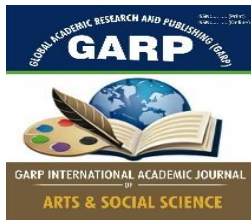


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GENDER STEREOTYPES AND LEADERSHIP LEGITIMACY IN NIGERIA: MEDIA REPRESENTATION, PERCEPTION AND REALITY

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ABSTRACT

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Gender stereotypes embedded in media discourse continue to shape how leadership is perceived and legitimized in contemporary societies. In Nigeria, mass media play a central role in constructing public understanding of leadership by determining which issues and attributes are prioritized in public discourse. Guided by Agenda-Setting Theory and Feminist Theory, this study examines how media representation of gender influences perceptions of leadership legitimacy. Agenda-Setting Theory explains how media salience of specific leadership attributes shapes public evaluation criteria, while Feminist Theory provides a critical perspective on how such representations reflect and reinforces unequal gender power relations in society. The study adopts a qualitative research design using secondary data analysis and literature synthesis. Relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and empirical media studies were systematically reviewed and thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns in the gendered portrayal of leadership. The analysis focuses on how media narratives construct meanings around male and female leaders and how these constructions influence legitimacy judgments. Findings reveal that media discourse consistently emphasizes authority, competence, decisiveness, and strategic ability in the representation of male leaders, while female leaders are more frequently associated with emotional expression, relational roles, and personality-oriented traits. These patterns reflect agenda-setting effects that prioritize gendered attributes in leadership evaluation. From a feminist perspective, such representations reinforce patriarchal structures that position leadership as inherently masculine, thereby marginalizing alternative constructions of leadership identity. The interaction of agenda-setting processes and gendered framing contributes to persistent perception gaps between actual leadership performance and perceived legitimacy. The study concludes that leadership legitimacy is socially constructed through mediated narratives rather than determined solely by objective performance indicators. It recommends the promotion of gender-sensitive media practices, strengthened media literacy among audiences, and targeted professional training for journalists to reduce stereotype reinforcement and improve balanced leadership representation.

Keywords: Agenda-Setting Theory, Feminist Theory, Gender Stereotypes, Leadership Legitimacy, Media Representation, Nigeria.

Introduction

Leadership legitimacy is a foundational pillar for democratic governance, institutional efficacy, and public trust. In any society, the perception of leaders significantly influences their ability to govern effectively, implement policies, and maintain societal cohesion. While leadership legitimacy can theoretically be assessed through measurable performance indicators, in practice, public perception often carries equal, if not greater, weight. In Nigeria, a country marked by diverse cultural, religious, and historical complexities, public evaluation of leadership is heavily influenced by both socio-cultural norms and media narratives.

Mass media serve as powerful intermediaries between leaders and the public. They not only inform citizens about policies and decisions but also frame the attributes, behaviors, and characteristics of leaders in ways that shape audience cognition and interpretation (McCombs, 2020; Ross, 2020; Van Zoonen, 2021). Media framing involves emphasizing certain traits or behaviors, repeatedly highlighting specific narratives, and sometimes omitting relevant contextual information. Such framing is particularly influential in societies where literacy levels, political education, and access to information vary, as it often becomes the primary lens through which citizens assess leadership competence and legitimacy.

Gender stereotypes are deeply entrenched within Nigerian socio-cultural structures, and these stereotypes are amplified and reproduced through media discourse. Traditionally, leadership qualities such as assertiveness, strategic decision-making, and authority are socially coded as masculine traits. Conversely, empathy, relational skills, and emotional sensitivity are often coded as feminine traits (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012; Hughes & Krook, 2022). When mass media reflect these norms, they reinforce pre-existing societal expectations about who is "fit" to lead, thereby influencing the evaluation of both male and female leaders. For instance, a female leader who displays assertiveness may be criticized for being aggressive, whereas a male leader displaying

similar traits is often praised for decisiveness and strength.

In the Nigerian context, the media coverage of female leaders often extends beyond policy competence to focus on personal attributes, appearance, emotional responses, and social roles. Prominent female figures such as Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and Aisha Yesufu have frequently been subjects of media scrutiny that emphasize these traits, influencing how the public perceives their legitimacy and capacity to lead (Luka & Ugondo, 2025; Governor & Ebiere, 2025). These media narratives, often subtle, can create perception gaps between actual performance and public evaluation. Consequently, female leaders may experience heightened scrutiny and reduced perceived legitimacy, not because of actual competence, but due to gendered interpretations of their behavior by media intermediaries and audiences.

The influence of mass media on leadership perception is further compounded by the intersection of culture, religion, and ethnicity. Nigerian media audiences are diverse, and interpretations of leadership behaviors are filtered through multiple socio-cultural lenses. Women leaders from minority ethnic groups, or those challenging traditional norms, face amplified bias, as media narratives often highlight deviations from both gender and cultural expectations (Norris & Inglehart, 2021; Hughes & Krook, 2022). Such intersectional factors intensify the challenges female leaders face in establishing legitimacy and achieving public trust.

Empirical studies suggest that persistent gendered media framing contributes to systemic barriers for women aspiring to leadership roles. Luka and Ugondo (2025) observed that female political candidates were more frequently covered in terms of personality than policy substance, while Omiunu (2023) demonstrated that Nigerian print media reinforce traditional gender roles, normalizing stereotypes. Governor and Ebiere (2025) found that television programming often portrays women in subordinate roles, shaping public expectations of appropriate leadership behavior. Njoku et al. (2024) highlighted that community-level media

exposure influenced perceptions of female authority, with audiences more likely to view women as less competent or decisive than their male counterparts.

Theoretical perspectives further illuminate these dynamics. Role Congruity Theory posits that incongruence between prescribed female gender roles and leadership roles leads to biased evaluations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012). Agenda-Setting Theory explains how media emphasis on particular traits or behaviors makes certain attributes more salient in the minds of audiences, guiding evaluation and reinforcing gendered stereotypes (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2020; Van Zoonen, 2021). Together, these theories suggest that media narratives not only reflect societal expectations but actively shape and reinforce them, creating structural challenges for female leadership legitimacy.

Despite constitutional commitments to gender equality, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions in Nigeria, suggesting that perception shaped by media narratives may act as a barrier to female leadership advancement (Luka & Ugondo, 2025; Governor & Ebiere, 2025). Understanding the influence of media representation is therefore essential for addressing both public perception and structural gender inequalities.

This study aims to investigate how mass media representation of gendered narratives influences perceptions of leadership legitimacy in Nigeria, through qualitative secondary data analysis and literature synthesis.

Statement of the problem

Despite increasing global advocacy for gender equality and inclusive leadership, disparities in the perception and acceptance of male and female leaders persist, particularly in Nigeria. While women have demonstrated competence and effectiveness in various leadership roles, their legitimacy is often questioned or evaluated differently compared to their male counterparts. This challenge is not solely rooted in institutional barriers but is deeply influenced by socio-cultural expectations and mediated representations.

Mass media, as a primary source of information and social interpretation, play a critical role in shaping public perceptions of leadership. However, media coverage frequently reflects and reinforces gender stereotypes by emphasizing personality traits, emotional expressions, and social roles when portraying female leaders, while highlighting authority, competence, and decisiveness in male leaders. Such gendered framing may distort objective evaluation, leading to biased perceptions of leadership legitimacy.

Although existing studies have documented the presence of gender stereotypes in media discourse, there is limited scholarly attention on how these mediated narratives directly influence public perceptions of leadership legitimacy within the Nigerian context. This gap is significant because leadership legitimacy is essential for effective governance, public trust, and societal development. Therefore, the core problem addressed in this study is the lack of comprehensive understanding of how mass media representation of gender stereotypes shapes public perception and contributes to disparities in the legitimacy accorded to male and female leaders in Nigeria. Addressing this problem is crucial for promoting equitable leadership evaluation and improving the role of media in fostering inclusive societal norms.

Objectives of the Study

The main research objective is to examine how mass media representation of gender stereotypes influences the perception and legitimacy of leadership in Nigeria.

Specific objectives include:

1. To examine how mass media representation constructs and reinforces gender stereotypes in leadership discourse in Nigeria.
2. To explore how gendered media narratives influence public perceptions of leadership traits and competence.
3. To analyze the relationship between media-driven gender stereotypes and the legitimacy attributed to male and female leaders.

4. To assess how media representation contributes to perception gaps between actual leadership performance and perceived legitimacy.

Literature Review / Theoretical Framework

Media Representation and Gender Stereotypes

Mass media play a powerful and often underestimated role in shaping how society understands leadership. From television broadcasts and newspaper headlines to social media platforms, the images and narratives presented to audiences subtly define what leadership “should” look like. Over time, these repeated portrayals become normalized, influencing not only public perception but also individual expectations and institutional practices. One of the most persistent patterns within this representation is the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in leadership roles.

Traditionally, leadership has been framed in masculine terms. Men are frequently portrayed as strong, assertive, decisive, and strategic qualities that align with long-standing cultural ideals of authority and control. In contrast, women in leadership are often depicted through a different lens one that emphasizes emotional intelligence, compassion, and relational abilities (Ross, 2020; Campus, 2013; Bosch, 2022). While these traits are not inherently negative, the problem lies in how they are framed as secondary or less authoritative compared to traditionally “masculine” leadership qualities. As a result, women leaders are often perceived as less competent or less legitimate, regardless of their actual performance.

This pattern is not accidental; it is deeply embedded in the way media narratives are constructed. Studies have shown that when covering female leaders, media outlets are more likely to focus on aspects unrelated to their professional capabilities, such as their physical appearance, fashion choices, marital status, or family responsibilities (Ross, 2020; Hughes & Krook, 2022). For example, a male political leader may be praised for his policy decisions or leadership strategy, while a female leader in a similar position might receive commentary on her

attire or tone of voice. These subtle yet consistent differences reinforce the idea that women’s leadership is an exception rather than the norm. Furthermore, the language used in media coverage often reflects and perpetuates gender bias. Female leaders are more likely to be described using terms that question their authority such as “emotional,” “aggressive,” or “too soft” depending on how closely they align with or deviate from gender expectations. This creates a double bind: when women display assertiveness, they may be criticized for being too harsh; when they demonstrate empathy, they may be perceived as weak (Bosch, 2022; Eagly & Heilman, 2021). Such framing places women in an unfair position where they must constantly navigate conflicting expectations to be seen as legitimate leaders.

The impact of these portrayals extends beyond individual perception to broader societal beliefs. Media representation acts as a mirror and a molder of cultural norms, shaping what audiences come to accept as “natural” or “appropriate.” When leadership is consistently associated with masculinity, it becomes more difficult for audiences to recognize and accept women as equally capable leaders. This phenomenon is particularly evident in political communication, corporate leadership coverage, and even entertainment media, where leadership roles are disproportionately assigned to male characters or figures (Van Zoonen, 2021; Harmer & Wring, 2022).

In recent years, digital media and social networking platforms have both challenged and reinforced these stereotypes. On one hand, platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and online news outlets provide women leaders with opportunities to present their own narratives and connect directly with audiences. On the other hand, these spaces can also amplify gender bias through online harassment, sexist commentary, and the viral spread of stereotypical representations (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2020; Banet-Weiser, 2021). Female leaders are often subjected to higher levels of scrutiny and criticism online, which can undermine their credibility and discourage participation in leadership roles. Despite these challenges, there has been gradual progress in

how media represent women in leadership. Increasing awareness of gender bias, coupled with advocacy for more inclusive representation, has led some media organizations to adopt more balanced and fair reporting practices. There is also a growing recognition that effective leadership is not defined by gender but by competence, vision, and the ability to inspire and mobilize others.

However, the gap between representation and reality remains significant. While more women are entering leadership positions across politics, business, and civil society, media portrayals have not fully caught up with this shift. The persistence of gender stereotypes continues to shape public perception, often undermining the legitimacy of women leaders even when they demonstrate equal or superior capability compared to their male counterparts.

In conclusion, media representation plays a critical role in reinforcing or challenging gender stereotypes in leadership. By consistently portraying men and women through different lenses, the media contribute to a social environment where leadership is still seen as predominantly masculine. To bridge the gap between perception and reality, there is a need for more conscious and equitable representation one that focuses on competence rather than gender, and that recognizes leadership as a diverse and inclusive concept. Only then can society move toward a more balanced understanding of leadership legitimacy, where individuals are judged by their abilities rather than constrained by stereotypes.

Media Influence across Platforms

The influence of media on public perception of leadership is not confined to a single channel; rather, it operates across a complex ecosystem of traditional and digital platforms. Each platform contributes uniquely to how leadership is understood, evaluated, and legitimized in society. Together, they form a powerful network that not only reflects societal beliefs but also actively shapes them especially in relation to gender. Traditional media, including television, radio, and print journalism, have historically played a foundational role in constructing leadership

narratives. These platforms often rely on established norms and professional routines that, consciously or unconsciously, reproduce gender stereotypes. For instance, television news coverage tends to emphasize authority, decisiveness, and control when portraying male leaders, reinforcing the idea of leadership as inherently masculine. In contrast, women leaders are frequently framed in terms of personality traits, emotional expression, or relational skills, which can subtly undermine their perceived authority (Bosch, 2022; Hughes & Krook, 2022). Even when women occupy high-ranking positions, the framing of their leadership often differs significantly from that of their male counterparts.

Print media, such as newspapers and magazines, also contribute to this pattern through both language and visual representation. Headlines, photographs, and feature stories often highlight aspects of women leaders' personal lives, including family roles or physical appearance, rather than focusing solely on their professional achievements. This selective emphasis shapes how audiences interpret competence and credibility, reinforcing the perception that women's leadership is conditional or exceptional rather than standard.

In recent years, the rise of digital media has transformed the landscape of communication, making it more interactive, immediate, and far-reaching. Social media platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have introduced new dynamics into the construction of leadership images. Unlike traditional media, where content is produced by professionals, digital platforms allow users to actively participate in shaping narratives. This democratization of content creation has both positive and negative implications for gender representation in leadership. On one hand, social media provides women leaders with opportunities to bypass traditional gatekeepers and present themselves directly to the public. Through personal accounts, live videos, and direct engagement with audiences, they can showcase their expertise, leadership style, and achievements without the filtering effects of traditional media institutions. This has the potential to challenge stereotypes

and promote more authentic and diverse representations of leadership.

On the other hand, digital platforms can also intensify gender bias in ways that are more immediate and widespread. Viral content, including memes, short videos, and trending hashtags, often simplifies complex issues into easily shareable formats. While this can increase visibility, it can also reinforce stereotypes by reducing women leaders to caricatures or subjecting them to ridicule. For example, a short clip taken out of context can quickly circulate online, attracting thousands of comments that may focus more on a woman leader's tone, appearance, or perceived attitude than on the substance of her message. Comment sections and online discussions further illustrate how media influence operates at multiple levels. Audiences are no longer passive recipients of information; they actively interpret, respond to, and reshape media content. Unfortunately, these spaces can become breeding grounds for gendered criticism, harassment, and misinformation. Research has shown that women in leadership positions are more likely to experience negative and personal attacks online compared to men, which can affect both public perception and their willingness to engage in digital spaces (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2020; Banet-Weiser, 2021).

Moreover, algorithms used by digital platforms play a subtle yet significant role in amplifying certain types of content. Posts that generate strong emotional reactions whether positive or negative are more likely to be promoted and widely shared. This means that controversial or stereotypical portrayals of women leaders may receive greater visibility, further entrenching biased perceptions. As a result, the digital media environment can sometimes reinforce the very inequalities it has the potential to challenge. The interaction between traditional and digital media also adds another layer of complexity. Stories originating from television or print media are often shared and debated on social media, where they can be reinterpreted, criticized, or exaggerated. This cross-platform circulation ensures that media influence is not isolated but interconnected, with each platform reinforcing and amplifying the

messages of others. Consequently, gendered narratives about leadership can spread rapidly and become deeply embedded in public consciousness.

Despite these challenges, there is growing awareness of the need for more balanced and inclusive media representation. Advocacy efforts, media literacy campaigns, and increased representation of women in journalism and media production are gradually contributing to change. Audiences are also becoming more critical of biased portrayals, demanding accountability and fairness in how leaders are represented.

In conclusion, media influence across platforms is multi-dimensional, dynamic, and highly impactful. Both traditional and digital media play significant roles in shaping perceptions of leadership, often reinforcing gender stereotypes in subtle and overt ways. While digital media offer new opportunities for representation and engagement, they also introduce new challenges that can amplify bias. Understanding this complex interplay is essential for addressing gender inequality in leadership and promoting a more inclusive and accurate representation of what leadership truly entails.

Analyzation of the relationship between media-driven gender stereotypes and the legitimacy attributed to male and female leaders.

The relationship between media-driven gender stereotypes and leadership legitimacy has become a major concern in contemporary scholarship across communication studies, gender studies, political science, and organizational leadership. Leadership legitimacy refers to the degree to which a leader is perceived as credible, competent, trustworthy, and deserving of authority. These perceptions are rarely formed in isolation; rather, they are shaped through cultural narratives, institutional norms, and media representation.

Mass media and digital communication platforms play a central role in constructing public understandings of who appears "leader-like." Historically, leadership has been associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness, decisiveness, dominance, rationality, and strength, while femininity has often been linked to warmth, empathy, emotionality, and nurturance. When

media repeatedly reproduces these binaries, male leaders tend to receive automatic legitimacy, while female leaders may face heightened scrutiny and conditional acceptance (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This literature review examines how media-generated stereotypes influence the perceived legitimacy of male and female leaders, with emphasis on symbolic representation, framing, political communication, organizational leadership, and emerging digital media trends.

Concept of Leadership Legitimacy

Leadership legitimacy refers to the social recognition that an individual has the right, competence, and authority to lead. It is rooted in public trust, institutional acceptance, and normative expectations. According to Max Weber, legitimacy is the belief in the validity of authority structures. In modern contexts, legitimacy often depends on performance, credibility, expertise, and symbolic fit. Media systems influence legitimacy because they shape the images, narratives, and repeated cues through which leaders are judged. Audiences frequently rely on mediated impressions rather than direct interaction. Therefore, leadership legitimacy is increasingly communicative as much as institutional. For male leaders, legitimacy is often presumed because leadership prototypes historically align with masculinity. Female leaders, by contrast, may need to continuously prove competence before receiving equivalent recognition.

Gender Stereotypes and Leadership Prototypes

One of the most influential explanations is Role Congruity Theory, developed by Alice Eagly and Steven Karau. The theory argues that prejudice emerges when there is perceived incongruity between stereotypes about women and stereotypes about leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Leadership is commonly associated with agentic qualities:

- assertiveness
- control
- confidence
- decisiveness
- authority

Women are stereotyped as communal:

- caring
- cooperative
- emotional
- supportive
- relational

Because these traits are seen as mismatched, women leaders may be judged as less legitimate before performance is even assessed. If they lead assertively, they may be criticized as harsh or unlikeable. If they lead collaboratively, they may be viewed as weak. This creates the well-known “double bind.”

Men generally benefit because masculine stereotypes overlap with dominant leadership ideals.

Media as a Producer of Leadership Legitimacy

Media does not merely report leadership, it constructs it. Through headlines, visuals, tone, source selection, repetition, and framing, media organizations help determine which leaders appear competent and authoritative. Agenda-setting scholarship by Maxwell McCombs suggests that what media emphasizes becomes publicly salient. Framing theory by Robert Entman explains that how issues are presented influences interpretation.

Thus:

- A male leader framed as “strong” during crisis gains legitimacy.
- A female leader framed as “emotional” during the same crisis may lose legitimacy.
- A male politician’s family life may be secondary.
- A female politician’s family responsibilities may become central.

Repeated media framing normalizes unequal legitimacy standards.

Media Stereotypes Affecting Female Leaders

Research consistently finds that women leaders receive more appearance-based, personality-based, and family-centered coverage than men.

Women in politics are often described in terms of:

- clothing
- voice tone
- likability
- motherhood
- marital status
- emotional responses

Male leaders are more likely to be discussed through:

- policy agenda
- strategic skill
- experience
- economic competence
- decisiveness

Recent studies of political communication continue to show that women candidates face more personalization and tone-based scrutiny than men. This weakens perceived authority because attention shifts from leadership substance to identity performance. The concept of symbolic annihilation, associated with Gaye Tuchman, is also relevant. Women may be underrepresented, trivialized, or framed through narrow stereotypes. Even when visible, they may not be represented as natural leaders.

Automatic Legitimacy and Male Leadership Advantage

Male leaders often benefit from what scholars describe as “prototype congruence”. Because historical leadership imagery—from presidents to CEOs to military commanders—has been overwhelmingly male, masculinity becomes subconsciously associated with authority.

This gives male leaders several advantages:

1. Competence may be presumed before evidence is evaluated.
2. Assertiveness may be praised rather than punished.
3. Errors may be interpreted as situational rather than dispositional.
4. Leadership ambition is viewed as normal rather than aggressive.

Media reinforces this through dominant imagery of men as commanders, negotiators, strategists, founders, and experts. As a result, men often

receive baseline legitimacy while women must earn conditional legitimacy.

The Double Bind for Female Leaders

A recurring finding in leadership literature is the double bind. Women leaders are penalized both when they violate feminine expectations and when they conform to them.

If a woman leader is:

- assertive → she may be labeled abrasive
- ambitious → power-hungry
- decisive → cold
- emotional → unstable
- collaborative → weak
- warm → not authoritative enough

This contradictory standard is often intensified by media commentary and social media discourse. Male leaders generally do not experience the same tension because assertiveness and ambition align with masculine leadership expectations.

Organizational and Corporate Contexts

The stereotype-legitimacy relationship extends beyond politics into corporate leadership. Women executives are frequently judged more harshly during crises and are over-represented in precarious leadership appointments, sometimes called the “glass cliff” phenomenon. When organizations are struggling, women may be appointed to risky leadership positions. If recovery fails, this may reinforce stereotypes that women are ineffective leaders, despite inheriting unstable conditions. Media coverage of corporate women leaders may still focus on novelty (“first female CEO”) rather than strategic competence, which subtly marks them as exceptions rather than normal leaders.

Digital Media: Reinforcement and Resistance

Digital platforms create two opposing dynamics.

• Reinforcement

Social media can amplify stereotypes rapidly through memes, trolling, misogynistic commentary, and harassment. Women leaders often receive

more abuse related to gender, appearance, or family than male counterparts.

- **Resistance**

Digital platforms also allow women leaders to bypass traditional gatekeepers. Through LinkedIn, X, Instagram, podcasts, and direct messaging, women can present expertise, communicate achievements, and build communities. This can increase self-authored legitimacy and reduce reliance on biased mainstream frames.

- **Emerging Shifts in Leadership Legitimacy**

Recent scholarship suggests some improvement in perceptions of women leaders, especially after visible success in governance, crisis management, academia, and business. Transformational, participative, ethical, and emotionally intelligent leadership models are gaining recognition. These models value collaboration and empathy, traits historically feminized but now increasingly seen as strategic strengths. This shift may weaken the old equation of leadership = masculinity.

However, progress remains uneven across regions, cultures, and institutions.

- **Implications for Gender Equity**

The relationship between media stereotypes and legitimacy has practical consequences:

- fewer women selected for top leadership roles
- reduced voter confidence in women candidates
- harsher evaluations of female executives
- lower aspirations among young women
- persistence of male-dominated power structures

Therefore, legitimacy is not just about ability; it is socially mediated.

The literature demonstrates a strong relationship between media-driven gender stereotypes and the legitimacy attributed to male and female leaders. Media narratives often align masculinity with authority and femininity with supportiveness, granting men presumptive legitimacy while requiring women to constantly prove competence. Female leaders frequently face double standards, personalization, and stereotype-based scrutiny

that weaken public perceptions of authority. At the same time, changing leadership models and digital self-representation are challenging traditional assumptions. For genuine equity in leadership legitimacy, media institutions, organizations, and digital platforms must normalize competence-based portrayals rather than gender-coded expectations.

Assessment of how media representation contributes to perception gaps between actual leadership performance and perceived legitimacy.

In contemporary political, corporate, and institutional environments, leadership evaluation is no longer based solely on measurable performance outcomes such as policy delivery, organizational growth, crisis management, innovation, or staff morale. Increasingly, perceptions of leadership legitimacy are shaped through media narratives that interpret, amplify, personalize, or distort leaders' actions. As a result, a significant gap can emerge between actual leadership performance and perceived legitimacy.

Actual leadership performance refers to observable effectiveness goal attainment, decision quality, ethical conduct, innovation, service outcomes, and organizational stability. Perceived legitimacy, by contrast, refers to whether audiences believe a leader is credible, competent, trustworthy, and deserving of authority (Weber, 1947). Media representation often mediates the transition from performance to public perception.

This literature review assesses how traditional and digital media contribute to these perception gaps through agenda-setting, framing, personalization, stereotype reinforcement, selective visibility, emotional narratives, and algorithmic amplification.

Conceptualizing Performance Legitimacy Gaps

A performance–legitimacy gap exists when leaders who perform effectively are not recognized as legitimate, or when leaders with weak performance continue to enjoy strong public legitimacy.

Examples include:

- high-performing leaders framed as weak or unlikeable
- underperforming leaders framed as strong or charismatic
- competent women leaders doubted despite results

- symbolic leaders praised despite poor governance outcomes

This gap matters because legitimacy influences:

- voter behaviour
- board confidence
- staff morale
- investor trust
- institutional authority
- succession opportunities

Therefore, legitimacy is socially consequential even when disconnected from objective performance.

Agenda-Setting and Visibility Bias

According to Maxwell McCombs, media shapes what the public considers important by deciding which issues and actors receive sustained attention (McCombs, 2004).

This creates gaps in several ways:

a. Selective Attention to Symbolic Traits

Media may emphasize charisma, speaking style, body language, or controversy more than measurable outcomes.

b. Unequal Coverage of Achievements

Some leaders' accomplishments receive wide coverage, while others' comparable achievements are ignored.

c. Crisis Amplification

A minor error may dominate headlines and overshadow years of effective leadership.

Thus, legitimacy can be shaped more by media salience than by substantive performance.

d. Framing Effects and Narrative Construction

Robert Entman defines framing as selecting aspects of reality and making them more salient in communication (Entman, 1993). Leaders are not simply reported; they are narratively interpreted.

The same leadership action can be framed differently:

Leadership Action	Positive Frame	Negative Frame
Rapid decision-making	Decisive	Authoritarian
Consultation process	Inclusive	Indecisive
Strong criticism	Principled	Aggressive
Emotional empathy	Human-centered	Weak

This framing determines whether audiences interpret performance as competence or failure. Hence, perception gaps often arise from narrative interpretation rather than actual outcomes.

Gendered Media Representation and Legitimacy Distortion

Research shows women leaders often face greater performance–legitimacy gaps because media applies different standards. According to Alice Eagly and Steven Karau, Role Congruity Theory explains that leadership is stereotypically associated with masculine traits, creating bias against women leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

As a result:

- successful women may still be seen as unlikeable
- collaborative women may be seen as weak
- assertive women may be seen as hostile
- male leaders may receive legitimacy even with average performance

Media often emphasizes women leaders' clothing, tone, family status, age, or emotional expression more than equivalent scrutiny of men. This creates a structural perception gap where performance is discounted through gendered framing.

Personalization and Celebrity Politics

Modern media frequently personalizes leadership, focusing on personality rather than governance outcomes.

This includes attention to:

- charisma
- speaking style
- scandals
- family life
- image management
- social media persona

Such personalization benefits leaders skilled in performance communication rather than institutional leadership.

Consequently:

- charismatic but ineffective leaders may appear legitimate
- quiet but effective leaders may appear uninspiring
- policy success may be overshadowed by image deficits

This phenomenon is common in electoral politics and executive leadership.

Emotional Narratives vs Evidence-Based Evaluation

Media often privileges emotionally compelling stories over technical performance indicators.

Examples:

- a single public mistake repeated virally
- dramatic conflict stories dominating news cycles
- symbolic gestures praised more than structural reforms

Meanwhile, less dramatic achievements such as administrative efficiency, budget discipline, staff development, research productivity, or incremental reforms may receive little attention. This leads audiences to judge leadership through emotionally memorable moments rather than sustained performance records.

Digital Media and Algorithmic Amplification

Digital platforms intensify perception gaps because algorithms reward engagement rather than accuracy.

Platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok often amplify:

- outrage
- conflict
- ridicule
- sensational clips
- identity attacks
- misinformation

Therefore:

- one awkward clip may damage legitimacy more than years of competence
- misinformation may outperform corrections
- polarizing leaders may gain visibility despite weak governance

Digital communication can create legitimacy through virality rather than effectiveness.

Symbolic Leadership vs Substantive Leadership

Media systems sometimes reward symbolic leadership strong rhetoric, dramatic gestures, identity symbolism, or media dominance over substantive leadership such as planning, coalition-building, and delivery.

This distinction creates two types of leaders:

• Symbolically Legitimate Leaders

Appear strong, dominant, confident, and visible.

• Substantively Effective Leaders

Deliver measurable outcomes, stability, and reform.

Where media privileges symbolism, public legitimacy may detach from real performance.

Organizational and Corporate Contexts

The same pattern exists in corporations and universities.

Executives may be judged by:

- keynote presence
- media interviews
- branding style
- investor narratives
- public charisma

While less visible but highly competent leaders may be undervalued. Women and minority

executives often face steeper legitimacy hurdles despite strong metrics. Boards and stakeholders may unconsciously rely on media-generated reputations rather than operational evidence.

Consequences of Perception Gaps

When legitimacy diverges from performance, several problems emerge:

1. Effective leaders may be removed prematurely.
2. Poor performers may remain in power.
3. Public trust becomes image-driven.
4. Meritocratic systems weaken.
5. Underrepresented groups face higher barriers.
6. Democratic and institutional accountability declines.

Thus, perception gaps are not merely symbolic they shape real power outcomes.

Corrective Measures

Scholars recommend narrowing performance–legitimacy gaps through:

Media Reform

- evidence-based reporting
- balanced framing
- reduced stereotype coverage
- contextualized performance metrics

Institutional Practices

- transparent KPIs for leaders
- evaluation beyond personality traits
- bias-awareness training for boards and voters

Digital Platform Responsibility

- reduced misinformation amplification
- context labels
- stronger anti-harassment systems

Public Literacy

- media literacy education
- critical evaluation of leadership claims

The literature demonstrates that media representation significantly contributes to gaps between actual leadership performance and perceived legitimacy. Through agenda-setting, framing, personalization, gender stereotyping, emotional storytelling, and algorithmic amplification, media often shapes leadership

reputations independently of measurable outcomes.

As a result, competent leaders may be undervalued while symbolic performers gain authority. Women and marginalized leaders are especially vulnerable to these distortions because stereotype-based framing can discount real achievements. A more equitable leadership environment requires shifting legitimacy judgments from image-centered narratives toward evidence-centered evaluation.

Theoretical Framework

This research work is anchored on Agenda-Setting Theory and Feminist Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory, originally developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) and further expanded in contemporary scholarship (McCombs, 2020), remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding how media shape public perception. At its core, the theory posits that the media do not simply tell people what to think, but rather what to think about. By selecting certain issues, individuals, and attributes for repeated coverage, the media influence the salience of these elements in the minds of audiences. Over time, this process plays a significant role in shaping how people evaluate public figures, including leaders.

The theory is commonly divided into two levels. The first level of agenda-setting focuses on issue salience what topics the media prioritize and present as important. In leadership contexts, this might involve the extent to which media highlight political performance, economic policies, or governance issues. The second level of agenda-setting, often referred to as attribute agenda-setting, goes a step further by emphasizing how specific characteristics or traits of individuals are portrayed (Van Zoonen, 2021; Bos & Van Zoonen, 2021). This second level is particularly relevant to discussions of gender and leadership because it shapes the criteria by which leaders are judged.

In practice, media coverage often assigns different attributes to male and female leaders. Men are more likely to be associated with competence-based traits such as strength, decisiveness, and strategic thinking, while women are frequently

linked to emotionality, compassion, or interpersonal skills. While these traits are not inherently negative, the imbalance in representation creates a hierarchy in which masculine traits are perceived as more aligned with effective leadership. As a result, audiences are subtly guided to evaluate leaders using gendered criteria that may disadvantage women.

Recent studies have shown that second-level agenda-setting plays a particularly powerful role in shaping perceptions of female leaders. When media repeatedly emphasize gendered attributes, these characteristics become cognitively accessible to audiences, influencing how they interpret and evaluate leadership performance (Bos & Van Zoonen, 2021; Van Zoonen, 2021). For example, if media coverage consistently highlights a female leader's emotional responses or family roles, audiences may begin to view these attributes as central to her identity, overshadowing her professional competence. This process, often referred to as "priming," creates long-lasting perception patterns that can affect judgments of credibility and legitimacy.

Agenda-Setting Theory is highly relevant to the study of gender stereotypes and leadership legitimacy because it provides a clear explanation of how media narratives influence public evaluation. Leadership legitimacy is not determined solely by objective performance; it is also shaped by perception. Media play a central role in constructing these perceptions by determining which attributes are emphasized and how they are framed. In the context of gender, the theory helps explain why women leaders often face additional scrutiny and skepticism. Even when women demonstrate competence and effectiveness, media emphasis on gendered traits can shift attention away from their achievements. This creates a situation where women must not only perform well but also overcome biased evaluation criteria that are reinforced through media coverage.

Recent research supports this argument. Studies indicate that audiences exposed to gendered media framing are more likely to evaluate female leaders based on personality traits rather than professional competence, whereas male leaders

are judged primarily on performance-related factors (Eagly & Heilman, 2021; Harmer & Wring, 2022). This imbalance contributes to the persistent perception that leadership is a masculine domain, thereby affecting the legitimacy of women in positions of power. Furthermore, the relevance of Agenda-Setting Theory extends beyond traditional media to digital platforms. In the age of social media, agenda-setting processes occur not only through institutional media but also through user-generated content, trending topics, and algorithmic amplification. This expands the reach and impact of agenda-setting, making it even more influential in shaping public perception.

One of the key strengths of Agenda-Setting Theory is its strong empirical foundation. Decades of research have consistently demonstrated the correlation between media emphasis and public perception, making it a reliable framework for analyzing media effects. Its ability to explain both issue salience and attribute salience provides a comprehensive understanding of how media influence operates at multiple levels. Another strength is its applicability across different media platforms. The theory has evolved to remain relevant in the digital age, where agenda-setting processes are more complex and interactive. It can be applied to traditional news coverage, social media trends, and even algorithm-driven content, making it a versatile tool for contemporary media analysis.

Additionally, the concept of second-level agenda-setting is particularly valuable for studying gender stereotypes. By focusing on attributes rather than just issues, the theory allows researchers to examine how subtle forms of bias are embedded in media narratives. This makes it especially useful for understanding the nuanced ways in which gendered perceptions of leadership are constructed and maintained. The theory also highlights the indirect nature of media influence, showing that media effects are not always explicit but can operate through repeated exposure and cognitive processes. This is important for understanding how stereotypes persist even in societies that promote gender equality.

Despite its strengths, Agenda-Setting Theory has several limitations. One major weakness is its

limited attention to audience agency. The theory tends to assume that audiences passively absorb media messages, overlooking the fact that individuals actively interpret and sometimes resist media content. In reality, factors such as personal beliefs, cultural background, and prior experiences can influence how media messages are received.

Another limitation is its focus on media influence at the expense of other social factors. While media play a significant role in shaping perception, they are not the only influence. Cultural norms, institutional structures, and interpersonal interactions also contribute to the formation of gender stereotypes and leadership legitimacy. By focusing primarily on media, the theory may oversimplify the complexity of these processes. In the context of digital media, Agenda-Setting Theory also faces challenges in accounting for the decentralized nature of content production. Unlike traditional media, where a limited number of organizations control the agenda, digital platforms allow multiple actors to shape narratives simultaneously. This makes it more difficult to identify a single "agenda" and complicates the analysis of media influence. Furthermore, while second-level agenda-setting explains how attributes are emphasized, it does not fully address the emotional and symbolic dimensions of media representation. For example, it may not adequately capture how visual imagery, tone, and framing interact to produce meaning. This limits its ability to fully explain the depth of gendered media portrayals.

Finally, the theory may not sufficiently account for rapid changes in media environments, particularly the role of algorithms and viral content in shaping visibility. These factors introduce new dynamics that extend beyond traditional agenda-setting processes. Agenda-Setting Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how media shape perceptions of leadership and reinforce gender stereotypes. Its distinction between issue salience and attribute salience offers important insights into how leaders are evaluated, particularly in terms of gendered traits. The theory is highly relevant to the study of leadership legitimacy, as it explains how media narratives influence the criteria by which leaders are judged.

However, while the theory has strong explanatory power, it also has limitations, particularly in accounting for audience agency, cultural influences, and the complexities of digital media. To fully understand gender and leadership in contemporary society, Agenda-Setting Theory should be used alongside other theoretical perspectives that address these gaps. Overall, the theory remains a critical tool for analyzing the relationship between media, gender stereotypes, and leadership legitimacy, especially in a world where media influence continues to evolve and expand.

Feminist Theory

Feminist Theory rooted in the works of early theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949), Betty Friedan (1963), and later developed in media studies by Liesbet Van Zoonen (1994), offers a critical framework for understanding how gender, power, and representation interact within society. At its core, the theory is based on the assumption that society is structured in ways that systematically privilege men while marginalizing women, particularly through cultural institutions such as the mass media. Feminist Theory argues that gender is socially constructed and that media play a central role in producing, reproducing, and sustaining gender inequalities.

The basic assumption of Feminist Theory is that media representations are not neutral; rather, they reflect and reinforce patriarchal power structures that shape how gender roles are understood and enacted in society. Through repeated patterns of representation, media contribute to the normalization of male dominance in leadership and public life while positioning women within limited or stereotypical roles. In this sense, media become active participants in the construction of gendered social reality. In the context of leadership, Feminist Theory explains why women are often evaluated differently from men, even when occupying similar positions of authority. Media representations frequently emphasize aspects such as appearance, emotion, marital status, or family roles when portraying female leaders, while focusing on competence, authority, and strategic ability when covering male leaders. This creates a

structural imbalance in how leadership legitimacy is constructed and understood.

This pattern reflects what feminist scholars describe as patriarchal media framing, where leadership is implicitly defined through masculine norms. As a result, women in leadership positions are often subjected to a “double bind,” where assertive behavior is criticized as aggressive, while emotional or relational behavior is interpreted as weakness. This creates unequal standards of evaluation that affect perceptions of legitimacy. Recent feminist media scholarship highlights that these patterns are not accidental but are embedded within broader systems of cultural power and representation. Media institutions, through routine practices of storytelling and framing, often reproduce gender hierarchies that position men as natural leaders and women as exceptions to the rule (Van Zoonen, 1994; Gill, 2007). This contributes to the persistence of gender stereotypes in leadership discourse.

Feminist Theory is highly relevant to this study because it provides a critical lens for understanding how media representation contributes to inequality in leadership legitimacy. It goes beyond description to question the power structures that produce and sustain gendered narratives in the media. It helps explain why, despite progress in gender equality, women continue to face barriers in achieving equal recognition as legitimate leaders. In addition, the theory highlights how media representation influences not just perception but also broader social expectations about leadership. By consistently portraying leadership in masculine terms, media reinforce the idea that leadership is naturally male, thereby discouraging alternative conceptions of authority and competence. This has direct implications for how audiences evaluate female leaders in real-world contexts.

Empirical studies in feminist media research show that gendered representations significantly affect public attitudes toward leadership. When media consistently portray women in subordinate or stereotypical roles, audiences are more likely to internalize these images and evaluate female leaders as less competent or less suitable for leadership roles (Gill, 2007; Van Zoonen, 1994).

This reinforces structural inequalities in political and organizational leadership. One of the key strengths of Feminist Theory is its ability to reveal underlying power relations in media representation. It provides a critical framework for analyzing how gender inequality is produced and maintained through cultural narratives, making it highly relevant for studies of leadership legitimacy and media influence.

Another strength is its emphasis on structural analysis. Unlike theories that focus primarily on media effects or audience interpretation, Feminist Theory examines the broader social, political, and cultural systems that shape media content and reinforce gender inequality. This makes it particularly valuable for understanding persistent patterns of bias. Additionally, Feminist Theory is flexible and has evolved to include intersectional perspectives, which consider how gender interacts with other identities such as class, ethnicity, and culture. This enhances its applicability to diverse contexts, including Nigeria, where leadership perception is influenced by multiple social factors.

Despite these strengths, Feminist Theory also has limitations. It is sometimes criticized for being overly ideological or normative, which may raise concerns about objectivity in academic analysis. In addition, it may generalize women's experiences without sufficiently accounting for differences across cultural or social contexts. Another limitation is that it focuses more on structural critique than on explaining micro-level audience interpretation processes. As a result, it may need to be complemented with other theories that address media effects and cognitive processes in perception formation. Overall, Feminist Theory provides a powerful critical lens for understanding how mass media contribute to gendered inequalities in leadership legitimacy. It highlights the role of media as both a reflection and reinforcement of patriarchal structures, making it essential for analyzing how gender stereotypes influence leadership perception in contemporary society.

Empirical Context in Nigeria

Empirical studies in Nigeria consistently reveal the persistence of gender bias in media representation, particularly in relation to leadership

and public participation. These studies provide concrete evidence that media narratives do not merely reflect societal attitudes but actively contribute to shaping and reinforcing them. Across different media formats political campaigns, advertisements, television programming, and community media gendered portrayals remain deeply embedded, influencing how audiences perceive women in leadership roles.

For instance, Luka and Ugondo (2025) found that during political campaigns, female candidates were more likely to be framed in terms of personality traits rather than policy positions. Instead of focusing on their competence, experience, or political agenda, media coverage often emphasized qualities such as temperament, likability, or emotional disposition. This contrasts sharply with the portrayal of male candidates, who are typically evaluated based on their strategic capabilities, policy ideas, and leadership strength. Such differential framing not only undermines the credibility of female candidates but also shapes voter perception, subtly suggesting that women are less suited for leadership roles.

Similarly, Omiunu (2023) demonstrated that print advertisements in Nigeria continue to reinforce traditional gender roles. Women are frequently depicted in domestic or supportive roles, while men are portrayed as decision-makers and authority figures. These representations may appear routine or harmless at first glance, but their repeated exposure normalizes a social hierarchy in which leadership is associated with masculinity. Over time, audiences internalize these images, making it more difficult to accept women as legitimate leaders in political, economic, or organizational contexts. Further supporting this pattern, Governor and Ebiere (2025) observed that television commercials often depict women in subordinate or dependent positions. Whether in family settings, workplaces, or social interactions, women are frequently shown as assistants, caregivers, or followers rather than leaders. This visual storytelling reinforces the notion that authority and leadership belong primarily to men. In a media environment where television remains a major source of information and entertainment, such portrayals have a significant impact on public consciousness.

At the community level, Njoku et al. (2024) found that exposure to local media content also shapes perceptions of leadership. Their study revealed that individuals who frequently consumed community-based media were more likely to perceive women as less authoritative and less capable of holding leadership positions. This highlights the pervasive nature of media influence, extending beyond national platforms to grassroots communication channels where cultural norms are often strongly reinforced. Importantly, these gendered portrayals are not limited to traditional media. Recent studies show that similar patterns exist across digital platforms, including social media, talk shows, and entertainment programming. Female leaders are often discussed in terms of their appearance, marital status, or personal demeanor, while male leaders are framed around competence, strategy, and decisiveness (Ross, 2020; Bosch, 2022). For example, online discussions may focus on how a female politician dresses or speaks, rather than the substance of her policies or leadership achievements. This creates a distorted evaluation framework in which women are judged by different and often more restrictive criteria than men.

The cumulative effect of these portrayals is significant. Media narratives, repeated across multiple platforms, shape societal norms and influence how leadership is understood and evaluated. When audiences are consistently exposed to images and stories that associate leadership with masculinity, they are more likely to question the legitimacy of women in positions of power. This not only affects public opinion but can also influence institutional decisions, such as hiring, promotions, and electoral outcomes.

In conclusion, empirical evidence from Nigeria clearly demonstrates that media play a central role in reinforcing gender stereotypes and shaping perceptions of leadership legitimacy. From political campaigns to advertisements and community media, the consistent framing of women in less authoritative roles contributes to a broader cultural narrative that limits their acceptance as leaders. Addressing this issue requires not only increased representation of women in media but also a fundamental shift in how leadership is portrayed

one that emphasizes competence, capability, and equality regardless of gender.

Methodology

The study employs qualitative secondary data analysis and literature synthesis. Instead of collecting new survey or experimental data, it examines existing research and media analyses to interpret patterns and theoretical insights. Secondary data analysis allows for the reinterpretation of previously collected data to answer new research questions or explore understudied phenomena (Johnston, 2017). Literature synthesis integrates findings across multiple sources to produce a coherent understanding of trends, relationships, and theoretical explanations. Sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, policy reports, and documented media studies focusing on gender representation, leadership, and media framing. Selection criteria emphasized relevance, scholarly rigor, and publication between 2000 and 2025, with a focus on both classical and contemporary perspectives.

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis of the reviewed literature reveals recurring patterns in how mass media representation shapes gendered perceptions of leadership legitimacy in Nigeria. Through systematic examination of scholarly articles, media studies, and theoretical works, four major themes emerged: gendered framing of leadership traits, media agenda-setting of leadership attributes, patriarchal reinforcement of leadership norms, and perception gaps in leadership legitimacy.

The first theme, gendered framing of leadership traits, shows that media narratives consistently assign different characteristics to male and female leaders. Male leaders are predominantly framed as competent, decisive, authoritative, and strategic, while female leaders are often portrayed through emotional, relational, and personality-centered lenses. This framing pattern suggests that leadership competence is implicitly associated with masculinity, while femininity is linked to softness or emotional sensitivity. Such representations influence how audiences interpret leadership capability beyond actual performance. The second

theme, agenda-setting of leadership attributes, highlights how media institutions determine which aspects of leaders become salient in public discourse. Guided by Agenda-Setting Theory, the literature indicates that repeated emphasis on certain traits such as strength and decisiveness in men or empathy and appearance in women shapes the cognitive criteria used by audiences to evaluate leaders. Over time, these prioritized attributes become normative standards for leadership assessment, influencing public judgment and opinion formation.

The third theme, patriarchal reinforcement of leadership norms, reflects insights from Feminist Theory. The literature consistently shows that media representations often reinforce existing power structures that privilege masculine leadership norms. By repeatedly constructing leadership as a masculine domain, media discourse sustains gender inequality and limits the social acceptance of women in authoritative positions. This reinforces structural bias within both media systems and societal expectations. The fourth theme, perception gaps in leadership legitimacy, demonstrates that there is often a disconnect between actual leadership performance and public perception. Female leaders who demonstrate competence may still be evaluated through gendered stereotypes, leading to reduced perceived legitimacy. This gap is largely attributed to the combined influence of agenda-setting processes and feminist-identified power imbalances in media representation.

Overall, the thematic analysis reveals that media narratives play a central role in constructing gendered meanings of leadership, thereby shaping public perception and influencing legitimacy judgments in ways that often disadvantage women.

Findings from Literature Synthesis

A comprehensive review of existing literature reveals a persistent pattern in how leaders are represented in the media, particularly along gendered lines. Male leaders are consistently framed as competent, decisive, authoritative, and capable of handling high-stakes decision-making. Such portrayals emphasize strategic thinking, decisiveness, and control, creating a public

perception that aligns leadership with traditionally masculine traits (Ross, 2020; Bosch, 2022). Conversely, female leaders are often depicted through emotional, relational, or personal lenses, with media coverage highlighting personality traits, appearance, family roles, or interpersonal skills rather than professional competence (Hughes & Krook, 2022; Van Zoonen, 2021).

This differential framing has far-reaching implications. It reinforces societal expectations regarding gender roles and creates perception gaps in leadership evaluation. Women leaders are subjected to a “double bind,” whereby demonstrating traditionally masculine traits, such as assertiveness or decisiveness, may result in negative evaluations for being perceived as too aggressive, while displaying stereo-typically feminine qualities like empathy or relational warmth may lead to being viewed as weak or less authoritative (Eagly & Heilman, 2021). The cumulative effect of these portrayals is a systematic questioning of women’s leadership legitimacy, influencing both public perception and organizational decision-making.

In the Nigerian context, these patterns are especially pronounced. Empirical studies have shown that political campaigns, advertisements, and television coverage frequently highlight gendered differences in leadership. Luka and Ugondo (2025) observed that female political candidates were often framed around personality rather than policy competence, while Omiunu (2023) noted that print advertisements reinforce traditional gender roles, depicting women in subordinate positions. Governor and Ebiere (2025) further demonstrated that television commercials routinely present women in supportive or domestic roles, while Njoku et al. (2024) found that exposure to community-level media strengthened

perceptions of women as less authoritative. Collectively, these studies indicate that media representation is not merely reflective of societal norms but actively constructs and perpetuates them.

Moreover, media influence is multi-platform. Beyond traditional channels, social media, talk

shows, and entertainment programming also contribute to the reinforcement of gendered leadership perceptions. On digital platforms, female leaders are frequently judged on appearance, marital status, or personal demeanor, while male leaders are evaluated on competence, strategy, and performance outcomes (Ross, 2020; Bosch, 2022). This consistent pattern across platforms illustrates the pervasive nature of gender bias in leadership coverage, highlighting how media narratives shape both individual and collective perceptions of leadership legitimacy.

Discussion

The findings underscore the pivotal role of mass media in shaping public perceptions of leadership and the social construction of legitimacy. Agenda-Setting Theory provides a useful lens for understanding these dynamics. By emphasizing specific issues or traits, the media guide audience evaluation criteria, subtly influencing what is considered important in leadership (McCombs, 2020; Van Zoonen, 2021). First-level agenda-setting highlights the prominence of certain topics, while second-level agenda-setting emphasizes particular attributes of individuals, such as decisiveness for men or emotionality for women. These processes collectively shape public understanding of who is deemed a legitimate leader and which qualities are valued in leadership roles.

Complementing this perspective, Role Congruity Theory explains why women encounter systematic bias in leadership evaluation. The theory posits that individuals whose behaviors violate culturally expected gender norms are more likely to face prejudice and negative evaluation (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2012). In the context of Nigeria, where traditional gender expectations remain influential, women leaders experience this bias acutely. For instance, women demonstrating assertiveness or decisiveness may be perceived as deviating from expected feminine behavior, while exhibiting warmth or relational skills may be interpreted as a lack of leadership capability. The “double bind” effect thus persists, reinforced by repeated media coverage that frames leadership through gendered lenses.

These patterns have tangible implications for the under-representation of women in leadership positions. Media narratives that emphasize masculine traits as the standard for effective leadership contribute to societal perceptions that question women's competence and authority. This, in turn, affects opportunities for political office, organizational leadership, and public decision-making. Nigerian women leaders face not only structural and institutional barriers but also the cognitive and cultural influence of media framing, which shapes both voter perception and organizational evaluation processes.

Furthermore, the rise of digital and social media has intensified the influence of these narratives. While online platforms offer new opportunities for women to communicate directly with the public and challenge traditional media portrayals, they also introduce new risks, including rapid dissemination of biased content, cyber harassment, and viral reinforcement of stereotypes. As such, media influence is multi-dimensional: it reflects cultural norms, reinforces stereotypes, and simultaneously provides channels for resistance and empowerment.

In conclusion, the literature highlights the central role of media in constructing leadership legitimacy through gendered representation. Male leaders are consistently associated with competence and authority, while female leaders are evaluated through relational or personal attributes, creating perception gaps that challenge their legitimacy. Agenda-Setting and Role Congruity theories provide a robust framework for understanding these dynamics, revealing the intersection of media influence, societal norms, and gendered expectations. Addressing these biases requires both conscious media practices and broader societal efforts to recognize and value competence in leadership independent of gender.

Conclusion

Mass media in Nigeria play a significant role in shaping leadership legitimacy through gendered representations. Male leaders are often portrayed as decisive and authoritative, while female leaders are framed in terms of relational or emotional traits. As a result, public evaluation of leadership is socially constructed and mediated by media

narratives rather than based solely on performance. Empirical evidence shows that these portrayals influence perceptions of competence, policy focus, and credibility, often disadvantaging women in leadership roles. While digital media offer opportunities for women to challenge stereotypes, traditional and online coverage continues to reinforce gendered expectations. To promote fair and inclusive leadership evaluation, media narratives must shift toward competence-focused, gender-neutral portrayals, ensuring that legitimacy is based on ability and effectiveness rather than gendered stereotypes.

Recommendations:

This study recommends that:

1. Media should provide balanced coverage, emphasizing leaders' competence and achievements rather than gendered traits.
2. Organizations and the public should evaluate leaders based on performance and skills, not societal gender expectations.
3. Women leaders should use digital platforms to present authentic narratives that counter stereotypes.
4. Regulatory bodies must enforce guidelines to reduce biased or stereotypical media portrayals.
5. Ongoing research and awareness campaigns should track media influence and promote gender equality in leadership.

Contributions to Knowledge

This study contributes to existing knowledge in several ways:

1. This study shows that leadership legitimacy in Nigeria is largely shaped by media framing rather than performance.
2. It applies Agenda-Setting and Role Congruity theories to explain gendered leadership perceptions in the Nigerian context.
3. It reveals how media narratives create and reinforce bias against women in leadership evaluation.
4. It demonstrates how traditional and digital media jointly amplify gender stereotypes.

5. It links media representation to women's under-representation in leadership and offers insight for policy and reform.

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