

THEMES AND SUBJECT AREAS OF MASS  
COMMUNICATION RESEARCH - A STUDY OF  
UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH PROJECTS IN TWO  
SELECTED UNIVERSITIES

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**ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this study was to identify the subject areas and themes of Mass Communication studies in Nigerian universities in the last five years with focus on undergraduate research projects in two selected universities: University of Lagos and Babcock University; both selected on the basis of ownership and period of existence.*

*The following research questions were raised: (1) What are the themes of Mass Communication research in Nigerian Universities? (2) Which subject areas of Mass Communication receive more focus in Mass Communication undergraduate research projects? (3) Do the themes and subject areas of Mass Communication research in private and public universities in Nigeria vary?*

*A content analysis of 662 available research projects (430 and 232 from the University of Lagos and Babcock University, respectively) covering a period of five academic session (06/07 – 10/11) were analyzed. The outcome of the study showed that research projects in broadcasting and advertising dominated Mass Communication undergraduate studies in the period under examination, while studies in film and cinematography, new media and book publishing were relatively rare.*

*On the other hand, the themes of the Mass Communication research projects in the two selected universities were mainly on Media effects and popular culture, giving less focus to other themes.*

**Key words:** Mass Communication, Research, Themes, Subject Area, Undergraduate Projects.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mass Communication is one discipline that has received enormous attention from almost all facet of society, be it politics, economy, culture, academia, just name it. The importance of Mass Communication to societal development is so immense that it can not be ignored either as a field of study or type of communication.

As a field of study, Mass Communication is divided into a few broad subject areas that provide platforms for manpower development and for research in the field. These include Print, Broadcasting, Public Relations and Advertising, Book Publishing, Sound recording, Film, New Media, etc. Thousands of studies are conducted daily in these areas by communication scholars as well as graduate and undergraduate students of Mass Communication for the purpose of providing answers to questions raised as a result of the daily interface between the mass media and society.

The research interests of scholars and students vary for reasons not too far from those of area of specialization and sequence preference. However, these factors in no small measure determine the direction in which a researcher would focus his/her study. Therefore considering the place of students' research projects in data gathering for Mass Communication growth and development, it is important to seek empirical information as to which areas of the field has received more research attention, especially in the last couple of years.

Hence the task of this study is to analyze the projects of undergraduate students in two selected Nigerian universities within a period of five years for the purpose of knowing the themes and subject areas that student researchers have paid more attention to in Mass Communication studies, and also to find out if ownership structure of the universities studied determined the direction of the studies with regard to theme and subject area.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What theme of Mass Communication receives more focus in undergraduate students' research projects?
2. Which subject area of Mass Communication receives more focus in undergraduate students' research projects?

3. Are the themes and subject areas of focus in mass communication undergraduate research different in private and public universities?

## METHODOLOGY

A content analysis of all undergraduate Mass Communication projects for five academic sessions (06-07 to 10-11) in two selected Nigerian universities: University of Lagos and Babcock University, was done. All undergraduate projects done in mass communication between the periods under study formed the sampled size for the study. A total of 470 and 232 projects were selected and analyzed in the University of Lagos and Babcock University, respectively.

Subject area was categorized into broadcast, print, advertising, public relations, new media, others, while theme of study was categorized into media effect, popular culture, development communication, brand management/promotion, new media, journalism, and others.

## REVIEW OF GERMANE STUDIES

In an early analysis of published content, Schramm (1957) in his study “*Twenty years of journalism research*” found out that the print media dominated his research study with 486 articles focusing on the print media. The study which covered 80 Public Opinion Quarterly journals in a period of twenty years (1937-1956) also found out that in the published articles, there was an increased use of the quantitative methods than the qualitative methods.

In another study by Perloff,(1976) entitled “*Journalism Research: A Twenty-Year Perspective,*” which examined the area of focus in articles published in the then Journalism Quarterly (now Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly) between 1955 and 1974, discovered that out of 1,490 articles analyzed, excluding book reviews, monographs, book chapters and convention papers, 67% focused on print media, 6% focused on electronic media,

and 26% related to both. The study also revealed that 56% of the articles analyzed used quantitative methods.

The trend was continued as reported by Weaver and Gray (1979) when they conducted a study entitled “*Journalism and Mass Communication Research in the United States: Past, Present and Future.*” Their findings revealed that 56% of articles they content analyzed in *Journalism Quarterly* between 1955 and 1974 dealt with print media, while electronic media constituted 26%.

In the early 1970s, Electronic media began to grow in research importance and started gaining great attention from researchers. For instance, a study by Dupagne, Carroll and Campbell (2005), “*Trends in Content-Analytic Research Practices in the Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 1956-2001*” revealed that focus on television rose from 41.1% in the 1960s to 90.9% in the 1980s and remained at that level in the 1990s. Also, entertainment programming climbed from 6.3% in the 1960s to 47% in 1980s and 1990s.

In a bid to shed more light to the on-going trend, a study was conducted on “*Mass Communication research trends from 1980 to 1999*”, by Kamhawi and Weaver (2003). They found out that broadcast media grew in importance to researchers through the 1980s and 1990s, accounting for 42.2% of all broadcast media studies, while the print media accounted for 28.7%. The research which covered ten published Mass Communication academic journals based on circulation and acceptance rate also showed that traditional broadcast and print media were the most studied media in the leading Mass Communication research journals during the last two decades, with broadcast media exceeding print media in both decades, while overall studies about the internet constituted only 2% of the articles analyzed.

They also found out that. The study further revealed that when broadcast research increased, print research decreased and vice versa. Also, the decrease in broadcast research was due to an increase in research in other media and non-mediated studies. They concluded that traditional broadcast and print continued to dominate mass media research, but asked, "Will these media continue to dominate research as we enter further into the 'Internet Age'?"

Herkman (2007) in his article "*Current trends in media research*" which was a summary of the result of the project "*Mapping media and communication research*" provided a general overview of the current media and communication research in seven countries - Finland, USA, Germany, France, Japan, Estonia and Australia, with the outcome that popular culture is the most popular topic in academic theses in countries like Finland, Japan, Australia and France while research into new media technology is steadily becoming more common in Germany, and traditional Mass Communication research remained the most popular in the US.

In another study entitled "*Subject Index of Research in five Nigerian Universities (1971-1988)*", Odukomaiya (1992) revealed that out of a total of 885 studies analyzed and categorized into 29 thematic areas, "Media Audience" had the highest amount of research focus with 183 studies, while "Advertising and Public Relations" followed with 157 studies. Other themes in the category were: "Process of communication" – 101 studies; "Development communication" – 64 studies; "Sociology of mass communication" – 64 studies; and "Political communication" – 62 studies. Other areas of studies in his categories had less than 50 studies each.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Agenda setting theory is best suited for this study. Agenda setting is a term coined by McCombs and Shaw (1972-1993) to describe how mass communication media establish the

salient issues and images to which the public react. According to McQuail (2005), it is the “process by which the relative attention given to items or issues in news coverage influences the rank order of public awareness of issues and attribution of significance”. The consequence of which is “effects on public opinion”.

Mass communication scholars and students in a way, also have the ability to reflect and determine reality in communication research. When relative attention is given to a subject area or theme in mass communication research, it could influence the rank order of public awareness of issues in that subject area or theme, and the significance attributed to them.

**DATA PRESENTATION**

**Table 1: Distribution showing the total number of project topics analyzed from 2007-2011 in the selected universities**

YEAR OF PROJECT	NO. OF PROJECTS SAMPLED IN UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS	NO. OF PROJECTS SAMPLED IN BABCOCK UNIVERSITY
06-07	68	38
07-08	73	46
08-09	68	71
09-10	82	48
10-11	139	29
TOTAL	430	232

Table 1 above shows that 430 projects were analyzed in University of Lagos, while 232 projects were analyzed in Babcock University in five academic sessions, representing a total of 662 projects in the mass communication departments of both universities.

**TABLE 2: Distribution showing the subject areas of research in the selected**

**universities**

SUBJECT AREA	UNILAG						BABCOCK					
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Total	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Total
BROADCASTING	30.9 %	24.7 %	42.6 %	32.9 %	22.3 %	29.3% (126)	26.3 %	30.4 %	26.8 %	18.8%	24.1%	25.4% (59)
PRINT MEDIA	17.6 %	21.9 %	11.8 %	15.9 %	11.5 %	15.1% (65)	13.1 %	15.2 %	12.7 %	16.7%	13.8%	14.2% (33)
PUBLIC RELATIONS	11.8 %	12.3 %	10.3 %	13.4 %	10.0 %	11.4% (49)	26.3 %	13.0 %	19.7 %	8.3%	13.8%	16.3% (38)
ADVERTISING	14.7 %	12.3 %	19.1 %	15.9 %	16.5 %	15.8% (68)	13.1 %	19.6 %	26.8 %	37.5%	31.0%	25.8% (60)
FILM & CINEMATOGRAPHY	2.9%	5.5%	-	3.7%	7.2%	4.4% (19)	2.6%	8.7%	1.4%	2.0%	-	3.0% (7)
NEW MEDIA	-	16.4 %	1.5%	4.9%	14.4 %	8.6% (37)	5.3%	4.3%	7.0%	4.2%	10.3%	6.3% (14)
BOOK PUBLISHING	1.5%	-	1.5%	-	-	0.5% (2)	-	4.3%	2.8%	-	-	1.7% (4)
MEDIA IN GENERAL	19.1 %	6.8%	8.8%	6.0%	15.8 %	11.9% (51)	13.1 %	2.2%	2.8%	12.5%	6.9%	6.8% (16)
OTHER (COMBINED)	1.5%	-	4.4%	7.3%	2.2%	3.0% (13)	-	2.2%	-	-	-	0.4% (1)
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100% (430)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100% (232)

Table 2 above reveals that students' research in broadcasting received more focus in University of Lagos Mass Communication department than other media with 29.3% (126 studies) , followed by advertising 15.8% (68 studies), the print media with 15.1% (65 studies), and public relations with 11.4 (49 studies). The medium with the least focus was book publishing with 0.5% (2 studies). Others are film and cinematography with 4.4% (19 studies) and new media with 8.6% (37 studies).

In Babcock University, advertising and broadcasting had more studies with 25.8% (60 studies) and 25.4% (59 studies), respectively. Public relations ranked third with 16.3% (38 studies), followed by the print media with 14.2% (33 studies). Book publishing had the least focus with 1.7% (4 studies), while film and cinematography had 3.0% (7 studies) and new media had 6.3% (14 studies).

**TABLE 3: Distribution showing the themes of research in the selected universities**

THEME	UNILAG						BABCOCK					TOTAL
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	TOTAL	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	
Media Effects	19.1%	20.5%	25%	23.2%	33.8%	25.8% (111)	21.0%	17.4%	22.5%	29.2%	31.0%	23.7% (55)
Popular culture	19.1%	19.2%	38.2%	18.3%	15.1%	20.6% (89)	15.8%	19.6%	15.4%	22.9%	34.5%	20.3% (47)
Journalism	19.1%	16.4%	13.2%	14.6%	15.8%	15.8% (68)	5.3%	13.0%	9.9%	10.4%	10.3%	9.9% (23)
Development comm.	10.3%	6.8%	4.4%	10.9%	5.8%	7.4% (32)	23.7%	21.7%	14.0%	14.6%	10.3%	16.8% (39)
New media	-	10.9%	1.5%	6.0%	10.0%	6.5% (28)	-	6.5%	8.5%	4.1%	-	4.7% (11)
Brand management/ promotion	27.9%	20.5%	11.8%	18.3%	14.4%	17.9% (77)	26.3%	17.4%	23.9%	14.6%	13.8%	19.8% (46)



Others	4.4%	5.5%	5.9%	8.5%	5.0%	5.8% (25)	7.9%	4.3%	5.6%	4.1%	-	4.7% (11)
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100% (430)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100% (232)

From table 3 above ‘media effects’ and ‘popular culture’ themes had more undergraduate studies in the University of Lagos mass communication department with 25.8% (111 studies) and 20.6% (89 studies), respectively, while Brand management/ promotion had 17.9% (77 studies), Journalism 15.8% (68 studies), development communication 7.4%(32 studies), and new media 6.5% (28 studies).

Students’ projects at Babcock University mass communication department, also had more themes in ‘media effects’ and ‘popular culture’ with 23.7% (55 studies) and 20.3% (47 studies), respectively, while new media also had the lowest with 4.7% (11 studies).

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

**RQ 1: What theme of Mass Communication receives more focus in undergraduate students’ research projects?**

The study revealed that themes on ‘media effects’ dominated mass communication students’ research in the University of Lagos and Babcock University, followed by themes in ‘popular culture’ during the period under study. 25.8% (111 studies) and 20.6% (89 studies) of undergraduate research projects in University of Lagos had themes in ‘media effects’ and ‘popular culture’, respectively, while 23.7% (55 studies) and 20.3% (47 studies) undergraduate studies in Babcock University had themes had themes in ‘media effects’ and ‘popular culture’, respectively.

**RQ 2: Which subject area of Mass Communication receives more focus in undergraduate students' research projects?**

This study corroborates the pattern followed by previous studies in Mass Communication as earlier captured in the review of germane studies. Similar to the outcome of previous studies, though in other countries, this study also shows that in the selected universities, research in Broadcast media and advertising are gaining more focus than other subject areas, particularly within the period under investigation. Research projects in University of Lagos mass communication department focused largely on the broadcast media with 29.3% (126 studies), while in Babcock University, advertising had more focus with 25.8% (60 studies).

**RQ 3: Are the themes and subject areas of focus in mass communication undergraduate research different in private and public universities?**

The findings show that there is a difference only in the subject area of research focus in the mass communication departments of the two selected universities. This means that while broadcast media received the highest attention from researchers in University of Lagos, advertising ranked highest in Babcock University with regard to subject area. 'Media effects' was the dominant theme in both universities.

**CONCLUSION**

The outcome of the study apparently reveals a pattern in mass communication research. While majority of the research projects analyzed in both universities focused on the broadcast media and advertising, little consideration was given to new media, book publishing industry and film/cinematography studies.

Research drought in some areas of mass communication may not be in the overall interest of the field. Each subject area in Mass communication has its strengths and weaknesses, and one must complement the other, especially at points of weaknesses, to effectively function. Students and young scholars may develop apathy for areas with dearth of academic and research materials, and this could further threaten the existence of those sequences in institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, organizations that ought to benefit from graduates and research materials from these seemingly neglected areas may lack manpower with requisite knowledge and training. Therefore, researchers should strive to strike a balance, and academics should encourage students to conduct research in every areas of communication regardless of specialization, particularly at the undergraduate level.

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