

Framing of Sexual Crimes by Select Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

The research was undertaken to investigate framing of sexual crimes by select Nigerian newspapers. The objectives of the study were to find out the pattern of sex crime stories as reported in Nigerian newspapers, find out the prominence given to sex crimes issues and ascertain dominant frames used by Nigerian newspapers in the reportage of sex crimes. The researcher employed content analysis research method. Four national newspapers; namely: *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Sun* and *Daily Trust* were purposively selected and analysed. The study period was from January 1, 2021 to December 31, 2021. The results revealed that most (67%) of the newspapers' reportage of sex crimes were presented as news stories. Further finding indicated that sex crime-related stories under the period of study were not given much prominence by the select newspapers, sixty four per cent (64%) of the items were published in the inside pages of the select newspapers. The findings further showed that the select newspapers (*The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Sun* and *Daily Trust*) used sensational frame more dominantly than any other frames. Thus, it was concluded that sexual crime issues were reported mainly as straight news items and it was not given prominence in the select newspapers. It was recommended that Nigerian journalists should do more of interpretative feature stories on sex crime cases than straight news stories since most of the straight news stories are spot news and skeletal.

Keywords: Framing, Sexual, Crimes, Rape, Nigerian, Newspapers

Introduction

Sex crimes have become a social phenomenon in Nigeria. The mass media is replete with catalogue of cases of sex crimes issue as hardly does a week pass by without an incident being mentioned in the media. There have been various media reports on sexual crime cases with headlines such as "Four men gang-rape 15-year old to a coma," "20-year old boy sexually violated a nine year-old girl." "A 27 year-old man rapes mother." "15 year-old boy defiles three kids; including 10-month-old baby." Favour Okechukwu, an 11-year-old girl, was gang-raped to death in Ejigbo, Lagos State (Olorok, 2021 & Musawa, 2014). Then there was the detestable assault and murder in 2012 of Cynthia Osokogwu by "friends" she met on Facebook. Vera Uwaila Omosuwa, a 22-year-old microbiology student, was raped and brutally assaulted in

2020 in a Church near her home in Benin, Edo State and died a couple of days later from her injuries. Hamira, a five-year-old, was drugged and raped by her neighbour in April 2020. Her injuries were so bad she could no longer control her bladder.

Similarly, Barakat Bello, an 18-year-old student, was raped during a robbery in her home in Ibadan, Oyo State. She was butchered with machetes by her rapists and died on June 1st, 2020(www.amnesty.org). The list seems endless. Also, in 2021, the case of popular actor, James Olanrewaju Omiyinka, aka Baba Ijesha, swam the media space and it further revealed the existence of several sexual crimes apologists (Otuyemi, 2021). Amnesty International revealed that 11, 200 sex crime cases were reported in Nigeria in 2020, including children raped to death by the rapists (Ugbodaga, 2021).

A sex crime is one of the most awful and brutal gender-based forms of violence, predominantly carried out against women and the girl-child; although, in some cases, men are also victims of sexual crimes. Male or female could be assaulted sexually, but studies have shown that the prevalence is more against women than men. Despite the outcry over the rising cases of rape in Nigeria, there seems to be no end to the nemesis. There is no day in the country without a reported case of sexual violence, especially rape, in the media (<https://www.blueprint.ng>). A sex crime is a form of unlawful human sexual behaviour. Someone who commits such is said to be a sex offender. Some sex crimes are crimes of violence, and of social taboos, such as incest, sodomy and indecent exposure of body (Waites, 2005). Sexual crimes have become problems and the frequency at which they are committed must be taken as serious issues that need to be tackled by all Nigerians. The contents and pages given to sex crime stories in the newspapers do not seem to be enough for adequate report on the issue. One manner in which news media shape perceptions of key events is through the act of framing. Thus, this study investigates through reports from the media the nature, prominence, frequency, sources of story and framing of story among other things given to sex crimes Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Cases of sex crimes have become a recurring feature in Nigeria. The issue remains one of the criminal acts perpetuated in the society that has been overlooked by the society especially the print media in terms of reportage. The Amnesty International report said in June 2020, Nigerian Police said they had recorded 717 incidents of sex crime between January and May 2021. In April 2020, Nigeria's Minister of Women Affairs, Mrs. Pauline Tallen said at least 3,600 cases of sex crime were recorded during the lockdown, while the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) received 11,200 reported cases of sex crimes over the whole of 2020. The public rely on the media to be informed, educated and influenced to take positive actions. The media are expected to inform and educate the public on issues of sex crimes in society. The print media, especially newspapers have been identified as one of the most effective means of communication. This is due to its unique features of reader control, exposure and

permanence (Odunlami & Busayo, 2013). Sampert 2010), as cited in Ezegwu (2019) who analysed all stories on sexual assault that appeared in six English-Canadian newspapers in one year (2002) found that “sex assault” or “sex attack” was used more frequently than the term “sexual assault” and that it appeared as a deliberate lexical choice made by journalists or editors.

This choice of words/phrase used in reporting sex crimes could either help to tackle the menace or escalate it. Thus, reading news stories, particularly sex crime in the media can help the public form opinions on such issues. One of the ways through which the media inform and educate the public about issues is framing and agenda setting. In a situation where the cases are reported, they are not given proper prominence in the newspapers and even when it is reported, the manner of the framing can influence newspaper readers. Thus, the problem that motivated this study is: how do Nigerian newspapers frame sex crimes issues?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Ascertain the pattern of sex crime stories presented in Nigerian newspapers.
2. Find out the level of prominence given to sex crimes in Nigerian newspapers.
3. Determine the frequency of coverage given to sex crime stories in Nigerian newspapers.
4. Identify the dominant frame used in Nigerian newspaper stories on sex crimes.
5. Examine nature of sex crime predominantly covered by Nigerian newspapers.

Conceptual Review and Empirical Studies

A sex crime is a criminal sexual offense, such as rape or sexual abuse that is identified by law as especially inimical to public decency and safety (American Heritage Dictionary of English, 2011). Sex crimes are unlawful forms of human sexual behaviour. Someone who commits one is said to be a sex offender. Some sex crimes are crimes of violence. Others are violations of social taboos, such as incest, sodomy, indecent exposure or exhibitionism (Waites, 2005). Jolly & Khan (2016) say that sex crime involves rape, sodomy, unlawful sexual penetration, and sexual abuse among others. According to Akinwale & Omoera (2013), sexual intercourse with a woman by a man without her consent and chiefly by force or deception is a sex crime. They also add that among sex crimes, rape has received more attention by researchers. Bimbo, Akinlabi & Olotu (2004) see a sex crime as rape or other forms of sexual abuse. Sex crime also refers to all forms of sexual acts or behaviour such as rape, sexual violence, incest, sexual harassment, lesbianism and other sexual abuses committed against a person (male or female) without his or her consent.

Nwammuo (2015) carried out a study on the views of women on press coverage of rape cases in Nigeria: A misrepresentation or an under-representation. The purposes of the study was to ascertain how Nigeria’s elite women view the coverage of rape cases by the Nigerian the press and to find out if other crimes receive more coverage than rape. The study adopted qualitative research approach in which Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was used in eliciting reliable responses from the respondents. The

findings showed that there was low reportage of rape cases by the press. The discussants argue that the low coverage of rape cases was caused by low reportage of rape cases by media houses. The researcher recommended that victims should be encouraged by the media, non-governmental organisations and other governmental agencies to always report the issue of rape to appropriate authorities.

Tade & Udechukwu (2018) investigated newspaper coverage and representations of rape in two select newspapers in Nigeria. The researcher used content analysis method. The results showed that 331 cases of rape were reported within the period with southwestern part of Nigeria recording largest occurrence. It was further found that low reporting behaviour of rape by victims was affected by fear of stigma, fear of rapist due to threats and religious sentiments. The researcher recommended diagnostic and prognostic frames to attract informed polices and give justice to the raped. Adekoya & Olaseinde-Fayomi (2020) carried out a textual analysis of audience responses to social media framing of domestic violence against men. The study adopted textual analysis method. Findings of the study revealed that the meaning audience derived from social media frame led to name calling, blaming of male victims, perpetrator and as well as social media platform that disseminated the stories. Further findings showed that social media can be protagonist of domestic violence as a result of framing of domestic violence stories. The researchers recommended that social media framing should be from human interest frames, rather than blame and name calling frames.

Osewa, Mohammed & Alabi (2020) did a study titled “the Nigerian State and the challenges of rising cases of sexual assault among Nigerian citizens.” The paper adopted the relative deprivation theory to validate its arguments. The researchers relied on secondary data. The researchers note that, in a country like Nigeria, the issue of rape among the people had been on the rising rate these days as many babies, aged and teenagers had been raped to death. These researchers argue that the major causes of the rising cases of rape and other sexual crime in Nigeria are youth’s unemployment that is realised as a result of bad governance and submit that good governance is the only lasting and perpetual solution to the rising cases of rape in Nigeria. Some of the studies are similar to the present study, but differs greatly in terms of the methodologies adopted. For instance, Osewa, Mohammed & Alabi (2020) adopted qualitative research method, Nwammuo (2015) study adopted qualitative research approach in which Focus Group Discussion (FGD), Adekoya & Olaseinde-Fayomi (2020) adopted textual analysis method. The current study adopted content analysis method and the researcher broaden the study area to include other forms of sex crimes such as groping, homosexuality, rape and sexual harassment amongst other things.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on social responsibility theory. Social responsibility is an extension of the libertarian theory of the press which places emphasis on the moral and social responsibility of persons as well as institutions which operate the mass media (Okoro & Naji, 2012). The theory is based on the principle that the press must be responsible to represent all aspects and interests in the society. Thus, Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma (2017) note that the theory says the media must be

socially to the members of public. In other words, the theory suggests that the mass media should permeate and represent all the strata of the society. Capturing it succinctly, “it presupposes that newspapers must have social conscience, be devoted to public welfare and public service; they should be responsive to problems in the society” (Johnson, Layefa&Taiwo, 2016, p. 7)

Similarly, Asemah (2011) notes that it was as a result of the failure and abuse of the libertarian theory of the press that the social responsibility theory came into existence. The relevance of social responsibility theory to this study is that since it is genuinely the responsibility or duty of the press to freely inform the members of the society, it is then part of this responsibility or obligation to bring to the public cases of sex crimes in the society with a view to exposing those perpetrating the heinous acts. This would not only sanitise the system but also make the society a better place. Without reporting these sex crimes, the ugly acts would continue to infest the society and this would no doubt be seen as an indictment against the press for non-performance.

Methodology

The researchers adopted content analysis research method. The population comprises all dailies published between January 1 and December 31, 2021. The population of the four newspapers is 1460. Four newspapers (*Vanguard*, *The Punch*, *Daily Sun* and *Daily Trust* newspapers) were purposively selected based on their national visibility and virtual visibility. In other words, they are highly rated national dailies with highly robust online platforms meaning they can be accessed from any part of the world. The sample size was statistically determined using the Taro Yamane’s formula for determination of sample size. The sample size was 314. The number of issues studied was determined using the purposive sampling method, which involves handpicking desired sample elements to ensure that such elements are included in the survey (Dode, 2002, cited in Ezegwu, 2019), in which case, the researcher scanned through each newspaper and selected each one that contained articles on sex crimes. In other words, purposive sampling was used because only unit of analysis (newspaper reports) that carried issues relating to sex crimes was selected. The units of analysis were: News, features, editorials, opinion/letters and pictures/cartoons.

Sex crimes in Nigeria were framed in terms of the following categories:

Health/Medical Frame: These are words/phrases that suggest health implications of the issues under study. It could be a report from hospitals, clinics and hospitals.

Legal/Justice frame: This is the content which has to do with court reports, sentences, and fines relating to sex crime matters. It also means information or news reports emanating from courts relating to sex crimes.

Human Rights Frame: This refers to news contents which infringe or impede on a persons’ right. It could be words or phrase suggesting violation or abuse of a persons’ right on sex crime issues.

Sensationalist Frame: These are reports or stories that intend to create public excitement. It also entails stories that are overhyped or exaggerated to present biased impressions on sex crime issues in Nigeria.

Sexist (gynocentric) Frame: This term is used to denote stories that are discriminatory, which are based on a person’s gender or sex.

Inter-Coder Reliability

A pilot study was conducted to ascertain the inter-coder reliability; eventually the inter-coder reliability was calculated using the Hosti (1969 as cited in Ezegwu, Ezeonyejiaku & Asodike, 2018) formula as follows:

$$\text{Reliability} = \frac{2(M)}{N_1 + N_2}$$

Where M = number of coding decision the coders agree on

N₁ + N₂ = Total number of coding decision by the first and second coders respectively.

$$\text{Therefore } R = \frac{2(24)}{33+26} = \frac{48}{59} = 0.81$$

This shows that the instrument has internal consistency.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Reports under which Sex Crime Stories are presented in the 4 Newspapers

Story Types	<i>The Punch</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	<i>DailySun</i>	<i>Daily Trust</i>	Total	%
News stories	32	40	19	17	108	(67)
Features	4	6	3	2	15	(9)
Editorials	2	1	2	1	6	(4)
Opinion/letters	7	5	6	3	21	(13)
Pictures/cartoons	3	4	3	2	12	(7)
Total	48	56	33	25	162	(100)

The table above indicates that 67% of the stories relating to sex crimes were reported in news format which accounted for the highest percentage. The editorial had the lowest number with 6 (4%) items. The implication is that sex crimes were reported more in news story format.

Table 2: Level of Prominence in Newspaper Coverage of Sex Crimes in Nigeria

Placement	<i>The Punch</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>Daily Trust</i>	Total	%
Front Page	10	13	7	5	35	(22)
Inside Page	29	36	22	16	103	(64)
Back page	9	7	4	4	24	(14)
Total	48	56	33	25	162	100

On the level of prominence accorded to sex crime. Table 2 above reveals that most (64%) of the items were buried in the inside pages, while 35 (22%) items were on the front pages. Sex crimes were not accorded the prominence they deserved.

Table 3: Frequency of Total Number of Reports on Sex Crimes in the Study Newspapers

Newspapers	Frequency	Percentage
<i>The Punch</i>	48	30
<i>Vanguard</i>	56	35
<i>Daily Sun</i>	33	20
<i>Daily Trust</i>	25	15
Total	162	100

Data on Table 3 reveals the total number of reports based on individual newspapers on sex crimes in Nigeria. *The Punch* led with 56 (35%) stories.

Table 4 : Frequency of Sex Crimes Appearance in the Studied Newspapers

Frequency	<i>The Punch</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>Daily Trust</i>	Total %
1-2 times	32	36	23	18	109(67.2)
3-4 times	13	15	7	6	41 (25.3)
5 times & above 3		5	3	1	12 (7.4)
Total	48	56	33	25	162 (100)

The table above indicate that, the news stories on sex crimes appeared mainly 1-2 times (67.2%) on the studied newspapers.

Table 5: Dominant Frames used in Sex Crimes Reportage in the Studied Newspapers

Dominant Frames	<i>The Punch</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>Daily Trust</i>	Total %
Health/medical frame	7	6	5	7	25 (15)
Legal/justice frame	10	15	13	8	46 (28)
Human rights frame	4	7	5	4	20(12)
Sensationalist frame	23	26	8	5	62(38)
Sexist (gynocentric) frame	2	2	2	1	9(6)
Total	48	56	33	25	162 (100)

Table 5 indicates that sensationalist frame dominated the coverage of sex crimes in Nigeria with 62 (38%) items.

Table 6: Nature of Sex Crimes predominantly covered by Nigerian Newspapers

Nature of Sex Crimes	<i>The Punch</i>	<i>Vanguard</i>	<i>Daily Sun</i>	<i>Daily Trust</i>	Total %
Rape by strangers	25	35	17	15	92 (57)
Homosexual rape	4	5	3	1	8 (11)
Lesbian rape	4	3	2	0	9 (6)
Sexual assault by relations	13	14	9	7	43 (26)
Total	48	56	33	25	162 (100)

Table 6 indicates Nature of sex crimes predominantly covered by Nigerian newspapers; rape by strangers dominated the coverage with 92 (57%) items.

Discussion of Findings

The items obtained from the study as shown in table 1, page revealed that 67% of the stories relating to sex crimes were reported in news format and has the highest percentage. The editorial has the lowest number with 6 (4%) items. This becomes even more worrisome when viewed against the backdrop of the fact that the editorial column is a foremost platform for advocacy in newspapers. The implication is that sex crimes were reported in straight news format. This finding further demonstrates that investigative and explanatory stories on sex crimes incidents presented in feature story format are lacking in these newspapers. This gives the reports on sex crimes a predictable pattern. Feature stories would have provided the opportunity for in-depth coverage of sex crime cases, with details presentation of facts, how the victims were attacked, news behind the news, interpretation of such incidents, and what law enforcement agents are doing. A Feature story provides a platform for informative story contents beyond the skeletal straight news presentation of sex crime cases. Ohaja (2005, cited in Ezegwu & Asemah, 2021) states that a feature is an in-depth and factual write up on a topical issue which sought to give comprehensive information in a more captivating and relaxed style than straight news.

Prominence in this study entails the placement or the position of the stories in the select newspapers. Most times, newspapers use prominence to indicate the importance attached to stories; thus, the more a news story appears in front page of a particular newspaper, the priority it has over others. In grading news stories, less attention is given to stories that are placed on the inside pages, while more attention is given to stories that appeared in front pages of newspapers (Ezegwu & Asemah, 2021). To this end, table 2 revealed that out of the 162 reports published in the four newspapers under study, 35 (22%) reports were placed on the front pages, a paltry 24 (14%) were placed on the back pages; while a whopping 103 (64%) were published inside. This revealed that sex crimes issues were not given prominence in the studied newspapers. Previous study showed that when events are placed either on the front or back page, they reflect the importance of the issue (Ohaja, 2003; Okorie & Oyedepo, 2011).

The findings showed that there was low coverage of sex crimes cases in Nigeria considering the total number of stories published by the four newspapers. The four newspapers published 162 stories in a year. *The Punch* published 48(30%) stories, *Vanguard* published 56 (35%), *Daily Sun* published 33(20%) and *Daily Trust* published 25(15%) and most of these stories appeared every 1-2 times (67.2%), the least was 5 times and above which accounted for 12 (7.4%) items. Musbau (2013) found out that an average of two sex crime cases occur per day in Lagos, Nigeria alone. Hence, if an average of two sex crime cases occur daily in Lagos, Nigeria alone and only 48 (30%) were reported in one year by *The Punch* alone, it deductively indicates low reportage of sex crime cases by Nigerian newspapers. Furthermore, Okafor-Vanni (2013) observes that there are numerous cases of rape and gang rape in Nigeria, yet many go unreported; the few that get reported to the authorities are either not pursued by the police or the victim is advised to keep silent lest she disgraces her family.

The findings showed that in most of the cases, sex crimes as reported by the Nigerian newspapers, the sensationalist frame was the most predominantly used form of reportage of sex crimes in Nigeria. Sensationalist frame had 56 (35%) reports and

Vanguard accounted for most of sensationalist reports with 62 (38%) items. This finding was supported by writing of Umeh (2010). According to her, the mass media, especially the print, frequently carry controversial reports in a bid to increase sales. Udeze & Uzuegbunam (2013) state that sensationalism has been a word associated with the tabloids, entertainment-styled newspapers like the own *Daily Sun*, *Saturday Sun* and *Sunday Sun* newspapers in Nigeria. The legal/justice frame was next dominant with 46 (28%) reports while the Sexist (gynocentric) frame was the least with 9 (6%) reports.

The findings further showed that rape by strangers dominated the coverage with 92 (57%) items, followed by sexual assault by relations with 43 (26%) items. The least is rape by lesbian with 9 (6%) items. No wonder news stories such as the following was found: Vera Uwaila Omosuwa, a 22-year-old microbiology student, was raped and brutally assaulted in 2020 in a Church near her home in Benin, Edo State and died a couple of days later from her injuries. Hamira, a five-year-old, was drugged and raped by her neighbour in April 2020. Her injuries were so bad she could no longer control her bladder. Barakat Bello, an 18-year-old student, was raped during a robbery in her home in Ibadan, Oyo State. She was butchered with machetes by her rapists and died on June 1st, 2020 (www.amnesty.org).

Conclusion

Data from this study have shown that sex crime stories under the period of study were not given much prominence by the national newspapers and the study revealed that there was low coverage of sex crime cases in Nigeria. The stories relating to sex crimes were reported in news format. The studied newspapers (*The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Sun* and *Daily Trust*) did not engage much in any form of advocacy geared towards discouraging sex crimes in Nigeria. The study concludes that the select newspapers (*The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Sun* and *Daily Trust*) used the sensationalist frame more than any other frames and that the *Daily Sun* and *The Punch* newspapers framed sex crimes more sensationally to their readers.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of the statistical analyses, as well as their conclusions, the following recommendations were made for the study:

1. Nigerian journalists should do more of interpretative feature stories on sex crimes cases than straight news stories since most of the straight news stories are spot news and skeletal. Interpretative features will help create context in stories about sex crimes.
2. Nigerian newspapers should devote sizeable space to sex crimes and give more prominence to it via front page stories, back page stories, editorials, columns and feature stories so that Nigerians will be better informed on the matter.
3. The issues related to sex crimes should be reported often as this will help to create more awareness on the dangers and implications of such crime.
4. Nigerian journalists should refrain from sensational reports or giving priority to trivial news items. They should strive to abide by the ethics of their profession.

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