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Evaluative Tone and the Five Candidate-Image Dimensions in Comparative Election News: A Nigeria–United States Analysis

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Abstract

Candidate image is often reduced to a single favourable–unfavourable score, a simplification that discards theoretically important distinctions between how positively a candidate is described and which specific qualities—such as competence, integrity, or viability—are being evaluated. This study examines both levels in a balanced corpus of 240 online election-news articles from four Nigerian and four United States outlets covering the 2023 Nigerian and 2024 United States presidential campaigns. Evaluative tone (positive, negative, neutral, or mixed) and five candidate-image dimensions—leadership competence, moral integrity, electability, emotional appeal, and national unity—were coded independently by two coders (mean Cohen’s kappa = .991). National context was associated with evaluative tone, $\chi^2(3, N = 240) = 10.26, p = .017$, although no individual tone category reached the conventional residual threshold and the omnibus association weakened

when individual outlets were removed. Three of the five candidate-image dimensions differed significantly by country under a Bonferroni correction (adjusted alpha = .01 across the five related tests): leadership competence, moral integrity, and electability. Negative electability judgments were markedly more common in the Nigerian corpus (15 articles) than in the United States corpus (1 article), and this result remained significant in every leave-one-outlet-out sensitivity check. Emotional appeal and national unity showed no detected country association at this sample size. The findings support treating overall tone and dimension-specific evaluation as related but distinct constructs and demonstrate that some cross-national candidate-image differences are substantially more robust to sample composition than others.

Keywords: candidate image, evaluative tone, framing, agenda-setting, comparative content analysis, electability

1. INTRODUCTION

The news media can evaluate presidential candidates at two analytically distinct levels. First, coverage can communicate an overall orientation of support, criticism, neutrality, or ambivalence. Second, it can construct judgements about specific qualities such as competence, integrity, emotional appeal, or prospects for electoral success. These signals are related, but they are not interchangeable. A candidate may be portrayed in warm or sympathetic terms while simultaneously being described as unlikely to win, whereas another candidate may receive restrained, matter-of-fact coverage that nevertheless presents that candidate as competent or viable. Coding election news only through an aggregate favourable–unfavourable measure risks losing precisely the distinctions that candidate-image research has examined for decades [1]. Recent methodological research on political text analysis reaches a parallel conclusion regarding sentiment and stance: sentiment captures a text’s overall positive–negative orientation, whereas stance captures the evaluative position taken toward a particular target; treating the two as interchangeable can introduce substantial measurement error [2]. The candidate-image dimensions used in this study resemble target-specific stance because each asks how a named candidate is positioned on a particular quality, while evaluative tone resembles a broader sentiment judgement across the article. The distinction also parallels a central point in framing theory. Entman’s [3] account treats evaluation as one of several framing functions alongside problem definition, causal interpretation, and treatment recommendation, meaning that similarly positive or negative tones can occur within substantively different frames. A tone measure alone therefore cannot identify which candidate quality is being evaluated or how that evaluation is constructed.

The case for separating overall tone from dimensional evaluation is not merely theoretical; it also has empirical support in political psychology. Voters do not assess candidates on a single good–bad continuum. Research instead shows that partially distinct trait dimensions, particularly competence and warmth, can carry different electoral weight and respond to different contextual cues [4, 5]. This suggests that the constructs may correlate without moving in lockstep. Whether tone and the five candidate-image dimensions move together in comparative news coverage is therefore an empirical question rather than an assumption. The present study keeps the two levels separate and tests both within the same balanced corpus. Evaluative tone captures the broader signal of whether an article’s overall treatment of a candidate is positive, negative, neutral, or mixed. The five candidate-image dimensions—leadership competence, moral integrity, electability or viability, emotional appeal, and national unity or division—capture a more specific signal by identifying the quality being constructed and coding that quality independently of the article’s overall tone. This distinction also tracks agenda-setting theory’s separation between object salience, or how much attention an object receives, and attribute salience, or which characteristics of that object receive attention [6]. More recent methodological work shows that detected attribute-salience relationships can depend strongly on baseline definitions, analytic windows, and other design choices [7]. Tone and dimensional evaluation can consequently be understood as two different approaches to candidate attributes: one broad and evaluative, the other fine-grained and quality-specific. That measurement sensitivity is directly relevant to the present findings because, as Section 3 shows, the tone association is substantially more dependent on outlet composition than several dimension-level associations.

The empirical setting compares coverage of Nigeria’s 2023 presidential election with coverage of the United States’ 2024 presidential election. The cases were selected because they differ meaningfully: the Nigerian campaign involved a multiparty field centered on four major presidential candidates, whereas the United States campaign was dominated by two major-party candidates, and the two countries operate within media systems with different institutional histories and market structures [8]. This most-different comparison is a deliberate design choice rather than a convenience. Cross-national evidence from thirty countries indicates that media-system characteristics vary continuously rather than falling neatly into a small number of discrete types [9]. Any two-country comparison therefore samples two positions along several institutional dimensions rather than representing two perfectly bounded categories. Two hypotheses organize the analysis. H1 tests whether national context is associated with evaluative tone. H2 tests whether national context is associated with each of the five candidate-image dimensions separately. There is no theoretical requirement that all five dimensions vary in the same direction or with the same strength, and the results confirm that they do not.

Among the five dimensions, electability deserves particular attention because it occupies an unusual position in the literature. Political scientists have studied how voters form electability judgements extensively, but they have usually treated electability as a property of voter cognition rather than as a property constructed within news content. Electability perceptions are malleable and respond to new information about fundraising, ideological positioning, and prior officeholding experience [10]. They can also be influenced by considerations that do not directly measure a candidate’s objective probability of winning, including the salience of electability as a decision criterion [11] and interactions between candidate characteristics and implicit or explicit prejudice [12]. Most of this research asks how citizens judge electability. Comparatively less research asks how news coverage itself constructs electability, article by article, as a candidate-image dimension that can be identified and coded. The D3 measure in this study addresses that gap. It is highlighted here because, as reported in Section 3, negative electability is the paper’s most compositionally robust cross-national finding.

Candidate image, in the broader research programme to which this study belongs, is not produced by text alone. A substantial and rapidly growing literature demonstrates that principal images, campaign photography, visual framing, and candidates' own social-media output can carry evaluative meaning that reinforces, complicates, or conflicts with accompanying text [13–15]. The field is now sufficiently developed to support a dedicated research handbook [16] and book-length treatment of how citizens use images to communicate political opinions and emotions on social media [17]. Comparative visual-framing instruments applied across national media systems show that character framing through images can vary with political and media-system characteristics [18, 19], while studies of campaign social media show that personalization and emotionalization are deliberate visual communication strategies rather than incidental by-products of platform use [20–22]. A cross-domain example from *Trends in Clinical and Medical Sciences* likewise illustrates that digital social-media communication can depend centrally on image-based information: AlMalmi's mobile-tele dermatology case series used clinical photographs shared through WhatsApp as the core communicative material [51]. Although that study is clinical rather than political and is not evidence about elections, it reinforces the broader methodological point that digital communication can be intrinsically multimodal. The present paper deliberately brackets the visual layer so that evaluative tone and the five textual candidate-image dimensions can be examined in depth. Visual valence and text–image alignment were coded within the same underlying corpus and form part of the same doctoral research programme, but they have not been written up as a separate, freestanding publication at the time of this submission. The H1 and H2 results should therefore be read as one component of a larger multimodal project rather than as the final account of the corpus's full visual and textual character.

One further comparative qualification belongs in the introduction because it affects how the study's generalizability should be judged from the outset. The design is intended to detect outlet- and phase-level heterogeneity rather than assume a single national “house style.” Comparable heterogeneity has been documented outside Nigeria and the United States. During Malaysia's 2022 general election, negative campaigning and video-based political messaging intensified unevenly across platforms and political coalitions [23], while research on Malaysian civil-society mobilization has shown that textual and visual framing on social media can reinforce, qualify, or complicate one another [24]. Comparative political communication scholarship also emphasizes that the forces transforming media systems and producing cross-national variation remain dynamic and only partly understood [25]. These considerations support treating the present two-country analysis as a bounded comparative contribution rather than as a definitive statement about either national media system.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The corpus comprised 240 online news articles from eight purposively selected outlets: four Nigerian outlets (*The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *The Guardian Nigeria*, and *Premium Times*) and four United States outlets (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, Fox News Politics, and CNN Politics). Articles were published during the 2023 Nigerian and 2024 United States presidential campaigns. The corpus was balanced at 120 articles per country and stratified evenly across early, middle, and late campaign phases, yielding 30 articles per outlet. Outlets were selected on the basis of audience reach, professional production standards, and diversity of ownership and editorial orientation through a documented eligibility procedure rather than convenience sampling [26, 27]. The Nigerian selection was also situated within an expanding body of research on election-news coverage. Relevant studies include a content analysis of *Vanguard's* online coverage of the 2023 presidential election [28]; a comparison of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* coverage of political parties [29]; a multimodal framing analysis of the Obidient movement in Nigeria's 2023 election environment [30]; an analysis of newspaper framing of political-party primaries before the presidential election [31]; and an analysis of newspaper coverage of the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Tribunal judgement [32]. The four-outlet Nigerian sample used here contributes to that developing literature, while the United States sub-corpus was compiled under the same eligibility and sampling requirements to support a symmetrical country-level comparison.

Evaluative tone was coded as a four-category variable—positive, negative, neutral, or mixed—representing the article's overall evaluative treatment of the focal candidate regardless of topic or frame. Each of the five candidate-image dimensions was coded independently on a three-point scale (negative, neutral/absent, positive). Independence across dimensions was essential to the design: for example, an article could portray a candidate as competent while remaining silent on integrity, or it could evaluate competence positively and integrity negatively within the same article. Both coding instruments were fully operationalized through explicit decision rules and anchor examples and were pretested on a 16-article pilot sample before the main corpus was coded.

The finalized instrument was applied independently by two coders to the complete 240-article corpus. Across all nineteen coded variables in the larger research programme, including the five candidate-image dimensions reported here, the mean Cohen's kappa was .991; the individual kappas for the dimensions analyzed in this paper were all at or above .986. Such near-ceiling agreement warrants explicit consideration because very high reliability can sometimes indicate categories that are overly broad or easily inferred from surface cues. That explanation is unlikely here. Tone and each image dimension required a holistic, context-dependent evaluative judgement rather than a simple keyword or presence–absence

decision, and reliability was not uniformly near ceiling during instrument development. In the 16-article pilot, the earlier tone rules produced a materially lower kappa of .810. The tone decision rules were then revised in direct response to the observed disagreement patterns, after which main-corpus agreement increased to its final level. The near-ceiling reliability in the main corpus is therefore interpreted as the result of iterative instrument refinement rather than evidence that the coding task was trivial. Full pilot-to-main-corpus reliability diagnostics, including pilot-stage kappas for all nineteen variables and the decision-rule changes made after the pilot, are documented in a separate methods-focused manuscript from the same research programme and are not reproduced in full here.

Both hypotheses, their operational definitions, coding categories, and planned significance thresholds were specified before main-corpus coding in a test matrix developed during the pilot phase; neither the hypotheses nor the analytic approach was altered after the main-corpus results were observed. H1 was tested with an omnibus Pearson chi-square test on the four-category evaluative-tone variable, followed by inspection of standardized residuals to identify category-specific departures from expectation. H2 consisted of five separate Pearson chi-square tests, one for each candidate-image dimension. A Bonferroni-adjusted alpha of .01 (.05/5) was applied to control the family-wise Type I error rate across these five related tests [33]. Because the 240 articles were clustered within eight outlets rather than independently sampled from national populations, a leave-one-outlet-out sensitivity analysis was conducted for every significant result, with each test recalculated after excluding one outlet at a time [34, 35]. This outlet-deletion analysis was the only robustness procedure used. Bootstrap, permutation, or multilevel alternatives were not performed; future studies with larger outlet samples could usefully cross-validate the present pattern using an independent robustness strategy.

The inferential strategy was therefore designed to keep several distinct questions separate rather than treating a single p-value as a complete description of the evidence. The omnibus chi-square statistic addresses whether the full categorical distribution differs between the two national corpora. Standardized residuals address a narrower question by showing which cells contribute most strongly to an observed omnibus association, thereby preventing a significant overall test from being described as if every category differed equally or in the same direction. The outlet-deletion exercise addresses a different source of uncertainty again: whether the observed association remains visible when the composition of the sampled news organizations changes. Cramer's V was interpreted alongside the chi-square results so that statistical significance was not treated as a substitute for the magnitude of association. These procedures do not eliminate the dependence created by articles being nested within outlets, and they do not transform the purposively selected outlets into probability samples of the Nigerian or United States media systems. Their purpose is narrower and more transparent: to distinguish a result that reaches the specified significance threshold, a category that makes a comparatively large contribution to that result, and a finding that remains stable when individual outlets are removed. This distinction is particularly important for H2 because the Bonferroni adjustment addresses multiplicity across the five candidate-image tests, whereas the sensitivity analysis addresses a separate concern arising from outlet composition.

3. RESULTS

The omnibus test was significant: $\chi^2(3, N = 240) = 10.26, p = .017$, Cramer's $V = 0.21$, with no cells below the expected-count-5 threshold. Table 1 reports the standardised residuals by tone category.

Table 1. *Standardized Residuals for H1: National Context by Evaluative Tone*

Tone Category	Nigeria Residual	USA Residual	Interpretation
Positive	+1.03	-1.03	Not significant
Negative	-1.87	+1.87	Not significant (approaching)
Neutral	+0.74	-0.74	Not significant
Mixed	-0.17	+0.17	Not significant

Note. Authors' analysis of the 240-article corpus. No individual residual exceeded the |1.96| significance threshold; the omnibus association is distributed across categories rather than concentrated in one.

No individual tone category reached the |1.96| standardized-residual threshold, even though the omnibus test was significant: the negative-tone cell came closest (Nigeria -1.87, USA +1.87), suggesting a modest tilt toward more negative coverage in the United States corpus, but not one large enough to stand alone. The leave-one-outlet-out analysis reinforces this modesty. Removing either Premium Times or The Guardian Nigeria from the corpus was enough to push the omnibus test above the .05 threshold ($p = .121$ and $p = .118$ respectively), meaning the H1 association depends materially on which Nigerian outlets are included.

Table 2 reports the five separate chi-square tests, each evaluated against the Bonferroni-adjusted alpha of .01.

Table 2. *H2 Chi-Square Tests by Candidate-Image Dimension (Bonferroni alpha = .01)*

Dimension	N	df	Chi-Square	p	Decision
D1 Leadership Competence	240	2	14.52	<.001	Supported
D2 Moral Integrity	240	2	14.80	<.001	Supported
D3 Electability/Viability	240	2	13.25	.001	Supported
D4 Emotional Appeal	240	2	0.85	.654	Not supported
D5 National Unity/Division	240	2	0.07	.965	Not supported

Note. Authors' analysis of the 240-article corpus using IBM SPSS Statistics. Cramer's V ranged from 0.235 to 0.248 for the three supported dimensions.

Three of the five dimensions differed significantly by country under the adjusted alpha: leadership competence, moral integrity, and electability. Emotional appeal and national unity showed no detected country association ($p = .654$ and $p = .965$). This distinction matters because an analysis based only on aggregate favourability would not reveal that specific candidate qualities vary differently across national contexts. Cell-count adequacy was checked for all five 2×3 tables, not only the three that reached significance: computed against the balanced 120/120 country split, minimum expected cell counts ranged from 5.5 (D2's least-frequent Positive category) to 14.0 (D1's least-frequent Negative category), comfortably at or above the conventional threshold of 5 in every case, so the two null results for D4 and D5 are not artefacts of sparse cells. This does not resolve the separate question of statistical power for a true small effect; with 240 cases split 120/120, both null tests would have limited sensitivity to detect an association weaker than the moderate effect sizes (Cramer's V around 0.24) found for the three significant dimensions, and the D4 and D5 results are accordingly reported as no detected association at this sample size rather than as evidence of true equivalence between the two country corpora.

Table 3 reports standardised residuals for the three significant dimensions.

Table 3. *Standardized Residuals for Significant H2 Dimensions*

Dimension	Category	Nigeria Residual	USA Residual
D1 Leadership Competence	Positive	+1.92	-1.92
D1 Leadership Competence	Negative	-1.87	+1.87
D2 Moral Integrity	Positive	+1.92	-1.92
D2 Moral Integrity	Negative	-1.91	+1.91
D3 Electability/Viability	Negative	+2.47*	-2.47*

Note. *Exceeds the |1.96| significance threshold. Authors' analysis of the 240-article corpus.

D1 and D2 show a distributed pattern similar to H1: the omnibus associations are significant, but no individual standardized residual crosses |1.96|. D3 is different. The negative-electability residual is the only one in the entire H2 analysis to reach conventional significance on its own (Nigeria +2.47, USA -2.47), reflecting a striking count: 15 Nigerian-corpus articles carried a negative electability judgement against just 1 United States-corpus article. Unlike H1 and the D1/D2 results, this finding survived every leave-one-outlet-out check without exception, making it the single most compositionally robust result in either hypothesis.

Table 4 draws these results together in one place, since the pattern that matters most, which findings are robust and which are fragile, only becomes visible when effect size and outlet-sensitivity are read side by side rather than construct by construct.

Table 4. *Synthesis: Effect Size and Outlet-Sensitivity Across All Six Tested Constructs*

Construct	p-value	Effect Size	Outlet-Deletion Outcome
H1 Evaluative Tone	.017	V = 0.21	Non-significant after removing either of 2 outlets
D1 Leadership Competence	<.001	V = 0.25	Substantively similar; borderline in a few deletions
D2 Moral Integrity	<.001	V = 0.25	Substantively similar; borderline in a few deletions
D3 Electability/Viability	.001	V = 0.24	Robust in every single outlet deletion
D4 Emotional Appeal	.654	V = 0.06	Not applicable (null result)
D5 National Unity/Division	.965	V = 0.02	Not applicable (null result)

Note. Authors' analysis. V = Cramer's V. Outlet-deletion outcomes summarise the leave-one-outlet-out sensitivity checks described in Section 2. D3 is the only construct whose significance did not shift under any single-outlet removal.

Figure 1 visualizes the effect-size and outlet-sensitivity pattern summarized in Table 4. The figure emphasizes that statistical significance alone does not convey robustness: D1, D2, and D3 are all significant under the specified testing framework, but D3 is notably less sensitive to the removal of any single outlet.

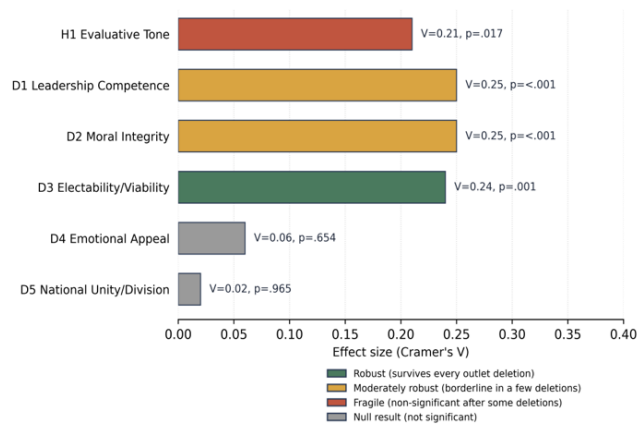


Figure 1. Effect size (Cramer's V) and outlet-sensitivity outcome for all six tested constructs, drawn from the same data reported in Table 4. Bars are colour-coded by robustness category rather than by significance alone because D3 (electability) and D1/D2 (leadership competence and moral integrity) are all statistically significant yet differ substantially in their dependence on outlet composition.

4. DISCUSSION

H1 is easy to overinterpret if attention stops at the omnibus p-value. The result, $\chi^2(3, N = 240) = 10.26$, $p = .017$, indicates that national context and evaluative tone are associated within this corpus. However, no individual tone category crossed the conventional $|1.96|$ standardized-residual threshold, and the omnibus association became non-significant when either of two Nigerian outlets was removed. The appropriate interpretation is therefore a modest, distributed difference between two selected country corpora rather than evidence of a general “United States negativity register” or a national psychological tendency. Legal-conflict and strategic-positioning stories in the sampled United States coverage may contribute to the pattern, but topic and event type were not tested as mediators. Similarly, audience-level outcomes such as news avoidance, persuasion, or engagement lie outside what this content-analytic design can establish.

This sensitivity is consistent with a broader methodological lesson in agenda-setting research. Work on second-level agenda setting shows that whether an association is detected, and how strong it appears, can depend on the operationalization of issue or attribute salience, baseline exposure, and the analytic configuration selected by the researcher [7, 36, 37]. Those studies did not examine election-news tone specifically, so they should not be treated as direct replications of H1. Their relevance is methodological: configuration-sensitive associations are common enough in observational media research that outlet dependence should be reported rather than hidden. A separate line of evidence concerning journalists' political orientations adds another reason for caution. Riedl et al. show that personal political orientation does not translate uniformly into partisan reporting and that organizational autonomy and professional roles can condition the relationship [38]. The present design cannot adjudicate among those mechanisms, but such conditionality is compatible with the finding that the tone association changes materially when particular outlets are removed.

A closer examination of how negativity was constructed reveals information that the tone variable alone cannot capture. In this corpus, United States articles were more likely to locate a negative evaluation in an attributed quotation—for example, from a rival campaign spokesperson or independent commentator—than in the reporting outlet's own unattributed evaluative voice. Both forms are coded as “negative tone” under the present scheme, but rhetorically they perform different functions: one assigns criticism to an identifiable source, whereas the other presents the evaluation through the newsroom's narrative voice. This distinction becomes visible only when tone is read alongside the discursive-strategy variables coded in the wider research programme. It therefore illustrates why a multi-variable coding design can reveal substantive differences that an aggregate sentiment measure would collapse.

Aggregation at the country level also conceals candidate-level variation. Within the United States sub-corpus, Trump and Harris displayed visibly different tone profiles, while within the Nigerian sub-corpus, single-candidate articles about Obi carried the largest positive share; Trump carried the largest negative share across the corpus as a whole. Such candidate-specific variation is consistent with research showing that affective agenda-setting processes are not uniform across audiences or political targets [39]. It is also compatible with political-psychology research demonstrating that candidate evaluation involves partially separable dimensions such as warmth and competence, which observers may weight differently depending on partisan position and contextual cues [4, 5]. If warmth and competence are separable in candidate evaluation, a country-level tone score necessarily averages across candidate profiles that may differ substantially. That aggregation provides one plausible reason why the national tone association is weaker and more outlet-sensitive than some of the dimension-level associations, particularly competence and integrity.

None of these findings justifies labeling either national corpus “biased.” Such a claim would require an external normative or factual benchmark against which coverage could be judged, and this study does not provide one. The results

instead justify caution about aggregation. A country-level tone result summarizes unequal and sometimes small candidate subsamples; treating it as if every candidate within a country received equivalent coverage would contradict the structure of the data. Independent research on candidate- and topic-level asymmetries in the 2024 United States election cycle provides a useful comparison, although differences in sampling period, outlets, and method mean that it can support only the broader point rather than the present study's specific numerical estimates [40]. The moral-integrity dimension also invites methodological refinement. Validated instruments for perceived political authenticity now distinguish consistency, ordinariness, and immediacy as separate components of perceived genuineness [41]. The present three-category D2 integrity measure is necessarily coarser. A future qualitative or mixed-method reanalysis could therefore examine whether the content underlying D2 maps onto those more differentiated authenticity components.

D3 electability is the paper's sharpest and most reproducible finding. Fifteen Nigerian-corpus articles contained a negative electability judgement, compared with only one United States-corpus article, producing standardized residuals of +2.47 and -2.47 respectively. More importantly, the association remained significant in every leave-one-outlet-out analysis. Qualitative inspection suggests that some Nigerian cases involve intra-party dissent in which senior figures publicly question a candidate's prospects. A multiparty field may create more opportunities for this type of viability-focused conflict than a contest dominated by two major parties because it contains more factional and coalition relationships in which doubts can be publicly articulated. That explanation is plausible but remains inferential. The present design cannot isolate party-system structure from candidate composition, campaign events, source availability, or newsroom practice as the causal driver of the observed D3 pattern.

Precision is especially important when interpreting electability because the political-behaviour literature treats it as a malleable rather than fixed perception. Experimental evidence shows that voters update electability judgements in response to relatively specific pieces of information, including fundraising performance, ideological positioning, and previous officeholding experience [10]. If voter perceptions can move in response to such cues, journalistic statements about viability may likewise be contingent on the sources available, events occurring, and strategic information circulating when an article is produced. The D3 variable should therefore be understood as a measure of journalistically constructed electability evaluation within a particular article, not as an estimate of a candidate's objective probability of winning. Maintaining that distinction is essential to the construct validity of the study.

The literature also warns against treating the salience of electability as a neutral background condition. Making electability itself more salient can change how voters rank candidates and can increase reliance on electability as the principal decision criterion [11]. Electability judgements may also interact with implicit and explicit prejudice in ways that disadvantage candidates for reasons not reducible to their objective electoral prospects [12]. Neither study examined Nigerian elections or a Nigeria–United States media comparison, and neither directly tests the multiparty-versus-two-major-party interpretation proposed above. Their contribution here is narrower but important: they establish that electability is an interpretively unstable construct whose prominence and meaning can shift with context. That makes it reasonable to test electability separately rather than assume that it is simply another expression of overall positive or negative tone.

Emotional appeal and national unity showed no detected country association, and those null results are substantively informative. A comparative candidate-image study need not produce differences on every dimension, and the absence of detected differences for D4 and D5 is not evidence that those qualities are unimportant. One possible interpretation is that emotional appeal and national unity are more directly shaped by candidate rhetoric, speeches, symbolic gestures, and self-presentation, whereas competence, integrity, and electability provide journalists with greater scope for independent assessment. That interpretation is compatible with theoretical work showing that media power can operate differently across types of political content depending on the amount of interpretive discretion available to journalists [42], and it aligns with multidimensional candidate-image research that cautions against assuming a single evaluative register [1, 18, 43]. Impression-management research offers a related possibility: if candidate image is actively managed rather than merely perceived, candidates may invest especially heavily in shaping emotional appeal and unity-oriented self-presentation [44]. These explanations remain hypotheses for future research, not mechanisms demonstrated by the present data.

Testing those explanations directly would require a design that varies candidate rhetoric or event context independently of media coverage, which the present study does not do. It is also important to distinguish statistical association from practical media influence. A significant chi-square test in a single content corpus establishes a distributional association within that corpus; it does not demonstrate an effect on audiences. Computational work on cumulative framing indicates that practical influence depends on persistence, repetition, and distribution across media environments rather than on whether a single content pattern crosses a significance threshold [45]. That distinction should remain central when interpreting the significant D1–D3 findings.

Several confounds further limit causal interpretation. Country is inseparable here from election year, candidate-field structure, party-system characteristics, the events generated by each campaign, and the eight outlets selected for analysis. Consequently, a significant chi-square result describes an association within this corpus; it does not identify “the Nigerian media system” or “the American media system” as an independent causal force. The leave-one-outlet-out checks reported

in Section 3 make this limitation concrete: some associations remained comparatively stable, whereas others changed substantially when a single outlet was removed. Robustness therefore differs by construct and should be discussed as part of the substantive result rather than relegated to a technical footnote.

The distinction between overall tone and dimensional evaluation also has a practical communication implication: anyone monitoring candidate image should avoid reducing reputation to a single sentiment score. Research on reputation and communication management increasingly treats reputation as multidimensional rather than unitary. Vito conceptualizes reputation as a strategic intangible asset whose management requires attention to multiple components [46], while a recent bibliometric analysis shows the breadth and thematic diversification of corporate-reputation research within public relations [47]. These literatures concern organizations rather than election candidates, so they should not be treated as direct political-communication evidence. Their structural insight is nevertheless relevant. In the present corpus, an aggregate favourability measure would have obscured the electability-specific movement identified by D3, the only candidate-image dimension whose country association remained significant after every outlet deletion. That movement was much less visible in the broader tone result and was absent from D4 and D5.

This distinction also clarifies what an actionable response would require. Strategic-communication research emphasizes that campaign effects depend on reach, effect size, durability, and the interaction of multiple supporting or restraining forces rather than on favourable messaging in the abstract [48]. Applied to the present findings, a documented electability deficit would call for communication addressing viability specifically rather than a generic increase in positive language. Adjacent public-affairs research similarly shows that engagement strategies depend on the character of the political relationship rather than on a uniform approach [49]. Evidence from a survey experiment on government transparency further demonstrates that the content of disclosed performance information can matter for trust more than framing alone [50]. These studies do not examine candidate electability and are not direct tests of the present corpus, but each illustrates the same broader principle: communication effects depend on the dimension of judgement being targeted. Methodological work outside political communication reaches a parallel conclusion about evidence boundaries. Mislevy [52], writing in the *Journal of Materials Education (Electronic)*, argues that the strength of a claim should match the level and type of evidence actually observed. That principle is directly relevant here: corpus-level associations support claims about coded news content, not unsupported claims about voter response or causal campaign effects.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study separated two forms of candidate evaluation that are often collapsed into a single measure: overall evaluative tone and five specific candidate-image dimensions. Both were analyzed in a reliability-tested, balanced corpus of election news from Nigeria and the United States. Evaluative tone was associated with national context, but the relationship was modest, distributed across categories, and sensitive to the inclusion of particular outlets. The five candidate-image dimensions did not behave uniformly. Leadership competence, moral integrity, and electability differed significantly by country under the Bonferroni-adjusted threshold, whereas emotional appeal and national unity showed no detected country association. Electability was the most robust result: negative electability judgements were concentrated in the Nigerian corpus, and the D3 association remained significant in every leave-one-outlet-out analysis. The findings therefore support the central conceptual argument of the paper: overall tone and dimension-specific candidate evaluation are related but analytically distinct, and conclusions drawn from one should not automatically be generalized to the other.

For researchers, the practical implication is to report dimension-level and category-level evidence alongside omnibus tests and to evaluate sensitivity to outlet composition before treating country-level candidate-image differences as stable. For journalism and communication practitioners, the findings show why a single aggregate sentiment score can be insufficient. A candidate whose viability is repeatedly questioned faces a different communication problem from one whose competence, integrity, emotional appeal, or capacity to unify is questioned, and those problems should not be treated as interchangeable. Future research should extend the design to more countries, additional election cycles, and larger outlet samples; incorporate candidate-level models and multilevel approaches where sample size permits; examine direct associations between overall tone and each image dimension; and integrate the visual variables already coded in the wider research programme. Such extensions would clarify whether the pattern observed here—a robust electability difference alongside a weaker, outlet-sensitive tone association—persists beyond the 2023 Nigerian and 2024 United States campaigns.

6. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations bound the interpretation of these findings. First, the eight-outlet, two-country design does not support cluster-robust population inference; the results describe the sampled corpus rather than all Nigerian or United States election news. Second, candidate subsamples were unequal and in some cases small, limiting claims about individual candidates. Third, the study measures published content rather than audience reception, so it cannot establish how readers

perceived the coded tone or candidate-image dimensions or whether those patterns affected attitudes or voting behaviour. Fourth, country is confounded with election year, party-system structure, candidate-field composition, campaign events, and outlet selection. Fifth, the leave-one-outlet-out procedure provides a useful sensitivity check but is not a substitute for a larger outlet sample, multilevel modeling, bootstrap analysis, or permutation-based robustness assessment. Sixth, the paper argues conceptually that tone and the five candidate-image dimensions are related but distinct constructs but does not report their empirical associations within the coded dataset. A secondary analysis testing how frequently, for example, negative overall tone co-occurs with negative moral-integrity or electability judgements would provide a direct test of that distinctness claim. Finally, strong reliability does not by itself establish construct validity; future work should validate the dimensional coding scheme against additional expert-coded samples, alternative operationalizations, and, where appropriate, audience-based measures. Consistent with the general principle that claim strength should remain proportional to the evidence actually observed [52], the conclusions of this paper are therefore limited to comparative patterns within the coded content rather than claims about causal media effects or national populations.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: A.U.B. and M.F.A. Methodology: A.U.B. Formal analysis: A.U.B. Investigation (coding): A.U.B. Writing – original draft: A.U.B. Writing – review and editing: A.U.B. and M.F.A. Supervision: M.F.A. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study analysed publicly available, professionally published online news content and did not involve human research participants, human data, animal research, or private/sensitive data; no institutional ethics approval was accordingly required for this content-analysis design.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The coded dataset and codebook underlying this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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