Newspaper Coverage of Rape Cases in Nigeria: Do Newspaper Report Set Agenda on the Issue?

Ugwuanyi, John Chidi¹

Abstract

This study investigates newspaper coverage of rape cases with specific attention to sources of stories, frequency of follow-up stories and the prominence accorded such stories. Content analysis was used for the study while two newspapers—the Daily Sun and the Vanguard—were selected for the study. A self-developed coding sheet was used to collect data for the study. With the use of Kappa statistical method, the Inter-coder reliability was determined with the aid of SPSS version 16.0 which yielded 0.85 which was considered very high reliability level. Result revealed that most of the stories on rape cases cited non-official sources. It was found that the newspapers studied had very few stories on follow-cases regarding rape. Also, the newspapers studied paid less prominence to rape cases as most of the studies were on the inside page. Based on the result of this study, the researcher recommends, among others that newspapers should improve on the prominence accorded rape cases so as to properly set agenda on the issue.

Keywords: Coverage, Ethical Evaluation, Nigeria, Newspaper and Rape

Introduction

Cases of rape have continued to increase in Nigeria. Almost every day, there will be a fresh rape case. This sad situation is surprising because for a country that is known for its religiosity, one would expect that sexual escapades will be on a low level. However, the surprising part of it is that even members of the clergy are guilty of this act of sexual indiscipline. The term “rape” is therefore the most serious kind of sexual assault and is punishable with imprisonment for life, (Okonkwo & Naish, 2013). It is also one of those actions that fall under violence against women (Nwammuo, 2013). Rape in its entirety, is a violation of human rights.

Rape is a criminal offence. Section 357 of Criminal Code Act, Law of Federation of Nigeria 1990 CAP77 (cited in WACOL) any person who has unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman or a girl, without her consent, or if her consent is obtained by force or by means of threats or intimidation of any kind, or by fear of harm, or by means of false and fraudulent representation as to the nature of the act, or in the case of married woman, by personating her husband, is guilty of an offence which is called rape [WACOL,2002,p.1]. It can be noted here that any person (male or female) who through tricks, threat or force engages in a sexual intercourse with a girl or a woman, raped the victim. Therefore, rape has to do with coitus obtained through force or other means. It is noteworthy that Nigerian criminal code does not either consider nor

¹ Corresponding author: Ugwuanyi, John Chidi Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Email: Johnchidi.ugwuanyi@unn.edu.ng
envisage sodomy or the possibility of a girl or a woman securing sexual intercourse with a boy or a man either through force, trick or intimidation. This position of the criminal code is affirmed by Women’s Aid Collective (WACOL) as it posits, “a woman cannot be convicted of raping her husband or any man because the offence can only be committed upon a girl or a woman” (WACOL, 2002,p. 4). It is not only the law, but also the society does not sympathize with male victims of rape.

When men or boys are victims of sexual violence, some of these problems can be compounded. While at least some legal and social networks, often exist for women and girls, who have been sexually attacked, there is rarely anything comparable for male victims (UNHCR, 2005,p. 5). Rape has become a moral burden in Nigeria. Oduah (2014, p. 26) states that “the rate at which rapes occur in our society today is becoming alarming and outrageous.” Musbau (2013, p. 53) reports that “687 cases of rape were recorded” in 2012, which is an average of two cases per day, 100 cases of rape in Kano took place in 2013 out of which 40 offenders were convicted”. In Anambra State, Guardian Newspaper of Friday 7, 2014 reports that there were 115 rape incidents and complaints but only 12 cases were taken up by the police. These were not the only rape cases reported in 2014.

On January 10, 2014, a similar incident was reported by Daily Sun Newspaper. In this case, a seventeen year-old girl was gang raped by three men on her way back from school. On June 6th 2013, Guardian, Newspaper had it that Masonter Iyanga of Akwabo street raped a young girl. Vanguard Newspapers of 25th October 2013 reported that a 50 years-old pastor of Choice Bible church allegedly raped three girls aged nine, seven and eight years. Also, Daily Sun of October 31st 2013 had it that a virgin school girl at Ikorodu Lagos state was gang-raped by men to coma. As if all these cases were not enough, Daily Sun of 19th December 2013 reported that a seven-year-old girl was gang raped by three men. The above instances are ugly scenarios that floods the Nigerian press on alarming rate of rape in Nigeria. This is despite the provision made in section 357 of the Criminal Code Act CAP 77, Laws of the Federation which states that: Any person who has canal knowledge of a women or girl without her consent, if the consent is obtained by force or by means of threat by force or by means of threat or intimidation of any kind or by fear of harm or by means of false and fraudulent representation as to the nature of the act, or, in the case of a married women, by impersonating her husband, is guilty of an offence which is called rape.

The manner of newspaper coverage of rape is worth investigating because of the power of the media to set agenda for the public. Gever, (2014) found that the media have the ability to set agenda for the public. What this means is that the media could achieve this through the language used, the sources of stories on rape as well as prominence of stories on rape cases in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The increasing cases of rape incidence in Nigeria has become a source of worry to the entire Nigerians of goodwill. This social problem, apart from constituting a problem on the moral standard of the Nigerian state, has raised concerns on the human rights ratings of the country. Also worrisome is the fact that this crime takes place in violation of extant laws. The media, more specifically, newspapers have a duty to report rape cases in a manner that set agenda on the issue. Consequently, literature is needed to understanding how the media set agenda on rape cases in Nigeria, hence the need for this study.
Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to evaluate newspaper coverage of rape cases with emphasis on the ethical dimension. Specifically, the study seeks to achieve the following:

1. To find out the sources of newspaper stories on rape cases in Nigeria.
2. To examine the volume of newspaper stories on follow-up stories on rape cases in Nigeria.
3. To examine the prominence of newspaper stories on rape cases in Nigeria.

Research Questions

This study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are sources of newspaper stories on rape cases in Nigeria?
2. What is the volume of stories on follow-up stories on rape cases?
3. What is the prominence of newspapers stories on rape cases in Nigeria?

The Media and Agenda Setting

Agenda-setting describes the ability of the mass media to trigger to the public what is important. By virtue of providing differential levels of coverage to specific issues, the media are able to shape individuals’ perceptions of the relative importance and salience of these issues. Moy, Tewksbury & Rinke (2016). The idea of agenda-setting is attributed to Walter Lippmann in his 1922 classic, Public Opinion, which opened with a chapter captioned “The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads (Lippmann 1922, p. 29). Lippmann had argued that the agenda of issues or other objects presented by the news media influence what the pictures in our heads are about. “Agenda-setting” resonates conceptually with ideas raised by others in earlier years. Cohen (1963) wrote about how “the press may not be successful all the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13; emphasis added). Lang and Lang (1966, p. 466) described how “most of what people know about political life comes to them secondhand—or even thirdhand—through the mass media. The media do structure a very real political environment but one which … we can only know ‘at a distance’.

The ability of the media to set agenda has not been in doubt. The area, however, continues to attract the attention of researchers because of the critical role the media are expected to play to the society. Gever (2014) says that the media have the ability to determine what the general public consider as very important. Moy, Tewksbury and Rinke (2016) say that the news media serve a normatively significant role in contemporary society. They are the conduits through which individuals learn of issues outside their immediate life space. In addition, they introduce information and viewpoints that foster disagreement, discussion, and democracy (Moy, et al, 2016).

Over time, scholars have attempted to understand the influence of media agenda-setting abilities. Althaus and Tewksbury, (2002) in an experimental research found that readers of the print version of the New York Times, after five days, systemically differed from online readers of the same newspaper in what they perceived to be the most important problems facing the country. Schoenbach, de Waal, and Lauf, (2005) found that the more
frequently individuals read print newspapers each week, the greater number of issues they mention as being the order of the day. The result of Schoenbach, de Waal, and Lauf suggest that the media actually have the ability to shape public views. Shoemaker and Reese’s (2014) in a study on the hierarchy of influences identifies several factors that affect news content: (1) ideological, socio-cultural forces that dictate what is appropriate or newsworthy and warrants coverage; (2) extra-media forces, such as economic incentives; (3) organizational influences, such as the publisher; (4) media routines, including journalistic norms; and (5) the journalists themselves. These factors are likely to suggest the direction of agenda.

**Empirical Review**

In this segment, the researcher reviewed previous works done by scholars that are also related to the current one either in content or design. The first is a research work carried out by Oduah (2014) titled “Exploring Media Framing and Representation of Rape cases in Nigeria”. The researcher content analyzed the Guardian, Vanguard and Daily Sun newspapers to ascertain the framing and representation of rape cases in Nigeria. The findings revealed that Daily Sun newspaper report rape cases more than other newspapers in Nigeria. The study also discovered that even when rape cases are reported, they were buried in inside pages of the newspapers thereby giving them little or no prominence. Finally, the study recorded that dominant frames of rape cases include innocence, neutral, intimidation and avoidance. Nwankwo, (2011) carried out a study to find out how Nigerian journalists cover crimes using content analysis as a research design. This study recorded that armed robbery is given high coverage while rape, house breaking and other related crimes are given low coverage by publishing them in inside pages. Eboh, (2011); content analyzed Nigerian newspapers to find out how rape cases were reported. The study found that although Nigerian press reported some rape cases, readers were not given a follow-up on how those cases were tried. It also reported that out of 720 rape cases recorded in Anambra State in 2010, only 12 of the cases were reported to the police while none of the cases had been successfully prosecuted by the court.

Also, Nwamnwo (2015) did a study on “The views of women of press coverage of rape cases in Nigeria: A misrepresentation or an under-representation?” The researcher aimed at ascertaining how Nigerian elite women view the coverage of rape cases by Nigerian press. It was a qualitative study in which Focus Group Discussion method (involving ten women selected from five state universities in the South-Eastern Nigeria) was used in achieving the aim of the study. The findings showed that respondents, view press coverage of rape cases as “under-representation” and not “Mis-representation”. This is based on the cited newspapers which contain few rape cases which were mostly buried in inside pages. Based on this finding, the researcher made the following recommendations.

- That NAWOJ members i.e. (Nigerian Association of Women Journalists) should team up with NUJ (Nigerian Union of Journalists) to enlighten and sensitize women about their rights generally while stressing the provisions of the law regarding rape and other crimes against women.
- That headlines should always be cast in national newspapers calling on victims of rape to always report to the police and media houses nearest to them;
• That rape cases be prosecuted once reported as this will encourage rape victims to always report such crimes while serving as deterrent to others who have such tendency to commit rape.
• That journalist always give a follow-up on any published rape case as readers will be interested to know how rape cases are resolved by the appropriate legal authorities.

Furthermore, Egbo (2011) conducted a study on “An evaluation of newspaper coverage of sexual violence against women and children in selected Nigerian newspapers” The study answered three research questions: Do newspapers give prominence to sexual violence stories? How often do newspapers report sexual violence issues? Do newspapers report sexual violence more as features than as straight news, editorial or letters to editors? Code[ sheet was used as the measuring instrument for data collection. Selected sample of three Nigerian newspapers were studied with content analysis as the design of the study. The study revealed that the contribution of Nigeria newspapers in tackling the problem of sexual violence against women and children is not impressive. This was because of the following findings: They do not give prominence to sexual violence stories. They could have done that by adequately placing them on the front pages. They do not frequently report sexual violence. They do not amply utilize features in presenting sexual violence stories. Doing that could entail analysing the facts of the stories and injecting emotional slant to them to precipitate public outcry against the problem.

Finally, Nwabueze and Oduah (2015) did a study on “Media Re-victimization of Rape Victims in a Shame Culture? Exploring the Framing and Representation of Rape Cases in Nigerian Dailies” The researchers content analysed three Nigerian Dailies – Daily Sun, Vanguard and Guardian newspapers to examine the framing and representation of rape cases in the newspapers. Among the objectives of the study were to find out the frequency of stories on rape reported in the Nigerian newspapers, to find out the sources of rape cases as reported in the Nigerian Newspapers, and to find out the dominant frame used in the stories on rape reported in the Nigerian newspapers. The frequency of reportage of rape cases showed that from June 2013 to April 2014, the three selected newspapers reported rape cases fifty-seven(57) times. The researchers reported that the sources of reported cases of rape in the Nigerian newspapers from June 2013 – May 2014 were as follows: thirteen(13) were reported or made known to the public by the victims themselves while thirty-two(32) of the cases were reported by family members of the victims. Other sources of stories on rape as revealed from the study are police(4) court(5), Non-Governmental Organizations (3).It was also found that the dominant frame of rape stories in the newspapers was innocence frame which portrayed victims of rape as innocent of the crime rather than re-victimisation frame which portrayed victims as responsible for the incident.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on agenda setting theory. Agenda setting theory posits that the mass determine what issues to be considered as important or not. The theory was proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972 (McQuail 2005). Folarin (1998) cited in Gever (2013) remarks that the agenda-setting theory implies that the media predetermine what issues to think about. The scholar adds that the media do this through factors like frequency of reporting, prominence given to the reports through headline display, pictures and layout in newspapers, magazines, films, graphics or timing on radio and television. Also, the degree of conflict generated in the reports and cumulative media specific
effects over time. Agenda setting theory has been criticised by many scholars who argue that the media do not actually set agenda for the public. Based on the provision of this study, the researcher argues that if the media frequently cover rape issues, the attention of the public will be drawn to it with a view to fighting the menace.

**Methodology**

Content analysis was used for this study. This design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to examine newspaper framing of rape issues. The population of this study consisted of all daily newspapers published in Nigeria between 2011 and 2014. According to Aina (2002), cited in (Fadairo, & Aminu, 2014) there are 43 daily newspapers in circulation in Nigeria. These newspapers constituted the population for this study. A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted in the sampling of issues of the newspapers selected for the study. The first stage includes the sampling of 2 newspapers namely, *Daily Sun* and *The Vanguard* from a list of widely circulated newspapers in Nigeria using simple random sampling technique. The second stage involved the division of each year into six parts of two months each i.e. January/February, March/April, May/June, July/August, September/October, and November/December. From a segment of two months, the first month of each segment was selected for the year 2011 and 2012, while the second month was selected for each segment for the year 2013 and 2014 using simple random sampling technique. On the third stage, two weeks (representing 50%) were selected from each of the sampled months and three days (representing 40%) from each of the sampled week. This was accomplished using simple random sampling technique. This gave a total of six issues per month for each of the newspapers and a total of 36 issues per year for each newspaper. Thus, a total of 288 issues (144 issues per newspaper) were sampled for the period of four years across the two newspapers. A total of 334 rape articles were generated from the 288 issues and analysed in this study. The units of analysis are articles of stories on rape. The articles or stories could be in form of news, features or opinion (editorials). The following were measures:

**Sources**

The following sources were delineated:

**Official Sources:** These were sources from government officials and its agents like security personnel.

**Non-official Sources:** Story sources that were not from government officials.

**Prominence**

Here, the researcher determined the importance attached to stories on rape cases as shown below:

- Front page
- Back page
- Centre spread
- Inside page

**Follow-Up stories:** These were stories that provided follow-up account of earlier reported rape cases. This included court proceeding, condition of the victims, among others.
Two coders were engaged and trained to code the data. The coders were told to code the texts of the two newspaper stories based on the items on the code sheet. With the use of Kappa statistical method, the Inter-coder reliability was determined with the aid of SPSS version 16.0 which yielded 0.85 which was considered very high reliability level.

**Results**

The result of this study is presented below:

**Table I Sources of stories on rape**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daily Sun</td>
<td>The Vanguard</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official</td>
<td>411(12)</td>
<td>72(22)</td>
<td>113(34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Official</td>
<td>123(37)</td>
<td>98(29)</td>
<td>221(66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>164(49)</td>
<td>170(51)</td>
<td>334(100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table above sought to determine newspaper sources of stories on rape cases in Nigeria. The result suggests that stories that cited non-official sources were almost two times those that cited official sources. What this means is that rape cases in Nigeria do not receive substantial attention from the government as such, such stories cited mostly the victims, their family members and friends, non-governmental organizations among other sources not related to the government.

**Table II: Showing newspaper reportage of victims and suspects of rape**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daily Sun</td>
<td>The Vanguard</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>30(9)</td>
<td>62(19)</td>
<td>91(28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Follow-Up</td>
<td>134(40)</td>
<td>108(32)</td>
<td>243(72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>164(49)</td>
<td>170(51)</td>
<td>334(100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table above sought to find out the emergence of follow-up stories on rape cases as reported by the newspapers studied. The result showed that most of the stories were on fresh cases with just few of the stories focusing on follow-up cases. This suggests that the newspapers examined did not provide thematic analysis of rape cases by way of following-up cases to ensure that victims get justice.
Table III: Prominence of newspaper stories on rape cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Front page</th>
<th>Centre spread</th>
<th>Inside page</th>
<th>Back page</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily Sun</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanguard</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>51.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>23.7%</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table three sought to find out the prominence accorded to newspaper stories on rape cases in Nigeria. The result revealed that less prominence was accorded such stories because they were largely on the inside page. The total number of stories on the inside page was more than half of the entire stories.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined newspaper coverage of rape cases in Nigeria. In doing so, attention was paid to sources of the stories, manifestation of follow-up stories as well as prominence given to such stories. It was found that most of the stories cited non-official sources. This result is contrary to that of Gever (2018) who reported that newspaper coverage cite mostly official sources. The difference between the result of the current study and that of Gever could be because of the subject investigated. While Gever examine media reportage of anti-open grazing law, the current study examined rape cases. These are two different issues involving different actors. The use of non-official sources could be a signal of the less attention the government of Nigeria has paid to the issue of rape cases. This is because when people are raped, it violate their human rights and the government owes them a duty to ensure that their human rights are protected. But where the government is not fully involved in ensuring that victims of rape get justice, the trend may continue. The result is however, similar to that of Nwabueze and Oduah (2015).

It was also found that there was less frequency in the manifestation of follow-up stories on rape (See table III). What this means is that the newspapers examined did not care much in ensuring that rape cases are followed-up until the victims get justice. This result is consistent with that of Egbo (2011) who reported that newspapers do not provide enough information on follow-up stories. This is a negative manifestation as it implies that the newspapers examined did not substantially provide thematic information on rape report, rather, their reports were episodic. Finally, it was found that the newspapers examined gave less prominence to the rape cases in Nigeria. This is because most of the stories were on the inside page. This result is similar to that of Nwabueze and Oduah (2015) who found that newspapers do not give prominence to stories on rape cases. What this result means is that the newspapers studied did not properly set agenda on the problem of increasing cases of rape in Nigeria. This is because, to set agenda,
the media must give prominence to stories on the issue reported. But in this study, that was lacking as stories on rape on cases were mostly on the inside page.

**Conclusion/ Recommendations**

Based on the result of this study, the researcher concludes that the newspapers examined did not properly set agenda on the issue. This is evidence in the lacking of official sources on the matter, the manifestation of only few stories on follow-up cases, as well as the less prominence accorded stories on rape cases. This result has implications on agenda setting theory and crime reporting. Theoretically, this study has implications on agenda setting theory by revealing that the theory could be a useful framework for examining media reportage of crime. Second, the result has implications on crime reporting in general and rape in particular. This result suggests that if the media must properly set agenda on rape issues, they must improve in the area of source selection, follow-up stories as well as prominence accorded stories. The following recommendations are made:

1. Newspapers should improve in their source selection to ensure that official sources are well represented on matters regarding rape cases so as to draw the attention of the authorities on the matter.
2. There is need for Nigeria newspapers to go beyond reporting rape cases but provide enough follow-up stories to ensure that cases of rape are follow-up to a logical conclusion.
3. It is also suggested that newspapers should improve on the prominence given to stories on rape cases so as to properly set agenda on the matter.

**References**


