

Tweeting the Violence Narratives in Nigeria: A Critical Stylistic Study of Tweets on the Benue Massacre

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Abstract

Violence, insecurity, and brutal killings have become urgent issues in Nigeria, capturing the attention of social scientists. This study critically examines the violence narratives in Nigeria, focusing on the linguistic strategies used in X discourse to narrate and frame the Yelewata Benue massacre. The aim is to analyse the linguistic techniques in tweets that depict and frame the Benue massacre, and investigate how victims, perpetrators, and government actions are portrayed through critical stylistic devices. Using a qualitative approach, the study applies Jeffrie's (2010) model of Critical Stylistics as its analytical framework. The analysis concentrates on five carefully selected tweets to explore how they report, resist, accuse, call for action, and criticise the government and public responses to the Yelewata massacre. The results indicate that tweets tend to highlight victims through quantification and emotional language, while perpetrators are often referenced indirectly or directly labelled. Governmental actors are depicted unfavourably due to their silence and negligence in fulfilling their primary duty to protect citizens. Contextualising the discourse within Nigeria's socio-political landscape, the study underscores the role of critical stylistics in unveiling how digital narratives of violence depict power, responsibility, and collective grief. It concludes that X functions as a space for communal outrage, mourning, and political critique, employing language and stylistic devices to shape Nigeria's fractured reality.

Keywords: Tweeting, Violence, Narratives, Nigeria, Critical Stylistics, X, Tweets, Massacre, Benue State.

Introduction

Violence and insecurity have become a recurring menace in Nigeria, establishing the government's inability to uphold its constitutional obligations to its citizens. Chapter four section 33(1), 34(1), and 53(1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, ensure that life, dignity, and liberty of citizens are to be protected from unlawful harm by the

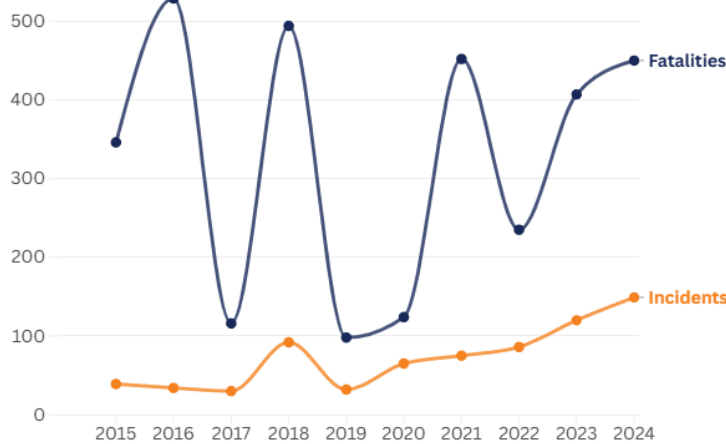
state, supported by the following statements. Section 33(1): *“Every person has a right to life, and no one shall be deprived intentionally of his life...”*. Section 34(1): *“...no person shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment...”*. Section 35(1): *“...every person shall be entitled to his personal liberty...”*. These sections ensure no citizen of Nigeria is to be deprived of life unlawfully, prohibiting torture, inhuman degradation, slavery of any sort, or forced labor. Thereby placing a duty on the state to protect citizens' physical and psychological well-being. Despite these acts, violence and insecurity have prevalently escalated, becoming regular headlines in the daily news. The continuous disregard for life by some sovereigns in their quest for power suggests a weakness in the universal legal instruments for the protection of the right to life (Onuegbulam & Ani, 2024). Nigerians continue to suffer as armed violence and brutal killings have taken the lead in the country's list of security challenges, others include: kidnapping, armed robbery, drug trafficking and abuse, banditry, militancy, communal clash, and many other forms of violence, demonstrating the disconnect between what is expected of the state and what is attainable. Yakubu et al. (2025) emphasise that “recurring cycle of violence threatens the legitimacy of democratic institutions and processes.”

Violence is an inevitable part of human existence (Mathew & Chijioke, 2023; Aluya & Terver, 2024). It is a behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something. At the same time, insecurity is simply the state of being open or exposed to danger, threat, or any form of harm, creating a lack of protection. Nigerians now live in fear of violence lurking around. The chances of going a day without danger or violent attacks have become very slim. Europa Institute for Gender Equality establishes that violence is “any intentional course of conduct that seriously impairs another person's psychological integrity through coercion or threats.” The country's economic stability is significantly impacted as farmers are

unable to access their farmlands, and citizens are hesitant to travel or pursue economic and business opportunities. In 2018, the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics recorded one hundred and thirty-four thousand six hundred and sixty-three (134,663) cases of violent acts in Nigeria. These violent cases were categorized into three: violence against property, persons, and against lawful authorities. With a total number of sixty-eight thousand five hundred and seventy-nine recorded cases, violence against property ranked highest. Fifty-three thousand six hundred and forty-one violent cases against persons were recorded, and twelve thousand four hundred and forty-three violent offences were recorded against lawful authorities. The report also emphasised that offences against persons were as follows: murder, manslaughter, infanticide, concealment of birth, rape, and other forms of physical abuse.

Amongst the 36 states in Nigeria, Benue State has suffered some of the most gruesome attacks and violence. Mathew & Chijioke (2023) reveal that violent activities between herdsmen and farmers have displaced more than 100,000 people in Benue and Enugu States and left them under the care of relatives or in makeshift Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps. ACLED data states that Benue experienced about 722 violent attacks and 3,251 deaths between 2015 and 2024 (Oluwole, 2025).

**Trend analysis of violent killings in Benue State, Nigeria:
2015-2024**



Source: [ACLED](#)

Benue State has faced numerous security challenges. The most recent source of insecurity involves conflicts between Benue farmers and herders (Fiase & Gbaden, 2024; Aluya & Iangba, 2025). In Benue State, the conflict between herders and farmers is a phenomenon that has had a profound impact on citizens, both physically and psychologically. Over the years, reports of violent killings between herders and farmers have continued to rise. Gambo et al. (2024) cited Sahara Reporters' record from 2016, stating that over 500 people were killed in Agatu, Benue State, now widely known as the Agatu Massacres, with over 7000 displaced. The incident occurred between late February and March 2016. The global terrorism index in 2015 classified the group as the fourth deadliest terror organisation, behind Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, and ISIS.

On Friday, the 13th of June 2025, the county was taken aback as both the social and print media shared the sad news of the gruesome massacre of Nigerian citizens in Yelewata, Benue state. Hence, this study aims to examine how X users use their tweets to mobilize, construct, negotiate, resist, and critique governmental lapses, insecurity, and violence in Nigeria,

employing critical stylistics to reveal the stylistic and linguistic choices that shape meaning in X discourse. The objectives of the study include examining: (i) the linguistic strategies used in tweets to narrate and frame the Benue massacre, (ii) how victims, perpetrators, and governmental actions are represented through critical stylistic tools. The objectives will be guided by the following corresponding questions: (i) What linguistic strategies are used in tweets to narrate and frame the Benue massacre? (ii) How are victims, perpetrators, and governmental actions represented in tweets? By analyzing selected tweets, the study seeks to explore how language functions as a tool for mobilizing, negotiating, and resisting violence and insecurity in Nigeria. This study is significant as it provides an in-depth understanding of how language is used to frame and circulate narratives of violence in social media discourse. The study also contributes to the growing body of Critical Stylistics by applying its framework to understudy crucial domains of social media and national insecurity. The practical nature of this study also makes it significantly important to policymakers, security agencies, and media personnel, as it reveals public perceptions of violence and insecurity, potentially informing them on more sensitive and effective communicative strategies.

Theoretical Framework

Humans are at the apex of civilization among other forms of life because of a highly structured and consistent form and use of language. Anurang (2023) states that language is a constituent of civilization, it raised man from a savage state to the plane which he was capable of reaching, and Anavami et al. (2025) agree, stating that Language transcends its function as a mere tool for communication, emerging as a potent force that shapes social relations and constructs individual and collective identities. This paper investigates how different citizens on X use language to inform, express, and construct social criticism in the Benue massacre. Utilizing Lesley Jeffries' Critical Stylistics (2010) as explicated by Irshad, & Mehmood, (2025), which


examines the relationship between ideology and power performance through a linguistic lens. Lesley Jeffries' model of Critical Stylistics comprises 10 tools, of which three will be utilised for data analysis. (i) Naming and Describing, (ii) Representing Actions/Events, and (iii) Equating and Contrasting. At the Naming and Describing analytic level, the framework examines how events, concepts, and even people or places are labelled using nouns, noun groups, or nominalized verbs (Aluya & Ochulor, 2024). At the analytic level of Representing Actions or Events, the framework focuses on verbs and the concept of transitivity. It establishes who is doing what, to whom, and what has been done, as well as how actions are performed or disrupted. Equating and Contracting investigates the way similarities and differences are constructed through the use of language (construction, expression, and choices of words). In the Context of the Benue massacre, Critical Stylistics provides a lens through which we view and analyze how linguistic choices are used to resist, condemn, and call out the government for failing its citizens.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology to examine the Yelewata Benue massacre. Data for this study were collected using the X-advance search feature, utilizing specific hashtags associated with Benue killings, such as #benuekillings, #Yelewata, and #benuemassacre. A purposive sampling method was employed to select 5 tweets from X. Tweets in English and Pidgin were selected, and Tweets in English served as the primary language of the discourse. The tweets were selected from 14th June, 2025 to 04th July, 2025. The analysis of this study employs Jefferies' Critical Stylistics to gain insight from the data collected.

Data Analysis

Tweet 1: Benue is bleeding 📌 Over 200 Nigerians brutally killed and rendered homeless. Enough is Enough!!! (MBAH, 2025).

In the opening lines of this tweet, the tweet performs several forms of rhetoric. The use of “*Benue is bleeding...*” is a metaphorical personification which frames a place “Benue” as wounded and bleeding. Benue, in this tweet, stands not just as the identifier of a location, but also for its people. The strategic use of the variant of the verb (to be) “is” and the continuous form of the verb (bleed) “bleeding”, emotionally frames the place into a suffering body, establishing empathy and urgency. The tweet labels victims as “*Over 200 Nigerians...*” instead of Benue residents, a choice that positions the urgency of the incident as a national challenge and not one to be described as local. The use of the adverb “brutally” qualifies the degree of insecurity in the nation, while characterizing the perpetrators as inhuman and barbaric. The tweet outlines and foregrounds the long-term effects and consequences to be faced by Benue indigenes through the use of “*rendered homeless.*” The verb “rendered” highlights the level of suffering not just the current attack has on the people, but also its aftermath. Further emphasizing the effect of the attack, the tweet deploys the use of the blood emoji “”, which functions as an intensifier to punctuate the level of pain and suffering. The blood emoji is also used to frame and describe the vision representation of the “bleeding Benue”. In the tweet, it is observed that there is an agent suppression of the actor; the actions and effects of actions are accounted for, but the actors are stepped aside, which leads to a centered focus on the victim and the effect of the violence and insecurity. The exclamatory clause “*Enough is Enough!!!*” expresses outrage and a call to corrective action. The capitalization of “E” in the second “Enough” goes against the convention of the English syntactic structure, but the tweet consciously deviates from the norms to buttress its call for action. The triple exclamatory marks serve as an increase in force for the call against insecurity and violent killings. Combining “Benue” and “bleeding” automatically equates a place with a wounded human body. This metaphorically personified statement makes the idea of communal suffering and pain

immediately relatable and felt. By referring to the victims of the attack as Nigerians, the tweet equates a local tragedy to a scale of national insurgency and insecurity. This tweet performs identity construction, moral positioning, and mobilizes a call for action.

Tweet 2: Stop Benue K!llings, 200 Nigerians have been killed in Benue and the government has turned a deaf ear, Benue bleeds 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔 (Amaka, 2025)

This tweet starts with an imperative demand, “*Stop Benue K!llings*” which is addressed to an unspecified audience. The insertion of “!” in place of the alphabet “i” intensifies shock and trauma, and is also an attempt to censor the brutal and gruesome killings in Benue while semantically retaining its transparency. The capitalization of each word in the sentence is against the convention of the English language grammatical rule, but the tweet employs it to call attention to itself, creating a sense of urgency. With the use of “*200 Nigerians have been killed in Benue...*”, the tweet labels both people and location. By combining both Nigerian and Benue in the same statement, the tweet doubles their identity, strategically framing the incident as both a crisis for local sympathy and national identification. The use of 200 in its exactness adds an evidential notion to the discourse, contrasting with Tweet 1, which states “*Over 200*”. Paying attention to the two “*K!llings*” and “*killed*” as used in the tweet, the first is written in initial caps when it shouldn’t be, and the “i” in it is replaced with the exclamation mark. This is done to establish emphasis and call to action against the Benue massacre. While the second is used in establishing the sad reality of the fate of Nigerians in Benue, hence the reason it’s written conventionally without any form of emphasis. “*...the government has turned a deaf ear...*” is an idiomatic expression that labels the nonchalant and neglectful attitude of the state concerning matters of its citizens. The lexical choices in the tweet express intentional ignorance and failure of the government to carry out its fundamental functions, thereby describing the level of insecurity suffered in the nation. The use of six crying emojis cannot be overlooked,

as it intensifies the grief, sadness, and public mourning. The repetition of the emoji signifies a deep and collective wailing, amplifying the tweet's call to action to stop the killings. Like Tweet 1, which strategically steps aside the actor in the crisis, this tweet also keeps the perpetrators grammatically absent, but it goes on to name the government, thereby strategically keeping the center of focus on the victims of the incident and the failure of the government in protecting its citizens. The strategic use of present perfect tenses creates a deep representation of events, amplifying their meaning. The use of “...have been killed” places the event in the recent past with relevance to the present. “has turned a deaf ear” establishes a continuation of the condition, implying that the actions of the government do not look like they intend to do anything soon, “...Benue Bleeds” presents the pain and suffering of the people as current and ongoing. The tweet equates local crises to national insurgency through the use of “200 Nigerians have been killed in Benue...” thereby establishing that insecurity is a national crisis and not a locally streamlined issue. The tweet frames victims as both locally affected and nationally relevant. The tweet informs, indicts, and demands a remedy.

Tweet 3: Benue is soaked in blood, and the 'President' is quiet. The Governor? Missing in action. 200 Nigerians massacred, not by natural disaster, but by terrorists. And the so-called leaders can't even pretend to care. This is criminal. (Jake, 2025)

This tweet exhibits various linguistic features, including vivid imagery, labelling, irony, sarcasm, and moral condemnation. It also uses metaphorical language. The phrase “Benue is soaked in blood” creates humanised imagery, linking the land to the human body. The word “soaked” highlights the severity of the attack, conveying a sense of overwhelming suffering and trauma, as if the area is drowned in violence. Similar to Tweet 2, this tweet provides a specific number and employs the verb “massacred,” a very strong term that not only describes violent killing but also implies deliberate intent. It labels victims as Nigerians, framing the insurgency as a national crisis. The clause “...not by natural disaster, but by terrorists” assigns

an actor- “terrorist”- framing the event as intentional and politically driven, rather than accidental or natural misfortune. Labelling them “terrorists” evokes an ideological outlook of political insecurity, framing the violence within a discourse of terrorism and counter- terrorism. The quotation marks around “President” are used strategically, representing how Nigerians often sarcastically quote the phrase when mocking or degrading the office. In this tweet, the president is put in quotes to sarcastically delegitimise the authority and significance of the title, suggesting it is undeserved. The phrase “The Governor? Missing in action” combines a rhetorical question- highlighting the governor's apparent inaction in his state- and the idiomatic " missing in action, " which depicts the governor as absent. The term “so called leaders” reinforces the quotation of the president and the governor's absence, further undermining the government and implying performative leadership or active government. Like Tweets 1 and 2, this tweet equates place with body, portraying Benue as a body soaked in blood. The stark contrast between natural disaster and terrorism indicates that the violence is intentional and political. It underscores that the magnitude of the attack should have been a natural disaster, not a human act. The tweet also highlights a clear ideological divide: while the public endures suffering and agony, the leaders remain absent and silent. The phrase “can't even pretend to care” intensifies this contrast by emphasising the leaders' failure- even in their minimal duty- to show concern for the people.

Tweet 4: And also no forget say this is not the first time something like this dey happen for Benue. The Agatu Massacre (Feb-Mar 2016, Benue State) it was Reported that 300-500 were killed by the same herdsmen. Them Dey slowly Dey wipe out Benue people. Right in front of our eyes. (Micheal, 2025)

This tweet recounts a previous Massacre in the same state (Agatu LGA), expressing iteration and framing accusations through narrative. The tweet corroborates its claim through the use of quantification and explicitly naming the perpetrator. The use of "no forget say" directly aims to jog the public memory, presupposing shared knowledge, framing the public as one social

entity and not the various ethnic groups and states that the nation possesses. The use of the Nigerian pidgin strategically describes and identifies the geographical location of the incidence, and also expresses the speaker's intention to communicate a wider audience thereby emphasizing the statement "no forget say". In the statement "The Agutu Massacre" the tweet capitalizes the "M" in Massacre, a strong evaluative labelling that frames the 2016 attack in the same Benue state as intentional killings. The expression of "Feb-Mar 2016, Benue State" provides identification of place and time, elevating credibility of the tweet, while condemning historical repetition and a possible continuation. The use of reported speech in "it was Reported that 300-500 were killed" with a combination of capitalization of "R" in reported frames the claims to be legitimate while strategically separating itself from owning the message. The mention of 300-500 acknowledges uncertainty, but succeeds in emphasizing the scale and degree of the damage. The tweet identifies and labels herdsmen as perpetrators of the violent act, and the use expression "the same herdsmen" labels them again as the perpetrators of the previous attack and the current attack, framing a patterned narrative, thereby creating a stance that when a future attack may come, then these "herdsmen" should be held accountable. "Dey slowly Dey wipe out Benue People" is an expression that the tweet uses to make its stance in the discourse. After reminding the audience of the pattern of the attack, identifying and labelling the perpetrators, the tweet now moves on to state that the people of Benue are slowly getting wiped out. The statement intensifies existential threat. The choice of "wipe out" frames extermination and use of "slowly" expresses that the intention of extermination is conscious and strategic. "Right in front of our eyes" is an idiomatic expression used in the tweet to frame the public as a part of the people being violated, constructing psychological proximity, and indulging moral urgency in the minds of the public. The Agutu Massacre is clearly equated to the Yelewata massacre as the tweet identifies the perpetrators of both attacks, "Herdsmen",

thereby converting isolated incidents into a patterned attack. The tweet also equates the targeted LGA Yelewate with the entire state by labeling “Benue people,” thereby establishing the incident not as a problem of one local government, but an entire state, hence framing collective victimhood. This tweet reframes the Yelewata massacre in Benue state as a patterned and intentional attack. Through the use of pidgin, historical citation, and naming the perpetrators, the tweet nationalizes the insurgency, reminds and call the public to action, and pressures the government to perform its duties.

Tweet 5: Has anybody been arrested in connection with Benue massacre or have we moved on?

This tweet, published on the 4th of July 2025, twenty-two days after the Yelewata massacre, reiterates a post by Kelvin Ugwu: “Today marks 20 days since over 200 persons were killed in Benue State, Nigeria. Has anyone been arrested in connection with the killings? Or have we moved on?” The tweet performs two rhetorical functions. First, it uses interrogative language to demand factual accountability, and it presents a sarcastic rhetorical assertion, “...*or have we moved on?*”, establishing that the situation begins to seem forgotten. The mention of “*Benue massacre*” names and identifies the event. Labelling the attack as a massacre frames it as intentional and brutal, rather than just a vague episode of conflict. The statement “*Has anybody been arrested...*” strategically uses the indefinite anybody to establish that an arrest has not been made, not because of a lack of perpetrators, but a sheer sense of irresponsibility and politicizing nature of the nation's government. The use of “*have we moved on?*” creates a sense of inclusivity as the pronoun “we” is deployed. “We” combines both the public, the media, and the government, putting everyone into a box of failing to demand accountability. Victims are identified only as part of a named event and foregrounded or framed emotionally, thereby shifting focus to accountability. The mention of the perpetrators is implied through the mention of “anybody”. The government is also indirectly named as the duty bearers who are expected

to have apprehended the perpetrators. The latter part of the tweet presents an intransitive evaluation; its illocutionary force is very rhetorical, as it strategically accuses through the use of suggestion, performing a criticizing act which accuses both the public and the government of forgetting. The tweet equates arrest with justice. Conceptually, the arrest is presented as a tool for society to respond to insecurity, violence, and crimes. The use of arrest and moving on are two contrasting elements that the tweet portrays to express its message. The contrast in both establishes that arrest is a form of answer and redemption for the government, while moving on is a clear statement of impunity and a failed government. The combination of the inclusive pronoun “we” is in contrast with the strategically labeled perpetrators “anybody”, establishing a call to “we” not to forget and move on from the action of “anybody”. Through interrogative structure and rhetorical alternatives, the tweet requests justice, condemning the absence of action by both the public and the government.

Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

Utilizing Jeffrie’s Critical Stylistics, the analysis reveals how citizens employ stylistic and linguistic strategies to construct narratives of violence, grief, and political failure. Analyzing the data, three critical trends were observed: foregrounding of victims, indirect and direct representation of perpetrators, and negative evaluation of governmental actors. Victims are consistently highlighted through quantification, use of emotional language, and metaphorical expressions to emphasize and explicate the harm caused. The repetition of blood and death is consistent in all tweets, framing the Benue state as not only a state of violence, but also a symbolic space of national tragedy. the tweets also humanize the victims while simultaneously mobilizing public empathy and outrage. Perpetrators are represented with varying levels of explicitness. In some tweets, they are named directly, in others, their actions are foregrounded without any specific naming. The use of the word “massacre” to describe the actions of the

perpetrators labels them as organized and intentional, framing their actions as systemic and not incidental. The government is mostly negatively represented in all tweets. The tweets consistently construct the government as negligent and incompetent, establishing failed leadership. The study underscores the critical role of digital media (X) in shaping violent narratives in Nigeria. X emerges as a platform where citizens strategically mobilize public consciousness, resist insecurity, insurgency, and bad governance. X stands as a site for communal outrage, mourning, and a platform for political critique, utilizing language and stylistic strategies to shape the fractured reality of Nigeria.

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Simply Amaka [@StelxyG]. (2025, June 15). Stop Benue Killings, 200 Nigerians have been killed in Benue and the government has turned a deaf ear, Benue bleeds 🩸🩸🩸🩸🩸🩸. X: <https://x.com/StelxyG/status/1934304646413107647?t=-AYn5aCxRllnAhi735EoTg&s=19>

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