

A Critical Discourse Study of Domestic Violence in Selected Nigerian Newspapers Headlines

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Abstract

This study conducts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of domestic violence representations in Nigerian online newspapers, specifically focusing on headlines from Vanguard and Daily Trust published between May 2024 and February 2025. The pervasive nature of domestic violence as a significant social issue necessitates examining how media language influences public perception and policy discourse. This research is vital as it fills a notable gap in existing literature, which often neglects the linguistic and discursive strategies used in news reporting on this topic. The main aims are to identify and describe the critical discourse features in these headlines, analyse how these features reflect social context, ideology, and power relations, and evaluate the media's role in shaping public understanding of domestic violence in Nigeria. Using a qualitative research approach and Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA for analysis, the study purposively selects and reviews ten news headlines. The findings show that media discourse is a powerful tool for expressing power dynamics, ideological positions, and hegemonic structures. Newspapers employ language that can either reinforce patriarchal norms or challenge them, portray domestic violence as a gendered issue (GBV) or a universal problem, and influence public consciousness through strategic lexical choices and framing. This research contributes to the fields of media studies, discourse analysis, and gender studies by offering a nuanced understanding of the interconnected relationship between language, media, and social power, ultimately calling for more responsible and transformative media practices in reporting domestic violence.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Domestic Violence, Media reports, News Headlines

Introduction

Domestic violence constitutes a profound and widespread social crisis in Nigeria, affecting individuals across gender, age, and socioeconomic backgrounds. As the primary channel for information dissemination and public understanding, the media plays an essential role in shaping the narratives that define this issue for the public. Language, as a socially constructed discourse (Boyd et al., 2015), is not only reflective but also constitutive of social reality. The way newspapers frame headlines on domestic violence, through specific lexical choices, grammatical structures, and rhetorical strategies, can greatly influence public perception, legitimise certain viewpoints, marginalise others, and ultimately shape policy responses. The background to this study is rooted in the complex interconnection between language, media, and social issues, where the media serves as a vital system for creating and spreading messages that influence cultural norms and social relationships (Silverstone, 2007). The problem this research addresses is the relative lack of linguistic and discourse-analytic examination applied to how domestic violence is reported in the Nigerian press. Although many studies have explored domestic violence from sociological, psychological, and legal perspectives (Aihie, 2009; Oluremi, 2015; Ibegbulam et al., 2022), and some have looked into media coverage (Adeline et al., 2020; Ekweonu, 2020), a significant gap remains in understanding the power relations, ideologies, and hegemonic practices embedded within the language of these reports. Therefore, this study aims to critically investigate how domestic violence is constructed discursively in selected Nigerian newspapers. Its goals include identifying key discourse features in headlines, analysing how these features reflect social context and ideology, examining the media's influence on public understanding, and exploring points of similarity and difference in vocabulary. The importance of this research lies in its potential to initiate a deeper, linguistically-informed understanding of media framing in Nigeria, providing valuable insights for media practitioners, policymakers, and scholars in communication, linguistics, and gender studies, thereby contributing to a more informed and critical public discourse on domestic violence.

Literature Review

A comprehensive review of existing literature reveals a multifaceted body of work on domestic violence in Nigeria, yet one that often avoids a rigorous discourse-analytic lens. Studies such as

those by Shayestefar et al. (2023) and Rajesh and Gagan (2018) have extensively documented the psychological and mental health impacts of domestic violence, providing important empirical evidence of its devastating effects on victims. However, these studies mainly treat language as a transparent medium rather than an object of inquiry itself, failing to analyse how the discourse surrounding the issue can sustain or reduce its stigma. Similarly, research by Ibegbulam et al. (2022) and Oluremi (2015) focuses on intervention strategies and the role of professionals, emphasising societal response mechanisms but not critically engaging with how these responses are linguistically mediated and influenced by pre-existing media narratives.

Within media-focused research, scholars such as Adeline et al. (2020) and Ekweonu (2020) have analysed newspaper coverage of domestic violence, but their approaches are primarily quantitative content analyses that count frequencies and themes without exploring the detailed linguistic features that reveal power and ideology. For example, while Adeline et al. (2020) might observe that The Punch newspaper reported more cases of domestic violence, their study does not critically examine how these cases were presented, whether victims were portrayed as powerless, whether perpetrators were mystified, or what ideological assumptions influence the choice of terms like "lovers' quarrel" versus "premeditated assault." This represents a significant gap, as it overlooks the constitutive power of language. Agbese (2021) investigates intimate partner violence in newspapers but again, from a thematic perspective, lacking the methodological tool of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to uncover the hidden persuasive elements in the texts. The work by Agbasimelo and Ignatius (2024) marks progress, as it focuses on violence against men, an often-neglected area, yet it still does not employ a CDA framework to analyse the discursive strategies that facilitate such reporting or challenge hegemonic gender narratives.

Internationally, scholars like Buchner et al. (2023) and Masood and Tehseem (2022) have incorporated linguistic perspectives, but as identified in the provided documents, they often do so without deploying a dedicated CDA framework, thus missing the opportunity to systematically connect textual features to broader social power structures. The few studies that apply CDA, such as those by Ejiaso (2024), who uses Fairclough's model, have not sufficiently focused on the unique context of Nigerian newspapers as key social actors. Therefore, this current study departs from and builds upon the existing literature by applying a rigorous CDA framework, specifically Fairclough's model, to a curated sample of Nigerian newspaper headlines. It seeks to fill the

identified gap by demonstrating that the fight against domestic violence is not only fought in homes and courtrooms but also in the linguistic choices made in newsrooms, arguing that a critical awareness of these discursive practices is a necessary precondition for transformative social change and more accountable journalism.

Theoretical Framework

This study is firmly based on the theoretical foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), primarily utilising the model developed by Norman Fairclough. CDA is not just a method for analysing language but a philosophical and analytical approach that considers discourse as a form of social practice. It maintains that every instance of language use is embedded within and contributes to the creation, sustenance, or challenge of social structures, power relations, and ideologies (Fairclough, 1995). Fairclough's three-dimensional model offers a strong framework for this investigation, suggesting that any discursive event can be analysed across three interconnected levels: text, discursive practice, and social practice.

The first dimension, text, involves a detailed linguistic analysis of the headlines themselves. This includes examining vocabulary (for example, the use of "suffer" versus "experience," "victim" versus "survivor"), grammar (such as active versus passive voice, nominalisation), and rhetorical structure (such as metaphors, presuppositions). For instance, a headline like "Nigerian men suffer domestic violence too" can be analysed to understand how the word "suffer" conveys intensity and victimhood, while "too" positions men's experience in relation to the more commonly reported violence against women, thereby making a specific ideological claim.

The second dimension, discursive practice, links the text to its production, distribution, and consumption processes. This study looks at how headlines are created by journalistic institutions like Vanguard and Daily Trust to reveal the news values at play, which sources are quoted (such as experts, ministers, victims), and how the text might be interpreted by readers. This dimension recognises that media discourse is not neutral but a result of institutional practices and conventions that shape the final text.

The third and most vital dimension, social practice, places the discursive event within the broader socio-cultural and ideological context. This involves examining how the discourse on domestic violence in these newspapers reflects, reinforces, or challenges existing power imbalances,

hegemonic gender ideologies (such as patriarchy and feminism), and social inequalities in Nigeria. It raises questions like: Does the discourse sustain the idea of male dominance? Does it challenge the silence surrounding male victimhood? Does it promote a liberal ideology centred on individual rights and state intervention? By mapping the findings from the textual analysis onto this wider social context, this framework enables a critical understanding of how media discourse is both influenced by and influences the social environment, making it an essential tool for a study aiming to explore the significant ideological work performed by newspaper headlines on a crucial issue like domestic violence.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative design, employing a descriptive and interpretive approach to analyse the discursive strategies used in selected online newspaper headlines. The study utilised a purposive sampling technique to select data most relevant to the research objectives. The data consists of ten news headlines: five from Vanguard newspaper and five from Daily Trust newspaper, all published between May 2024 and February 2025. These two newspapers were chosen due to their significant online presence, nationwide coverage, high circulation, and influence on public discourse in Nigeria (Adeyinka & Oyebode, 2019; Soola, 1995). Their prominence ensures that the analysed discourse reaches a wide audience and significantly influences public opinion. The headlines were purposively selected from the newspapers' online archives based on their direct relevance to the topic of domestic violence and their potential to provide rich insights into the research questions.

The primary method of data collection involved directly downloading these headlines from the official online platforms of Vanguard and Daily Trust. The specific URLs for each headline are included in the appendices to ensure transparency and verifiability. The collected data was analysed using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The analysis proceeded in two main phases: first, a detailed textual analysis of the linguistic features of each headline (for example, word choice, transitivity, modality); and second, an interpretive analysis linking these features to discursive practices (journalistic production) and broader social practices (ideology, power, hegemony). This method enables a deep, nuanced

understanding of how language functions ideologically within the context of Nigerian media reporting on domestic violence.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section offers an analysis of ten purposively chosen headlines, five from Vanguard and five from Daily Trust, published between May 2024 and February 2025. The analysis adheres to Fairclough's model, progressing from description to interpretation.

Analysis of Vanguard Headlines (May 2024 - February 2025)

1. Headline (May 2024): "Tinubu vows to end gender-based violence, promote girls' education" (Source: Vanguard, May 2024).

The headline uses a declarative structure with "Tinubu" as the active agent, performing acts of "vowing," "ending," and "promoting." The term "vow" conveys a strong commitment, while "gender-based violence" frames the issue as primarily targeting a specific gender. "Promote girls' education" is linked as a solution, suggesting an ideological connection between education and reducing violence. The headline quotes the President, a powerful political authority, which adds credibility and indicates state-level concern. This is a typical journalistic practice of using elite sources to frame an issue. It reflects a liberal ideology where the state is seen as the protector of citizens' rights. It also reinforces state dominance and authority to enact change, while framing the solution within educational empowerment, aligning with neoliberal development discourses.

2. Headline (October 2024): "Gender-Based Violence: OAIC, UN women partner to educate religious leaders" (Source: Vanguard, October 2024).

The headline emphasises the process of "partnering" and "educating." The actors involved include both international and local NGOs (such as "OAIC, UN women"), with the aim of educating "religious leaders," a group holding significant social influence in Nigeria. The decision to focus on the education of religious leaders recognises their role as guardians of social norms. It serves as a discursive strategy to combat domestic violence by engaging influential community figures. This reflects an ideology that values the deep-rooted influence of religion and culture in upholding or challenging gender norms. It signals a move towards working with traditional structures to foster

social change, showcasing a complex power dynamic between global organisations and local religious groups or institutions.

3. Headline (August 2024): “Untold stories of domestic violence survivors in Lagos” (Source: Vanguard, August 2024).

The noun phrase "Untold stories" presupposes a history of silence and suppression. The word "survivors" is agentive and empowering, contrasting with the more passive "victims." This headline frames the report as giving voice to the voiceless, a common journalistic trope that highlights the media's role as a platform for marginalised narratives. It addresses the social practice of silence and stigma surrounding domestic violence. By focusing on "survivors" in "Lagos," it urbanises the issue, potentially reflecting wider societal problems such as economic stress in a megacity. It challenges hegemonic silence and empowers those who have experienced violence.

4. Headline (March 2025): “GBV: Silence of survivors hinders justice in Nigeria -- Stakeholders Lament” (Source: Vanguard, March 2025).

The headline establishes a cause-and-effect relationship: "Silence" (cause) "hinders justice" (effect). "Stakeholders lament" frames the response as one of frustration and helplessness from official bodies. The use of the term "stakeholders" is a broad, institutional label that encompasses both government and non-government actors, creating a sense of collective concern. This underscores a critical failure in the social practice of justice delivery. It implicitly critiques a system that places the burden of achieving justice on the survivor, thereby exposing a hegemonic structure where the state's apparatus is ineffective without the victim's vocal participation, thereby revealing social inequality.

5. Headline (February 2025): “My wife beats me for disciplining our children', man laments in Church” (Source: Vanguard, February 2025).

This is a direct quotation framed by the reporting clause "man laments in Church." The verb "beats" is stark and physical, and the reason given ("for disciplining our children") introduces a narrative of role conflict. The decision to include a direct quote from a male victim in a religious setting is highly significant. It personalises the story and uses the setting (Church) to emphasise the search

for solace and the irony of violence occurring within a moral institution. This headline powerfully challenges hegemonic patriarchal ideology that presumes male perpetrators and female victims. It reveals the social reality of male victimhood and the stigma that often leads to silence. The venue ("Church") also critiques the role of religious institutions in mediating family conflicts and reinforcing certain gender norms.

Analysis of Daily Trust Headlines (December 2024 - February 2025)

6. Headline (December 2024): "Breaking the Cycle of Domestic Violence" (Source: Daily Trust, December 2024).

The word "Breaking" serves as a powerful, active verb that suggests force and decisive action. The metaphor "Cycle" conceptualises domestic violence as an intergenerational and recurring pattern that is difficult to escape. This headline is solution-oriented, common in advocacy journalism, and acts as a call to action for the readership. It advocates for intervention and rupture. The "cycle" metaphor draws on psychological and sociological understandings of violence, framing it as a social illness that requires collective effort to break, thereby assigning societal responsibility.

7. Headline (Date N/A): "GBV: I tell my daughters to retaliate if their husbands slap them" (Source: Daily Trust).

This is a first-person account. The verb "retaliate" is highly controversial, implying a response of violence with violence. "Slap" downplays physical abuse, while "GBV" categorises it. Quoting a parent offers a personal, though contentious, perspective. It is a discursive strategy meant to provoke strong reader reactions and debate. This reveals a complex ideology. On one hand, it can be seen as a form of resistance against accepted gender-based subjugation, empowering women to defend themselves. On the other, it promotes a cycle of counter-violence, which may perpetuate the very violence it aims to address. It reflects a desperate response within a social context where formal justice systems are seen as ineffective.

8. Headline (Date N/A): "Sexual offences, domestic violence perpetrated by victims trusted ones -- Lagos CP" (Source: Daily Trust).

The passive voice in "perpetrated by victims' trusted ones" removes the actor from the syntactic subject position, subtly backgrounding them. However, the focus on "trusted ones" highlights the betrayal aspect. The source, "Lagos CP" (Commissioner of Police), is an authoritative official source, which adds factual credibility and gravity to the statement. This headline reinforces the social reality that danger often lies within intimate spaces, challenging the stranger-danger paradigm. It underscores an ideology of betrayal and the abuse of trust, which is central to domestic violence, thereby shaping public awareness towards vigilance within familiar relationships.

9. Headline (Date N/A): "Domestic violence: Lagos Assembly seeks counselling units in schools" (Source: Daily Trust).

The headline depicts a government body, "Lagos Assembly," as the actor seeking a solution through "counselling units." The phrase "in schools" targets the youth. This reflects the discursive practice of reporting on policy proposals, portraying the government as proactive and institutional. It promotes a preventive and educational ideology. By focusing on schools, the government is seen as aiming to address the problem at its core by shaping young minds, advancing emotional literacy, and breaking the intergenerational "cycle" of violence. This exemplifies a hegemonic practice where the state wields its power through educational institutions.

10. Headline (Date N/A): "Spousal neglect: Women tell their stories" (Source: Daily Trust).

"Spousal neglect" expands the idea of domestic violence beyond physical harm to include emotional and psychological abuse. "Women tell their stories" is an active phrase that gives women agency. This follows the practice of creating a space for personal narratives, aiming to foster empathy and awareness. It challenges the dominance of physical violence as the only "real" abuse, bringing a more subtle form of violence into public discussion. This aligns with feminist views that try to broaden the understanding of violence against women to include all types of patriarchal control and oppression, highlighting the power imbalances involved in neglect.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of the ten headlines shows that Nigerian newspapers are not just recorders of events but active shapers of the discourse on domestic violence through complex linguistic choices. The findings directly respond to the research questions, demonstrating a consistent use of critical

discourse features. Power relations are evident through the quoting of influential figures (such as the President and the Police Commissioner) versus personal narratives from victims, highlighting a hierarchy of voices. Ideology is conveyed through lexical choices; for example, the use of "gender-based violence" (GBV) by both newspapers—especially by Daily Trust—frames the issue from a gendered perspective, often implicitly emphasising female victimhood. Conversely, Vanguard's headline on male victimhood challenges this very ideology and reveals a hegemonic blind spot.

Hegemony is evident in the reinforcement of state power (Vanguard: "Tinubu vows...") and religious authority (Vanguard: "...educate religious leaders"), as well as in the challenge to patriarchal dominance (Vanguard: "My wife beats me"). Social inequality is emphasised in headlines discussing the silence that obstructs justice, exposing a system that fails its citizens. The media's role in shaping understanding is clear; for example, Daily Trust's "Breaking the Cycle" employs a powerful metaphor to influence public perception of the issue as a solvable social problem, while Vanguard's "Untold stories" present it as a hidden epidemic that needs to be exposed.

Regarding convergence and divergence, both newspapers view domestic violence as a serious social issue. However, a key difference lies in how they frame it: Vanguard adopts a slightly broader approach by explicitly including male victims, whereas the selected Daily Trust headlines consistently use the "GBV" frame, highlighting violence against women. This subtle difference in vocabulary can notably influence how readers perceive the extent and nature of the problem.

Conclusion

This study aimed to critically examine the discourse surrounding domestic violence in Nigerian newspaper headlines. The findings conclusively show that these headlines are dense arenas of ideological and hegemonic struggle. Using Fairclough's CDA model, the analysis revealed how language is selectively employed to express power, promote ideologies (state intervention, liberalism, feminism, resistance), reinforce or challenge hegemonies (patriarchy, state power), and highlight social inequalities. The media plays a crucial role not only in reporting domestic violence but also in constructing it for the public, shaping perceptions, and potentially influencing agendas for public discourse and policy.

The implications for future research are considerable. Studies could broaden to include a larger corpus, add reader reception analysis to understand how these discourses are interpreted, or undertake comparative analyses with broadcast and social media. A specific study on the portrayal of male victimhood would be especially valuable. Based on the findings, it is advisable for media practitioners to adopt a more critically aware approach to language use, avoiding terms that obscure violence or blame victims and promoting a frame that holds perpetrators accountable and recognises the issue's full complexity. Policymakers should acknowledge the media's influence in shaping public opinion and work together to promote accurate and transformative messages. Ultimately, this research highlights that fighting domestic violence requires not only social and legal reforms but also a fundamental change in the language used to discuss it.

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Appendices

Links to sources of data (Vanguard)

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