Chapter 10

Malevolent Trespassers or Benevolent Guests: A Meta-Analysis of Media Representation of African Migrants

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ABSTRACT

Migration, a phenomenon where different factors compel people to move from one location to a new location, has remained an intrinsic feature of the human world. Many studies have been conducted on media portrayal of migrants, little scholarly attention has been paid to the dominant image of African migrants in the news media. Therefore, this study, deploying agenda-setting and framing theories, attempted a meta-analysis of the existing studies on media portrayal of African migrants with a view to establishing the dominant image of the migrants as reported by the media. Twenty-five journal articles on portrayal of African migrants purposively selected through online search were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Findings reveal that the media portrayed African migrants via negative lens with the use of ubiquitous derogatory frames which include: aliens, foreigners, purveyors of social ills, vagrant, criminals, chaotic and hopeless. These dominant negative images of Africa and African migrants portend a great danger to globalisation and global economic integration. The realisation of comprehensive globalization and global economic integration will remain elusive as long as the media continue to give more prominence to the negatives of migration than the positives. Therefore, the media agenda, in all climes, should be used to positively influence public agenda and policies as regards migration.

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INTRODUCTION

Human beings, by their nature, are itinerant: They constantly move from one place to another for many reasons, chief among which is survival. However, Africa is often seen as a continent of mass migration and displacement caused by poverty, violent conflict and environmental stress (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016). Expatiating more on the perceived general image of Africa by other continents, Harth (2009) observes that Africa is viewed as a place of danger, darkness, violence, poverty and hopelessness. The author states further that “many Westerners view Africa as primarily a jungle or desert landscape where the people speak unintelligible languages” (Harth, 2009, p. 5). Consequently, it has been argued and empirically established that the mass media, being the invention and tool of the Western world, are being deployed to portray the Black Race in manners that give legitimacy to the stereotypical ideas of Africa as a continent of poverty and conflict (Flahaux et al., 2016). Profoundly, Scott (2009), states that “the media coverage of Africa is understood to typify the very worst elements of media coverage of the wider world” (p. 535). Also, according to Hawk (1992), Africa is often presented in the Western media as a homogeneous continent and in a more specific observation, Brookes (1995) cited by Scott (2009) reports that the UK press uses frames such as presenting Africans as animals, as chaotic, brutal and wild, and Africa as a continent which is gravely dependent upon the West and a burden to it. Media, in umpteen times, frame Africa as a place of darkness (Alozie, 2007). However, scholars like De Haas (2007) have argued that despite media hysteria on the growth of African migration to Europe, the actual numbers seem quite small.

Significantly, the biased media portrayal of migrant groups is not particular to African continent. It is a common trend across different countries of the world. Buttressing this reality, Christoph (2012) aggregates some studies conducted on media portrayal of migration across the world and concludes that diverse migrant groups across all climes are often portrayed in a negative manner in the mass media, “usually referring to them as members of an ethnic group rather than as individuals, leading to the creation of a negative image of the entire group in the host society” (p. 97). The author, therefore, avers that the portrayal of ethnic minorities and migrants in the mass media is not likely to change in the near future (Christoph, 2012). Similarly, Pooley (2014) observes that “the global media cast migrants in a negative light and construe migration as a problem. In turn, such reporting can fuel discrimination against immigrants and can make their lives more difficult” (p. 3). This is in alignment with the assertion of Nolan, Farquharson, Politoff and Marjoribanks (2011) that numerous studies have demonstrated how migrants (refugees and asylum seekers) are frequently portrayed in a negative and problematic manner in the news media with labelling that borders on stereotypes, invocation of fear and danger.

Eberl, Meltzer, Heidenreich, Herrero, Theorin, and Strömbäck (2018) also lend their voice to the discourse of media portrayal of migrants when they state that migrants are generally under-represented and shown as delinquents or criminals. They further reveal that “while migrant groups are generally underrepresented, when they are in the media, they are often framed as economic, cultural, or criminal threats and thus covered in a highly unfavourable way” (p.13). Meanwhile, it has been discovered that humans are more interested in and more reactive to negative information which therefore implies that media firms, in a bid to enhance and sustain patronage of their contents, would tilt towards bias and negative style of reporting (Soroka & McAdams, 2015; Ibrahim, 2016). This can inform the reason for the biased negative portrayal of migrants by the media. Currently, the divisive impact of negative media reportage of migrants is pervasive across many countries and it is really affecting international diplomatic relations and economic integration. However, scholars like Scott, (2009); Georgiou, (2012)