

ETHICS AND AESTHETIC SENSATIONALISM IN NIGERIAN MEDIA PRACTICES: AN EVALUATION OF VISUAL FRAMING AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN ONLINE JOURNALIS

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Abstract

This study examined how much aesthetic sensationalism affects public trust, professional responsibility and ethical standards in modern online journalism. The quantitative research methodology was to determine the relationship between the ethical behaviour and the aesthetics presentation in media work. Working journalists in Delta State, Nigeria were surveyed using a survey research design in order to collect standardized responses. The population consisted of journalists from prints, broadcast and internet media outfits that were members of the accredited media chapels under the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ). Multi stage sampling technique was used to select 400 journalists. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire with Likert-Scale items measuring important constructs such as ethical standards, sensational practices, visual exaggeration and perceived professionalism. The results showed how far aesthetic sensationalism affected the ethics of online journalism. This study also found a high occurrence of sensational storytelling and visual exaggeration, which undermines professional accountability and public confidence in media outlets. The study suggests that more rigorous enforcement of ethical standards, ongoing professional development and increased editorial oversight can foster responsible and dependable online journalism.

Keywords: Ethics, Aesthetics, Sensationalism, Media Practice, Visual Framing, Moral Responsibility, Online Journalism

Introduction

Digital technologies and algorithm-driven distribution systems have accelerated the fierce competition for audience attention that characterizes the modern media landscape. Ekwok, Ugo, and Eja (2022) claimed that social media applications and technology advancements have promoted multimedia communication, which includes voice, video, still images, chats, messages, and graphics. Nigerians with diverse political and ethnic backgrounds can obtain information in a variety of formats with the help of web links on various social media platforms. Interestingly, the information society is characterized by the growing commercialization of information in a worldwide market driven by information and communication technology (ICT) as well as the increasing influence of information in our daily lives, (Abiodun & Kayode, 2018). The development of information and communication technology led to the emergence of an information society. Stated differently, the information society can be defined as the use of computers, information technology, and telecommunications to enable speedier global communication, (Udenze & Oshionebo, 2020).

The media landscape in Nigeria has seen significant change over time, with internet news sources now vying for viewers alongside more established media outlets, (Akinrosoye, & Isamuko, 2018). This is fueled by online platforms, which were primarily developed using new media technologies. As a result, numerous online platforms were created, including Twitter, YouTube, Digital platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, LinkedIn, and others make it easier to produce, distribute, and consume news globally. According to Ahmedu & Busari (2020), social media, which was created through the web 2.0 movement a term used to characterize the new wave of internet modernization that allows users to

produce and share material online is responsible for internet-based platforms.

The way news and entertainment content is presented has become just as significant in this setting as the content itself. To draw in and hold on to viewers, media companies now mainly use eye-catching imagery, dramatic headlines, emotive language, quick editing, and stylized studio production, (Alaekwe, et al 2024). Angese, et al (2022). argued that although aesthetics improves appeal and the efficacy of communication, it has also aided in the emergence of what can be called aesthetic sensationalism, a strategy that puts dramatic narrative and visual impact ahead of moral obligation.

Accuracy, justice, objectivity, respect for human dignity, and social responsibility have historically been emphasized in media ethics. Journalists and content producers must uphold the ethical standards of professional integrity, avoidance of harm, protection of privacy and truthful reporting. However, the pressure to get clicks, ratings and advertising revenue has been strengthened by the use of dramatic headlines, graphic images, emotional framing and visual enhancement techniques in storytelling (Obayi, 2022). This aesthetic amplification often blurs the line between responsible reporting and sensational display. The result is a tension between two major goals of media practice: the need to maintain moral and professional standards, and the quest for beauty and engagement.

In both local and global contexts, aesthetic sensationalism can take many different forms. Clickbait headlines and dramatic thumbnails are used in digital journalism to arouse interest or indignation. Strong background music, striking visuals, and recurring breaking-news banners increase the sense of urgency in broadcast media. Exaggerated representation is further encouraged on social media

platforms by algorithmic systems that reward visually appealing and emotionally stirring content. Similar trends can be seen in the Nigerian media landscape in televised political coverage, entertainment blogs, and online news platforms, where visually appealing presentation occasionally takes precedence over ethical restraint and fair analysis.

The scope of aesthetical issues in contemporary journalism practice is wide and encapsulates a multiplicity of factors that collectively help to give the media audience the best aesthetic experience, (Ahmedu & Busari, 2020). According to Ineji (2022), discussed in this essay, such issues range from layout and formatting of the media content to thematic issues, grammatical, textual and contextual issues, legal and ethical issues among others. Varied as they are; all of these issues count in the overall aesthetic judgement of the media and help to give the audience the best aesthetic experience while engaging with the media, (Obayi, 2022)). It, thus, behoves on media operators, editors and journalists to ensure that all these aesthetical issues are satisfactorily attained to in order to enhance the communicative value of the media. A media platform that is found wanting in any of these is likely to lose its aesthetic ratings by the audience, (Angese, et al 2022).

This study explores the complex relationship between ethics and aesthetic sensationalism in contemporary media practice. It interrogates how media organizations negotiate the balance between visual appeal and moral responsibility, and it examines the broader implications of this balance for credibility, audience perception, and democratic communication. By situating the discussion within both global and Nigerian contexts, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates about the evolving standards of professionalism in an increasingly visual and competitive media environment.

Statement of the Problem

In the competitive media world that contemporary media operators operate, such aesthetical undoing would be costly and the damage arising therefrom can be monumental, (Alaekwe, et al 2024). All these inform the need for media operators to pay keen attention to the various aspects of media aesthetics in their day-to-day operations. The advent of online journalism has expanded the focus on media aesthetics from the physical issues such as layout and design that hitherto preoccupied copy editors to other crucial issues in journalistic aesthetics such as grammatical, textual, contextual, legal and ethical issues, (Angese, et al 2022). This shift in focus has become compelling, given that online journalism has exerted such an overbearing influence on journalism practice, and most audience today access their news online. This expanded focus is an indication that aesthetics and journalism are inseparable no matter the form, and as long as journalism practice exists, aesthetical principles and elements will be continually invoked to enrich and enhance the communication process. This is if there is ethical adherence for online journalism that require visual appealing contents.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To examine the extent to which aesthetic sensationalism influences ethical standards in contemporary online journalism.
- ii. To evaluate the implications of aesthetic sensationalism on professional responsibility and public trust in online journalism.

Research Questions

- i. What is the extent to which aesthetic sensationalism influences ethical standards in contemporary online journalism?
- ii. What are the implications of aesthetic sensationalism on professional responsibility and public trust in online journalism?

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Concept of Ethics

As a branch of applied ethics, media ethics examines the particular moral rules and guidelines that apply to the media, such as print, broadcast, film, theater, the arts, and the internet. Applying moral concepts to media practices is known as media ethics, and it guarantees that media workers follow rules that uphold truthfulness, equity, and integrity. Awofadeju (2024). Upholding the legitimacy of the media and preserving public trust depend heavily on this ethical framework. Media ethics are essential in Nigeria because they help journalists navigate obstacles like political pressure, financial limitations, and the growth of uncontrolled online platforms. By upholding ethical norms, journalists can effectively act as societal watchdogs, encouraging accountability and openness in government, (Alaekwe, et al 2024).

Media ethics are essential in Nigeria because they help journalists navigate obstacles like political pressure, financial limitations, and the growth of uncontrolled online platforms. By upholding ethical norms, journalists can effectively act as societal watchdogs, encouraging accountability and openness in government. Nonetheless, ethical standards violations have been noted, highlighting the necessity of ongoing initiatives to strengthen media ethics through training courses, professional groups, and legal frameworks (Amatu & Nwafor, 2021).

Concept of Aesthetic

The art of perception, or the impressions people form of things based on their perceptions, is what aesthetics is all about. According to Zettl (2011), whether they are aware of it or not, people make a number of aesthetic decisions every day, such as what to dress, how to set up their desk, what flowers to place on the dinner table, and so on. The word "aesthetics" has become commonly used to refer to beauty and the ways in which people's decisions contribute to their perception of beauty. Udoudo (2015), aesthetics is the study of beauty and the propensity to see beautiful. According to this school of thinking, aesthetics describes how people experience or value beauty and how it shows itself in their everyday lives.

However, the scope of aesthetics and the discourse it supports in the media industry goes beyond the question of beauty alone. It covers a wide range of topics related to the creation and presentation of media messages, the decisions made during these processes, and the meaning or impression that these decisions leave on the audience. The "process in which people examine a number of media elements, such as lighting and sound, how they interact, and our perceptual reactions to them" is how Zettl (2021) defines applied media aesthetics, which is consistent with this logic. In light of this, there is a difference between the idea of applied media aesthetics and the conventional definition of aesthetics.

Media producers are tasked by applied media aesthetics to make important judgments about how to offer media content to the public in the most enticing way possible (Alaekwe, et al 2024). These decisions are essential to guaranteeing audience patronage as well as their sense of fulfillment from the media (Ada, 2023). Since aesthetics is at the core of the art and science of media productions, whether they are news, programs, or other types of media contents—whether broadcast, print, or web-based media producers cannot afford to downgrade it in today's complex media landscape.

Over time, the literature on media aesthetics has broadened to include other topics related to the media sector, like ethics (Udoh, Senam & Peters 2021). According to Zagidullina (2019), "professional journalism can find its own niches in the communication field and strengthen its position as a socially important institution by analyzing the aesthetics aspect of current communication." In addition to having a big influence on how media items are perceived, aesthetics improves the process of effectively interacting with viewers. In order to convey meaning and sense to the audience, sophisticated media aesthetics like textual aesthetics are essential.

When Udoh and Obot (2013) observe that "beaming aesthetic searchlight on the stories themselves – how such stories are written to command the serious attention of the reader, is also of importance," they further emphasize the importance of aesthetics in ensuring that the media captures the attention of their target audience. In the print media sector, this is one method of achieving aesthetic balance. All of them demonstrate that aesthetics is too significant to be disregarded in modern journalism. According to Udoh (2014), aesthetics is fundamental to media management and needs to be taken into account for a media outlet to be successful overall.

Concept of Online Journalism

One of the most significant activity in the media sector is journalism. The media sector cannot claim to be relevant in society without journalism. The entirety of efforts to collect, process, evaluate, and disseminate information about current events, thoughts, and happenings through mass communication media under the direction of editors or producers (Udoakah, 2016).

Online journalism is essentially a new type of journalism that makes use of the internet and its several platforms, such as social media, weblogs, and other internet gadgets (Alaekwe, et al 2024). It is instructive to observe that online journalism now serves as a point of convergence for print and broadcast journalism, enabling access to both via the internet and its different channels. This means that journalism is currently undergoing a revolutionary phase, with the distinctions between its various forms becoming increasingly hazy and media convergence on the internet becoming a prominent trend with significant effects on modern journalism practice. As was to be expected, this shift will have a significant impact on the aesthetic choices and decisions made by media producers.

The emerging new media environment offers a new set of audience demands and expectations, new traditions in journalism that were previously unheard of, and a new set of opportunities and challenges specific to internet-age journalism (Senam, Udoh & Peters, 2021). According to Zagidullina (2019), the media aesthetic component of communication is becoming more powerful in our current communication environment, which is technically structured as

a multimedia information exchange system accessible to every user. Although aesthetic concerns are relevant to all types of journalism, this study focuses on print journalism and, consequently, online journalism, which is considered to be the cutting-edge activity in media.

Concept of Responsible Journalism

A fundamental component of democracies is responsible journalism, which makes sure that information is disseminated in a way that respects moral principles and advances the general welfare. It guides journalists to deliver trustworthy and objective information by embodying values like accuracy, fairness, responsibility, and independence.

Responsible journalism is at the heart of democracies, providing information in a timely manner, with respect for ethics and contributing to the public good. It directs journalists to give reliable and objective information, based on values such as accuracy, fairness, responsibility and independence.

Ethical media is important for Nigeria's progress. Journalists are expected to support democracy, promote good governance and carry out their social responsibilities. If Nigerian journalists abide by ethical standards, they can be effective social watchdogs and foster accountability and transparency in government (Pepple, & Acholonu, 2018).

Another definition focuses on the ethical aspects of journalism and describes it as a type of applied ethics, which is concerned with what news organizations and journalists ought to do in light of their social function. This way of thinking emphasizes the social responsibilities of journalists; their duty to defend the public interest and to encourage social progress. Ethical media is a must for Nigeria's progress. Journalists are expected to uphold democracy, good governance and discharge their social responsibilities.

Nigerian journalists can effectively act as social watchdogs and promote accountability and openness in government by upholding ethical standards.

Impact of Media Ethics on the Accuracy and Fairness of Journalism

Media Ethics are crucial to ensure fairness and truthfulness of journalism in Nigeria (Alaekwe, et al 2024). The Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) said factual, accurate, balanced and fair reporting is the ultimate goal of excellent journalism and the cornerstone of winning the public's trust and confidence. This highlights the importance of maintaining moral standards to safeguard one's reputation in the industry. According to Amatu and Nwafor (2021), media ethics when followed leads to responsible journalism as it teaches journalists to verify information before sharing it, thereby preventing the spread of false information. Ethical journalism is relevant in Nigeria because it provides credible information to the public, and the milieu of the media is very diverse and complex.

This commitment to accuracy and truthfulness strengthens the media's role in fostering social responsibility and transparency (Ineji 2022). The application of ethical norms affects also the impartiality of journalism. Ethical journalism is better equipped to deal with the challenges of economic and political pressures, and to guarantee the objectivity and fairness of the reporting. That commitment to fairness is what forms the basis of the public's trust in the media and its role as a watchdog for society. However, the challenges of maintaining these moral principles are

still there (The Guardian Nigeria, 2019). The independence and objectivity of journalism are threatened by economic pressures, political influence, and the proliferation of unregulated internet outlets. These challenges notwithstanding, the need to protect the sanctity of journalism in Nigeria calls for continued efforts at strengthening media ethics through education and legal frameworks.

Influence of Media Ethics on Public Trust in Journalism

Public trust in journalism is greatly impacted by media ethics, which from the cornerstone of dependability and trustworthiness. Maintaining public trust in the media Nigeria requires strict adherence to ethical norms. Gaining the public's trust and confidence requires reliable, accurate, fair and balanced reporting. Following ethical standards helps journalists report truthfully and objectively, which improves public opinion of the media as a reliable organization. On the other hand, violations of these norms, such as slanted reporting or the spread of false information can damage public confidence, (Senam, 2014). It is therefore noted that biased reporting has negative effects on public opinion as highlighted by critical analysis which call for the need for ethical journalism to preserve credibility, (Ada, 2023)

Public trust is further impacted by the difficulties in upholding ethical norms brought about by the growth of citizen journalism and unregulated online platform. According to Awofadeju's (2024) research on audience perception of ethical and security issues in Nigerian online journalism practice has raised significant question over the veracity of information shared via these platforms. To significantly achieve a large range of ethical standard, online media must follow traditional media, which follow some level of ethical framework and legal institution. This is why Ineji (2022), stated that the analysis of these frameworks, upholding ethical standards is essential to raising the bar for journalism practices. This, in turn, strengthens public confidence in journalistic endeavour by reinforcing the media role as reliable watchdog of the society.

Challenges and Prospects of Upholding Media Ethics in the Digital Age

Media ethical is very important in the cause of achieving peaceful society. However, there are some factors that infringe of the intention of journalistic to uphold ethical standard. According to Ada (2023), achieving ethical standard in the view of online journalism has become more challenging due to the rise in unregulated contents. This is why Asemah & Edegoh (2014) mentioned that there is a great concern to how new journalism is becoming a free for all. That in Nigeria, citizen journalism has created opportunity for quick development of online media which has created serious ethical standard in the media industry. Hence, the proliferation of sensationalism and fake news is one of the main issues. The ethical difficulties and problem with online journalism in Nigeria. This is due to the fact that spread of misleading information and sensationalism reporting are common in the online media space in Nigeria.

Consequently, the public trust is highly affected as well as journalism professions. Seam & Akpan (2014) noted that disregarding of ethical standard in the Nigeria Media industry is a serious issues. Owing that the issues is well documented among online journalism which lack professional training and media regulatory practice. The media

training that these journalists do away covers knowledge of ethical standard and quality reportage. However, Ada (2023), stated that there are opportunities to maintain media ethics in the digital age despite these obstacles. To ensure responsible journalism and uphold professional standard, Nigerian journalist should implement comprehensive media laws and ethics. The journalism profession may adjust to the digital environment while maintaining ethical standards by implementing these rules and offering sufficient training.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory. This theory was propounded by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956. the theory focus on how the media should function independently in the society. This stipulates the duties of the media shall not be influenced by external or internal forces so as to achieve impartiality, balance, trustfulness and accuracy, (Ada, 2023). The theory is predicted on the idea that media can protect democracy by giving the public the knowledge they need and serving as a watchdog over the ruling class. In the context of the ruling class in this study, the information sources are regarded. Furthermore, irregular adherence to social obligations may result from a lack of enforcement tools. According to proponents of the Social Responsibility Theory, as offered by McQuail (1987), it point to the framework for striking a balance between society accountability and media freedom, encouraging ethical journalism. However, detractors such as Altschull (1995) argued that the notion is unrealistic because media organization frequently priorities profit over social duty. The Social Responsibility Theory provides insightful information about the ethical duties of the press in Nigerian Media space.

Empirical Review

Some empirical review were serached are used as empirical understanding. According to Amutu & Nwafor (2020), use quantitative research to established the relationship between media laws and ethical standard. Questionnaire was used to gather information from 234 respondents and the result indicated that 68% of the total respondents admitted to the sporadic infractions. Therefore, journalists in Nigeria adherent poorly to mass media laws and ethics. The study recommended that improvement in the online media space requires more rigorous enforcement of ethical standard and training. Similarly, Okpaara (20215) examined the moral issues surrounding coverage of the 2015 Nigeria presidential election using the content analysis of some online journalism. The study indicated that although community journalism and online journalism contribute to the spread of knowledge, prejudice and other ethical transgressions were common. The study recommended that increased in credibility for citizens journalism requires media ethical training. Ward (2015), did a comprehensive study on ethical issues that media faces in the 21st century from the global scale using case studies with theoretical foundations of journalism ethics. It was discovered that institutional, cultural and individual factors all affect ethical dilemmas. In conclusion, creating ethical standard requires a knowledge of these influences.

In another study by Hanitzsch et al. (2019) the degree of confidence in journalism and media in several nations has brought about the need to examine the recent shift in unethical practices. The study analysed data from a variety of communication scientist using empirical research methods. The study concluded that perceived ethical transgres-

sions are causing a global decline in public trust in the media and resorting to public trust requires a string emphasis on ethical principles. Also, Banda (2010) looked into the restoring of public trust by journalist in the era of digital proliferation of news stream. The study used exploratory research and concluded that while citizen journalism supports democratic processes, it frequently disregards moral principles. Therefore, in order to increase citizen journalist.s participation to democracy, they must be trained in ethical behaviours.

In another study by Singer (2016), object of trust, objectivity and openness in media ethics were examine in the study using conceptual analysis approach was used in the investigation. The study concluded that these components are essential to ethical journalism and interdependent. The study agreed that ethical reporting requires striking a balance between these factors.

Mabweazara (2015) examined how digital technologies are changing newsrooms in Africa. The study employed qualitative research methods such as observation and interview. Even though digital technologies offer new benefits, the findings revealed that they also introduce moral dilemmas, including the necessity to check information. The study concluded that a digital journalism epistemology must be developed to overcome these obstacles. Craft & Davis (2016) attempted to present the basic principles that underlie American journalism. The study adopted a theoretical approach in analysing the existing body of literature. The results highlighted the significance of independence, truth and minimizing harm as fundamental ethical principles. The study concluded that these guidelines are to be followed to protect journalistic integrity.

Gaps in the review

The evaluated empirical research point to a number of gaps in the present knowledge of responsible journalism and media ethics in Nigeria. Although Amatu and Nwafor (2020) evaluated journalists' compliance with media regulations in Anambra State, their research was restricted in scope and might not accurately represent practices across the country. Given the quick development of digital media, Okpara's (2015) analysis of citizen journalism during the 2015 elections is devoid of current data. Because of its breadth, Ward's (2015) comparative analysis might not take into account particular Nigerian settings. Without delving deeply into Nigerian journalism, Hanitzsch et al. (2019) concentrated on media trust worldwide. The exploratory study on African citizen journalism conducted by Banda (2010) does not offer a thorough examination of the need for ethical training. There is no empirical support for Singer's (2016) conceptual investigation.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research method. This type of research method provide measurable and statistical

analysis on the relationship between ethics and aesthetic sensationalism in media practice. The quantitative method was considered appropriation because it enables the research to generalised findings from a defined population and to examine patterns, trends and relationship using numerical data. The study specifically employed a survey research design which is suitable for collecting standardised response from a relatively large number of participants within a professional population. The population of the study comprosed practicing journalists in Delta State, Nigeria. This included journalists affiliated with recognised media chapels under professional bodies such as the Nigeria union Journal (NUJ) in Nigeria. These chapels cut across print, broadcast and online media organizations operating within the state. Given the broad and structured nature of the population, the multi stage sampling technique was adopted to ensure adequate representation. At the first stage, selected chapels were identified from the recognised NUH structures within Delta State. At the second stage, journalists were proportionately selected from choosen chapel using random sampling procedures. This approach enhanced representative while reducing sampling bias, a total sample size of respondents was drawn from the population to ensure statistical reliability.

The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire designed in line with the study objectives and research questions. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended items measured on a Likert scale to facilities quantification variables and key construct such as ethical standards, aesthetic presentation, sensationalism practices and perceived professional responsibility, sensational practices, and perceived professional responsibility. To enhance accessibility, and response rate, data were collected through online administration. The online version of the questionnaire was created using Google Forms and distributed through professional communication channels and verified journalist networks. This ensure reach and convenient for respondents.

Ethical consideration were strictly observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before participating and respondents were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary withdrawal at any stage of the study. The study utilised the descriptive data analytical tools. The mean and standard deviation was used to analyse and interpret response, allowing the researcher to determine central tendencies and the level of variation across response.

Data Analysis

4.1 Data Presentation based on Demographic

4.1.1 Gender Distributions

Caterogrise	Responses	Responses Percentage
Male	199	51.16%
Female	190	48.84%
Valid Count Per Participant	389	100

Source: (Authors' Field Survey, 2026)

Tables 4.1.1 showed that out of the 389 respondents, 190 (48.84%) of the respondents are female while male are 199 (51.16%).

4.1.2 Age Distributions

Caterogrise	Responses	Responses Percentage
20-30	100	25.71%
31-40	220	56.56%
41-50	68	17.48%
51-and above	1	0.26%
Valid Count Per Participant	389	100

Source: (Authors' Field Survey, 2026)

Tables 4.1.1 showed that out of the 389 respondents, 100 (25.71%) of the respondents are between 16 to 20 years, 220 (56.56%) of the respondents are between 21-25 years, 68

(17.48%) of respondents are between 26 to 30 years and 1 (0.26%) are 31 years and above.

4.1.3 Chapel Town Distributions

Caterogrise	Responses	Responses Percentage
Agbor Chapel	69	17.74%
Asaba Chapel	152	39.07%
WarriChapel	95	24.42%
SapeleChapel	73	18.77%
Valid Count Per Participant	389	100

Source: (Authors' Field Survey, 2026)

Tables 4.1.3 showed that out of the 389 respondents, 69 (17.74%) of the respondents are in Agbor Chapel, 152 (39.07%) of the respondents are in Asaba Chapel, 95

(24.42%) of respondents are Warri Chapel and 73 (18.77%) are in Sapele Chapel.

4.1.4 Jornalist Media House Distributions

Caterogrise	Responses	Responses Percentage
The Pointer Newspaper	37	9.51%
DBS Asaba	96	24.68%
DBS Warri	62	15.94%
Vanguard newspaper	53	13.62%
The Sun	24	6.17%
Guardian Newspaper	37	9.51%
Channels TV	26	6.68%
NTA	38	9.77%
Thisday Newspaper/Arise TV	16	4.11%
Valid Count Per Participant	389	100

Source: (Authors' Field Survey, 2025)

Tables 4.1.3 showed that out of the 389 respondents, 37 (9.51%) of the respondents are in faculty of management, 96 (24.68%), of the respondents are in faculty of social sciences, 62 (15.94%) are in faculty of Engineering, 53

(13.62%), are in faculty of Education, 24 (6.17%) are in faculty of science, 37 (9.51%) are in faculty of Arts, 26 (6.68%) are in faculty of Law, 38 (9.77%) are in faculty of Medicine and 16 (4.11%) are in faculty of Environmental science.

Table 4.1.5: Length of Service of Journalists

Caterogrise	Responses	Responses Percentage
1-10 years	132	33.93%
11-20 years	101	25.96%
21-30 years	107	27.51%
31 years & above	49	11.59%
Valid Count Per Participant	389	100

Source: (Authors' Field Survey, 2026)

Tables 4.1.3 showed that out of the 389 respondents, 132 (33.93%) of the respondents claimed to have worked as

journalists for 1-10 years, 101 (25.96%), of the respondents claimed 11 to 20 years, 107 (27.51%) claimed 21 to 30 years, 49 (11.59%), claimed 31 years and above.

Table 4.1.6 Extent to which aesthetic sensationalism influences ethical standards in contemporary online journalism.

Description of Items	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Deviation	Decision
The use of visual exaggeration images and graphics in online journalism reduces the credibility of new reports	3.1800	.11317	.80026	Accepted
Sensational storytelling techniques in online journalism encourages ethical misconduct	3.2800	.10706	.75701	Accepted
The pressure to gain clicks and online engagement leads journalists to ignore professional ethical guidelines.	3.3800	.11025	.77959	Accepted
Aesthetic enhancements such as flashy layouts and dramatic thumbnails influence how news content is framed.	3.1600	.11556	.81716	Accepted
Online journalists sometimes sacrifice ethical considerations to make stories more visually appealing.	3.3600	.11697	.82709	Accepted
Sensational visual elements increase audience engagement but weaken ethical responsibility.	3.1600	.13510	.95533	Accepted
Total Mean Score				Accepted

Source: (Authors' Field Survey, 2026)

The data in Table 4.1.6 showed the mean and standard deviation of respondents on the extent to which aesthetic sensationalism influences ethical standards in contemporary online journalism. Given the 2.50 benchmark for acceptance, items 1-6 had mean above the benchmark indicating that there is evident of extent to which aesthetic sensationalism influences ethical standards in contemporary online journalism. In summary, respondents agreed that the use of visual exaggeration images and graphics in online journalism reduces the credibility of new reports with mean score of 3.18, that sensational storytelling techniques in online

journalism encourages ethical misconduct with means core of 3.28, that the pressure to gain clicks and online engagement leads journalists to ignore professional ethical guidelines with mean score of 3.38, that aesthetic enhancements such as flashy layouts and dramatic thumbnails influence how news content is framed with mean score of 3.16, that online journalists sometimes sacrifice ethical considerations to make stories more visually appealing with mean score of 3.36 and that sensational visual elements increase audience engagement but weaken ethical responsibility with mean score of 3.16.

Table 4.1.7 The Implications of Aesthetic Sensationalism on Professional Responsibility and Public Trust in Online Journalism.

Description of Items	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Deviation	Decision
Aesthetic sensationalism in online journalism weakens journalists' sense of professional responsibility.	3.2000	.12778	.90351	Accepted
The use of exaggerated visuals in online news reduces public trust in media organizations.	3.1400	.11432	.80837	Accepted
Sensational presentation of news stories negatively affects the credibility of online media platforms.	3.2200	.12219	.86402	Accepted
Professional accountability declines when online news prioritizes visual appeal over accuracy.	3.1800	.12352	.87342	Accepted
Aesthetic sensationalism contributes to misinformation and misinterpretation among audiences.	3.3800	.10258	.72534	Accepted
Public trust in online journalism decreases when stories are presented in a dramatic or emotionally manipulative way.	3.3600	.09798	.69282	Accepted
Total Mean Score				Accepted

Source: (Authors' Field Survey, 2026)

The data in Table 4.1.7 showed the mean and standard deviation of respondents on the the implications of aesthetic sensationalism on professional responsibility and public trust in online journalism. Given the 2.50 benchmark for acceptance, items 7-12 had mean above the benchmark indicating that there is evident of the implications of aesthetic sensationalism on professional responsibility and public trust in online journalism. In summary, respondents agreed that aesthetic sensationalism in online journalism weakens journalists' sense of professional responsibility with means score of 3.20, that the use of exaggerated visuals in online news reduces public trust in media organizations with mean score of 3.14, that sensational presentation of news stories negatively affects the credibility of online media platforms with mean score of 3.22, that professional accountability declines when online news prioritizes visual appeal over accuracy with mean score of 3.18, that aesthetic sensationalism contributes to misinformation and misinterpretation among audiences with mean score of 3.38 and that public trust in online journalism decreases when stories are presented in a dramatic or emotionally manipulative way with score score of 3.36.

Discussion of Findings

Result of findings for research question one indicated that there is extent to which aesthetic sensationalism influences ethical standards in contemporary online journalism. This is showed with the presence of visual exaggeration of images and graphics in online journalism and sensational storytelling. This come as a result of pressure to gain clicks and online engagement. The outcome of this result align with existing studies as According to Amatu and Nwafor (2021), following media ethics encourages responsible journalism by directing reporters to confirm material before sharing it, which stops false information from spreading. Ethical journalism is essential to delivering trustworthy information to the public in Nigeria, because the media environment is varied and intricate.

Regarding the second research question, the result showed that aesthetic sensationalism has significant consequences for professional responsibility and public trust in online journalism. Thus, sensationalism in online journalism destroys the sense of professional responsibility of journalists, while over-the-top visuals in online news diminish public trust in media organizations. The results were consistent with previous research as it is a commonly held view among scholars that ethical breaches in journalism result in a significant drop in public trust, especially in the digital age where the aesthetic presentation is more valued. Hanitzsch et al. (2019) state that perceived ethical violations are among the reasons for the decline of global confidence in the media. Citizen journalism is democratically valuable but often lacks ethical standards, (Banda, 2010). Truth, objectivity, and transparency were interdependent pillars of ethical reporting (Singer, 2016). Also, Mabweazara (2015) noted that with digital transformation, there are ethical issues and this underscores the need for more robust ethical frameworks in an era of evolving, aesthetics-driven media practices.

Conclusions

Based on the result of the findings the followings are the conclusions for the study.

- The study highlighted that there is significant issue of ethical aesthetic in the media industry especially in the online space journalism.
- From online journalism, there is significant presence of visual exaggeration of image and graphics in online journalism and a lot of sensational storyteling are witnessed.
- The implication of these ethical issues on journalism come with bias and lack of trust from the public as all contents are received with skepticism.
- Sensationalism in online journalism weakens journalists sense of professional responsibility.

Recommendations

- i. Media stakeholders need to push for more ethical standard from internal regulation mechanism.
- ii. There is need for review of legal framework and institutional standards to ensure that contents of ethical bias are regulated and culprits are punished within the armpt of the law.
- iii. There is need for media organization to regularly conduct knowledge training on media laws and ethical standard.

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