

Uses and Gratifications in Newspaper Columns: A Thematic and Functional Analysis of Readers' Reactions to Mike Awoyinfa's *Press Clips*

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ABSTRACT

Readers' reaction as an effective feedback mechanism, which thrives on subjectivity and marked individualism, is an important mode of sharing knowledge between the newspaper audience and columnists. Little scholarly attention is paid to the needs of readers of newspaper columns by mass media researchers. The study analyses the thematic contents and functional values of readers' reactions. Our findings show that the content of the readers' reactions is a function of these variables: subject matter, style, and displeasure. Functionally, readers' reaction, by creating a forum for exchange of comment and criticism, fosters social integration, provides an avenue for columnists to improve the way they write, helps newspapers build and sustain readership, provides a means of assessing audience's understanding of, and disposition to, media messages, and gives column loyalists a platform for the propagation of viewpoints and ventilation of feelings. Readers' reaction, therefore, is a requirement for a free society.

Keywords: Uses and gratifications, readers' reactions, newspaper columns, thematic analysis, functional analysis, Mike Awoyinfa, Press Clips.

1. Introduction

Press Clips, a long-running Nigerian newspaper column, is written by Mr. Mike Awoyinfa, a seasoned journalist, author, and media manager. Awoyinfa started the column from his days at the defunct *Weekend Concord* newspaper, a paper he also edited; and when he pioneered the establishment of *The Sun* newspaper in 2003, following the proscription of the Concord Group of Newspapers in 1993, he took *Press Clips* to *The Sun*. Interestingly, after ten years' break, the column, like in its *Weekend Concord* days, continued to command an overwhelming readership, which expectedly attract equally considerable responses, albeit in written form, from its regular readers.

Although Awoyinfa would leave *The Sun* in 2010, to jointly set up another newspaper, *Entertainment Express*, with Mr. Dimgba Igwe, he has continued to write *Press Clips* in *The Sun*, perhaps for the sake of its teeming readers. The study, therefore, seeks to know the thematic contents of readers' reactions to *Press Clips* and the functional values of readers' reactions to the writer of *Press Clips*.

It is pertinent to note that a column can also mean "a row of type of any length" (Ike, 2005:39), but column here shall refer to a genre of journalism, which, since making its way into the newspapers and magazines, has greatly enriched their contents; and this interesting genre of the print media derived its name from its packaging and presentation in the newspapers and magazines, as it is distinctively packaged, often in double-columns, and presented to fill about a column of newsprint for easy identification by readers (Braden, 1997; Nwosu, 2004).

2. Overview of Newspaper Columns

Traditionally, the mass media are known to perform a tripartite function to the society. These functions are information, education, and entertainment. With the passage of time, however, the mass media assumed an additional function known as surveillance, and this surveillance function has, in turn, metamorphosed to the watchdog and crusade-dog roles now associated with the modern mass media.

Today, the sustained progress made by the mass media in carrying out its watchdog and crusade-dog roles eventually resulted in a new genre of journalism widely known among mass media scholars as interpretative journalism, which is the style of news gathering and reporting that involves a careful thought analysis of an idea as well as dogged pursuit of facts to bring together information in a new, more complete context that provides deeper public understanding (Ike, 2005). But while it was easy for the broadcast media, because of its flexibility, to integrate interpretative journalism into its other outlets, it was not the same for the more conservative print media; so the need to accommodate interpretative journalism into the print media offerings in the face of the challenges posed by multi-media competition resulted in the expansion of the commentary genre of the print media, which according to Okoye (2002), includes editorials, opinion articles, editorial cartoons and letters-to-the-editor. As a result, the interpretative functions of Features and Editorials were also extended so that newspapers and magazines now have a genre known as Column!

Explaining the column as an important part of media writing, Okunna, Omenugha, and Ebeze (2002:243), write that:

The column is a write-up in form of a feature that reflects the opinion of the writer. It is normally by (sic) authorities on particular issues (medical column, humour column, gossip column etc). The column contains the view of an individual on a particular issue affecting the society. Columns are noted for their regularity of publication. Most columns appear regularly in the same position, on the same page of newspaper, under the same by-line.

The above explanation of the column by Okunna *et al* clearly points out some of the characteristics of the column. First, the column is written by an individual who truly has something to say. Secondly, the column is written by individuals who, by virtue of their deep understanding of a subject matter, qualify as authorities in that field. Again, the column is based on the issues that have direct bearing on the society. Also, for the column to be more impactful, it has to be easily identifiable. Another important point raised by Okunna *et al* is the diverse nature of columns, which makes it defy, like communication, every attempt by communication scholars to give it a generally acceptable definition; corroborating this stance, Sheeman (1972:131), writes that: "Columns, in a sense, defy definition because of the multiplicity of types, and purposes. There are columns written for businessmen, for sports fans, for women and for persons interested in travel. Columns

are written on international affairs, on politics, on finance, on health, on fashions, on cooking and on dozens of other subjects.” In fact, “Columns are written on every subject imaginable, from managing money to handling death and dying” (Braden, 1997:191). However, despite the difficulty a generally acceptable definition of columns poses, some scholars have offered some definitions, and explanations, of a column. One of such scholars is Ike (2005:39), who defines a column as “an article that appears regularly, expressing a viewpoint found in newspapers and magazines.” Here, again, it bears pointing out that Ike’s definition of a column above is rather shallow. It is not a true representation of what a newspaper or magazine column is all about. The definition offers a reader who does not know what a newspaper column looks like little help in recognising one when he sees it; and it misses out on some key attributes of a column. In fact, Ike’s definition can also, although still not correctly, pass for that of an editorial or a feature story. Granted that Ike was right about the regularity of a column and the fact that it ideally expresses a viewpoint per edition of a publication, he failed to note that a column is written by an individual and is often found in the same position, and on the same page, with a column logo, which he ironically defines as “a graphic device that labels regularly appearing material by the writers (sic) name, the column name and a small mug or drawing of the writer” (Ike, 2005:39); all this would have brought his definition of a column closer to what it truly is, as well as made it possible for readers who do not previously know what a newspaper column looks like identify it through the definition. For Nwosu (2003:133): “A column is a write-up in form of (sic) article that reflects the opinion of the writer. It is normally boxed and written by authorities on particular issues. The important aspect of the column is that it contains the view of an individual on a particular issue or on many issues affecting that society. Columns are noted for their regularity of publication. It is often patronised by column loyalists. Columns could be signed or unsigned.” Obviously, the above definition is an improvement on the earlier definition, as Nwosu brings a new dimension to the meaning of a column when he rightly observes that columns could be “signed or unsigned”. Columns are traditionally signed, but editors also allow some columns to run without a recognised author for reasons ranging from a need to avoid over-exposure of the columnist to that of ensuring continuity of authorship; and when a column is not signed, it goes with only the column logo and name, which serve as a pseudonym. For instance, in *Daily Express*, a London newspaper, *By the Way* is described as a column consisting of “unsigned humorous pieces” (*Daily Express*, p.2, January 5, 1996). Although the column, which was later changed to “*Beachcomber*”, was in the period 1919-1975 written by D.B Wyndham-Lewis, J.B. Morton, Major John Bernard Arbuthot, and William Hartson, the columnists did not use their names, instead they wrote under the column name. Furthermore, in a rather intensely personal perspective, Awoyinfa (2009:17), observes that bias, which is anathema in news stories, is a significant attribute of the column. He writes: “From my experience, I would like to see a column as a platform offered MR. (sic) [me] in a newspaper to share my perspective on anything under the sun. My column is me. It is my world view. It is the world as I see it. It is a means of expressing my thoughts, my ideas on the burning issues of the day or of the week. Unlike news report, a column is usually biased, because it is the opinion of the writer.”

Since the multiplicity of types and purposes has made the definition of a column rather diverse, scholars favour its classification based on the scope of subjects it deals with and the depth with which it treats the subjects. Thus, beyond simply categorizing a column as political, economic, business, sports, gossip, humour, or entertainment, etc., writers on this subject have opted for its broader classification, a point that Uyo (2009:4) agrees with when he says that: “Columns that deal with any subject, be it political, economic, social, scientific, etc. are generalist in nature; and those that restrict themselves to one subject are specialist. Columns that treat their subject in a way that the general public can understand, that is, using language that is open to all, are popular columns; those that treat their subjects in a way that only people versed in the area can understand are technical columns.” There are, broadly speaking, generalist, specialist, popular, and

technical columns. But among these categories, the generalist column, because of the availability of a wider spectrum of topical subject matters, which often stem from strategic socio-political and economic issues, is more prevalent; hence, the tendency for readers to erroneously assume that all columns are political, a position which Awoyinfa (2002:18), addresses thus: “Most columnists write on topical issues of the day, which are mostly political in nature. But not all columnists are political. A columnist has the poetic licence to write on anything that hits his fancy – be it politics, economy, crime, whatever. Some columnists write on the ‘affairs of the hearts’ and others on softer topics devoid of politics. But ‘hardcore’ columnists prefer to comment on issues of the day which have political connotations.”

One unique quality of the column is the advantage of tapping into the knowledge of experts in different spheres of life, other than journalism. Experts, who, due to their proven expertise in their fields of endeavour, are engaged by newspaper and magazine editors to write columns that the editors believe should build and sustain appreciable readership. And this multi-disciplinary edge equips columnists adequately to comment on every aspect of human existence. In fact, in the defunct *The Westerner* magazine, a Nigerian news magazine, a column entitled *Forum* was created for anybody, within and outside the company, who wished to write. As a result of the freedom to utilize the expertise of journalists and non-journalists alike, the significance of columns to the society and its place in the print media is enormous, as one can see from Izeze (2009:xi-xii):

Among the greatest visionaries are newspaper columnists. They show how things ought to be done differently, even better. They prescribe how everyone ought to run their lives well. Sometimes, they make us laugh at ourselves, our idiosyncrasies, our fads. But they also have an uncanny ability to make us cry for ourselves and our society – for the opportunities lost, the charade we have turned our affairs into, the mediocrity and buffoonery, the thievery and fraud that seem so prevalent around us. At other times, they think our thoughts. They broach taboo subjects, and jerk us back to consciousness. They provide answers to troubling questions, too. Many a time, they think for us, they decide what we should be thinking about. And yet, they possess a charm that makes us feel good about ourselves even when we have so few reasons to do so. Newspaper columnists are the people’s representatives. They pose questions the public would never have opportunity or access to raise. They demand answers from those in positions of authority at all levels, and in all facets of life. They canvass new ideas which invariably find their way into public policy. They are therefore policy makers in their own right. But they are also the society’s conscience. Their usually high-pitch cry against injustice or incompetence, ignominy or illegality, resonates with the public who over time, develop personal affinity with the columnists. Newspapers are indeed indispensable in any modern society, and columnists make a newspaper richer and its goals better fulfilled. They do not just bring colour, they bring completeness to a newspaper. They are the wise ones with a certain arrogant swagger of the know-all oracle, delivering their rulings always magisterially.

It is little wonder, therefore, that columns have proven to be the reason that a great number of readers buy newspapers and magazines, and this translates to increases in the circulation figures of these publications. Columns, then, have become indispensable in newspapering, as one can see from the pithy submission of Anibueze (2005:88-89): “In every newspaper there are men and women whose names are the sales pitch.

They write in their individual styles, creative styles that are gripping to read. There were columnists...who were able to examine the day's issues in the light of yesterday's events in a way that made the reader see tomorrow in his mind's eye."

3. Thematic Contents of Readers' Reactions

The theme of any write-up is the central idea in it; the most basic element of the write-up, which the writer wants his readers to take from the story. It is, according to Ike (1999:50-51), ". . . the idea behind the . . . short story, and which gives meaning and significance as well as a sense of direction to a work of fiction. Invariably, it is a reflection of the writer's attitude to life, or his philosophy of life." Of course, communication is all about sharing, interaction, and exchange of ideas; so, there is a marked exchange of thematic ideas between the audience of a column and its writer: the readers read the columns, ponder over, and respond to their themes; and since themes are often not explicitly stated, readers of columns actively decipher the themes of the various topics that the columnist offers them. The columnist is also expected to carefully articulate the readers' reactions to his column, with a view to ascertaining their respective themes as that will help to enhance the column's subjects, substance, size, structure, and style. Kirsznner and Mandell (1984:332), agree that the theme of a write-up is usually not overtly stated, but submit that it is always there for the active reader to search out: "When we refer to the theme of a . . . short story . . . we mean the point or points the author sets out to make – the 'message' of the work. To understand this theme, you must consider the author's purpose in writing the work, what truth he or she is trying to convey. The theme, or central concept, often appears subtle on the surface, yet many of the story's elements may point to it."

Usually, when readers write to the columnist, they convey their understanding of the column in themes, which in turn help to reveal the predominant themes of the columnist.

Readers' reactions to newspaper columns also vary in size: while some are big enough to fill the length and breadth of a newspaper column, others are not more than a line, but irrespective of the size of a reader's written response to a column, it always comes with an identifiable theme; it is always a direct reaction to the message of the columnist, especially as the print media to which the columns belong is a literate organ of the mass media. Hence, the ability of the readers to articulate their reactions in identifiable themes is not in doubt.

Columns, irrespective of their types and classifications, have one central objective: persuasion; so the themes of readers' reactions to *Press Clips* are viewed in terms of readers' understanding of the persuasive techniques the columnist chooses to pass his message to the readers.

4. Functions of Readers' Reactions to the Columnist

Readership is strategic to the success of the columnist: "without the reader the columnist may as well engage in a monologue (Idowu, 2009:xiii); so to avoid engaging in mere monologue, columnists make use the feedback mechanism.

Ike (2005:81), in addition to defining feedback, also points out its importance to the sender (columnist) of the message. He writes that feedback is: ". . . the set of responses to a message which allows communicators to assess the effect and improve the quality of messages. Feedback can take the form of any set of symbols that the second communicator uses to respond to the message such as an oral statement, a written comment or any type of nonverbal symbol like a smile, a frown or a gesture." However, feedback in the columns mostly take the form of written comments, either directly to the columnist through his phone number(s), or recently his e-mail address(es), or any of the social media outlets; and when a columnist does not provide either of these channels of feedback, readers resort to the op-ed page of the newspapers or magazines to air

their views regarding a column, for through these views, the success or failure of a columnist, as one can see from the view of Verderber (1990:11), can be measured:

Whether receivers decode the meaning of messages properly or not, they are likely to give some kind of verbal or nonverbal response to the messages; this feedback tells the person sending a message whether that message has been heard, seen, or understood. If the feedback tells the sender that the communication was not received, was received incorrectly, or was misinterpreted, the person can send the message again, perhaps in a different way, so that the meaning the sender intends to share is the same meaning received by the listener.

Besides, feedback is most appropriately known as Readers' Reaction in the print media; and regardless of the columnist's aim, the column "should be sufficiently interesting to whet and satisfy the reader's curiosity to find out what happens next" (Ike, 1991:105); and audience participation, when stimulated as Ike notes above, often finds expression through readers' reactions. In other words, without readers' reactions to the column, it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the effectiveness of the columnist's message on the readers because communication is a two-way process (Onah, 2005:246).

Again, beyond providing a channel for measuring how well readers understand the message of the columnist, readers' reactions also offer him an opportunity for self-improvement; an opportunity to become a better columnist, simply by listening to the comments his readers offer him: ". . . feedback has benefits other than as a simple test of the understanding of the message; it can help us gain insight into ourselves as people, stimulate personal growth, and verify or validate our perceptions" (Verderber, 1990:12).

The column is written for readers. And the topic of the column, the theme, the style, and the subject matter are creatively harmonised to elicit reactions from the readers, without whom the columnist will be engaging in a monologue; and the columnist who opens channels of receiving readers' reactions will, in addition to ascertaining how well the readers understand his message, improve the way he writes, and enjoy immense goodwill and acceptance from the readers: "The Gbolabo Ogunsanwo column in *The Sunday Times* was, also, a crowd puller. . . . The column was so popular that when the writer went on leave, readers demanded his return" (Omotoso, 2009:63). Therefore, readers' reactions are of immense value to the columnist.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 Uses and Gratifications

The Uses and Gratification theory is a response to a theoretical regime in mass media development when emphasis shifted from what the media do to people to what the people do with the media. This theory explores the interactive relationship between the media and the audience, thereby calling attention to the need for a functional uses and gratifications approach to understanding media effects.

Ojobor (2002), citing Katz (1974), notes that the uses and gratifications theory is concerned with the social and psychological origins of needs that generate expectations of the mass media or other sources, which leads to differential patterns of media exposure, resulting in need gratification and other consequences, mostly unintended ones. In summary, therefore, "This theory is purely audience-centered and addresses needs like surveillance, excitement, guidance, relaxation, tension release, social integration, entertainment, escape, identity, socialization and information acquisition" (Ojobor, 2002:20).

5.2 Individual Differences

This theory explains why even homogenous audience members of a society have different reactions to the same mass media messages, owing to individual, unique characteristics, which affect the extent of reaction to a message; thus, a message that creates happiness in one member of the audience may generate great sadness in another. Berelson (1960), cited by Ojobor (2002:20), sums up the basic postulates of the theory thus: “Some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions, have some kinds of effects.”

Clearly, the uses and gratifications media theory provides a framework for a better understanding of the study, as it focuses on the interactive relationship between the columnist and his audience, while the individual differences theory offers explanations regarding a columnist’s ability to attract audience participation.

6. The Problem

Over the years, readers of newspaper columns, through their reactions, have spurred widely read columnists to undertake a compilation of their celebrated columns in book formats. In Nigeria, for instance, there are several collections of individual columns. Some of them are: *Winners take all* (1988), by Alade Odunewu; *Aiyekooto* (1991), by Olabisi Onabanjo; *A familiar road* (1998), by Pini Jason; *The Voice of Reason* (1999), by Kola Animasaun; *Nigeria: This is my country, Damn it!* (2000), by Tunde Fagbenle; *The Struggle Continues: Selected writings on Freedom, Democracy & Liberation* (2002), by Haroun Adamu; *Media All the Way* (2005), by Tunji Oseni; and *Dele Alake: The writer as strategist* (2006), by Segun Ayobolu and Bamigbetan Kehinde. Others are: *Teacher, Don’t Teach Me Nonsense* (2006), by Bamigbetan Kehinde; *Intimate Affairs* (2007), by Funke Egbemode; and *Fingerprints: Nigeria’s tangled transition to nationhood* (2007), by Kunle Oyatomi. In fact, *Nigerian Columnists and Their Art*, edited by Lanre Idowu in 2009, is a book-length treatise on columns, columnists and column writing, yet, not even a chapter of the book, or the others like it, was devoted to an empirical study of the readers, to further understand their needs and preferences.

It is this neglect of the audience’s needs and preferences in the various studies on column writing that this study shall endeavour to assuage by establishing the predominant themes in the readers’ reactions to the selected newspaper column and their functional values to the columnist.

7. Research Questions

1. What are the thematic contents of readers’ reactions to *Press Clips*?
2. What are the functional values of readers’ reactions to the writer of *Press Clips*?

8. Methodology

8.1 Research Design

Content analysis method was used for the study. The researcher chose content analysis because it is best suited for the study, given that newspapers were the sources of data for the study.

8.2 The Sample

The readers’ reactions to *Press Clips*, published in *The Sun* newspapers for three years, from June 2008 to June 2011, made up the sample of the study. When counted, the total readers’ reactions published within the period amounted to 548, and they were found in 20 editions of the newspaper.

8.3 Sampling Technique

Census Study was deemed appropriate for the study because the data that constituted the sample were not too large. For instance, when the sample was coded, using the study's unit of analysis, a total of 382 readers' reactions met the criteria for inclusion in the final sample, which represents 69.7% of the sampling frame.

8.3 Instrumentation

Content Categories

Subject Matter: Whenever a reader critiqued the subject of the column.

Style: When a reader commented on how the column was usually written – the writer's use of language.

Displeasure: When a reader condemned the column.

Other: Any comment that did not fall within the above categories.

Unit of Analysis

The criterion for inclusion of the readers' comments to the sample was: all readers' reactions that critiqued the column/columnist and or revealed the emotion(s) that reading the column created.

8.4 Data Collection

The data used in the study were collected from two sources: the Internet and library. The researcher first browsed *The Sun* newspaper's website, where all the editions of *Press Clips* were already grouped serially according to the dates. However, while it was easy for some of these online editions to be downloaded, some were not accessible, so the researcher went to the head office of *The Sun* in Apapa, Lagos, where the rest of the data were gathered from the company's library.

9. Findings and Discussion

Findings show that the predominant themes of *Press Clips* were style, subject matter, and displeasure, in that order. This finding agrees with the postulations of the Uses and Gratifications theory advanced by Katz (1974), cited in Ojobor (2002), who found that even homogenous audience members of a society have different reactions to the same mass media messages because of their unique individual characteristics; different media users expect different gratifications from the mass media. Furthermore, that the column attracted readers' reactions at all, is clearly in agreement with a tenet of the Individual Differences theory advanced by Berelson (1960), cited in Ojobor (2002:20), who found that "Some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions, have some kinds of effects." The columnist chose some topics, gave them some creative treatments, and brought them to the attention of his readers, and they expressed the effects of the column through different themes viz. subject matter, style, displeasure, others.

Therefore, in the readers' reactions that were analysed, 137 readers (35%) commented on the subject matters of the columnist. Findings also show that 215 readers (56.2%) focused their comments on the columnist's writing style, regardless of the subject matter.

It was observed that, although some of the readers' reactions focused on subject matter and style, 25 (6.5%) readers also frowned on the columnist. While some of the readers in this category condemned his choice of subject matters, others condemned his stance on the subject matters, and in the process, leveled allegations of bribery, tribalism, religious bigotry, and un-patriotism on him. This finding, again, conforms to one of the propositions of the Individual Differences theory espoused by Ojobor (2002), when he noted that a message that creates happiness in one member of the audience may generate great sadness in another.

Apart from the readers' reactions that focused on subject matter, style, and displeasure, there were 5 others (1.3%) that did not fall into any of the study's three other content categories. These were readers' reactions that merely thanked the columnist for "what" he wrote, without necessarily critiquing the column or revealing the emotion(s) that reading the column created.

Additionally, findings, again, show that some readers (3.1%) of *Press Clips*, in their readers' reactions, revealed that reading the column made them shed tears, by being immensely satisfied with the column, or cried, because they were deeply touched by a certain subject matter. This finding agrees with the submission of Izeze (2009), who, writing on the significance of columns to the society, noted that columnists sometimes make the society laugh at itself – its fads, and idiosyncrasies – and at other times, the columnists have an uncanny ability to make the society cry for itself. This shows that the columns have a moderating influence on the society; making it cry when it should cry, and making it laugh when it should laugh. This way, columnists use their columns to ensure social stability. Furthermore, it was also discovered that there were readers (0.7%) of *Press Clips* who said that they bought *Saturday Sun* because of the column. This finding underscores the notion of Anibueze (2005), and Omotosho (2009), who noted that every newspaper has men and women whose names are the sales pitch. Finally, some findings also show that 3 readers (0.7%) revealed that they have been reading *Press Clips* from its *Weekend Concord* days. This finding confirms the claim made by the researcher in the introduction of the study that *Press Clips* is a long-running column, which started in the 1980s, when the columnist worked at the defunct *Weekend Concord* newspaper.

10. Conclusion

The study set out to determine the thematic contents and functional values of published readers' reactions to *Press Clips*. Now, findings have shown that readers of the column focused their reactions mostly on the columnist's style and subject matter, and a few other readers either felt disappointed by the columnist's subject matter, style, and stance on some issues, or merely wrote to thank the columnist, without necessarily indicating why they did that. Similarly, there were findings which showed that readers' reactions influence the contents of a column, as the religious style, which found expression in the numerous readers' reactions with spiritual undertones, saw the columnist often fondly referring to his stories as sermons; his readers as brethren; his readers' reactions as testimonies; and his column as *Press Clips Pentecostal Church, PCPC*. Lastly, there are columns for every field of human endeavour, which ensures that there is a column for everybody in the society; the general literate populace is, therefore, encouraged to seek for columns that suit them, and read actively, by not merely reading and enjoying issues discussed in the columns, but by also critiquing and passing their informed commentaries on the issues through the readers' reactions mechanism. This way, they would be partnering with the mass media in the provision of a "forum for the exchange of comment and criticism", an ideal set by the Commission on Freedom of the Press in its 1947 publication, *A Free and Responsible Press*, as a major requirement of a free society.

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