

Newspaper Coverage of Rape-related Issues in Nigeria during Covid-19 Pandemic

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KEYWORDS Agenda Setting. Framing. Rape Stories. COVID-19. Newspaper Coverage. Rape Survivors

ABSTRACT This study examined how newspapers covered rape-related issues in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic; the focus of this study was to vividly study how sexual assault and rape trends escalated in the year 2020. The study adopted a quantitative approach using content analysis. The study involved three national newspapers (*Daily Trust, Sun and Punch*) with dedicated crime reporting pages published between January and December 2020. These newspapers circulate the same edition nationwide, including at weekends, and have online versions. The study found that most stories focused on reporting rape cases in Nigeria, followed by sensitization/advocacy/police parade of offenders and public condemnation of the rape incidents. The study also found that 13.5 percent of the causes of rape are due to cultist, criminal and gangster activities. In some other cases, to gain some form of respect or to be feared in the neighbourhood, gangsters go around oppressing and raping girls because they want to climb some form of the social ladder. Reports of rape cases amount to a total of 35 percent, which means a handful of survivors tend to report their rape cases and speak out in the hope of getting justice. However, a total of 1.1 percent report special courts for rape trials which implies that many victims may not know the appropriate court of competent jurisdiction for redress and speedy judgement. Most of these reported rape cases do not make it to court, and those reported do not get justice sought for. This study concludes that deliberate efforts on public sensitization/advocacy should be the hallmark of media coverage of rape in Nigeria. Also, the media should continue to protect the identity of rape survivors to avoid victimization and name and shame rape perpetrators by revealing their entire identity with their photographs in line with the sex offender's register.

INTRODUCTION

Rape in Nigeria has transcended from a mere social problem to an epidemic that requires drastic action due to its devastating high-risk psychological (including physical injuries, fatigue, chronic headaches, traumatic stress disorders, sexual dysfunction, and depression which may lead to suicide attempts in extreme cases), and health implications of the sexually transmitted diseases (such as HIV infection, Hepatitis Virus, Urinary Tract Infections) and unwanted pregnancies which may lead to unsafe abortions (Ashiru and Orifowomo 2015; IkuAkubaka and Ngantem 2019; Idoko et al. 2020).

It is worrisome that most perpetrators of this crime, in violation of human rights provisions and extant laws against sexual violence, go about their business with impunity as most rape cases are not reported nor prosecuted (Akinade et al. 2010; Ejim 2013; Idoko et al. 2020). Only those that are publicised play an

essential role in shaping and preserving public perceptions of sexual assault.

Ideally, the media takes an active role in the coverage of rape/sexual violence in Nigeria. Media coverage of this issue is believed to have a corresponding effect on how society perceives the problem. For this reason, the media portrayal of rape is a significant issue. However, despite the media attention on this issue over the years, there has been an upsurge in rape cases in Nigeria (Idoko et al. 2020). Available statistics show that about two million Nigerians (mainly women and girls) are raped yearly. Approximately one in every ten Nigerians (26%) claim they know someone who has been raped in the past. Moreover, most survivors are minors between 1-15 years and young adults aged 16-25 years (Nextier Security, Peace, and Development 2020). In 2020 alone, the commissioner of women's affairs revealed that each state among the 36 states of the federation recorded at

least 100 rape cases during the COVID-19 lockdown (Aborisade 2020). Furthermore, Uwaegbute and Unachukwu (2022) reported an upsurge in rape during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria with horrible effects on survivors. Also, a serial rapist was allegedly arrested after raping 40 women in Kano State, northern Nigeria (Njideka 2020). No wonder the Vanguard Editorial (2020, June 18) described the incidents as a rape epidemic amidst the Coronavirus pandemic. The increase in coverage of rape cases could be attributed to increased awareness, the total increase in the number of rape cases or both (Amah et al. 2008; Adeleke et al. 2012; Meel 2017). On the contrary, Agaba (2013) asserts that the rise in sexual crimes in Nigeria may be linked to inadequate prominence in the news media. Additionally, Al Mamun et al. (2021) averred that there was an increase in violence and rape during the COVID-19 pandemic. More so, Dalton (2018) opines that rape is more common in societies where the media promotes rape culture. Hence, rape culture in the media influences both the amplitude of rape and how national judicial systems handle it (Dalton 2018). Also, how the rapist and the survivors are portrayed in the media impacts the audience's beliefs. Thus, the nature of media coverage influences public perception of crime (Fountain 2008; Boyle 2012; Ali Youssef and Qamar 2020).

When the media publishes a sexual incident, the victim's reputation among the general public improves due to a more incredible rape culture in the media than in real life. Due to inaccurate media portrayals and the defense of the offenders, sexual assaults have sharply escalated (Baum et al. 2018). For instance, whenever a sexual attack occurs, there is a subliminal implication that the victim committed the "own" rape. This is because the media portrays the victim as having "secretly desired" the attack and finding pleasure in it. Rape myths predominate in headlines and news reports, along with inaccurate depictions of sexual violence in the media and the dehumanization of survivors (Phillips et al. 2015; Muldoon et al. 2021; Peraud et al. 2021).

Although investigations on media coverage of rape issues in Nigeria exist, many studies still fail to explain how the media frame the stories and how such attacks can be prevented. To curb the prevalence of rape incidents, a school of thought has recommended the consideration of possible causes of rape and its potential solutions to pre-

vent future occurrences (Folayan et al. 2014). Therefore, to change the narrative around sexual violence in Nigeria, media reports must be examined to unravel how the news media identified the causes of rape incidents and how it was reported in the year 2020 through content analysis of selected national newspapers- Punch, Sun and Daily Trust.. Thus, this study will bring to the fore Nigerian newspaper coverage of the rape epidemic during the pandemic from January-December 2020. The study is imperative for actualizing Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which focuses on ensuring gender equality. Specifically, this research aligns with SDG 5 Target no 2, which aims to eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking, sexual and other types of exploitation.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to evaluate newspaper coverage of rape in Nigeria in 2020. Specifically, the study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- I. to discover the most popular genre in reporting rape cases in the selected Nigerian newspapers.
- II. to identify the direction of the rape stories in the selected Nigerian newspapers.
- III. to determine the dominant narrative employed by the selected newspapers in describing the survivors and the perpetrators involved in the rape reports.
- IV. to ascertain the kind and causes of the rape incidents reported in the selected newspapers.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the theoretical insight of Agenda Setting and Framing Theories. The agenda-setting theory was proposed in 1972 by Mccombs and Shaw (as cited in Price et al. 1997). The theory's fundamental presumptions are that the prominence (placement or amount of coverage) of an issue due to the mass media's emphasis on it affects how the public perceives media messages (Anaeto et al. 2008). Therefore, the media want the public to think about the topics they portray as urgent problems, making them more approachable and memorable so that, ultimately,

the public sees them as important problems (Ozuru and Ekeanyanwu 2013). The frequency of reportage, the importance given to media stories through the headline, layout, and images and graphics in magazines, movies, and newspapers, or the timing on radio and television, all help create the agenda, as well as the degree of conflict produced by the total amount of reporting throughout time (Gever 2013). However, scholars who think the media sets the public's agenda have criticized the theory. This school of thought contend that the general audience chooses news stories.

According to the agenda-setting theory's recommendations, this study contends that rape-related issues in Nigeria will get more public attention if they are frequently covered by the media and given priority. Framing is concerned with how messages are delivered and interpreted. According to the theory, how a tale is delivered affects how the audience interprets it (Jennings et al. 2012). Therefore, how rape stories are reported in the media can have a beneficial or harmful impact on how the general population perceives the messages. As a result, the media affects how people and society feel about rape.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study used content analysis as part of a quantitative methodology. Because content analysis entails assessing and evaluating the evident content of media reports, it has been determined to be an appropriate and adequate research approach for this study. Three national newspapers (Daily Trust, Punch, and Sun) with specialized crime reporting pages published between January and December 2020 are included in the study. These publications publish the same issue every day, including on weekends, and they also have online editions.

Using Taro Yamane's formula as cited in Mora and Bas (2010), the sample size for this study was calculated to be 398 articles. As a result, 398 divided by 3 equals 132.6, or roughly 133 editions, as the sample size for each newspaper was chosen. Systematic random sampling was employed in selecting the rape articles used as the study sample.

Using the web portals of the chosen newspapers' search engines and specific phrases like "Rape

2020" and "Rape during the COVID-19 lockdown," data for this study was gathered. Relevance and date were used to order the results. The same categories given in the coding guide were read and checked in each article chosen for the study. The analysis was descriptive. The size for each chosen newspaper comes to 133 editions.

RESULTS

Table 1 demonstrates that 92 percent of the articles are straight news reports. This implies that many articles in the selected newspapers are reported in straight news formats, whereas other genres such as editorial, features, opinion and columns are scarcely adopted. Therefore, straight news reports dominated the study.

Table 1: Genres used in reporting rape cases

<i>Type of news article</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Straight news report	252	92.0
Editorial	3	1.1
Feature	7	2.6
Interview	3	1.1
Comments/Opinion	4	1.5
Opinion	3	1.1
Column	1	.4
Special report	1	.4
Total	274	100

Source: Field Study, 2022

Table 2 indicates that reports of rape cases (35.8% of the total articles) dominated the selected articles, followed by 24.1 percent and 11.7 percent that focused on public sensitisation/advocacy about an increase in rape incidents/police parade of offenders and public condemnation of rape issues respectively. This trend is expected since the incidents of rapes reported in the mass media, such as newspapers, would easily attract public advocacy and condemnation. It is worrisome that only 6.2 percent concentrated on government intervention in the rape scourge and only 3.6 percent reported the conviction of rapists.

Table 2 also shows other dimensions of the rape stories, such as legal provisions about rape offences, capital punishment for rapists, and a special court for the speedy trial of rape cases as well as aiding or abatement of the perpetrators by security agencies and so on are scarcely reported.

Table 2: Dimension of rape reports in the selected newspapers

<i>The topic of the news article</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Report of rape cases	98	35.8
Public sensitisation/Advocacy about the increase in rape incidents/police parade of offenders	66	24.1
Reports about legal provisions for rape offence	4	1.5
Reports about capital punishment for rapists	7	2.6
Public condemnation of rape issues	32	11.7
Report about special court for a rape trial	3	1.1
Petition law enforcement agencies to investigate rape issues	4	1.5
Report of the murder of a rapist	3	1.1
Condemnation of rape threat	1	.4
Petition against rape threat	1	.4
Report of victim's condition	4	1.5
Report of the rape accusation	15	5.5
Government response	17	6.2
Report of conviction of rapists	10	3.6
Institution intervention	4	1.5
Report about aiding or abatement of the perpetrators by security agencies	3	1.1
Report about the execution of rapist	2	.7
Total	274	100

Source: Field Study, 2022

Table 3 portrays that out of the 274 articles used in this analysis, 142 disclosed rape survivors. Among this number, 69 (48.6%) adopted the use of anonymity, of which the majority of the articles in this category used age and gender while identifying the survivors. Also, 35(24.5%) used partial anonymity, with most of the stories in this group identifying the survivors using their age and relationship with the offenders. The results

signify that rape survivors were predominantly mentioned so that their identities would be concealed to avoid stigmatisation.

However, the data show that 38 (26.8%) revealed the entire identity of the survivors, with a majority of the articles in this subset using the full name and age, as well as full name and the victim's relationship with the offender to portray the survivors. It was observed that the entire identities of the sur-

Table 3: Identification of rape survivors in the selected newspapers

<i>Use of anonymity in identifying the survivors</i>	<i>Use of partial anonymity in identifying the survivors</i>	<i>The whole identity of the survivors</i>
Name withheld	2	Use of the first name only
Use of the fictitious name	1	Use of first name and relationship with the offender
Woman/female	9	Use of age and relationship with the offender
Daughter	4	Use of age and background
Age and background	4	Background only
Age and relationship with the offender	4	Age and job only
Age and gender	40	
Maid	1	
Man	1	
Victim	1	
Widow	2	
Total	69 (48.6%)	35 (24.6)

Source: Field Study, 2022

vivors were used where incidents involved celebrities/famous individuals or instances that resulted in the victim's death.

Table 4 shows that 24.1 percent of the total reports express empathy for the survivors, 27 percent are neutral, whereas only 0.7 percent of the articles blame the victim. This finding indicates that the selected newspapers reported the rape incidents with a more neutral stance about the survivors.

Table 4: Description of rape survivors in the selected newspapers

Description of rape survivors	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not applicable	132	48.2
Empathy	66	24.1
Victimisation/Blame	2	.7
Neutral	74	27
Total	274	100.0

Source: Field Study, 2022

Table 5 demonstrates that a total of 142 articles disclosed the identity of rape penetrators. Among this number, 81 percent (115) used the entire identity of the survivors, with most of the articles in this subset using the full name and job as well as full name, background and job while referring to the rapists. Another 14.8 percent (21) used anonymity of which the majority of the articles in this category indicated that the rape offenders are yet to be identified. In contrast, only 4.2 percent used partial anonymity (age and job) while referring to the offenders.

The data implies that the selected newspapers revealed the entire identity of rape perpetrators to shame them publicly.

Table 5: Identification of rape perpetrators in selected articles

Use of anonymity in identifying the survivors	Use of partial anonymity in identifying the survivors	The whole identity of the survivors
Suspect	2	Use of the first name only
Yet to-be-identified persons	12	Use of first name and relationship with the victim
Age and gender	3	Use of age and relationship with the victim
Rapist	0	Use of age and background
Perpetrator	2	Background only
Boy/Man/Male	1	Age and job
Hoodlum	1	
Total	21 (14.8%)	6 (4.2%)
		115 (81%)

Source: Field Study, 2022

Table 6 illustrates that 36.1 percent of the total reports use neutral statements in describing the perpetrators, 13.5 percent condemn them, whereas only 2.2 percent express empathy for them. Therefore, the selected newspapers maintain a high level of neutrality in describing the perpetrators.

Table 6: Description of the rape perpetrators

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not applicable	132	48.2
Empathy	6	2.2
Condemnation	37	13.5
Neutral	99	36.1
Total	274	100.0

Source: Field Study, 2022

Table 7 indicates that only 142 articles mentioned rape offenders and survivors. A total of 75 reported rape incidents (27.4%) fall in the category of date/acquaintance rape, 16.8 percent are rape

Table 7: Kinds of rape cases reported in the selected newspapers

Kinds of rape cases reported	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not applicable	132	48.2
Date/acquaintance	75	27.4
Stranger/Hoodlum	46	16.8
Soldiers/Police/Prison warders	4	1.5
Family member/relation	8	2.9
Incest (father-daughter)	8	2.9
Incest (brother-sister or sister-brother)	0	0
Unknown	1	.4
Total	274	100.0

Source: Field Study, 2022

perpetrated by strangers or hoodlums, and 2.9 percent are rape incidents committed by family members and incest (father-daughter), respectively. Also, 1.5 percent are rape cases perpetrated by security officials such as soldiers/police/prison officials, while unknown cases accounted for only 0.4 percent.

This result indicates that rape perpetrated by acquaintances (persons whom the victim knows or relates with) dominated the reports, followed by coverage of rape committed by strangers (persons whom the victim does not know or relate with).

Table 8 demonstrates that the majority (55.1%) of the total reports did not mention the cause/s of rape. Alternatively, the cause/s of rape predominantly mentioned in the remaining 123 articles that discussed the causes of rape are; the survivors' naivety/deception by the offender and criminal/gangster activities which accounted for 12.8 percent respectively, followed closely by the vulnerability of the victim with 12.4 percent. In contrast, alcohol/drug abuses, restriction of movement/curfew and peer influence are less reported as causes of rape, with 0.4 percent respectively.

Table 8: Predominant causes of rape identified in the selected newspapers

<i>Predominant causes of rape</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
The cause of rape is not mentioned	151	55.1
Survivors' naivety/deception by the offender	35	12.8
Alcohol/drug abuse by the perpetrator	1	.4
Revenge by the offender	9	3.3
Peer influence	1	.4
Restriction of movement/curfew due to COVID-19	1	.4
Ritual purpose	3	1.1
Cultism	2	.7
Criminal/ gangster activities	35	12.8
Vulnerability of the victim	34	12.4
Punishment for violation of COVID-19 guideline	2	.7
Total	274	100.0

Source: Field Study, 2022

Therefore, rape incidents, as reported in the selected newspapers, are caused by various factors but the predominant causes are deception, a rise in criminal activities due to insecurity and the

vulnerability of the survivors, which are, in most cases, the female gender.

DISCUSSION

The Most Popular Genre Used in Reporting Rape Cases in the Selected Newspapers

The research sought the most popular genre in reporting rape cases in the selected newspapers. The results of this study, as illustrated in Table 1, show that 92 percent of the articles are straight news reports. This implies that most of the articles in the selected newspapers are reported in straight news formats, whereas other genres such as editorial, features, opinion and columns are scarcely adopted. This finding is similar to earlier studies which found that most of the articles studied in selected newspapers were straight news reports (Nwabueze and Oduah 2015; Ernest-Onuiri and Jegede 2017; IkuAkubaka and Ngantem 2019).

The Direction of the Rape Stories in the Selected Newspapers

The result is anticipated as the commissioner of women's affairs revealed that each state among the 36 states of the federation recorded at least 100 rape cases during the study period (Aborisade 2020). Also, 24.1 percent of the reports were directed towards sensitisation/advocacy /police parade of offenders, while public condemnation of rape issues constituted 11.7 percent. It is only natural for the media to sensitise the public about the rising incidents of rape and garner public opinion on the issue as newly reported cases attract public advocacy and condemnation from various quarters.

It is worrisome, though that only 6.2 percent concentrated on government intervention in the rape scourge and only 3.6 percent of the reports were about the conviction of rapists. This result confirms the claim that only a handful of offenders are convicted (Agiriga 2019; Akinade et al. 2010). It also substantiates the report that most perpetrators of rape are not prosecuted. When prosecuted, a logical conclusion in a rape case and conviction of the offenders is usually tricky due to a lack of evidence and other challenges (Akinade et al. 2010; Ejim 2013; Idoko et al. 2020).

Other critical dimensions of the narrative, such as legal provisions about rape offences, capital punishment for rapists, and a special court for the

speedy trial of rape cases, are scarcely reported. Low coverage of these issues may be because only a few states in Nigeria have passed the bill for capital punishment, the violence against women and children act and established a special court for rape trials.

Dominant Narratives Used in Describing the Survivors, and the Perpetrators Involved in the Rape Reports

The data in response to objective three of this study which sought to find out the dominant narratives used in describing the survivors and the perpetrators involved in the rape reports, show that 48.6 percent adopted anonymity while identifying the survivors, and another 24.5 percent used partial anonymity. In contrast, only 26.8 percent reveal the full identity of the survivors. More so, the data in Table 6 demonstrate that the selected newspapers reported the rape incidents in a more neutral stance about the survivors, as 24.1 percent express empathy for the survivors, and 27 percent are neutral. In contrast, only 0.7 percent of the articles blame the survivors. This finding is a departure from earlier findings which conclude that rape survivors are perceived as people of low moral virtues, often wrongly blamed and suffer stigmatization and neglect because of victim blaming (Akinwale and Omoera 2013; Aborisade 2016). The study also contradicts earlier claims that the media have failed the survivors, blaming and belittling them instead of holding the perpetrators accountable (Anderson 2015; Cosslett 2017; IkuAkubaka and Nngantem 2019; Layman 2020; Amoo et al. 2022).

On the contrary, the findings of this study support Csoká's (2015) report that victim-blaming was not prevalent in selected newspapers from Hungary and the United Kingdom. Likewise, the study reaffirms Nwabueze and Oduah's (2015) report that only 3 out of 57 articles in selected Nigerian newspapers adopted the re-victimisation (blame) frame, which portrayed survivors as responsible for the incident. With the result of this study which shows that only 0.7 percent of the reports in the selected newspapers blamed the survivors, it can be concluded that media portrayal of rape in Nigeria has changed from placing blame on the victim and removing the same from the perpetrator to a more comprehensive understanding of sexual violence.

On the part of the perpetrators, the findings show that the majority (81%) of the articles that disclosed the identity of rape offenders used the full identity of the survivors. The result suggests a deliberate attempt by the media to publicly shame the rape perpetrators as it is believed that when people are aware that someone has the proclivities for sexual assault, such individuals could be avoided.

Kind and Causes of the Rape Incidents Reported in the Selected Newspapers

In response to objective four, which investigated the kind of rape cases reported in the selected newspapers for the period of the study and the identified causes of the rapes, the results presented in Table 7 show that date/acquaintance rape dominated the reports (27.4%), followed by rape committed by strangers/hoodlums (16.8%), whereas incest (father-daughter) and rape incidents committed by family members accounted for 2.9 percent respectively. The findings show that rape committed by a person known to the survivors, including acquaintances and immediate and extended family members, outweighs that committed by strangers. This result substantiates the report that, more likely than not, rapists are people that the survivors knew, including family members such as fathers, step-fathers, uncles, cousins, grandfathers, and friends, family friends, and people who should normally earn the trust of the survivors such as religious leaders while very few were total strangers (Sodipo et al. 2018; Tade 2020; Vanguard Editorial 2020 June 18).

Also, 1.5 percent of the rape cases reported in the selected newspapers were perpetrated by security personnel such as soldiers/police/prison officials. This result reaffirms the supposition that law enforcement officials in Nigeria are reported to have perpetrated acts of rape and other sexual abuses in different locations (Amnesty International 2014).

For the causes of rape, the results in Table 8 indicate that 55.1 percent of the total reports did not mention anything regarding the cause/s of rape. However, the results show that rape incidents, as reported in the selected newspapers, are caused by various factors. However, the predominant causes are deception of the survivors by the offenders (12.8%), rise in criminal activities due to insecurity (12.8%) and the vulnerability of the survivors, which are, in most cases, the female gender survivors (12.4%).

Surprisingly, alcohol/drug abuse, restriction of movement/curfew and peer influence (0.4%), respectively, are scarcely reported as causes of rape in the selected newspapers. This finding contradicts earlier assumptions that alcohol, drug abuse, indecent dressing by the women, the use of drugs to intoxicate the victim, exposure to pornography and negative peer influence play a major role in the rising incidents of rape in society (Akinade et al. 2010; Nnaji 2020).

CONCLUSION

Most articles in the selected newspapers are reported in straight news formats, whereas other genres such as editorial, features, opinion and columns are scarcely adopted. Most of the stories focused on reporting rape cases in Nigeria, followed by sensitization/advocacy /police parade of offenders and public condemnation of the rape incidents. Most articles adopted anonymity while identifying the survivors, but most of the articles disclosed the full identity of rape perpetrators. However, the rape incidents were reported as more neutral in describing survivors and perpetrators.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. The media should provide detailed reports of rape incidents, such as editorials, features and opinion articles, to better understand rape issues rather than straight news reports that lack details.
- ii. Deliberate effort on public sensitization/advocacy should be the hallmark of media coverage of rape in Nigeria.
- iii. The media should continue to protect the identity of rape survivors to avoid victimization and name and shame rape perpetrators by revealing their full identity with their photographs in line with the sex offender's register.
- iv. As a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) duty of the media, representatives from the media house can go to NGOs associated with rape and retrieve news on such cases pro bono and publish after verifying.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researchers appreciate the Covenant University Centre for Research, Innovation and Dis-

covery (CUCRID) for the financial support for this publication.

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Paper received for publication in August, 2022
Paper accepted for publication in February, 2023