Extending the rape narrative: A corpus-assisted discourse analysis of the construction of rape in selected Nigerian dailies

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Abstract

This study examines the discursive construction of rape in news reports from the standpoint of critical linguistics. To do this, a corpus of news articles on rape cases was generated from five Nigerian newspapers (*The Punch, Vanguard, Daily Trust, Nigerian Tribune and Sun)* published between 2018-2022. For concordance analysis, AntConc4 was deployed to tease out lexemes and collocates that index the construal of rape and actors. With insights from Wodak's (2001) model of critical discourse analysis, the study identifies (e) vilifying rape and its perpetrators through labelling, the empathy-evoking construal of rape victims' experience, and sexual offenders as blame-shifters as ideological constructs accentuated by discursive strategies. Existing studies have argued that the Nigerian press has largely promoted an androcentric order in the reporting of rape cases, to the detriment of rape victims. However,

this study extends this view and suggests that Nigerian newspapers attempt to combat the heinous act of rape by vilifying, demonising, denigrating, and negatively portraying rape and perpetrators through linguistic constructs. These constructs are meant to project sexual offenders and their heinous acts to the public in highly repugnant and distasteful ways that would convince the public to desist from such acts.

Keywords: corpus-assisted approach, critical discourse analysis*,* media representation, Nigerian dailies, rape

Introduction

Sexual assault is a global phenomenon that cuts across societies. Some identified types of rape and sexual assault are stranger rape, seduction rape, date rape, acquaintance rape, marital or spousal rape, multiple assailants/gang rape, drug-facilitated rape, and child sexual abuse and assault, among others (Grubb & Harrower, 2009). Rape culture is being promoted in many societies through what is regarded as rape myths. Rape myths are essentially ideological beliefs that serve as instruments for blaming the sexually abused and exempting the perpetrator. Benedict (1992) identifies some rape myths that shape media portrayal of women: women use the accusation of rape as a tactic for revenge; the assaulter is a pervert; only 'loose' women are victims; the assailant is motivated by lust; the assailant is usually black or lower class; rape is sex; women provoke rape; women deserve rape. With a female victim, rape can take on a variety of forms, including those that serve to show hatred, exert vengeance for a victim's rejection of a man's approaches, and/ or satisfy male sexual craving. In Nigerian newspaper articles, rape reports frequently include these aspects (Osisanwo & Ojo, 2022).

The phenomenon of rape continues to be one of the most prevalent forms of gender-based violence and human rights violations in Nigeria (Ogunlana et al., 2021). According to some studies, rape continues to be a social problem in Nigeria as a

result of inadequately validated evidence on rape cases and poor statistics on rape incidents by concerned government agencies and parastatals; underreporting by sexual assault victims due to fear of stigmatisation and victim blaming; a lack of trust in the criminal justice system; and police extortion and manipulation, among other factors (Adebajo, 2019; Amnesty International, 2021). In the Nigerian situation, one of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures adopted by many countries around the world to curtail its spread was a spike in rape incidents across the nation. The upsurge in rape cases in Nigeria during the COVID-19 lockdown was caused by poverty, lack of sex education, discriminatory gender norms and inadequate institutional and legal frameworks (Uwaegbute & Unachukwu, 2022). This period also witnessed a surge in femicide (Ogunlana et al., 2021). While studies exist on rape culture and gender-based violence from the standpoints of linguistics, sociology, psychology, and several other social science and humanistic disciplines, this study focuses on a corpus-assisted approach to engaging the discursive construction of rape in selected Nigerian dailies. The objectives driving this study are to (i) examine the various discursive structures in the construction of rape; (ii) extricate the representational strategies and lexical resources that index the constructions of rape in selected Nigerian dailies; and (iii) discuss gender-based assumptions that underlie the discursive construction of rape in selected Nigerian dailies.

Media representation of gender-based violence

The media, as a tool for constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing public perception on a variety of social issues, plays a significant role in shaping public perspectives and optics on rape and other sexual assaults (Kitzinger, 2013). Numerous studies have revealed that, in relation to the way victims of gender-based (or sexual) violence is portrayed, the wider media tends to sensationalise its reporting of violence against

women, with discourses frequently being heavily gendered and persistently sexualised (O'Hara, 2012). 'Frames', which could be negative or positive, are strategic constructs deployed to present an issue or a personality in specific ways the text producer desires, thereby influencing public perception. To support a specific problem definition, interpret and analyse social issues, and make an evaluation or moral judgement in a communicative text, a high level of prominence and salience is given to some aspects of perceived reality in consonance with the ideology the media seeks to project (O'Hara, 2012). Framing, as such, is a potent discursive tool for projecting representations and ideologies. Consequently, media framing and representation in media reportage of gender-based violence can largely influence not only dominant public thinking but also the responses of policymakers, public authorities, and institutions (Carlyle, Slater & Chakroff, 2008).

In congruence with the power the media wields in framing and representing gender-based violence, Breen et al. (2017) argue that certain media outlets frequently add extraneous information to new stories on rape for no other reason than to make them more "sensationalistic," even though it was unnecessary to do so to convey the gravity of the crime. This act has been called the media's 're-victimisation' of rape victims (Nwabueze & Oduah, 2014). Media re-victimisation refers to the use of linguistic choices and frames to convey the idea that a rape victim was responsible for the rape by either dressing indecently, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or other blame-shifting strategies (Nwabueze & Oduah, 2014). Benedict (1992) earlier projected this stance on the notion of media re-victimisation of sexual violence victims. Although studies have established that both male and female genders can be victims of rape (Kunnuji & Esiet, 2013), the media seems to have, over time, given prime attention to the reportage of female victims. More so, many societies have been plagued with the rampancy of male violence against women or female gender. In this line of

thought, Dare (2016) submits that a typical Nigerian journalist is incredibly sensitive to female concerns and takes advantage of any chance to say something important regarding women.

Gender/sexual violence discourse and problem statement

Gender-based violence has, over the years, been a subject of interest to scholars in communication and journalism, feminism and gender studies, social psychologists, media experts, and public policy analysts globally. Literature abounds in studies on the representation of sexual violence, domestic violence, non-domestic violence, and several other gender issues in media reporting (Gold & Auslander, 1999; Adcock, 2010; Animasahun, 2015; Ahmed, 2018). Scholars have also continually explored the function of ideology in the media's framing and representation of gender issues (McNeil, Harris & Fondren, 2012; Tijani-Adenle, 2016; Egen et al., 2020). An avalanche of studies exists on rape from different perspectives, for instance, legal and justice systems (Steyn & Steyn, 2008), psychology and mental health (Campbell & Raja, 1999), media (Nwabueze & Oduah, 2014), and linguistics (Bohner, 2001; Ahmed, 2018; Babatope & Muhyideen, 2019). Belmonte and Negri (2021) explore social representations of gender-based violence in the Italian press to determine the role played by the media in perpetuating a social structure that fosters inequality and power relations. The following thematic focuses are identified by the authors as socially constructive practices: the normalisation of violence; denying women's subjectivity; the "de-responsibilisation" of the violence perpetrator; the episodic narrative of violence; and an unbalanced representation of victims and perpetrators. Furthermore, the authors observe that in the narrative of gender-based violence, attention is preponderantly given to the crimes committed against women with an emphasis on *women* and the investigative processes and legal proceedings. Such framing and representation are presented in a way that conceals male responsibility and denies that abuse, violence, and femicide are typically committed by men.

Within the Nigerian context, Nwabueze and Oduah (2014) underscore media framing and representation, as well as the frequency of news reports on rape cases in the selected Nigerian newspapers. The 'innocence frame', which depicts victims of rape as innocent of the crime, was found to be the dominant frame of rape stories in newspapers. In contrast, the 're-victimisation frame', which depicts victims as responsible for the incident, was found to be the least common. Taking a cursory look at the coverage and reportage of rape cases in two Nigerian dailies, Tade and Udechukwu (2018) identify the attribution frame, morality frame, human interest frame, and episodic frame as framing strategies for crafting news reports on rape. The episodic frame only centres on the personality, temperament, or motivational condition of the individuals involved. Morality frames place greater emphasis on the ethical or religious context of an issue or event. The reason for using the human-interest frame was to elicit an emotional response from the viewers and establish a personal connection with the victim. The attribution of responsibility frame portrays issues by assigning the cause or solution of a problem to someone, the government, or an external entity rather than the individual. The study further found that some factors contributed to the low rates at which rape cases were reported to authorities and covered in the media, some of which are fear of the assailant, religious orientations, family ties, stigmatisation, and the inability to access media correspondents and security personnel. In another study, Nnaemeka and Ezeabasili (2020) uncover the deployment of the pity frame, heartlessness frame, and predominantly 'defenselessness frame' by selected Nigerian newspapers in the coverage of incidents of sexual assault and other forms of violence against women in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Nigeria. Through the lenses of quantitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis, Ogunlana et al. (2021) investigate the digital media reportage of the trend of femicide and rape incidents that occurred in Nigeria both during and

after the COVID-19 lockdown. They found, unsurprisingly, that most of the rape victims (97% of them) were females, while the majority of the perpetrators were males. They also discovered that the media - Nigerian online newspapers, Facebook and Twitter as case studies - did not attribute blame to victims in the portrayal of rape and femicide. The discussion of the victim was done more passively, and this may have contributed to the welcome unpopularity of victim blaming in some reports.

This study closely relates to Osisanwo and Ojo's (2022) investigation of the discursive construction of female rape victims (FRV) in selected Nigerian newspapers. While it focuses on a group of participants in the reportage of rape cases, the female gender precisely, this study probes the lexical and discursive construction of the act and the victims and perpetrators of rape in selected Nigerian newspapers. Therefore, this study is born out of the insufficient extant linguistics-oriented studies on rape, as constructed in Nigerian newspaper reports. Adopting a corpus-assisted approach, the study underscores the lexical construction and discursive representation of social actors in rape cases in the Nigerian press.

Material and Methods

The study adopts a corpus-assisted critical discourse analytical approach, a synergetic methodology of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis (Baker et al., 2008). Critical discourse analysis examines social practices that manifest in politics, gender, institutions, and the media as they reflect power and ideology within the social strata in which they operate. Wodak's (2001) discourse-historical approach (DHA) systematically integrates all available background information to analyse and interpret the text's numerous layers, either written or spoken. In addition to extra-linguistic, social and sociological elements, the history of an organisation or institution, and situational frames, the focus of DHA is on the intertextual and interdiscursive links between utterances, texts, genres,

and discourses (Reisigl & Wodak, 2008). The representational categorisations of social actors, actions, phenomena, and events are achieved through discursive strategies. This study adopts Wodak's DHA due to the relevance of its discursive strategies in explaining rape as a social issue of historical practice. For instance, the discursive strategy of 'perspectivisation' relates to ideological standpoint and positioning, and empowers text producers (the five newspapers in the context of this study) to signal and project their stances in relation to the discursive framing of rape as a recurring social vice and menace both historically and in the present. Corpus Linguistics (CL) adopts a system of computerised technology to carry out quantitative analysis on massive volumes of language data with the aid of numerous statistical methods and measurements, including frequency, keyness, and concordance. Frequency and keyness show patterns and topics hidden in the data. Not only does CL methodology allow the reduction of researcher bias, but it also enables the explication of contextualised findings. In essence, CL through frequency patterns, aids in uncovering various macro-contexts in data. It also strengthens CDA results, which are more likely to be reliable and valid if they are supported by a large dataset (Nartey & Mwinlaaru, 2019). The adopted synergetic methodology engages the use of computerised methods to identify frequent and statistically significant linguistic patterns in conjunction with qualitative reading (Baker & Levon, 2015). According to some prominent scholars in corpus-based or corpus-assisted discourse studies (Baker, 2006; Baker *et al.*, 2008; Flowerdew, 2008; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Partington *et al.,* 2013), CL can respond to socially relevant research issues about power, inequality, identity, and change when using this methodology. The quantitative analytical approach represents the micro-level analysis of data, while the lexical and grammatical patterns are taken as indexes of discursive constructs and constitute macro- or meta-level analysis.

Table 1: Newspapers, news items and tokens

Newspaper	No of Texts (news items)	Words (Tokens)
The Punch	55	17,482
Sun	49	24,333
Vanguard	353	95,017
Daily Trust	16	12,013
Nigerian Tribune	30	12,647
Total	503	161,492

The study draws data from five Nigerian dailies: *Punch, Vanguard, Nigerian Tribune Daily Trust* and *The Sun*. These newspapers significantly represent coverage across the western, eastern and northern parts of Nigeria. We selected them based on wide circulation and readership, and availability of archived reports on rape cases. These archived news articles on rape cases are, unlike other mainstream and less mainstream newspapers, easily accessible on the online platforms of the selected newspapers. News items spanning 2018 to 2022, drawn on to build the corpus, constitute 503 news items, culminating in 161,492 words as shown in Table 1 above. This period, especially the COVID-19 lockdown era, was characterised by an increase in the occurrence and media reporting of rape (Ogunlana et al., 2021). News articles on rape cases were searched on online platforms of selected newspapers through Google and manually gathered. Each news article culled from each of the selected newspapers was stored as a document file and fed into *AntConc4* for concordance and collocational analysis.

Given the corpus orientation adopted, the concordance programme *AntConc4*, developed by Laurence Anthony, was deployed and fed with the created corpus to generate concordance lines for search queries such as 'rape', 'gang-raped' and 'devil',

and to reveal the collocational patterns within the generated concordances. For qualitative analysis, some news contents that explicate the identified discourses surrounding the construction of rape in the data were taken as excerpts. These excerpts were given context-based explanations through the orientations of critical discourse analysis. While the corpus created for this study is a specialised corpus designed to provide insights into discourses of rape in Nigerian news media, it should be noted that this is not a diachronic corpus study. While the corpus provides a sample of the rape discourses presented to and engaged with by large audiences in Nigeria, it is not representative of all news reports on rape cases for these dates.

Results and Discussion

The descriptive representative excerpts, which are quantitatively corroborated by concordances of keywords in context and collocates extracted from *AntConc*, are presented below to unveil the construction of rape perpetrators, victims, and the act of rape in the five selected Nigerian dailies. The study identifies three key discourses: (e)vilifying rape and its perpetrators through labelling; empathy-evoking construal of rape victims' experience; and sexual offenders as blame-shifters, and explicate them through discursive strategies.

	Collocate	Rank	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Range	Likelihood	Effect
1	cases	1	274	112	162	6	624.155	14.244
2	of	2	777	545	232	6	227.118	12.223
3	against	3	108	70	38	6	135.051	7.716
4	victims	4	99	50	49	6	138.671	7.626
5	in	5	397	140	257	6	55.600	6.462
6	alleged	6	63	61	2	6	92.071	6.155
7	and	7	460	122	338	6	48.141	6.107
8	is	8	156	49	107	6	41.632	5.352
9	over	9	55	50	5	6	56.909	5.209
10	violence	10	68	14	54	6	47.496	5.095
11	other	11	55	8	47	6	52.508	5.081
12	defilement	12	38	7	31	6	67.827	5.030
13	recorded	13	35	21	14	6	66.272	4.895
14	murder	14	30	3	27	5	71.784	4.766
15	assault	15	35	9	26	6	53.941	4.654
16	gang	16	34	31	3	5	46.438	4.441
17	reported	17	40	22	18	6	33.711	4.164
18	minors	18	25	4	21	6	46.768	4.126
19	increasing	19	21	19	2	5	56.689	4.080
20	nigeria	20	47	23	24	5	28.854	4.051

Figure 1: Collocates of *rape* and their statistical value

Figure 1 above shows the collocates of the key linguistic item, *rape*. For statistical significance, we utilise the Effect-Size Metric (ESM), which incorporates the T-score measure to evaluate the collocate strength of the keyword rape, as well as the patterned co-occurrence between the node of interest (rape) and collocates. We rely on *AntConc's* built-in t-score measure.

The essence of this collocational measure is to establish the association between a query term and collocate. Harper's (2008) argument motivates the choice of t-score as a reliable measurement for collocates, indicating the confidence with which one can assert the existence of an association. In essence, a higher t-score value would statistically imply a higher level of confidence that a co-occurring association exists between the query node and collocates, and vice versa. Therefore, the higher the t-score value, the stronger the collocate (Harper, 2008).

The contextual significance of the top 20 ranking collocates out of 61 hits generated through the 'sort by' function in *AntConc* is explained because our focus is on collocates with higher t-score values. Therefore, the top 20 collocates hold significant value and, statistically speaking, exhibit a strong association with the keyword *rape*, as they are present throughout the entire data set. According to Huston (2002), collocates significantly contribute to the overall meaning of a text because they convey the implicit meaning of messages.

The understudied Nigerian newspapers, as depicted in Figure 1. above, use lexical constructs to capture the debilitating effects of rape and the traumatic consequences that victims face. This is significantly captured statistically through the collocates *violence* (5.095 as effect-size value), *defilement* (5.030 as effect-size value), *murder* (4.766 as effect-size value), and *assault* (4.654 as effect-size value) as these collocates show a strong association with *rape*. Additionally, the patterned co-occurrence value of the collocate *gang* (4.441) is symbolic and shows that gang rape, which is considered to be more physically and psychologically devastating, is one of the prevalent kinds of rape that bedevils Nigeria as a society. Another collocate, *minors* with an effect-size value of 4.126, evinces a strong association with rape incidents in Nigeria. This statistical evidence shows an increase in minors as rape victims. This is, therefore, a wake-up call to policymakers in Nigeria to protect the lives of minors and shield them from ravenous sexual offenders so as not to build a community of irate and psychologically battered people.

Furthermore, the collocate word *increasing* features among the top ranking collocates based on its significant value of effect-size of 4.080. This strongly suggests that the newspapers understudied decry the worrisome rise in the index of rape incidents in Nigeria. Although some studies (Tade & Udechukwu, 2018; Ogunlana et al., 2021) argue that rape is underreported in some parts of Nigeria, the strong affinity of rape with the collocate words *reported* (with an effect-size value of 4.164) and *recorded* (with an effect-size value of 4.895) suggests that the news media made some efforts in unveiling the noisome spread of rape, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown period, although more strategic and result-oriented efforts were expected from the media.

(e)vilifying rape and its perpetrators through labelling

The media often latches onto the power of language for the cognitive construction of ideas, actions, and people (Kitzinger, 2013). Media framing and constructs have been observed to strongly influence the public's perception of rape and other forms of sexual violence (Belmonte & Negri, 2021). In Excerpts 1–3 below, the framing of rape, rape victims, and perpetrators is actualised through labelling. These labels express negative valence and pejorative representation and are indexes of vilification of rape perpetrators and denigratory portrayal of rape.

Excerpt 1: Tackling Nigeria's rape crisis

Rape is a *violent crime* that *dehumanises* the victims and *devalues* their sense of self-worth. *There must be no place in our society for sexual predators.* We must chain and lock this *monster* in a dungeon. Our womenfolk and vulnerable people of all ages must be adequately protected. (*Vanguard*, June 18, 2020)

In Excerpt 1, the lexical choice "violent crime" is an instance of predication deployed in discursively qualifying rape as an evil act. Also, "violent crime" is a form of evaluative attribution that expresses negativity in the text producer's stance on rape. The verbal elements "dehumanises" and "devalues" are denotative terms that capture the demoralising effect of rape on victims and the havoc it wreaks on their self-esteem and psychological health.

Excerpt 2: Corpse of six-year-old rape victim found in Kaduna burial ground

On June 28, while locals were in their houses due to the lockdown orchestrated by COVID-19, early risers had woken up to the gory scene of the corpse of the little girl in a Mosque whose *killer(s)* is yet to be apprehended up till November 8, when another girl, Aisha Ya'u, was found dead in the same circumstance but this time at a burial ground. (*Sun*, November 9, 2020).

Excerpt 2 provides a conceptual mapping of sexual offenders as criminals and "killers" who are known for acts of violence. The description of sexual offenders with the nominal "monster" and "killer" further expresses an ideological stance on rape. "Monster" is an animal prosody and a depersonalising metaphor that projects rapists as beings who do not deserve to live among humans. This notion is substantiated in Excerpt 2, where the rapist carried out the act of killing and demonstrated cruelty by abandoning the victim's corpse at a burial ground. Given the epistemic knowledge of monsters as beings that are not meant to exist in human society, the text producer exploits the perspectivisaation strategy in expressing the ideological positioning of distancing, which dissociates peace-loving humans from sexual offenders. To magnify this, the deictic element "our" indicates association with the plights of "women

folks" in society. The expression "There must be no place in our society for sexual predators" is a form of membership categorisation that explains the otherisation of "sexual predators". In addition, the representation of victims as "vulnerable people of all ages" indexes the nomination strategy as a metonymic construct that considers "vulnerable people" such as children and the elderly. This construction is strategic, especially because cases of paedophilia and carnal knowledge among the elderly are reported in the media as plaguing society. By extension, "vulnerable people" could also mean people with disabilities or the physically challenged, whose tendency to struggle against and resist sexual predators and assailants is relatively low. In light of the above, it can be argued that the print media do not hold back in negatively projecting and vilifying rape and rapists.

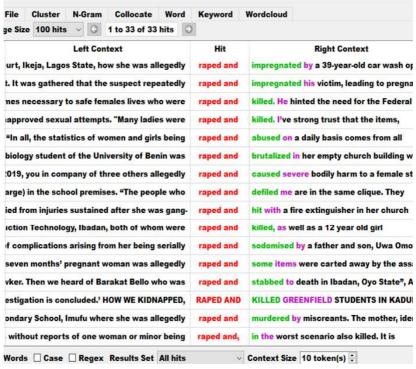| Left Context	Hit	Right Context
urt, Ikeja, Lagos State, how she was allegedly	raped and	impregnated by a 39-year-old car wash of
t. It was gathered that the suspect repeatedly	raped and	impregnated his victim, leading to pregna
nes necessary to safe females lives who were	raped and	killed. He hinted the need for the Federal
approved sexual attempts. "Many ladies were	raped and	killed. I've strong trust that the items,
"In all, the statistics of women and girls being	raped and	abused on a daily basis comes from all
biology student of the University of Benin was	raped and	brutalized in her empty church building w
:019, you in company of three others allegedly	raped and	caused severe bodily harm to a female st
arge) in the school premises. "The people who	raped and	defiled me are in the same clique. They
ied from injuries sustained after she was gang-	raped and	hit with a fire extinguisher in her church
iction Technology, Ibadan, both of whom were	raped and	killed, as well as a 12 year old girl
f complications arising from her being serially	raped and	sodomised by a father and son, Uwa Omo
seven months' pregnant woman was allegedly	raped and	some items were carted away by the ass
vker. Then we heard of Barakat Bello who was	raped and	stabbed to death in Ibadan, Oyo State", A
estigation is concluded.' HOW WE KIDNAPPED,	RAPED AND	KILLED GREENFIELD STUDENTS IN KADU
ondary School, Imufu where she was allegedly	raped and	murdered by miscreants. The mother, ide
without reports of one woman or minor being	raped and,	in the worst scenario also killed. It is

Figure 2: Keywords in context for *raped and*

The screenshot above provides a concordance analysis of the construction of rape. The query term *raped and* is chosen to tease out other physically and psychologically demoralising actions performed in addition to rape against victims. As indicated in the right context of *raped and*, the activities of sexual offenders are negatively portrayed as evil, violent, and devilish through active verbs such as "hit", "killed", "brutalised", "abused", "stabbed", "murdered" and "sodomised" these action words are collocates of "rape," implicating rape as a disastrous and traumatic practice for women. According to Wodak (2001), these collocates instantiate the predication strategy that explains the discursive qualification of negatively construed actions. These collocates form discursive patterns that explain the media's negative perception and projection of rape and rapists.

Table 2: Frequencies of nominal choices for framing sexual offenders

Nominal choices framing sex offenders	Frequency
Man	613
Men	337
Rapists	123
Rapist	88
Monster	15
Abuser	13
Pervert	9
Killer	55
Miscreant	8
Assailant	15
Paedophiles	21
Murderer	15
Beast	13

Brutal	10
Attacker	14

The nominal choices in Table 2 point to the negative categorization of sexual offenders, which relates to the discursive strategy of 'nomination' (Wodak, 2001). Through the corpus tool deployed, the lexemes above and their frequencies in news reports further establish the media's denigration and lambasting of sexual assault and sexual offenders. These nominal prosodies are negative imbuements of sex offenders. Again, the above animating and inhuman prosodies, such as "monsters" and "beast", and agent role terms such as "abuser", "killer", "attacker", and "murderer", are viewed as metaphoric framing that affirms the positioning or perspective of the media about rape and rapists.

Empathy-evoking construal of victims' experience

The experiences of rape victims are captured in ways that denote injustice, inhumanity, and empathy. Just as the strong presence of the collocate *increasing* with an effect-size value of 4.080 indicates in Figure 1, the first sentence of Excerpt 3 is suggestive of the notion that sexual violence against women is worrisomely gaining root in Nigeria:

Excerpt 3: Defiled on arrival: Season of agony for Nigerian infants *hunted, raped* by perverts

…At a time when sexual violence against women and the girl child has been a burning issue globally, the story of Khadijah may be shocking, but is, unfortunately, not the first in recent times. In fact, in the last few months, it seems *infants are increasingly becoming unsafe* in Nigeria, as ritualists and paedophiles *defile babies* barely out of their mother's wombs. (*The Punch*, May 13, 2018).

Therefore, the media is quick to sympathise with victims who are alive and can only be hunted by this traumatic experience. In Excerpt 3, the text producer leans on 'argumentation' in disclosing and affirming the stance that "infants are increasingly becoming unsafe" in the country. In voicing the media's position and concern, the lexical choice "increasingly" stands to index the discursive strategy of intensification. There is a conceptual mapping of children and infants as prey who are hunted by randy men: "perverts", "ritualists", and "paedophiles". Additionally, a sense of fear, dread, and insecurity is implied in the excerpt. Notably, the text harps on the degeneration of security in a nation where rapists not only satisfy their sexual cravings but also rape and kill for money rituals.

Excerpt 4: Six-year-old allegedly raped to death in Kaduna, body dumped in cemetery

Earlier, a six-year-old girl's l*ifeless body* was found at a cemetery in Kurmi Mashi on Sunday. It was suspected that the girl was *raped to death* before *her body was dumped at the cemetery*. A couple of months ago, the body of a 6-year-old girl suspected to be *raped* was found in a Mosque in the same community. (*The Punch*, November 10, 2020).

Furthermore, a sense of empathy is evoked with the description of the experiences of the girl child who was "defiled" (Excerpt 3) and another who was "raped to death" and whose "lifeless body was dumped at the cemetery (Excerpt 4). It can be said that the media do not hold back in describing the horrific experiences of some infants who are "defiled on arrival" while others are sent to an early grave. The purpose of this is to appeal to the emotions of the audience and to express their stance on the evil of rape and sexual violence, knowing the trauma and psychological damage such an experience could instil in a growing child. In Fig.1 above, the collocate *victims* has a high

effect-size value of 7.626 and this shows its close association and patterned co-occurrence with the key term *rape* in all of the reportage. The word *victims* in itself suggests suppression, oppression and all forms of inhuman acts that accrue to rape which the female gender has suffered. Invariably, this collocate appears constantly to provoke empathy for rape victims in the heart of news consumers. Figure 3 below attempts to provide a concordance description of the emotive lexical choices deployed to construct the experience of victims of sexual molestation empathetically. Gang-raping is another heinous act committed by several attackers against a rape victim. Apart from the query term *rape* earlier used in Figure 2, the keyword *gang-raped* is selected to unveil the reported consequences of rape within the generated concordance lines.
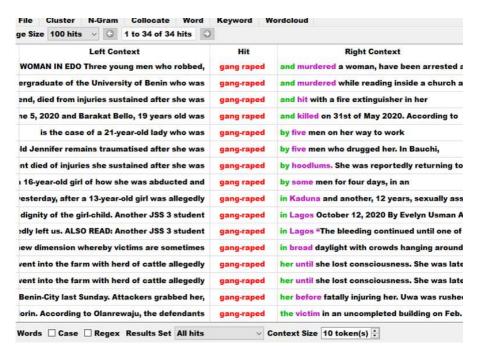

File	Cluster	N-Gram	Collocate	Word	Keyword	Wordcloud

ge Size 100 hits   1 to 34 of 34 hits

Left Context	Hit	Right Context
WOMAN IN EDO Three young men who robbed,	gang raped	and murdered a woman, have been arrested a
ergraduate of the University of Benin who was	gang-raped	and murdered while reading inside a church a
end, died from injuries sustained after she was	gang-raped	and hit with a fire extinguisher in her
ne 5, 2020 and Barakat Bello, 19 years old was	gang raped	and killed on 31st of May 2020. According to
is the case of a 21-year-old lady who was	gang-raped	by five men on her way to work
ld Jennifer remains traumatised after she was	gang-raped	by five men who drugged her. In Bauchi,
nt died of injuries she sustained after she was	gang-raped	by hoodlums. She was reportedly returning to
16-year-old girl of how she was abducted and	gang raped	by some men for four days, in an
esterday, after a 13-year-old girl was allegedly	gang-raped	in Kaduna and another, 12 years, sexually ass
dignity of the girl-child. Another JSS 3 student	gang-raped	in Lagos October 12, 2020 By Evelyn Usman A
edly left us. ALSO READ: Another JSS 3 student	gang-raped	in Lagos "The bleeding continued until one of
ew dimension whereby victims are sometimes	gang-raped	in broad daylight with crowds hanging around
vent into the farm with herd of cattle allegedly	gang-raped	her until she lost consciousness. She was late
vent into the farm with herd of cattle allegedly	gang-raped	her until she lost consciousness. She was late
Benin-City last Sunday. Attackers grabbed her,	gang-raped	her before fatally injuring her. Uwa was rushe
orin. According to Olanrewaju, the defendants	gang-raped	the victim in an uncompleted building on Feb.

Words ☐ Case ☐ Regex Results Set All hits   Context Size 10 token(s) ⇕

Figure 3: Keywords in context for *gang-raped*

In the concordance screenshot, 'punchline' emotive constructs such as "she lost consciousness", "the bleeding continued", "drugged her", "died of injuries", "died of injuries sustained" (right context) and "remains traumatised" (left context) express the high level of victimisation, trauma, and multiple jeopardies that rape victims are subjected to. These lexical choices are semantically related to death and the traumatic process of dying. The construal of such an experience evokes empathy for the female rape victims and emphasises the evil effects and consequences of rape.

Sexual offenders as blame-shifters

In most cases, specifically in the Nigeria context, when individuals have been apprehended for being involved in illegal activities, there is a common practice of shifting blame to "the devil" to appeal to the sense of emotion of law enforcers and to seek pardon or a considerate verdict. This is a shared social knowledge among Nigerians (Nairaland, 2013). The perpetrators present themselves as having their minds controlled by a stronger spiritual force. In this case, the metaphysical devil is always a victim of the blame game because of the shared knowledge occasioned by the religious orientation of the devil as the initiator of all evil works. This study considers blame-shifting as a strategy used by perpetrators to trigger exoneration from punishment to be meted out to sexual offenders. Rape perpetrators refuse to take responsibility for not controlling their sexual urges and therefore ascribe blame to a greater spiritual force of manipulation, as shown in the excerpts below:

> **Excerpt 5: 'I was pushed by the devil', says undergraduate arrested for rape in Ondo**
>
> An undergraduate, Femi Adejuwon has *blamed the devil* for raping a 16-year-old secondary school leaver in Akure, the Ondo state capital. He pleaded for mercy, regretting his crime and promised to turn over a new leaf. (*Vanguard,* April 4, 2020)

Excerpt 6: Rape: Castrate them all

One cannot help wondering what *demon* has taken over the menfolk to resort to this basest of means to satisfy sexual urges. Of course, as is usually the case, these *fiends* must find an alibi in the *devil,* or they were acting under some influence, including *witchcraft spells.* (*Sun*, May 3, 2021)

In Excerpt 5, the rape perpetrator "blamed the devil for raping a 16-year-old secondary school leaver". The offender presents himself as an innocent but manipulated being and makes a commitment to "turn a new leaf". Similarly, in Excerpt 6, the text producer leans on a 'perspectivization technique' in expressing the exact excuse of sexual offenders who seem to have been emboldened by the devil to perpetrate rape. The attribution of blame to the devil is informed by the absence of an iota of sanity, morality, and humanity that rapists are expected to have, which should serve as a prompt to desist from the act of rape. The lexemes and semantic prosodies "demon", "fiends", "devil", and "witchcraft spells" suggest the impact of spiritual manipulation on rapists. Invariably, such a belief provides leeway for ascribing blame and responsibility to the devil. While such expressions are not accepted as valid, especially within legal jurisdiction, male sexual offenders are often fond of making such excuses for their acts of cruelty (Miller, 2024).

File	Left Context	Hit	Right Context
...	couple confessed to the crime, but blamed the	devil	for it. They also pleaded for forgiveness from the
...	ndergraduate, Femi Adejuwon has blamed the	devil	for raping a 16-year-old secondary school leaver in
...	d to the commission of the crime, blaming the	devil	for their action. According to Ogun State Police Spokesman,
...	o on youth's unemployment. An idle man is the	devil'	s workshop. We have youths who have spent 10 years
...	ep them busy, pointing out that "an idle mind is	devil'	s workshop". "I am also calling on governments at
...	e victim twice, but said it was the handiwork of	devil.	He insisted that he had an affair with the
...	hat he was pushed to commit the crime by the	devil	and had regretted his action. Meanwhile, the state commanda
...	the case, these fiends must find an alibi in the	devil,	or they were acting under some influence, including witchcraf
...	nder-aged girls, saying they were allowing the	devil	to use them to destroy the society. He ordered

Figure 4: Keywords in context for *devil*

The screenshot above shows the keyword "devil" and the generated words in context. In expressing opinions about rape, the concordance analysis shows the text producers' use of allusion in expressing their stance on the act of rape. The common saying, "an idle hand is the devil's workshop," is meant to caution against getting involved in vices that result from idleness and non-productivity. In this sense, sexual offenders are regarded as idlers, although not all those convicted of rape are jobless or idle. In the context of this belief, rapists quickly resort to blame-shifting to appeal for clemency from the justice system (Ikwechegh, 2018; Miller, 2024).

Conclusion

This study interrogated the discourse of rape within the context of discourse analysis, media studies, and gender issues.

It interrogated rape as a gender issue within media practice through the lens of critical discourse analysis. Assisted by corpus analysis, this study identified the discursive construction of rape in selected Nigerian dailies through three particular discursive structures: (e)vilifying rape and its perpetrators through labelling; empathy-evoking construal of rape victims' experience; and sexual offenders as blame-shifters. Some existing studies (Adcock, 2010; Animasahun, 2015; Breen *et al*., 2017) on gender-based violence, especially those routed through feminist ideals, uphold the position as this study does, that newspapers implicitly contribute to the androcentric social order by deploying linguistic resources for empathetic construal of the ordeals of rape victims, usually females. This study particularly views this position from an extended perspective and contends that the media not only represents female victims and their unfortunate experiences with sexual offenders through empathy-invoked construal but also vilifies, denigrates, and demonises perpetrators or rapists. In essence, newspapers are not mild in branding and labelling perpetrators with negative constructs and monster imagery. In most news reports on rape, the identities of rapists are sufficiently supplied which tends to place them in the blacklist of the public. This re-echoes Tade and Udechukwu's (2018) stance that traditional media in Nigeria play a pivotal role in directing attention to criminal behaviours such as rape. As such, the news media are making efforts to project sexual offenders and their heinous acts to the public in highly repugnant and distasteful ways that would convince the public to desist from such acts.

This study shows that the representation of rape perpetrators in all senses of negativity projects rape and sexual offences in such a way that their acts would be repulsive to the public. This suggests that these five Nigerian newspapers do not hold back in exposing rapists and delineating their actions in negative and repulsive projections. Significantly, this position dovetails with the stance of Blauenfeldt (2014), i.e., that in the British tabloid press, sex offenders are frequently sensationalised and described

in derogatory and emotionally charged language. This study, therefore, argues in accordance with the argument of Babatope and Muhyideen (2019) that the discourse representations in some Nigerian newspapers are relatively fair to the victim, while the perpetrators and their actions are exposed, with the perpetrators treated as outcasts by totally devoicing them. Additionally, this study does not write off Bonher's (2001) position on the media's victim-blaming representational practices in rape cases and the propagation of general stereotypic beliefs that exonerate rapists. With a different optic, it contends that attention should be shifted to the efforts of the media (Nigerian newspapers in this case) in denigrating and decrying the evils of rape and other forms of sexual violence by harnessing linguistic and discursive constructs. Although the phenomenon of media re-victimisation exists (Campbell & Raja, 1999; Nwabueze & Oduah, 2014; Dare, 2016) in newspaper reports on rape, efforts are also made to negatively portray sex offenders and circumstances responsible for perpetuating sexual violence in society. This study also calls for a more extensive exploration of the discourses around rape to engender the campaign against rape and other forms of sexual violence in Nigeria.

Furthermore, this study opines that the news media can strengthen their efforts in combating the menace of rape and its attendant traumatic consequences. Beyond the linguistic and discursive structures weaponised by the news media to represent and frame the occurrence of rape, media practitioners must further channel their efforts into advancing strategic and massive media campaigns against rape and objectification of the female gender. In line with the perspective of Egen et al. (2020), the news media can enhance their coverage by monitoring and reporting on lawsuits against sexual offenders, thereby disseminating these reports to the public. The Nigerian society at large could be motivated to enact improved preventive legislation, implement more effective punitive measures to punish offenders, and provide greater support for victims.

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