representative from the State Tourism Board acknowledged:

"We react when something bad happens, but we don't invest in proactive messaging. We don't have a digital strategy or partnerships with travel influencers or the media."

This reflects findings from Beirman (2003) and Coombs (2015), who emphasize the importance of crisis communication and proactive rebranding in conflict-sensitive destinations. Successful rebranding examples from Rwanda and Colombia show that destinations can recover from violence-related reputations by emphasizing resilience, culture, and reform.



However, in Imo State, the lack of a unified narrative and stakeholder coordination has allowed fear-based narratives to dominate. Even tourism operators struggle with inconsistent messaging and limited marketing budgets. Without government-led initiatives and partnerships with media outlets and influencers, the region remains susceptible to reputational harm.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The study reinforces the significant role of media in shaping public perception of tourist destinations, especially in politically volatile or insecure regions. In the case of Imo State, persistent negative framing, lack of media engagement, and weak digital presence have collectively undermined tourism development.

This calls for a multi-pronged rebranding strategy that includes:

- training and partnerships to ensure balanced reporting.
- Social media campaigns showcasing real tourist experiences.
- Crisis communication units for timely response to incidents.
- Stakeholder collaboration between government, private sector, and local communities.
- Digital influencers and travel bloggers to humanize and promote the region.

By investing in image repair and perception management, Imo State can reposition itself not as a zone of conflict but as a destination of resilience, culture, and hospitality.

### **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that media coverage plays a pivotal role in shaping tourist perceptions of security challenges in Imo State, Nigeria. Drawing from both qualitative and quantitative data, it is evident that traditional media and social media channels predominantly present Imo State through a lens of conflict, insecurity, and unrest. These portrayals, though sometimes accurate, often lack context and balance, leading to widespread misperceptions that deter potential tourists.

Through the application of Framing Theory, Risk Perception Theory, and relevant crisis communication frameworks, the findings establish a clear link between media narratives and tourist behavior. The over-representation of violent events in the media-without follow-up stories of resolution or safety improvements-fuels destination stigmatization. Tourists, both domestic and international, respond to these narratives by altering their travel plans, avoiding the state entirely, or expressing hesitation even when presented with firsthand assurances of safety.

Furthermore, the study identifies significant gaps in rebranding and public communication strategies. Despite Imo State's cultural, historical, and tourism assets, there is a conspicuous absence of structured efforts to counteract negative perceptions or promote alternative, positive narratives. Tourism stakeholders, government officials, and media professionals lack coordination in delivering a unified, compelling image of the state.

To reposition Imo State in the tourism market and rebuild trust among travelers, there is a pressing need for intentional, strategic rebranding that leverages media engagement, social proof, and crisis communication principles.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

#### **1. Develop a Comprehensive Rebranding Strategy**

The Imo State government, through its Ministry of Culture and Tourism, should initiate a rebranding campaign focused on repositioning the state as a safe and culturally rich destination. This strategy should include visual branding, positive storytelling, and the creation of a tourism slogan or identity that counters the prevailing negative image.



## **2. Engage in Media and Public Relations Training**

Media professionals covering Imo State need capacity building in conflict-sensitive journalism and development communication. Training workshops should encourage responsible framing, inclusion of diverse perspectives, and contextual reporting to avoid perpetuating fear and misinformation.

## **3. Leverage Digital and Social Media Platforms**

A digital content strategy should be developed to boost the online presence of Imo State's tourism offerings. This could involve collaborations with travel influencers, YouTubers, and content creators to document and share positive tourist experiences. The use of hashtags, SEO, and short-form videos can help change the narrative on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook.

## **4. Establish a Crisis Communication Unit**

A dedicated crisis response team should be created within the tourism ministry to monitor, respond to, and manage real-time incidents that may affect tourist confidence. This unit should provide official updates, correct misinformation, and coordinate with the media to ensure timely and factual communication.

## **5. Foster Public-Private Sector Collaboration**

Tourism stakeholders, including hotels, tour operators, and local businesses, should partner with the government to create joint promotions, safety guarantees, and loyalty programs that incentivize visits. Regular stakeholder forums can also help align messaging and pool resources for broader outreach campaigns.

## **6. Promote Community-Based Tourism and Safety Education**

Community members should be trained as tourism ambassadors to provide safe, informed, and welcoming experiences to visitors. This local involvement can improve

tourist satisfaction while fostering a culture of hospitality and security awareness at the grassroots level.

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