

Climate Change Communication in the Global South: Media Framing, Public Trust, and Behavioural Response in Lagos, Nigeria

Ajibola, Moshood Olawale¹, Oyewo, Olusola Oyeyinka, PhD², Thanny, Noem Taiwo, PhD³

Public Relations and Advertising, Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800583>

Received: 24 August 2026; Accepted: 29 August 2026; Published: 12 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Climate change communication is central to public understanding, trust, and behavioural response, particularly in rapidly urbanising cities of the Global South. Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital and one of Africa's largest megacities, faces increasing climate-related risks, including flooding, extreme heat, and environmental degradation driven by waste. This study examines how climate change is framed in Nigerian media and how such framing influences public trust and behavioural responses among urban residents in Lagos. Anchored in framing and agenda-setting theories, treated as complementary rather than parallel frameworks in this study — with agenda-setting determining issue salience and framing shaping interpretive schemas — the study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining content analysis of selected Nigerian newspapers (2019–2022) with survey data from Lagos residents. Findings indicate that climate change coverage is dominated by disaster- and event-oriented frames, with limited emphasis on solutions, citizen agency, or local adaptation strategies. Although public awareness of climate change is relatively high, uneven trust in media and institutional sources contributes to a persistent gap between awareness and sustained behavioural change. The study argues that localised, solution-oriented, and participatory communication strategies are critical for strengthening trust and motivating climate-responsive behaviour in urban Nigeria. By foregrounding Lagos as a case study, the paper contributes to the de-Westernisation of climate communication scholarship and advances understanding of climate engagement in Global South megacities.

Keywords: Climate change communication; media framing; public trust; behavioural response; Lagos; Nigeria; Global South

INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, climate change has been identified as the most challenging environmental issue globally (IPCC, 2022). Its impacts cut across different cities, including cities in the Global South, especially those that are most vulnerable (Ngcamu, 2023). Factors such as socio-economic inequalities, rapid urbanisation, and inadequate infrastructure have been identified as major issues aggravating vulnerability in Africa, particularly in megacities like Lagos. Lagos, a low-lying coastal city, remains the most populous state in Nigeria with a population estimate of around 20 million (Chidi and Badejo, 2024). Also, Lagos remains the biggest economy in Nigeria, and more than half of its population lives and works around wetland areas, with the majority of the low-earner population occupying informal settlements such as marshy areas and slums (Abubakar et al., 2025). Lagos faces climate change challenges just like any other coastal city in the world (Ndimele et al., 2024). Environmental issues associated with climate change in Lagos include floods, extreme heat, rising sea levels and biodiversity loss (Abubakar et al., 2025).

Generally, the issue of climate change is well established, even among scientists. However, behavioural adaptation and public engagement among the people, especially in cosmopolitan cities like Lagos, remain irregular. Some communication scholars (Karacaoğlu and Akbaba, 2024; Getson et al., 2022; and Badullovich, Grant, and Colvin, 2020) have argued that the gap in this regard could be bridged through effective communication, particularly through the use of the media. Digital platforms (such as marketplaces, social media and content platforms) and mass media form the major sources of environmental information in Nigeria, and yet these media have not been fully explored to foster behavioural change and trust. In this study, the gap was

addressed through the investigation of climate change media framing and its consequences for behavioural responses and public trust in Lagos.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Framing and Climate Change Communication

Media framing was first introduced in 1974 by Erving Goffman and has since been explored across various fields, particularly in communication. Media framing explains how the media constructs social reality by selectively emphasising certain issues to shape public opinions and perceptions (Fadeji, Aluko, & Hamza, 2025). In reference to climate change communication, Moernaut (2018) discovered that dominant climate change framing includes cycles of nature, human rights, environmental justice, economic challenges and inscrutable ways of nature. In another study conducted by Lück et al. (2018), they highlighted four framing categories in climate change studies, which are global warming victims, political dispute, sustainable energy, and common sense. A closer look at the two categories of themes revealed that they are somewhat inseparable. Despite the dominance of framing such as human rights, environmental justice, economic challenges, global warming victims and political disputes, it should be understood that such framing patterns could induce fear and/or fatalism, and when sustained over a long period, they might not be capable of influencing response (De Graaf et al., 2024).

When comparing findings from other Global South contexts, a balanced perspective is realised. A study by Billett (2010) in India found that framing such as disaster and risk gained prominence in mainstream print media coverage of climate change, while issues such as adaptation and mitigation received less attention. The findings of a study conducted in Bangladesh revealed that newspaper coverage of climate change was dominated by international science sources, while neglecting community and local voices Partha and Nahar (2023). In a study carried out in Brazil, Loose and Carvalho (2023) found that mainstream media heavily relied on official state representatives, large-scale industrial agriculture, and macro-economists while neglecting local community members and indigenous activists. Looking at the different evidence, it reveals that the framing discrepancy identified in Nigeria is not peculiar; rather, it reflects the general structure of climate journalism in most places in the Global South context – a coexistence of ecological vulnerability and limited editorial capability. This observed framing pattern supports the need for the generalisability of this study beyond the Lagos context.

Climate Change Coverage in Nigeria

Different studies have been conducted in Nigeria on the coverage and framing of climate change issues in the Nigerian media. Most of the studies agree that the reportage and framing of climate change issues are not adequate and are event-driven (Onuegbu et al., 2025; Eze & Ukonu, 2025). Also, media coverage of climate change has been accused of favouring elite sources, such as international organisations, governments and scientists, while giving limited attention to local perspectives and community issues (Omu-Ngebo & Alegu, 2024). The consequence of this is that the climate narrative would be devoid of public identification.

Public Trust and Behavioural Response

Talking about information sources, trust is an important aspect that connects both awareness and action. In situations where trust in media and public institutions is weak, the possibility is high that the public might understand climate risks and yet get stuck at the awareness level, with zero consideration for behavioural change (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022). Looking at Nigeria, different factors such as misinformation, sensationalism and perception of political bias, particularly on social media, have a great influence on the low level of trust in climate change-related communication (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by framing theory and agenda-setting theory, which are treated as complementary rather than parallel. Framing theory explores and explains the impact of media narratives on audience interpretation of issues by giving prominence to certain areas of an event or happening (Kuan et al., 2021). Within the study's

context, framing theory is applied through the interpretation of dominant frame categories such as human interest, disaster, solutions and science. This was applied to the different newspaper content throughout the period. On the other hand, agenda-setting theory explains that the media shape and determine issues of public discussion by giving attention to certain issues (Almakaty, 2025). In this study, agenda-setting was used to understand the macro level, such as how global warming interacts with public interest. On the other hand, framing was used to understand the micro level, explaining the manner in which the news presents individual stories. To put it succinctly, while agenda-setting was used to understand *what* issues the public thinks about, framing was used to understand *how* the media stories are told. Relating it to the Lagos context, it should be understood that disaster-dominated framing, though capable of raising awareness, could weaken behavioural responses by mirroring climate change as an episodic and/or externally driven subject. This could therefore undermine the precondition for climate-related behavioural change.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed-method design that combined a cross-sectional survey of Lagos residents with quantitative content analysis of Nigerian newspaper coverage. The **content analysis** looked at climate-related reporting published from January 2019 to December 2022 in three national newspapers — The Guardian, Punch, and Vanguard. The dailies were purposively selected owing to their national reach, agenda-setting influence, editorial diversity, strong Lagos-based readership and availability of accessible online archives, ensuring both replicability and analytical depth. While using a keyword-driven retrieval strategy, 383 climate-related articles were selected, which represents a sample size that exceeds usual thresholds for quantitative content analysis. This also enables a robust inter-newspaper comparison across different climatic cycles.

For the unit of analysis, a single news article was considered. Articles were extensively classified for the prevalence of dominant framing patterns, solution-oriented narratives, source attribution, and thematic focus. Framing theory was used to guide the inductive development of coding categories. For inter-coder reliability, the research used two coders who randomly applied the coding scheme to a selected sub-sample totalling 15% of the articles ($n = 58$). Krippendorff's alpha ($\alpha = 0.81$) was used as the inter-coder reliability measure. This assisted in meeting the conventional acceptable content-analytic research threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.80$. Additionally, Cohen's Kappa was computed at $\kappa = 0.79$, showing a strong correlation between coders, with disagreements sorted using iterative codebook refinement and discussion. Meanwhile, a trial coding exercise was carried out to improve analytical dependability and strengthen the codebook.

To improve the media analysis, a survey was conducted among Lagos residents with the intention of accounting for audience awareness, risk perception, trust in information sources, and behavioural responses to climate change communication. The study focused on adults (18+) across Lagos State, using a multi-stage sampling strategy that guaranteed geographic spread through LGA stratification, household sampling, neighbourhood selection, and respondent selection within households. 420 respondents were surveyed, exceeding the minimum sample size required for large populations at a 95% confidence level, making it possible for meaningful subgroup analyses across socio-demographic and media consumption variables. To measure trust in media sources, behavioural intention and risk perception, multi-item scales were adopted. Cronbach's alpha for trust in media sources ($\alpha = 0.76$), behavioural intention ($\alpha = 0.78$) and risk perception ($\alpha = 0.81$) were reported for each scale to measure internal consistency. From the findings, the acceptable standard threshold of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ (Nunnally, 1978) was met by all the values. This showed an acceptable standard of internal reliability for the survey instrument.

Questionnaire administration, face-to-face, was used to gather data, making it possible to maximise response rates and reduce obstacles linked to literacy. Generally, through matching media content patterns and audience interpretations, the methodological design enhances internal and external validity and provides a thorough empirical analysis of Lagos's climate change communication dynamics.

Table 1: Dominant Climate Change Frames by Newspaper (2019–2022)

Frame Category	The Guardian	Punch	Vanguard	Total
Disaster/Flooding	54	58	33	145

Scientific/Expert	49	26	17	92
Government Policy	32	28	16	76
Human Interest	15	17	9	41
Solutions/Adaptation	8	12	9	29
Total	158	129	96	383

From the foregoing, it is clear that *The Guardian* demonstrates a strong preference for scientific and expert-driven framing, reflecting its editorial orientation toward policy and intellectual discourse. Almost one-third of its coverage on climate-related issues draws on expert voices, allowing it to position climate change as a general and global issue. Looking at *Punch*, there seems to be a great emphasis on disaster and flooding narratives, especially in periods with higher rainfall. This suggests a populist editorial style that prioritises immediacy and human impact. However, this pattern often lacks continuous solution-oriented follow-up. Examining the data gathered from *Vanguard*, the reports showed lower volume, though with a marginally higher proportion of solution-oriented content compared to the total output. However, these articles are usually sporadic and not rooted in long-term environmental reporting.

Disparity is noticed in the framing patterns of the three newspapers, and this implies that audience orientation and editorial ideology significantly affect climate discourse. Readers of different newspapers are therefore open to diverse perspectives on climate change, which could influence their perceptions of responsibility, urgency, and agency. These differences in the framing patterns will definitely muddle the development of a coherent public climate narrative in Lagos.

FINDINGS

Media Framing of Climate Change in Lagos-Based Nigerian Newspapers

Content analysis of climate-related issues published from 2019 to 2022 in *The Guardian*, *Punch*, and *Vanguard* shows an irregular distribution of climate change frames, with emphasis on disaster narrative.

Table 2: Dominant Climate Change Frames in Nigerian Newspapers (2019–2022)

Frame Category	Number of Articles	Percentage (%)
Disaster/Flooding	145	37.7
Scientific/Expert	92	24.0
Government Policy	76	19.8
Human Interest	41	10.7
Solutions/Adaptation	29	7.6
Total	383	100.0

Figure 1 (Bar Chart) illustrates the dominance of disaster- and flooding-related frames relative to other categories.

Expanded Analysis

The data shows that more than one-third of the coverage concentrates on disasters and floods. This seems to be consistent with recurrent flooding issues in Lagos, especially during the rainy seasons of 2019, 2020, and 2021 (Akinwumi et al., 2023). This suggests that the newspapers' reports covered the flood incidents as they happened, suggesting a reactive rather than sustained media engagement with climate change-related issues.

Furthermore, scientific/expert related framing is responsible for almost one-quarter of the entire coverage. Most of the articles referenced IPCC reports, international climate change summits and climate science, framing the climate change issues as global or technical affairs rather than an everyday worry. Government policy frames

accounted for almost 20% of the entire coverage, reporting policy announcements, official statements and international commitments. What was lacking in the reports was follow-up and critical interrogation.

Human-interest frames and solution-oriented frames recorded marginal coverage. Less than 8% of the articles concentrated on citizen-led initiatives, mitigation efforts and adaptation strategies. The inconsistency implies that while climate change was prominent in the media agenda, the issues were rarely framed to focus on solutions, agency, or everyday relevance for the residents of Lagos.

Public Awareness of Climate Change among Lagos Residents

Survey findings showed relatively high climate change consciousness among Lagos residents. Despite this, the depth of understanding among Lagos residents varies significantly.

Table 3: Levels of Climate Change Awareness

Awareness Level	Percentage (%)
High Awareness	62
Moderate Awareness	26
Low Awareness	12
Total	100

Figure 2 (Bar Chart) visually represents the distribution of awareness levels.

Expanded Analysis

Clearly, the majority of the respondents (62%) demonstrated a high level of climate change awareness, showing knowledge of its causes and impacts. Respondents in this category cited excessive rainfall, waste accumulation, flooding and heat stress as evidence of climate change. It is noteworthy that awareness is strongly tied to direct lived experience rather than to exposure to policy-oriented media narratives or scientific information.

Around one-fourth of respondents (26%) showed moderate awareness by recognising climate impacts, even though they lacked clarity about the underlying long-term implications and causes. The remaining (12%) reported limited awareness, mostly confusing climate change with seasonal weather variability and general environmental pollution. This pattern of thought suggests that climate awareness in Lagos is experiential and not necessarily instructional. Also, residents' media exposure shows understanding of climate impacts but lacks explanatory depth and actionable knowledge. This is in tandem with the findings of Akinola et al. (2020), who found that built environment professionals in Lagos State had a high level of climate change awareness.

Trust in Media and Institutional Sources of Climate Information

Trust in information sources emerges as a critical variable shaping public engagement with climate change messages.

Table 4: Trust in Climate Information Sources

Source	High Trust (%)	Moderate Trust (%)	Low Trust (%)
Television	48	34	18
Newspapers	52	29	19
Radio	44	36	20
Government Statements	27	31	42
Social Media	21	39	40

Figure 3 (Bar Chart) compares trust levels across information sources.

Expanded Analysis

From the foregoing, the conventional media platforms — television, radio and newspapers — have relatively higher trust compared to government sources and social media. For newspapers, more than half of respondents report high trust, attributed mainly to credible professional journalistic standards and editorial oversight.

In comparison, the highest levels of distrust were toward social media platforms. This was exhibited by 40% of the respondents who expressed low trust. Respondents cited sensationalism, conflicting narratives and misinformation as reasons. Another issue that received low trust was statements from the government. This reflected institutional distrust caused by years of weak implementation and policy inconsistency. The data suggest that trust is an important gatekeeping mechanism, suggesting that lack of trust could undermine the influence of climate change information on the people.

A hierarchical regression analysis was carried out to test the impact of trust on the relationship between exposure to media content and behavioural response. Exposure to media content was displayed as the only predictor of behavioural response ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.09$) in Model 1. Trust (in media sources) as another variable, along with the interaction term (Media Exposure $\times$ Trust) in Model 2. The interaction term appeared to be statistically significant ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = 0.012$). The overall model also justified a considerably higher proportion of variance ($R^2 = 0.17$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.08$, F change = 8.43, $p < 0.01$). This establishes that trust plays a significant role in the media exposure-behaviour relationship: residents with a high level of trust in the sources of climate change information demonstrate a high level of behavioural change compared to others. This finding establishes the importance of trust not only as an associate of behavioural responses but as an amplifier of effective communication.

Behavioural Responses to Climate Change in Lagos

Despite relatively high awareness, behavioural engagement with climate change remains limited and uneven.

Table 5: Self-Reported Climate-Related Behaviours

Behaviour	Percentage Practicing (%)
Waste Reduction	38
Energy Conservation	31
Flood Preparedness	22
Community Climate Action	17

Figure 4 (Bar Chart) illustrates disparities in reported behavioural responses.

Expanded Analysis

The most common climate change-related behaviours reported include reduced dumping and informal recycling (38%). Energy conservation practices (31%), such as reduced electricity consumption, followed. This could indicate limited access to alternative energy sources and infrastructural constraints. Another climate change behavioural report was flood preparedness (22%), which includes clearing of drainage channels and elevation of household structures. This was reported by less than one-quarter of the respondents. The least reported was collective actions (17%), which include climate advocacy and participation in community clean-ups.

These findings suggest that there is an obvious awareness-action gap. Collective and/or sustained actions were taken less often compared to individual coping strategies. This could be interpreted to mean that the respondents considered climate change more as a personal issue rather than a shared challenge.

Summary of Empirical Patterns

From the findings, the consistent patterns are:

1. Media visibility does not necessarily guarantee mobilisation
2. Trust is a significant moderating factor in the media exposure–behavioural response relationship
3. Structural and communicative constraints intersect to produce the awareness-action gap

In a nutshell, it could be said that climate change communication in Lagos is characterised by high media salience, uneven trust, and limited behavioural uptake.

DISCUSSION

From the findings, it could be deduced that there is a visibility–mobilisation inconsistency in the climate change communication landscape in Lagos State. Although media reportage of climate change issues such as flooding has boosted public awareness, the dominant framing of climate change as a disaster positions it as an externally driven or episodic matter. This harms public perception, thereby reinforcing behavioural inertia.

It is important to state that the inadequate solution-oriented and human-interest framing of climate change issues weakens public engagement and trust. This corroborates the findings of Thier and Lin (2022). The implication is that residents can identify climate risks but lack clear and actionable guidance commensurate with their socio-economic realities. There is an obvious lack of trust, particularly in communication from the government, which weakens the relationship between awareness and action. This finding is consistent with Ojebuyi and Salawu (2019) but contradicts Cologna and Siegrist (2020), who found moderate institutional trust in climate change communication contexts.

From the findings, framing and agenda-setting theories are extended by demonstrating that salient issues alone are not sufficient to achieve climate mobilisation in Global South megacities. Trust has been identified as an important moderating variable in the media exposure–behaviour relationship. The findings from the regression presented show scientific evidence for this moderation effect, taking the fact away from the descriptive correlation that demonstrates the communicative effectiveness of exposure to media and is structurally conditioned by the extent and/or limit of trust the audience has in the source of climate information.

It is also important to note an intersection of structural barriers from the findings on the awareness-action gap that requires urgent attention, which is the fact that even among respondents whose awareness level of climate change was high and who demonstrated high trust in media sources, behavioural change was a constraint. What this suggests is that communication alone, irrespective of the framing pattern and the level of trust, is not enough to facilitate an awareness-action pattern in a context like Lagos. The intent and capacity to invest in flood preparedness measures that include drainage improvement and structural elevation among households is limited by economic factors. Therefore, limited infrastructure such as blocked drainage channels, absence of green spaces (capable of absorbing runoff) and early warning systems in urban cities makes climate-responsive behaviour somewhat challenging to practice, irrespective of the intent or effectiveness of the communication. Talking about informal settlements like Makoko in Lagos that house many of the climate-vulnerable Lagos residents, the facilities that could facilitate sustained behavioural change are usually not available. It is important that the challenging factors that condition the residents of such areas to prepare less for climate adaptation, such as instability in income and housing and food insecurity, be immediately attended to. It is necessary at this juncture to understand that effective communication in megacities like Lagos must not be seen as a replacement for structural intervention, but rather as a complement with the intention to record maximum achievement.

Therefore, it could be said that for climate communication to be effective in a megacity like Lagos, it has to be rooted in localised integrated experience, participatory engagement and practical solutions.

Recommendations for Climate Communication Practice in Lagos

Based on the findings from the study, the following recommendations are made to climate communication practitioners in Lagos and Global South megacities at large.

First, practitioners need to accord high importance to community radio, community leaders, religious leaders and organisations, routing climate change information through them. From the survey data, an indication exists

that the residents of Lagos have higher trust in climate information from television and newspapers compared to information from government statements or social media. However, in areas such as informal settlements or with low-income residents where access to broadcast media is uneven, community radios, most especially those broadcasting in local languages such as Yoruba or Pidgin English, have very high potential to reach and appeal to the residents. It is important to partner with religious leaders who command respect and have earned trust in their communities.

Second, there must be a paradigm shift in climate communication from risk and disaster framing to agency and solution framing. Findings have revealed that disaster-oriented framing, though somewhat effective in raising awareness, is lacking or ineffective in behavioural change and capable of reinforcing fatalism. Therefore, climate communication practitioners need to adopt and adapt content with local adaptation successes, like indigenous flood management practices, informal recycling networks, and community initiatives on flood preparedness, to move residents of Lagos from being passive victims to becoming active agents.

Third, climate change communication practitioners in Lagos need to develop and deliver in the language of the people. Though communicating climate information may command authority but can also limit reach and reduce identification. That is why communicating in local languages such as Yoruba or Pidgin English could be of great advantage since they exercise broader reach and are easy to identify with in low-income and informal communities. A model example is the BBC Yoruba and Pidgin services.

Fourth, participatory community engagement mechanisms need to be institutionalised and not treated as supplementary project activities. Structured conversations and community climate dialogues that allow residents to share their experiences and knowledge are effective in communicating complex issues and, if adopted in communicating climate issues in Lagos, could help significantly. This will directly address the issue of trust, as community members are not just recipients but knowledge holders.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has no doubt contributed to the body of knowledge in the area of climate change communication. It must be acknowledged that there are some limitations.

First, at a point in the study, a cross-sectional survey design was used to explain attitudes and self-reported behaviour. The implication of this is that causal inferences about the correlation among media exposure, trust and behavioural change are limited. A longitudinal design should be used in future studies to follow up on each respondent at multiple time points. This will pave the way for a rigorous assessment to understand how framing metamorphoses over time in media coverage into changes in behaviour and public trust.

Second, though the newspaper samples were sufficient for quantitative content analysis, it is restricted to the printed and/or online editions of the three newspapers. In a place like Lagos State, one cannot rule out the increasing influence of social media and digital-native news platforms in a megacity like Lagos. It is necessary that future studies employ digital content analysis methods.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the critical role of media framing and trust in climate change communication in Lagos. It was revealed that climate change awareness was relatively high; however, dominant disaster framing and institutional trust deficits have constrained behavioural engagement. It is important to note that the study went beyond descriptive findings, using regression analysis, to show that trust is significant in the correlation between media exposure and behavioural change and/or response. This finding will have serious implications for how climate communication is targeted and designed in megacities in Nigeria and the Global South at large.

Therefore, to achieve the desired result, participatory, solution-oriented and localised communication strategies are needed to empower urban residents to become active agents of climate response. It is important to note the importance of using trusted channels such as religious networks, community radio and multilingual platforms.

Also, structural interventions are needed to address infrastructural and economic issues that limit behavioural responses even among motivated residents.

By carrying out this study in Lagos, this research makes a distinctive contribution to climate communication scholarship. In this study, content analysis was combined with audience survey data in a single theoretical framework, making it different from previous studies in Nigeria that have focused solely on audience awareness and media content by combining important variables such as trust and behavioural change. The approach makes it possible for the methodological template to be adopted for similar studies in megacities in the Global South.

The implication of the study in terms of policy is crucial for action. The Ministry of the Environment in Lagos State and the Federal Ministry of Environment need to combine communication audits (such as trust levels, channel reach and framing patterns of available climate communication campaigns) with regular planning cycles. It is also important for multinational communication sponsors and NGOs to tap into the opportunity presented by community-based initiatives and multilingual use in climate communication in the Global South, considering the value of trust, localised channels and behavioural response. It is also necessary for various schools of journalism in Nigeria to adopt solution-oriented environmental reporting in their curricula.

There is a need for further studies on longitudinal changes in framing. It is also important to research the responsibilities of grassroots communication and community media in fostering climate resilience.

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