Watchdogs or Catalysts for Change? Exploring Mass Media's Role in Combating Kidnapping in Benin City, Edo State

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Abstract
Kidnapping has become a major security challenge in Nigeria, particularly in Edo State, with Benin City emerging as a hotspot for this crime. This study examines therole of the media in combating kidnapping activities in Benin City. It explores how media campaigns, public awareness, and media-law enforcement collaboration can shape public perception, reduce crime rates, and enhance community engagement. The research draws on existing literature to review the concepts of mass media, kidnapping, and their interconnected roles in crime prevention. It also investigates how media campaigns inform the public about safety, promote community participation, and address the psychological and economic impacts of kidnapping. Using a qualitative approach, the study assesses the effectiveness of media messages in reducing kidnapping incidents and examines the ethical responsibilities of journalists in security reporting. The findings reveal that while mass media can significantly influence public awareness and community action, challenges such as sensationalism, misinformation, and weak collaboration with security agencies remain critical barriers. The study concludes with actionable recommendations for policymakers, media practitioners, and community leaders, emphasizing the need for balanced, accurate, and culturally sensitive media strategies to effectively combat kidnapping in Benin City.
Keywords: Watchdogs, Catalysts, Mass Media, Combating, Kidnappers in Benin City

Introduction

Kidnapping has become a prevalent and disturbing phenomenon in Nigeria, particularly in Edo State. The activities of kidnappers have caused untold hardship, fear, and insecurity among the residents of Benin City. The rise in kidnapping cases has led to increased concerns about the safety and security of individuals, particularly in urban areas like Benin City (Adeyemi, 2020).

By acting as a conduit between the public and the government, the mass media provide two-way communication, which is crucial for discussing security issues (Odoemelam, 2021; 2011). The media can raise public knowledge of safety precautions, cover kidnappings, and hold officials responsible for security failures through news reporting, investigative journalism, and public awareness campaigns. The media's ability to effectively carry out this function, however, is contingent upon a number of variables, such as the caliber of reporting, how abduction stories are presented, and the degree of cooperation with security forces (Odoemelam, 2012). The media's influence in preventing and controlling crime and insecurity has been the subject of several studies (Adeyemi, 2020; Odoemelam, 2014). The way that crime is portrayed in the media, for example, affects public opinion and can either foster a sense of security or fear(Nwabueze and Ebeze, 2022; Okoro, Obayi&Odoemelam, 2013). Similar to this, Ekeanyanwu and Edewor (2022) stressed the importance of responsible journalism in covering kidnapping situations in order to steer clear of sensationalism that can increase public anxiety.

Research has shown that kidnapping is often motivated by financial gain, with perpetrators demanding ransom from the families of victims (Okereke, 2025). However, the impact of kidnapping goes beyond financial loss, as it can also lead to psychological trauma, emotional distress, and even death (Uche, 2020). It has been determined that the mass media is an essential weapon in the battle against kidnapping. The public can be influenced by the mainstream media's reporting, which can also enlighten people about prevention techniques and increase

awareness of the problem (Ede, 2019; Odoemelam, Kidafa, Onyebuchi&Agu, 2014). Mass media, however, has a complicated and multidimensional influence in reducing kidnapping operations.

Mass media can influence the fight against kidnapping in both beneficial and harmful ways, according to studies. On the one hand, the media can help spread awareness and stop future kidnappings by offering useful information about such instances (Ojo, 2018). However, sensationalized reporting has the ability to increase the number of kidnapping instances by fostering fear and anxiety (Adebayo, 2020; Ede, 2019).

A major factor in determining public opinion and societal behavior is the mass media, which includes print, broadcast, and digital media. There has been extensive media coverage of kidnapping in Benin City at this time. Omokapue et al. (2022) evaluated how viewers in Nigeria, with an emphasis on Benin citizens, viewed broadcast media coverage of kidnapping and banditry in Nigeria. Although there is a high level of media exposure to kidnapping cases, the results showed that more positive and solution-focused reporting is required to adequately address the problem (Nwaoboli et al., 2023).

These studies underscore a significant gap in the literature: the need for an in-depth examination of how mass media can be leveraged to effectively curtail kidnapping activities in Benin City. While existing research highlights the extent of media coverage, there is limited exploration into the specific imperatives and strategies that the media can adopt to combat kidnapping.

The body of research on kidnappings mostly examines the scope and character of media coverage of these crimes, with little attention paid to the proactive role that the media plays in deterring and lessening these acts, (Nwaoboli et al., 2023). Few studies have examined seriously the efficacy of public service announcements, media campaigns, and community engagement programs designed to reduce kidnapping. It is also rare to find study on how law enforcement, media outlets, and community members work together to combat kidnapping, Nwaoboli et al. (2023).

Anchored on the Framing theory, as propounded by Robert M. Entman, our study argues that the way the media cover kidnapping issues may impact the fight against kidnapping. For instance, framing theory explains how media selectively present information and construct narratives by emphasizing certain aspects of a perceived reality while omitting others, thereby influencing audience interpretation and response. According to Entman cited in Odoemelam(2013), "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text… to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." Thus, framing does not merely inform; it shapes how issues are understood and addressed by the public.

In the context of kidnapping and insecurity, framing becomes a powerful tool through which the media can either amplify public fear, create empathy for victims, assign blame, or encourage civic participation in crime prevention The language, imagery, and sources used in media coverage all contribute to how the issue is framedwhether as a national crisis, a political failure, or a community challenge. The tone and focus of the reporting may influence whether the public feels empowered to act or helpless in the face of rising insecurity.This theory is sits well with the current study, which examines how kidnapping is framed the media. By analyzing perceptions about headlines, thematic emphases, and the portrayal of victims and perpetrators, the study assesses whether media framing contributes to heightened public concern, desensitization, or mobilization. In a country grappling with repeated incidents of abduction and violent crimes, the manner in which the media frames these events can significantly affect societal responses, policy demands, and security behaviors.

This study aims to fill the identified gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the imperatives of mass media in curtailing kidnapping activities in Benin City, Edo State.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do mass media campaigns inform the public about the dangers of kidnapping and the steps necessary to prevent such crimes?

2. How does media coverage of kidnapping influence public attitudes and perceptions regarding the frequency, severity, and seriousness of the crime?

3. In what ways do the media encourage community participation in crime prevention, especially in relation to kidnapping?

4. How effective is the collaboration between media outlets and law enforcement in sharing timely, accurate information about kidnapping cases and public safety alerts?

Method

The study adopted a descriptive research design through a cross-sectional sampling of residents, media practitioners, and law enforcement personnel in Edo State, to explore the phenomenon (Creswell, 2024; Babbie, 2023; Neuman, 2023; Saunders, Lewis, &Thornhill, 2016). The research aims to provide understanding on how mass media influence the public and supports crime prevention efforts, particularly in the context of kidnapping. A sample size of 400 respondents was selected using Yamane's formula for sample size determination (Pritha, 2020; Ader&Mellenbergh, 2020).

The Simple Random Sampling technique was used to select 200 residents in Edo State. It ensures that each individual in the population has an equal chance of being selected (Kerlinger& Lee, 2020). The Purposive Sampling was applied to select media practitioners (n=50) and law enforcement officials (n=150) who have direct involvement in media campaigns or law enforcement activities related to kidnapping (Neuman, 2023; Fink, 2020; Kumar, 2021; Saunders, Lewis, &Thornhill, 2016; Orodho, 2019; Wilkinson, 2021)

Data and Results

Table 1: below provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Category	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage
Age Group		
18-25	100	25
26-35	120	30
36-45	90	22.5
46 and above	90	22.5
GENDER		
FEMALE	200	50
MALE	200	50
OCCUPATION		
STUDENTS	120	30
Civil Servants	100	25
Business Owners	80	20
Other (e.g., farmers)	100	25

Public Awareness of Mass Media Campaigns on Kidnapping Prevention
Table 2
Mass media campaigns play a significant role in raising public awareness about the dangers associated with kidnapping.

Response options	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage
Agreed	140	40
Strongly Agreed	180	45
Disagreed	40	10
Strongly disagreed	40	10
Total	400	100

From the data, it is evident that a majority of the respondents (85%) either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that mass media campaigns are significantly effective in raising awareness about dangers. This high level of affirmation (with 45% strongly agreeing and 40% agreeing) highlights a strong public confidence in the media as a credible source of enlightenment and information dissemination. Mass media campaigns are known for their ability to reach vast audiences, influence social attitudes, and promote behavioural change through strategic use of communication channels such as radio, television, newspapers, and digital platforms (Ojebuyi&Salawu, 2018). The high level of agreement in this study reflects the success of these campaigns in informing citizens about threats and guiding them on safety measures, especially in environments plagued by insecurity. On the other hand, 20% of the respondents either *disagreed* (10%) or *strongly disagreed* (10%) with the statement. While this is a minority, it suggests the presence of certain barriers or limitations that could undermine the effectiveness of some media campaigns. Possible reasons include limited access to media, distrust in media content, language or literacy barriers, or the perception that media sometimes exaggerate or politicize security issues.

Effectiveness of Media Campaigns in Raising Awareness
Q: The way the media portrays kidnapping can shape how the public understands the seriousness and frequency of such crimes.

Response options	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage
Agreed	150	37.5
Strongly Agreed	120	30
disagreed	80	20
Strongly disagreed	50	12.5
Total	400	100

Based on the response data: 37.5% (150 respondents) agreed, 30% (120 respondents) strongly agreed. This means 67.5% of respondents (270 out of 400) believe that media portrayal significantly shapes public understanding of kidnapping. 20% (80 respondents) disagreed and 12.5% (50 respondents) strongly disagreed. A combined 32.5% (130 respondents) do not share this view, indicating some skepticism or differing interpretations of media influence. The majority of respondents recognize the power of media framing in influencing how seriously people take kidnapping and how often they believe it occurs. However, a notable minority believes that media portrayal may not be as influential or that people form their views based on other sources or experiences.

Highlights the potential of constructive journalism in promoting community engagement and proactive responses to crime, particularly kidnapping. 47.5% (190 respondents) agreed. 32.5% (130 respondents) strongly agreed. A total of 80% (320 respondents) believe that when the media emphasizes solutions and community efforts rather than just fear or negativity, it motivates people to act positively such as adopting safety practices or supporting local security initiatives. 10% (40 respondents) disagreed. 10% (40 respondents) strongly disagreed. Only 20%

(80 respondents) do not see a strong link between solution-oriented reporting and community preventive behavior. A large majority of respondents affirm that media has the power to inspire positive change when it focuses on solutions rather than just problems. This suggests that constructive journalism, which highlights community efforts, safety strategies, and successful prevention cases, can mobilize public participation and reduce fear-based apathy.

Table 3: Community Crime Prevention
The media serves as a platform to inform communities about the importance of collective action in preventing crimes like kidnapping.

Response options	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage
Agreed	100	25
Strongly Agreed	180	45
Disagreed	80	20
Strongly disagreed	40	10
Total	400	100

The data shows that a significant majority (70%) of respondents comprising 25% (100 respondents) who *agreed* and 45% (180 respondents) who *strongly agreed* believe that the media plays a vital role in promoting collective community action to prevent crimes like kidnapping. This indicates strong public confidence in the media as a catalyst for awareness, mobilization, and social responsibility.

However, 30% of respondents (120 individuals) 20% who disagreed and 10% who strongly disagreed do not share this view. This sizable minority suggests a level of skepticism, possibly due to:

Perceived media bias or lack of focus on community-oriented solutions.
Distrust in media institutions.
Belief that crime prevention is more reliant on government or security agencies than on public mobilization through media. The high level of agreement highlights the potential of media campaigns to unite communities in fighting crime through information dissemination and collective engagement. The dissenting views suggest a need for the media to do more in showcasing and supporting grassroots efforts, community vigilance groups, and preventive strategies rather than merely reporting incidents.

Most respondents recognize the media's powerful role in informing and mobilizing the public for crime prevention, particularly regarding kidnapping. However, a notable portion of the population remains unconvinced, signaling a call for more inclusive, practical, and community-centered media messaging.

Q: Through public service announcements, talk shows, and documentaries, media outlets highlight ways citizens can contribute to local safety efforts.

Response options	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage
Agreed	150	37.5
Strongly Agreed	180	45
Disagreed	30	7.5
Strongly disagreed	40	10
Total	400	100

The data shows that 82.5% of respondents (330 out of 400) either *agreed (37.5%)* or *strongly agreed (45%)* that media outlets play an active role in promoting community safety by using tools such as public service

announcements, talk shows, and documentaries. This indicates a strong public perception that the media is not just a passive reporter of crime but an active agent in public education and crime prevention.

On the other hand, 17.5% of respondents (70 out of 400)—comprising *7.5% who disagreed* and *10% who strongly disagreed*—do not view media as playing this kind of proactive, supportive role. This minority may reflect either a lack of exposure to such content or skepticism about its effectiveness or sincerity.

Table 4: Media-Law Enforcement Collaboration
Media organizations often work with law enforcement to share crucial information about ongoing kidnapping cases and public safety alerts

Response options	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage
Agreed	100	25
Strongly Agreed	120	30
Disagreed	100	25
Strongly disagreed	80	20
Total	400	100

The responses to the statement that "Media organizations often work with law enforcement to share crucial information about ongoing kidnapping cases and public safety alerts" reflect a divided view on the collaboration between media and law enforcement: 55% of respondents (100 agreed + 120 strongly agreed) believe that media organizations do indeed work with law enforcement in sharing critical information. This suggests that the majority view media-law enforcement collaboration as a positive and necessary aspect of effective crime reporting, especially in cases involving kidnapping. 45% of respondents (100 disagreed + 80 strongly disagreed) disagree with the statement, indicating a significant portion of the population either believes that such collaborations do not occur frequently or that they are not impactful.

Q: Collaboration between the media and law enforcement helps ensure that accurate and timely information is disseminated to the public.

Response options	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage
Agreed	150	37.5
Strongly Agreed	90	22.5
Disagreed	100	25
Strongly disagreed	60	15
Total	400	100

Based on the response data, the findings suggest that a majority of respondents (60%) recognize the importance of collaboration between the media and law enforcement in ensuring the dissemination of accurate and timely information to the public.

37.5% (150 respondents) agreed, and 22.5% (90 respondents) strongly agreed with the statement, indicating that 60% (240 respondents) of the sample understands the significance of this collaboration in the effective communication of public safety information. 25% (100 respondents) disagreed, and 15% (60 respondents) strongly disagreed, representing 40% (160 respondents) of the sample who either do not see the value in this collaboration or have a differing opinion. This may indicate that some respondents either feel that the media can be trusted to operate independently or that they believe law enforcement is sufficient in providing public safety information without media involvement.

Discussion of Findings
The findings suggest the significant influence of the media on public understanding of kidnapping, with a large majority of respondents agreeing that media coverage shapes how seriously people view the issue. This finding agrees with Okoro, Obayi and Odoemelam (2023).

The findings suggest that while the media is widely viewed as a crucial actor in crime prevention through public sensitization and advocacy, its impact depends on trust, accessibility, and relevance. Enhancing these factors could strengthen the media's role in promoting community-based responses to kidnapping and related crimes.

The findings clearly suggest that the majority of the public recognizes and values the media's educational and preventive function in crime-related matters. The high level of agreement indicates that public service announcements, talk shows, and documentaries are seen as impactful tools in guiding citizens on how to support local safety efforts, such as: Reporting suspicious activity, participating in neighborhood watch programs, Educating children and youths about personal safety.While the findings affirm the media's significant influence on public perception of kidnapping, they also reveal that media alone cannot shape societal response. A holistic approach that combines trustworthy media content, community involvement, and education is essential for addressing the issue comprehensively.

Findings additionally indicate that sensational or fear-driven media coverage could escalate public anxiety and potentially cause panic, while positive, solution-oriented reporting could foster greater community involvement in crime prevention. Findings further reveal the importance of collaboration between the media and law enforcement to ensure accurate information is provided to the public, highlights an understanding that media collaboration with law enforcement is critical for public awareness and safety efforts. In situations like kidnapping, sharing accurate and timely information can help prevent further crimes, alert the public, and aid in the recovery of victims (Ojebuyi&Salawu, 2018).
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Conclusion
The mass media plays a crucial role in curtailing kidnapping activities in Edo State, particularly by raising public awareness, promoting safety measures, and facilitating timely responses to kidnapping incidents. The study reveals that while media coverage significantly shapes public opinion, it must be done responsibly to avoid increasing public fear. Positive media campaigns, in collaboration with law enforcement, can help inspire public cooperation and vigilance. The findings suggest that effective mass media strategies can help prevent kidnapping by informing the public, fostering a culture of collective responsibility, and encouraging proactive actions.

Despite the acknowledged benefits of media involvement, the study also highlights challenges, including skepticism about media portrayals and concerns about the effectiveness of law enforcement. These challenges must be addressed for mass media campaigns to be more impactful in the fight against kidnapping.

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