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# Shell's Greenwashing by Proxy in Nigeria: Corporate Narratives and Media Representation

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**Abstract**

This article examines how Nigerian newspapers frame Shell's sustainability claims and asks whether that framing enables or challenges greenwashing by proxy: a pattern in which a corporation's environmental claims gain the credibility of independent journalism through a news outlet's editorial choices rather than paid advertising. Using critical discourse analysis, I analyze 96 news reports, investigations, and opinion columns published between 2020 and 2024 in five Nigerian dailies, Premium Times, The Guardian Nigeria, ThisDay, Vanguard, and Punch, selected for addressing Shell's environmental or sustainability claims. I identify three recurring mechanisms: uncritical reproduction of corporate press releases, reliance on corporate and government sources with little independent verification, and framing that foregrounds favorable claims while omitting the contrary environmental record. These mechanisms are more pronounced in ThisDay, Vanguard, and Punch, while Premium Times and The Guardian Nigeria more often contextualize or contest Shell's claims.

**Keywords:** greenwashing; greenwashing by proxy; Shell; corporate narratives; environmental journalism; news framing; critical discourse analysis; source dependence; Niger Delta

## 1. Introduction

Corporate narratives play an increasingly important role in shaping public perceptions of environmental sustainability, particularly where a multinational corporation's core business depends on continued fossil fuel extraction (Plec & Pettenger, 2012). In 2020, Shell pledged to reduce its methane emissions by 45% before 2025 and framed this commitment as one of the cornerstones of its sustainability strategy (Keilmann & Koch, 2023). The announcement drew a mixed international response, from cautious optimism about its potential to skepticism grounded in Shell's continuing extraction and sale of fossil fuels (Etim et al., 2026). In Nigeria, where Shell has operated for more than six decades (Bousso, 2024), its business has been shaped throughout by the country's political instability (Frynas, 1998); the reception has been similarly divided.

The social problem this divide reflects is concrete. The oil-rich Niger Delta region has borne a disproportionate share of the environmental costs of that operation, including recurring oil spills and unregulated gas flaring, with consequences for both the regional ecology and livelihoods that depend on it (Friedman & Campbell, 2023). Shell continues its oil exploration alongside a public environmental protection campaign, so the same company that is the subject of continuing environmental complaints is also the subject of continuing environmental messaging.

This is the communication problem the article addresses: how Shell frames these two facts together. Shell relies on themes of sustainable development, renewable energy



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investment, and community engagement, exemplified by its acquisition of the Nigerian solar company Daystar Power (Amnesty International, 2024) and its stated ambition for carbon neutrality by 2050, to project leadership in the low-carbon transition. Because oil and gas remain the company's principal source of revenue (Li et al., 2022), the sincerity of this messaging in a market as extraction-dependent as Nigeria is itself an open question, and I treat it in this article as an empirical question rather than a settled fact assumed at the outset.

How that question gets settled in public depends heavily on how the Nigerian press covers it, which is the journalistic problem at the center of this study. Newspapers in Nigeria, like newspapers generally, are used by powerful institutions to advance an agenda and can also serve as platforms for contesting that agenda (Elving, 2012). Because reporting on corporate environmental claims relies heavily on the sources an outlet has access to and the resources it can commit to independent verification, the press's own routines of sourcing and framing can shape which version of a company's environmental record the public receives, independently of what the underlying record actually shows.

Existing scholarship on greenwashing is concentrated on Western media contexts (Friedman & Campbell, 2023), leaving a gap in the study of how media in oil-dependent developing economies engage with the same corporate practice. This gap matters because the socio-economic and environmental context of a country such as Nigeria, Africa's largest oil producer, differs considerably from that of the Global North (Eweje, 2006); coverage of an international oil company in Nigeria is bound up with the wider economic and political dependence of the national economy on oil revenue (Amnesty International, 2024) in a way that Western coverage of the same company is not. To date, no study has examined specifically how Shell's sustainability narrative is taken up, contested, or recirculated by the Nigerian press.

This article addresses that gap and makes a conceptual contribution to it. I argue that Shell's sustainability claims travel into Nigerian public discourse less through the company's own advertising than through the editorial and framing choices of the outlets that report on it, a pattern I call greenwashing by proxy: a corporate environmental claim that gains the authority of independent journalism through a news outlet's own reporting choices, rather than through advertising an audience can recognize as paid promotion. I develop this concept fully in the Literature Review below. Two questions guide the analysis. RQ1 asks how Nigerian newspapers frame Shell's sustainability and emission reduction claims. RQ2 asks how this framing enables or challenges greenwashing by proxy.

Situated within corporate environmental communication and media framing theory (Pezzullo & Cox, 2017; Plec & Pettenger, 2012), the article advances the discussion of the media's role in fostering, or withholding, the transparency and accountability that corporate environmental claims require.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Greenwashing and Corporate Environmental Communication*

The term "greenwashing" was coined by Jay Westerveld in 1986 to describe deceptive corporate practices in which companies present themselves as environmentally friendly while continuing harmful operations (Orange & Cohen, 2010), part of a broader corporate assault on environmentalism conducted through public relations (Beder, 2002). Lyon and Maxwell (2011) define it as the selective disclosure of positive environmental information to conceal negative aspects, and Delmas and Burbano (2011) describe it as the discrepancy between a company's environmental performance and its communication about that performance. Most greenwashing involves half-truths or exaggeration rather than outright falsehood (De Jong et al., 2019), distinguishing "behavioral-claim greenwashing," where a

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company misrepresents the scope of its green efforts, from "motive greenwashing," where it claims credit for action that is legally required. These map onto what Mulch (2009) called the "sins" of greenwashing, such as vagueness or false labeling, and De Jong et al. (2019) find that both full and partial deception damage corporate reputation, reinforcing Delmas and Burbano's point that even minor misrepresentation erodes consumer trust.

Delmas and Burbano (2011), Peloza and Shang (2011) and Walker and Wan (2011) offer the definition this article builds on most directly: green-washing is a form of symbolic corporate environmentalism in which a firm attempt[s] to project a green image without matching it with substantive "environmental performance". This symbolic-performance gap, rather than any single false statement, is what the concept of greenwashing by proxy developed later in this review is built to extend.

### *2.2. Corporate Narratives, Legitimacy, and Symbolic Management*

Firms tell stories about themselves to build legitimacy and manage impressions, and environmental messaging is one of the main settings in which this happens (Dowling, 2006; O'Donovan, 1999; Lischinsky, 2011; Suchman, 1995). Suchman's (1995) account of legitimacy as something an organization actively manages, rather than possesses, is useful here: a firm can seek legitimacy not only through its own communication but by aligning itself with actors the public already treats as credible. Research on corporate social responsibility communication shows that sustainability talk lets a company align itself with public values and soften scrutiny of its core operations, so that a green narrative can do reputational work even where practice has not changed (Elving, 2012; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Plec & Pettenger, 2012). Reading Shell's output as narrative rather than as fact, in the analysis that follows, lets me ask what story is being told, who is cast as responsible, and what is left out. The word proxy itself began as a legal term for an organization or individual that acts or communicates on behalf of another (Leow, 2019), and it is this transfer of the right to speak for another party, rather than the sustainability content specifically, that the conceptual model in the final part of this review relocates from a corporate-legal setting into a press setting.

### *2.3. Journalistic Source Dependence and Information Subsidies*

A separate study explains why a news outlet might carry a corporate narrative without necessarily endorsing it. Gandy (1982) describes the material that powerful actors supply to under-resourced newsrooms, including press releases, data, and ready-made quotations, as an "information subsidy": it lowers the cost of producing a story and, in doing so, increases the odds that the subsidized account is the one that gets published. Bennett's (1990) indexing hypothesis makes a parallel claim about official sources: that the range of viewpoints in coverage tends to track the range of viewpoints among the elite sources a reporter has access to, rather than the full range of public debate, a pattern confirmed in later work on source selection (Althaus, 2003; Turcotte, 2017). The political economy of the news industry compounds this: advertising and ownership shape what gets covered and how (Guyot, 2008; Herman & Chomsky, 1988), and which matters most in places where, as in Nigeria, media houses depend heavily on corporate revenue. None of this literature assumes a newsroom's intent to mislead; it describes a resourcing and access problem that produces an information environment favorable to whoever can supply the cheapest, most usable content, which is usually the largest, best-resourced actor in a given story.

### *2.4. Framing and Critical Discourse Analysis*

News does not simply record an event; it constructs it through selection, sourcing, and framing (Hall, 1997). Entman (1993) gives the definition of framing that this article adopts: the selection and salience of particular aspects of an issue so as to define a problem, attribute cause, make a moral judgment, and suggest a response. Agenda-setting research adds that the salience a story receives shapes what the public comes to see as important in the first place (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Roberts et al., 2002). Taken together, this literature already establishes that a powerful actor can shape their own representation through the ordinary sourcing and framing routines of news, without any explicit coordination with a newsroom. What it has not addressed is how this plays out for environmental claims in an oil-dependent African media system, which is the gap this article fills. Framing theory identifies what to look for; Fairclough's (1995) and van Dijk's (1993) principles of critical discourse analysis supply the textual method used to find it, as detailed in the Methodology.

### 2.5. The Nigerian Media System and Environmental Journalism

While greenwashing has received considerable scholarly attention in North America and Europe, its study within Nigeria remains underexplored, and there is no scholarship specifically investigating how corporations operationalize sustainability narratives within Nigeria's extractive industries. This gap is notable given that Nigeria is Africa's largest oil producer, with well-documented environmental degradation concentrated in the Niger Delta (Adeola et al., 2021; Ajala, 2025). Several factors plausibly contribute to it: colonial-era knowledge production centered on Euro-American contexts, sidelining African experience; research in Nigeria is constrained by limited funding for local academic institutions (Igben & Etadafe, 2023); and the political sensitivity of studying a multinational company such as Shell is compounded by a postcolonial condition that does not readily support open criticism of foreign control over natural resources (Chike, 2017; Chinaza Ikueze & Anele Ejesu, 2022).

The Nigerian media system carries its own structural constraints. African media systems face financial and political pressures that make sustained investigation of corporate environmental claims difficult (McCurdy & Power, 2007), and (Mbungu et al., 2024) report documents systemic barriers to environmental and climate accountability journalism across the continent. Matsilele and Tshuma (2023) find that corporate-sponsored journalism can narrow the space for independent environmental reporting. In Nigeria specifically, media houses' reliance on corporate advertising and sponsorship for revenue (Olatunji, 2013; Okeibunor et al., 2022; Ukpong, 2020) creates a direct incentive for editorial caution toward advertisers, which Akakwandu (2015) links to biased representation of corporate environmental claims.

Shell's own communication in this environment leans heavily on sustainable development, renewable energy investment, and community engagement, exemplified by its acquisition of the Nigerian solar firm Daystar Power (Amnesty International, 2024) and its stated ambition for carbon neutrality by 2050, messaging echoed in coverage urging the company toward renewable-energy optimization (Eromosele, 2023). This sits alongside continued dependence on fossil fuel revenue (Li et al., 2022) and environmental practices, gas flaring and oil spills prominent among them, that are frequently minimized or absent from the company's own reporting (Ezinna et al., 2024; Olukaejire et al., 2024; Ajala, 2025). Emenyeonu (2017) documents Nigerian media houses repackaging Shell's press releases as news stories without independent verification, a specific instance of the information-subsidy dynamic described above, and the UNEP handbook (UNEP, 2006) calls for more investigative capacity in African journalism to counteract exactly this kind of corporate dominance over environmental narratives.

### 2.6. A Conceptual Model of Media-Mediated Greenwashing

Building on Delmas and Burbano (2011), Peloza and Shang (2011) and Walker and Wan (2011) account of greenwashing as a symbolic-performance gap, I propose greenwashing by proxy to describe cases in which that symbolic work is located outside the firm. A company's environmental claim gains credibility not through its own voice but through a third party that presents the claim as its own account. What reaches the public is the organization's stated values rather than a record of its actual practice: the firm advertises what it claims to stand for, and a trusted intermediary repeats it. In the case examined here, that intermediary is the news institution, which can carry Shell's claims and lend them the authority of independent journalism whether or not the company is taking meaningful steps toward sustainability. This is what separates greenwashing by proxy from conventional greenwashing, where the corporation makes the claim directly and an audience can read it as self-interested: the proxy is the news outlet acting as a seemingly neutral reporter, not a paid advertisement, a public relations firm, or a sponsored post.

In Nigeria specifically, this mechanism is enabled by a combination of historical, political, economic, and social conditions. Colonial-era dependence on foreign capital and expertise in extractive industries persists structurally (Bousso, 2024; Craggs & Neate, 2020; Miapyen & Bozkurt, 2020) and limits the state's capacity to enforce environmental standards on powerful multinationals; the government has, in practice, tended to prioritize foreign investment over environmental accountability (Nwali & Jumbo, 2025), a calculus shaped by Shell's scale as a fiscal partner: the company paid $5.63 billion in taxes and fees to the Nigerian government in 2019 alone (Udo, 2020). Economically, the media's dependence on corporate advertising discussed above narrows the space for critical coverage, and socially, public distrust of government institutions makes audiences more receptive to environmental claims when they arrive through outlets, NGOs, or other actors seen as independent of the state, which is precisely the credibility greenwashing by proxy depends on.

### *2.7. Distinguishing Greenwashing by Proxy from Adjacent Constructs*

Greenwashing by proxy is not the only concept that describes how a claim gains authority by passing through a third party, and it is worth stating precisely where it overlaps with, and departs from, related constructs already in circulation: third-party greenwashing (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020) and third-party endorsement, mediation in greenwashing, information subsidy (Gandy, 1982), source laundering, native advertising and advertorials (Wojdynski & Evans, 2016), public relations content disguised as news, churnalism (Davies & Davies, 2008), corporate journalism, astroturfing (Cho et al., 2011), and Suchman's (1995) transfer of legitimacy.

The key component of greenwashing by proxy is the transfer of institutional credibility: a claim acquires the epistemic standing of independent reporting because a trusted news institution, rather than the company itself, is its apparent author. This is the same underlying mechanism Suchman (1995) describes as legitimacy transfer and that the literature on third-party endorsement names more generally; greenwashing by proxy specifies that mechanism for the particular case of a news institution and an environmental claim.

Unlike native advertising, advertorials (Wojdynski & Evans, 2016), and public relations content disguised as news, all of which involve a company paying for or directly controlling placement, greenwashing by proxy does not require payment or direct control. This is also what distinguishes it from source laundering, where an actor deliberately obscures the origin of a message to make it appear independent, and from astroturfing, where an apparently grassroots voice is manufactured (Cho et al., 2011). Greenwashing by proxy can occur without any deliberate concealment or fabrication on the part of Shell or the newsroom: it can result from the ordinary economics of news production that information subsidies and indexing already describe (Gandy, 1982; Bennett, 1990), which is also why it overlaps with churnalism, the practice of publishing supplied material with little independent verification (Davies & Davies, 2008). Where churnalism is a general description of under-resourced reporting across any subject, greenwashing by proxy names the specific consequence of that practice for a corporation's environmental reputation.

This bears directly on whether greenwashing by proxy requires intentional collaboration between Shell and a newsroom. It does not. The concept describes a structural and functional role, and the account that ends up carrying the corporate frame to the public, rather than an intentional alliance or a claim that an outlet represents Shell's interests. A newsroom that reproduces a press release under deadline pressure, with no knowledge of or interest in advancing Shell's reputation, still performs the proxy function if the effect is that Shell's claim reaches the public with the outlet's authority attached to it. This also means that reproducing a press release is not automatically greenwashing by proxy: it becomes so when the claim is presented without independent verification or context, so that the outlet's institutional authority, rather than any evidence the outlet has gathered, is what lends the claim credibility. A report that reproduces the same claim but frames it explicitly as a company statement, or sets it against independent evidence, does not perform the same function even though the underlying content is identical.

It follows that the concept does not require proving that Shell's initial claim is false. Greenwashing by proxy is a claim about the journalistic act, the transfer of institutional authority to a claim, not a claim about the truth or sincerity of what Shell says. This is also where the concept meets its clearest limit: the distinction between poor journalism in general and greenwashing by proxy specifically is a distinction of subject matter and consequence rather than of mechanism. The mechanism identified here, uncritical reproduction under resource constraints, is the same mechanism churnalism and information-subsidy research already describe for any topic; what greenwashing by proxy adds is attention to what that mechanism does specifically to public understanding of a corporation's environmental record. A media organization can therefore be described as a proxy in this sense without any evidence that it represents Shell's interests: the label describes the function a piece of reporting performs for a claim, not an allegation about the outlet's motives.

This distinction has direct consequences for how the findings that follow should be read. Because favorable coverage can result from ordinary source dependence rather than deliberate collusion, I use language throughout this article that describes coverage as enabling, legitimizing, or contributing to the circulation of Shell's claims, rather than language that would imply the newsroom's intent or that would assert, beyond what the analysis can show, that Shell's claims are themselves false.

Because this study reads Shell's claims as corporate narratives that newspapers represent, the analysis draws directly on the two lines of study reviewed above: corporate narrative and legitimacy research supplies the account of why a firm tells the story it tells, and source dependence and framing research supplies the account of how a newsroom's routines can carry that story into public discourse largely intact. This study contributes to journalism and media studies and to environmental communication at the intersection of the two. Its contribution is the concept of greenwashing by proxy itself, which names the way a corporation's green claims gain credibility through the editorial and framing labor of news institutions that recirculate corporate messaging as journalism, rather than through paid advertising that audiences can recognize as promotional. It is useful to scholars studying how media represent powerful actors, to journalists examining their own sourcing routines, and to accountability advocates who need to locate where a misleading claim acquires its legitimacy. Two questions guide the analysis. RQ1: How do Nigerian newspapers frame Shell's sustainability and emission reduction claims? RQ2: How does this framing enable or challenge greenwashing by proxy?

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## 3. Methodology

This study uses critical discourse analysis to examine how Nigerian newspapers frame Shell's sustainability claims, including its emission reduction targets and renewable energy projects. Critical discourse analysis treats news texts as sites where meaning, framing, and power relations are produced, rather than as neutral records of events (Bednarek & Caple, 2014; Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993). I do not count categories or report frequencies of themes in the sense of systematic content analysis. Instead, I read the texts closely to identify the framing and discursive strategies through which newspapers represent a powerful corporate actor and its environmental record. Two research questions guide the analysis. RQ1 asks how Nigerian newspapers frame Shell's sustainability and emission reduction claims. RQ2 asks how this framing enables or challenges what I describe as greenwashing by proxy. I read the texts through a media framing lens. Following Entman (1993), I treat framing as the selection and salience of particular aspects of an issue so as to define a problem, attribute cause, make a moral judgment, and suggest a response. Framing theory directs attention to what each report emphasizes, what it leaves out, and whose account is treated as authoritative.

### 3.1. Data Collection and Sample

I collected articles from the websites and online archives of five leading Nigerian dailies: Premium Times (premiumtimesng.com), The Guardian Nigeria (guardian.ng), ThisDay (thisdaylive.com), Vanguard (vanguardngr.com), and Punch (punchng.com). Searches were run using each outlet's internal site search on 8 March 2025, and covered full article text rather than headlines alone. I used the following search terms, applied individually and in combination: "greenwashing," "oil spillage," "methane emissions," "net-zero," "renewable energy," "Shell Nigeria," "environmental sustainability," and "corporate social responsibility." This was restricted to items published between January 2020 and December 2024. I retained investigative reports, news reports, opinion columns, and editorials that addressed Shell's environmental operations or sustainability claims, and excluded wire-service briefs, items that mentioned Shell only in passing, and paid or sponsored content presented as editorial material.

The search returned 119 records. I removed 20 exact duplicates: cases in which the same article had been indexed twice under URLs that differed only by a trailing slash or a tracking parameter (for example, "?tztc=1"). A further three records were dropped at screening. One URL attributed to The Guardian Nigeria in fact resolved to a different outlet (Ripples Nigeria) and not to the sampled newspaper. A second resolved to a Shell corporate PDF rather than to a news article. A third, published by Premium Times, was labeled "Advert" on the page itself, identifying it as paid promotional content rather than editorial journalism. I dropped this last item because the concept of greenwashing by proxy is defined precisely against paid advertising, to isolate the credibility that editorial framing supplies; retaining a paid item inside the analytic corpus would blur that distinction. This screening left a final corpus of 96 articles. All retained URLs were checked and confirmed live and correctly attributed as of 27 July 2026; the full list, including the excluded and duplicate records and the reason each was excluded, is reported in the data deposit described in the Data Availability Statement.

Table 1 reports the distribution of the 96 articles by outlet and year. The corpus is concentrated in 2023 and 2024 (58 of 96 articles), which tracks the period of heaviest sustainability messaging around Shell's January 2024 divestment announcement and continuing coverage of its 2020 methane pledge, rather than an artifact of when the searches were run. ThisDay's 20 articles fall entirely within 2023–2024; earlier ThisDay coverage of Shell may exist but did not surface under the search protocol above, and I note this as a limitation of the sample rather than evidence that ThisDay was silent on Shell before 2023.

**Table 1.** Corpus Composition by Outlet and Year.

| Outlet | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Premium Times | 1 | 2 | 6 | 2 | 5 | 16 |
| The Guardian Nigeria | 3 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 19 |
| ThisDay | 0 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 13 | 20 |
| Vanguard | 4 | 6 | 1 | 2 | 9 | 22 |
| Punch | 0 | 2 | 3 | 9 | 5 | 19 |
| Total | 8 | 14 | 16 | 23 | 35 | 96 |

I selected these five dailies because they are widely treated as prominent national outlets. An independent, peer-reviewed study of Nigerian online news coverage selected four of the same five outlets, The Guardian Nigeria, Premium Times, Punch, and Vanguard, as leading Nigerian online newspapers using an objective web-traffic ranking method (Bamigbolayin-Afolabi et al., 2025), and industry traffic data separately places Vanguard and Punch among Nigeria's highest-traffic news websites, each with more than 100 million annual visits in a ranking produced by the media analytics firm SquirrelPR (Vanguard News, 2025). Comparable third-party traffic data for ThisDay was not available at the time of writing; it is included for its established national reach and its long-standing coverage of the oil and gas sector. Together, the five outlets span a spectrum of commercial pressure. All five outlets are privately owned public daily news source; the sample does not include a state-owned news source. ThisDay, Vanguard, Punch, and The Guardian Nigeria are mass-market commercial dailies whose revenue depends substantially on advertising; Premium Times is a digital investigative outlet that operates on a nonprofit, grant- and donation-funded model. Comparing outlets under these different commercial pressures lets me examine how revenue structure relates to how an outlet handles the same corporate claims. I set the window from 2020 to 2024 because Shell's 2020 methane pledge and its 2024 onshore divestment bracket the period in which its sustainability messaging in Nigeria was most active.

I also coded each article's genre as news report, investigation, opinion, or editorial, through close reading of each article's byline and section placement rather than relying on section labeling alone. For Premium Times, section placement is explicit in the outlet's own URL structure (news, business, opinion, and investigation are separate sections); for The Guardian Nigeria, ThisDay, Vanguard, and Punch, I checked each article's assigned category (recovered from the page's navigation markup or, where that was not exposed, from the live-rendered page) together with its byline, since a named individual byline under a non-news category is the clearest signal of a column rather than a staff-reported item. Of the 96 articles, 91 are news reports, 3 are opinion columns (2 in Premium Times, 1 in ThisDay), 1 is an editorial (ThisDay), and 1 is an explicitly labeled investigation (Premium Times). The corpus is therefore not, in practice, a mix of hard news and opinion of a kind that could by itself produce the outlet-level contrast reported in the Section 3.3: the comparison between the favorable and the critical outlets is overwhelmingly a comparison of how each outlet's own news desks, rather than its opinion or editorial pages, cover the same set of events. The complete genre coding for every article is recorded in the accompanying data file (see Data Availability Statement).

Within this corpus, I investigated how the company leverages digital affordances such as hyperlinked reports and infographics (Eyman, 2015), and corporate narratives, to present

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its environmental actions favorably alongside continuing environmental degradation. I also examined the role played by hegemonic media institutions in making it easier for Shell to dominate the sustainability narrative and enhance corporate legitimacy while marginalizing critical voices (Lull & Hinerman, 1997; Hansen & Machin, 2013).

### 3.2. Level of Analysis

For the level of analysis, I draw on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model and concentrate on the textual or descriptive dimension, while keeping the discursive practice dimension in view. The textual dimension is the most appropriate primary level for studying how newspapers frame corporate claims, because framing in news is carried by concrete choices in the text itself (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). I attend to lexical choice, naming and labeling, transitivity and agency (who is named as the actor and who is acted upon), modality (how certain or hedged a claim is), presupposition, headline framing, and patterns of source attribution and quotation (Adekunle, 2025; Hammond & Wellington, 2012). These features show where a report adopts Shell's wording, whose voice is granted authority, and whether corporate claims are repeated or interrogated. I link this textual reading to the discursive practice dimension by noting how press releases are recirculated as news, since the way a text is produced and distributed shapes the frame the public receives.

To structure this reading, I developed a coding scheme, reported in full in Appendix A, that operationalizes the textual features listed above together with the three mechanisms through which I argue greenwashing by proxy operates in the text: recirculation of corporate statements as news, selective sourcing, and favorable framing. I applied this scheme to each of the 96 articles through close reading, working outlet by outlet, and used it to identify the dominant framing strategy or strategies at work in each piece before selecting the illustrative passages reported in the Section 3.3. Because the analysis is interpretive rather than a systematic content analysis, I do not report intercoder reliability statistics or category frequencies as a quantitative content-analytic study would. The coding scheme instead functions as a transparent, replicable record of the categories a second reader could apply to the same corpus, and it is included in full in Appendix A and in the data deposit described in the Data Availability Statement.

In reading the coverage this way, I attend to three ways greenwashing by proxy operates in the texts. First, and most directly, media outlets recirculate Shell's press releases as news. A company statement about a scholarship scheme, a community project, or an emission target is reproduced as a report, often with little more than light editing, so that a promotional claim reaches the public in the form of journalism rather than advertising. This is the core mechanism, because the value Shell gains comes from the news outlet's standing as an independent reporter, not from any payment the audience can see.

Second, greenwashing by proxy depends on whose voice the report carries. When a story draws only on Shell and government officials and includes no independent source, the corporate account becomes the news account. Source dependence of this kind, where the range of views in a report tracks the range of official and corporate sources rather than the wider public debate, is what allows a claim to pass into the public record without being tested.

Third, the framing itself does the work. Media outlets describe Shell's divestment as a sustainability effort, a small scholarship scheme as community development, and an emission target as climate leadership, selecting and emphasizing the elements that fit a green story while leaving out the contrary record. Taken together, these three patterns, recirculation, selective sourcing, and favorable framing, show how news platforms, and not paid promotion, supply the credibility on which greenwashing by proxy rests.

### *3.3. Findings*

This section reports what the news texts show, organized by outlet group and by the framing strategies that recur across the corpus of 96 articles: 16 from Premium Times, 19 from The Guardian Nigeria, 20 from ThisDay, 22 from Vanguard, and 19 from Punch. Rather than sorting outlets into two fixed camps, I read the coverage as occupying different positions on a continuum that runs from corporate message reproduction, through some balance and news reporting with context, to critical reporting and investigative exposure. ThisDay, Vanguard, and Punch cluster toward the reproduction end of this continuum more often than Premium Times and The Guardian Nigeria do, but all three also carry pieces that supply independent context or challenge a Shell claim directly, and the two more critical outlets carry some reporting that simply relays a Shell or government statement. Table 2 gives illustrative examples of where specific articles sit on this continuum, showing the textual features, lexical choice, source attribution, and modality that place them there; the examples are illustrative of variation within and across outlets, not a claim that any outlet occupies a single fixed position across all of its coverage. I hold interpretation of what these patterns mean for the wider argument until the Section 4.

**Table 2.** Illustrative Examples of Framing Position Across the Outlet Continuum.

| Outlet & Date | Headline (Shell's Framing) | Sources Used/ Independent Voice | Continuum Position |
|---|---|---|---|
| Punch, October 2023 | "NNPCL-Shell awards scholarships to 35 Niger Delta students" (Akintayo, 2023) | Shell/NNPCL statement only; no community reaction or scale comparison | Corporate message reproduction |
| Vanguard, September 2024 | Shell spokesperson quoted stating the company "spent $42.2 million" on host communities in 2023 (Oritse, 2024) | Shell spokesperson only; unhedged modality treats the figure as fact | Corporate message reproduction |
| ThisDay, November 2024 | NAPE conference coverage; Shell named "best-exhibiting energy company"; MD quoted on "commitment to public safety" | Shell MD and conference organizers; no host-community response included | Corporate message reproduction |
| The Guardian Nigeria, February 2021 | "Shell unveils green strategy after oil output peak" | Shell statement, but headline itself juxtaposes the green claim with continued oil output | News reporting with context |
| Punch, March 2024 | "50% of Shell's gas flaring occurred in Nigeria—Report" (Olawin, 2024b) | Independent report data leads the headline, not a Shell statement | Critical reporting |
| Premium Times, October 2023 | "Shell's controversial data raises questions about methane emissions in Nigeria, others" (Koop et al., 2023) | Independent analysts quoted disputing Shell's own reduction figures | Investigative exposure |
| The Guardian Nigeria/Premium Times, 2022 | Shell's spill clean-up reported as containment rather than restoration (Godwin, 2022) | Community and independent observation set against Shell's account | Critical reporting |

### *3.4. Corporate Message Reproduction in ThisDay, Vanguard, and Punch*

Shell presents itself as a socially responsible company focused on environmental sustainability and the well-being of host communities. Reports in this group more often carry that sense of self-presentation with limited independent scrutiny, though, as the continuum framing above suggests, not uniformly so: the same outlets also carry reporting on how Shell uses media narratives and lawsuits to frame its actions favorably, deflect blame, and contest accountability for environmental damage in Nigeria. The Bonga oil spill lawsuit (Onoyume, 2024; Igoni, 2021) illustrates this pattern: despite a $3.6 billion penalty assessed by the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) for the release of 40,000 barrels of crude into the Atlantic Ocean, Shell used protracted litigation to contest the scale of its liability, and fishing and coastal agricultural communities argue that remediation to date is insufficient. A similar pattern appears in the Oruma, Goi, and Ikot Ada Udo spills (Akanbi, 2021), where legal maneuvers delayed compensation until the UK High Court granted more than 13,000 farmers and fishermen the right to sue Shell over allegations that the company prioritizes profit over its stated social responsibility (Akanbi, 2021). Coverage of these disputes in this group of outlets more often frames them as complex legal proceedings than as instances of corporate negligence, which is itself a lexical and framing choice: "legal dispute" presupposes contested facts, where "spill" or "negligence" would assign responsibility more directly.

Shell's divestment from onshore operations, widely covered across all five outlets (Aina, 2024; Esiedesa, 2024), shows the same pattern in coverage that treats the move as a step toward cleaner energy without examining who inherits the environmental liability it leaves behind (Enumah, 2024). Coverage of the divestment in ThisDay and Punch draws substantially on Shell's own framing of the move as a "sustainability effort," without independent investigation of its effect on host communities, even as financial reporting elsewhere shows Shell continuing to invest heavily in offshore extraction, which sits uneasily with a clean-energy framing of the same divestment (Enumah, 2024). Aina (2024) and Akpan (2024) document how local operators without Shell's technical or financial resources have inherited derelict spill sites and abandoned pipelines, a consequence largely absent from the reporting that frames the divestment as corporate responsibility rather than as a transfer of environmental liability.

The gap between Shell's claims and community experience recurs in Vanguard's (Vanguard News, 2024) report on the Ogbotobo Federated Communities in Bayelsa State, where residents describe repeatedly broken promises, including unfulfilled scholarships and abandoned infrastructure, and community leaders have threatened to halt Shell's operations. These accounts illustrate how Shell's corporate social responsibility measures can function as reputational shields rather than instruments of change, a reading available only once the reporting includes the community's own account rather than Shell's alone.

Across ThisDay, Vanguard, and Punch, the pattern that recurs most is source dependence: government statements and corporate press releases supply the account, and the language of the report tracks the language of the source. Oritse (2024) reports, without independent verification, a Shell spokesperson's claim that the company spent $42.2 million developing host communities in 2023; the modality here is unhedged: the figure is presented as settled fact rather than as a claim attributed to Shell. A related example is Akintayo's (2023) report that Shell awarded scholarships to 35 secondary school students in the Niger Delta: the number is accurate to the press release, but the report does not set it against the scale of the population affected by Shell's operations, so the framing effect is to let a modest figure read as a substantial achievement by omission of comparison rather than by any false statement. ThisDay's (2024) coverage of a Shell-sponsored conference of the National Association of Petroleum Explorationists, at which Shell was named the event's best-exhibiting energy company, quotes Shell Nigeria's managing director stating that the company's "commitment to public safety is reflected in its activities," an unhedged claim carried without reference to the company's unresolved obligations to host communities.

This is not the only pattern the same outlets carry. Idowu (2023) gives voice to victims of the Bonga oil spill whose accounts directly counter Shell's own prior statements in the same outlet; Olawin (2024b) amplifies the voices of gas-flaring victims in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, and its own report that 50% of Shell's 2023 gas flaring occurred in Nigeria leads with an independent finding rather than a Shell claim. Oritse (2024) also reports a suit brought against Shell by the National Inland Waterways Authority over an unpaid N4 billion debt, coverage that, because it originates from a regulator rather than from Shell, exposes a gap between the company's public messaging and its financial conduct without needing to editorialize.

*3.5. Independent Verification and Critical Reporting in Premium Times and the Guardian Nigeria*

Premium Times and The Guardian Nigeria are known for credible reporting in the energy sector, and their investigations more often set Shell's claims against independent evidence and community testimony than reproduce them. A Premium Times investigation documents continued gas flaring by Shell despite regulatory measures intended to reduce methane emissions (Koop et al., 2023), and The Guardian, with Osayande (2021), reports Shell's appeal against a Federal High Court judgment that had ordered the company to stop continuous flaring in the Iwhrekan community, Delta State, coverage in which the court's finding, not Shell's position, is the anchor of the story. Olawin (2024b) reports that 50% of Shell's 2023 gas flaring occurred in Nigeria, associated with respiratory illness and further environmental degradation, and documents Shell's continuation of the practice despite government fines and unmet commitments to gas-capture investment.

On methane specifically, Koop et al. (2023) reports that independent experts dispute Shell's claimed reductions in upstream flaring, citing undeclared flaring at fields Shell operates (Koop et al., 2023), and documents the disproportionate health burden gas flaring places on nearby communities. The Guardian's reporting on biodiversity loss and soil degradation from uncurbed flaring (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2010) sets Shell's environmental record against its public declarations rather than reproducing the latter.

On oil spillage, Godwin (2022) reports that Shell's clean-up operations function more as containment than as restoration, and The Guardian, with Igoni (2021), reports that Shell understates the severity of spills, a claim attributed to independent investigation and community testimony rather than to Shell's own account. Coverage of Shell's divestment in these two outlets similarly foregrounds structural consequences that ThisDay, Vanguard, and Punch's coverage of the same event leaves out: Akpan (2024) and Ibunge (2024) report that the divestment strategy transfers long-term environmental liability to operators with fewer resources than Shell, and Ibunge (2024) links Shell's withdrawal from oil-endowed zones to abandoned infrastructure and continuing spills, framing the divestment as a means of disengaging from pending liability rather than as a sustainability measure. Olawin (2024a) and The Guardian Nigeria also report on Shell's political relationships and their bearing on regulatory enforcement, again anchoring the account in independent reporting rather than in Shell's own statements.

On renewable energy investment, Olawin (2024a) and, separately, Koop et al. (2023) report that only a small share of Shell's revenue is directed to green initiatives relative to its public emphasis on sustainability, and characterize the company's public communication on this point as outpacing its investment. Premium Times and The Guardian Nigeria converge on the same recurring themes, such as gas flaring, unmitigated spills, regulatory friction, and a gap between green messaging and green investment, using independent investigation and community testimony as the anchor for each.

Read together, these examples illustrate the critical-reporting and investigative-exposure end of the continuum introduced at the start of this section: Premium Times and The Guardian Nigeria more often set a Shell claim against independent evidence than the other three outlets do, and in doing so treat the claim as contested rather than settled. The next section considers what this pattern of variation, rather than a strict two-outlet-group split, implies for how greenwashing by proxy operates.

## 4. Discussion

Read together, the findings answer the two research questions and show why the framing of Shell's claims matters. On the first question, the coverage varies along the continuum introduced in the Findings. ThisDay, Vanguard, and Punch more often frame Shell's claims on Shell's own terms, selecting Shell and government officials as sources and carrying their wording with little challenge, so that a divestment reads as a sustainability effort and a small scholarship scheme reads as community development. The Guardian Nigeria and Premium Times more often frame the same events by foregrounding affected communities, court actions, and independent investigation, so that the same divestment reads as an attempt to shed liability. The events being reported are largely the same across outlets; what differs is selection, salience, and sourcing, which is what framing theory leads us to expect (Entman, 1993). The frame is not added on top of the facts; it is built into which facts are chosen and whose account is allowed to stand.

I describe this as a difference between outlets rather than a difference caused by ownership. The design of this study, a purposive sample of published texts read through critical discourse analysis, can show that ThisDay, Vanguard, and Punch carry Shell's framing more often than Premium Times and The Guardian Nigeria do; it cannot, on its own, show that ownership structure, advertising revenue from Shell, or a specific editorial policy is what produces that difference, because the study did not examine ownership records, outlets' income sources, Shell's advertising spend, or newsroom procedures, and did not interview journalists at any of the five outlets. The pattern is consistent with commercial-pressure explanations already established in the political economy of news (Bennett, 1990; Herman & Chomsky, 1988) and with the resourcing account that information-subsidy and indexing research offers (Gandy, 1982), but consistency is not confirmation, and I return to this as a limitation of the design in the Section 5.

On the second question, the favorable outlets do not simply report Shell's claims; their reporting routines are what let those claims function as greenwashing by proxy. When a newspaper reproduces a Shell press release as a news story, attributes the central claims to Shell or to government officials, and adds no contrary source, the corporate claim takes on the authority of independent journalism. This is the same dynamic that churnalism research describes for under-resourced reporting generally (Davies & Davies, 2008) and that Gandy's (1982) concept of the information subsidy explains structurally: a press release lowers the cost of producing a story, and a newsroom under deadline pressure has every incentive to use it. What greenwashing by proxy adds to that general account is the specific consequence for Shell's environmental reputation once the subsidized account is published: the value Shell gains does not come from advertising that audiences can recognize as paid promotion, it comes from the editorial labor of a news institution that audiences trust to be neutral, which is Suchman's (1995) legitimacy transfer performed through a specific institutional channel, the press. The critical outlets show the reverse process. By attributing claims to named investigations, quoting Niger Delta residents, and setting Shell's statements against its continued flaring and spills, they withhold that authority and return the claim to the status of a contested assertion. The same institutional position that can lend credibility can also withdraw it.

Evidence from outside the news corpus helps explain why the favorable framing meets so little resistance, and it belongs here in the Discussion rather than in the Findings. The World Bank's gas flaring data place Nigeria among the largest gas-flaring countries in the world, with Shell a significant contributor, while Shell's own 2022 sustainability reporting claims substantial reductions in upstream flaring. Independent analysts question those figures, pointing to undeclared flaring at sites where Shell and other operators work (Li et al., 2022). The mismatch between the discourse of reduction and the record of continued extraction is consistent with what researchers have found across the major oil companies, where green language has run well ahead of green investment (Li et al., 2022; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Placed next to this external record, the favorable Nigerian coverage is not merely generous; it fills the gap that independent scrutiny would otherwise occupy, a gap UNEP's own environmental assessment of Ogoniland (UNEP, 2011) had already sought to document outside the press entirely. News production routines that favor fast, low-cost sourcing over verification, and a broader relationship between journalism and public relations in which press offices increasingly supply newsroom content directly, offer a plausible account of how that gap goes unfilled, though, again, this study did not observe newsroom routines directly and treats this as an inference from the published record rather than as a demonstrated mechanism.

The implications run in three directions. For media studies, the case shows that greenwashing is not only a corporate communication problem but a journalistic one, located in the routine choices of sourcing and framing that decide whose version of an environmental story the public receives (Mocatta, 2015). For environmental communication, greenwashing by proxy offers a way to name the role of the news institution as the carrier of a corporate claim, distinct from the claim itself and from the advertising channels usually studied. In practice, the contrast between the favorable and the critical outlets is encouraging, because it shows that the same press system already contains the corrective: where reporters drew on independent sources and affected communities, the green narrative did not hold. Strengthening that kind of reporting, and examining directly whether commercial pressure is what discourages it, a question this design cannot itself answer, is the natural next step suggested by the pattern this study describes. These conclusions rest on an interpretive reading of a purposive sample of five newspapers over a fixed period, so they are best understood as an account of how this framing works rather than a measure of how often it occurs, and future work could test the pattern across a larger and more varied set of outlets.

## 5. Conclusions

This article has examined the relationship between media outlets, corporate communication, and environmental journalism in Nigeria, using Shell's sustainability messaging as a case. The findings show that ThisDay, Vanguard, and Punch more often present Shell's environmental initiatives on favorable terms, while Premium Times and The Guardian Nigeria more often set those claims against independent evidence and community testimony, highlighting gaps between the company's public messaging and its environmental record. Shell's emphasis on renewable energy investment and carbon neutrality goals is repeatedly contested, in the more critical outlets, by reporting on continuing gas flaring, oil spills, and community harm in the Niger Delta.

The pattern of variation across outlets described here points to opportunities for strengthening critical and investigative environmental journalism in Nigeria, including through greater editorial independence and clearer disclosure of corporate sourcing. Journalists and media organizations are well placed to expand independent verification of corporate environmental claims and to draw more consistently on community and civil-society sources; McCurdy and Power (2007) point to media education and investment in investigative capacity as structural steps in this direction, and diversifying outlets' revenue away from corporate advertising is a plausible further step, though this study did not test whether revenue diversification changes coverage in practice. Nurse (2016) frames corporate greenwashing by companies such as Shell as a problem that extends beyond misleading communication to produce environmental harm for local communities and, cumulatively, for global climate stability; addressing it in the Nigerian context depends on a press able to report on corporate environmental claims independently of the commercial pressures those same corporations can exert.

## 6. Limitations

This study has a number of limitations that determine how its findings should be read. The corpus is drawn from five Nigerian outlets and concerns a single corporation (Shell in 2020–2024); the findings describe how greenwashing by proxy operates in this case rather than establishing its prevalence across Nigerian media or other corporate actors. The 96 articles are not evenly distributed across outlets, sixteen to twenty-two per outlet, and combine 91 news reports, 3 opinion columns, 1 editorial, and 1 investigation; genre was coded for every article through close reading of its byline and section placement, and the corpus is overwhelmingly news reporting rather than opinion or editorial content, so the outlet-level contrast reported in the Findings is not, in the main, an artifact of genre mixing. The uneven distribution of articles across outlets remains a limitation independent of genre. The analysis was conducted by a single researcher through close, interpretive reading, without a second coder and without formal intercoder reliability testing, which is appropriate to the interpretive design but means the coding decisions reported here have not been independently replicated. The study does not include audience research, so it makes no claim about how readers actually interpret this coverage, and it does not include interviews with journalists, editors, or Shell's communications staff, so it cannot demonstrate what newsroom procedures, commercial relationships, or editorial policies produced the patterns observed; the account offered in the Discussion of why outlets vary is an inference from the published record, not a finding about organizational or financial influence that this design is able to confirm. For the same reason, the findings should not be generalized beyond this case to Nigerian media as a whole or to media-mediated greenwashing in the Global South more generally; they are offered as an account of how the mechanism can operate in one setting, which future research, including newsroom interviews, audience studies, and comparison across a larger and more varied set of outlets and corporations, could test further.

While the media has a role in challenging corporate greenwashing, that role depends on editorial independence from the corporate influence it is asked to scrutinize. Advancing environmental accountability in Nigeria, as elsewhere, depends on both responsible journalism and genuine corporate responsibility.

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## Appendix A. Coding Scheme

This appendix reports the coding scheme referenced in the Section 3. It operationalizes the textual features drawn from Fairclough's (1995) framework and Entman's (1993) account of framing, together with the three mechanisms through which greenwashing by proxy is argued to operate in the text. A second reader applying this scheme to the corpus deposited with this article (see Data Availability Statement) should be able to identify the same dominant framing strategy in a given article.

| Category | Definition | Coding Question | Illustrative Indicator |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lexical choice | Word-level choices carrying evaluative weight. | Does the report adopt Shell's own vocabulary for an action, or neutral/critical vocabulary? | "Clean energy transition" vs. "asset sale" for the same divestment. |
| Naming and labeling | How actors and events are named. | Is Shell named as a specific, accountable agent, or referred to institutionally ("the company," "the industry")? Are affected communities named individually or aggregated? | Community members named and quoted vs. described only as "residents." |
| Transitivity and agency | Grammatical structure assigning agency for an action. | Is Shell the grammatical subject of a harmful action (active voice), or is the agent obscured through passive voice or nominalization? | "Shell's pipeline spilled crude oil" vs. "a spill occurred." |
| Modality | Degree of certainty or hedging attached to a claim. | Is Shell's sustainability claim reported as established fact, or attributed as a claim ("Shell says")? | "Shell has cut emissions by 45%" vs. "Shell says it has cut emissions by 45%." |
| Presupposition | Background assumptions treated as already established. | Does the report presuppose the sincerity or success of a claim without evidencing it? | A headline presupposing that divestment "improves" the environment. |
| Headline framing | What the headline foregrounds. | Does the headline lead with Shell's claim, with an affected community's response, or with an independent finding? | Headline centered on Shell's press statement vs. on a community's legal action. |
| Source attribution | Whose voice is quoted or cited. | Does the report rely only on Shell and government sources, or include independent, community, or NGO sources? | Proportion of quoted material originating from Shell's own statements. |
| Recirculation | Whether a press release becomes a news item. | Is the report substantially a Shell or government statement reproduced with light editing and no independent verification? | A scholarship announcement published near-verbatim from a Shell release. |
| Selective sourcing | The range of viewpoints represented in a report. | Does the range of sources track the range of elite and corporate opinion, or does it include contesting voices? | A divestment report citing only Shell and a government official. |
| Framing outcome | The net effect of the features above. | Read together, does the article lend Shell's claim the authority of independent journalism (proxy-enabling), or treat it as contested (proxy-challenging)? | Coded as favorable, critical, or mixed for each article. |

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