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Three Newspapers' Coverage of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in Nigeria, 2015-2017

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how three national newspapers cover the cases of intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) in Nigeria from 2015 to 2017 to contribute to global research on mediated representations of violence against women. The study focuses on how Nigerian newspapers, *The Guardian*, *Punch* and *Vanguard,* reported the IPVAW cases from 2015 to 2017, and how they covered and framed IPVAW. Using quantitative content analysis, we found that the newspapers used episodic framing, blamed the victims, and exonerated/ excused the men's actions. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords

content analysis, intimate partner violence, Nigeria, Nigerian newspapers

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INTRODUCTION

On June 30, 2017, hundreds of people participated in the #1in3 Africa march against domestic violence in Nigeria and grabbed headlines. This was because unlike previous protests on the issue, which affects about two-thirds of Nigerian women, the march included two celebrities - Tonto Dikeh and Mercy Aigbe (Animasaun, 2016). The award-winning actresses had held Nigerians' attention with accounts of violence in their marriages from January 1, 2017, to the end of the year.

Unlike other Nigerian female celebrities who disclosed the violence they suffered in their marriages after divorce, Aigbe and Dikeh used social media to expose their experiences almost immediately after they occurred. They posted pictures, videos, and documents online and granted exclusive interviews to tell their stories. Their husbands were not left out. They also used social media and interviews to counter the allegations laid against them. These incidents kept intimate partner violence (IPV) in the news for months, thereby hurling "*a social problem into the public eye*" (Maxwell et al., 2000, p. 258).

Intimate partner violence is a global social health problem that 30% of women have suffered worldwide (World Health Organization, 2019). Recent global movements against IPV have revitalized public and scholarly interests in the issue, even in the pandemic situation (Nduru & Dedees, 2020). As IPV is a newsworthy issue that meets the shocking, unusual, controversial, and timeliness newsworthiness criteria, scholars are also interested in the news media's influence on

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people's perception of IPV because what people see, read or hear from the news is commonly accepted as accurate representations of real-life (Halim & Meyers, 2010). So far, news media have distorted society's perspective of IPV, blamed victims, and reflected patriarchal ideologies in society (Alat, 2006; Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Meyers, 1996). This is because coverages focus on individuals and rarely frame IPV as a systemic societal issue.

Therefore, to contribute to the growing literature, this study presents the findings of a content analysis of three newspapers' coverage and framing of intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) in Nigeria from 2015 to 2017. The study looked specifically at cases of IPVAW because they are more prevalent in Nigeria (Abayomi & Olabode, 2013; Brisibe *et al.*, 2012). The high rates of IPVAW in Nigeria make this study imperative and provides a baseline look at how Nigerian newspapers cover IPVAW. In addition, as most studies on mediated representations of IPVAW come from Western societies, this study adds a non-Western perspective to the literature.

Intimate Partner Violence in Nigeria

The World Health Organization (2019) defines IPV as "*behavior by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviors*" (p. 2). These behaviors range from physical acts like beating, slapping, and rape to controlling ones like monitoring and isolating partners from family and friends. Statistically, women are more likely to suffer IPV than men (World Health Organization, 2019). In Nigeria, Oseyemwen et al., (2019) found that 80% of women are victims of IPV, with sexual, physical, and psychological abuse being the commonest. In their study, Benebo *et al.* (2018) found that one in four Nigerian women aged 15 to 49 had experienced a form of IPV. On average, 300 to 350 Nigerian women also die from IPV annually (Shija, 2004). These high rates are attributed to certain factors.

One factor is Nigeria's patriarchal framework, which has created customs and norms that see women as inferior and allow and support violence against them (Duru, *et al.*, 2018; LaFraniere, 2005). Examples include paying bride price (which gives husbands ownership of their wives) and conferring only or mostly men with economic privileges such as owning land and making money (Benebo *et al.*, 2018). Among the Igbos of southeastern Nigeria, traditions normalize wife-beating (Chukwu, *et al.*, 2014). Among the Tiv of central Nigeria, wife-beating signifies love and is an acceptable punishment for women (Angye, 2004).

A second factor is that IPV "*is generally regarded as belonging to the private sphere in Nigeria, and therefore to be shielded from outside scrutiny*" ("Half of Nigeria's women", 2005). Married women do not talk about the violence they experience. Rather, they tolerate and accept it as part of marriage (Dauda, 2015). They also will not, or cannot, leave abusive marriages because women who do are culturally perceived as failures and promiscuous (Udobang, 2018). Aigbe said she endured the violence for seven years because of her children and did not want to be seen as "*moving from one man to the other*" (WahalaTV, 2017).

A final factor is Nigeria's legal system. Though the 2015 Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act criminalized violence in private and public life, certain federal and state laws allow IPV. Section 55 of the Nigerian penal code allows wife beating if it does not cause critical bodily harm and customary law allows it. Courts and police also treat IPV as private matters, often telling victims to go home and settle (Ojigho, 2009). The police also largely refuse to "*investigate or press charges*" when victims report ("Half of Nigeria's women", 2005). As of 2005, "*only 1% of abused women*" went to the police (Okulate, 2005, p. 1598). But cases are also difficult to prosecute because victims intentionally misplace evidence in 88% of cases after in-laws have pressured them to drop the case (Nwannekanma & Salau, 2017). According to Dauda (2015), these attitudes have caused "*grievous harm*" and left many women "*murdered, maimed or (with) physical scars*" (p.124).

Overall, IPV is difficult to fight because women are aware of these structural, philosophical, and cultural challenges. When they fall victim, they know that a system that favors violence against women exists and "*limits opportunities for redress or grievance-remedial*" (Dauda, 2015, p. 125). "*The fear of being ostracized, the lack of material and financial resources, and the general lack of sympathy and support from the public, have contributed immensely to*" violence in Nigerian homes ("Curbing growing domestic violence", 2019, para. 3).

Newspapers and IPVAW

Researchers have studied the role newspapers play in public perceptions of intimate partner violence because they can influence and determine how society sees and reacts to it (Alat, 2006; Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie *et al.*, 2013; Meyers, 1996). So far, scholars have criticized newspapers for largely ignoring, negatively stereotyping, skewing, and distorting intimate partner violence against women in their coverage.

For instance, Kathleen Tierney's (1982) pioneering study found newspapers did not treat wife-beating as a social issue. Rather, covering wife-beating was "*good*" because it was new, controversial, and did not require sacrificing "*the entertainment value, action and urgency on which the media typically depend*" (Tierney, 1982, p. 213 – 214).

In her examination of Turkish newspapers, Alat (2006) also found the coverage of IPVAW, especially between dating couples, was sexualized and turned "*attention from the crime to the morality of the relationship by raising questions about the purity of the female victim*" (p. 304). In some stories, the perpetrator was invisible and absolved of all responsibility. Doing this, Alat (2006) argued, weakened "*the seriousness of male violence in the society and maintains the myth that family is a sanctioned and safe place for women*" (p. 302).

In examining newspaper coverage of the rapes of over 76 girls in one night at St. Kizito secondary school in Kenya, Leslie Steeves (1997) added that coverage strengthened "*patriarchal conceptions of rape and other forms of gender violence*" (p. 7). Kenya's most popular newspaper rarely mentioned rape in its coverage downplayed the incident's severity and blamed hooliganism and indiscipline for the violence, not the perpetrators. Coverage also commiserated with the perpetrators. In studying South Africa, which has one of the highest rates of IPVAW in the world, Isaacs (2016) found that newspaper coverage overemphasized and characterized IPVAW as excessive acts of "*physical violence, which undermined the complexity and true reality of the social phenomenon in South Africa*" (p. 501).

Overall, these studies indicate how newspapers have covered IPVAW in some contexts and often failed. They also suggest it is important to understand how IPVAW cases are covered in different contexts because the media and its messages "*largely determine whether or not female survivors speak out about their abuse and the nature of the assistance women receive from the public, criminal justice system, and the health sector*" (Isaacs, 2016, p. 492).

Theoretical Framework – Framing theory

Guiding this study is framing theory, which suggests that news media select parts of reality and make them more salient to promote a certain interpretation of an event, issue, or person (Entman, 1993). Using a frame, a "*central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events*," news media help audiences make sense of important or relevant issues, events, and people (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). To frame, according to Entman (1993), is to "*select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation*" (p. 52). This means other parts of the issue or event are omitted or obscured because framing involves selection bias. Therefore, audiences will have an incomplete picture. Through their use of repetitions, placement, and/or associations to culturally shared symbols such as language and images, journalists can also tell people not only what to think about, but how to think about things (Entman *et al.*, 2009). But media frames are not only about the media's selection and display process. Rather, they are crucial elements in how people think, interpret, understand and respond to an issue, person, or event (Comas-d'Argemir, 2015).

In journalism, framing serves two purposes. Firstly, journalists routinely use framing to quickly identify and select whom or what gets covered because the information is checked against traditional news values, such as conflict, unusual/shocking, and impact (Schudson, 1989). Secondly, framing helps journalists know how to cover and present news because routine coverage of certain subjects over time establishes patterns of how things are, or should be, covered. Frames are, after all, "patterns of interpretation rooted in culture and articulated by the individual" (Brüggemann, 2014, p. 61). There are two categories of frames – episodic and thematic frames.

Episodic frames "*present an issue by offering a specific example, case study, or event-oriented report*," and thematic frames "*place issues into a broader context*" (Gross, 2008, p. 171). According to Iyengar

(1991), while episodic frames illustrate issues and limit them to just the individuals in a story, thematic news frames place issues in a social context and provide "*collective or general evidence*" that pushes for communal and government action (p. 14). Gross (2008) adds that episodic frames make audiences "*hold individuals responsible for their situation, thereby diminishing support for government programs designed to address the problem*" (p. 173). Gross (2008) found journalists use episodic frames more because they are "*emotionally engaging*" and "*more likely to draw the reader or viewer into the story*" (p. 171). Several studies have been applied to the media coverage frame of IPVAW.

In their study of newspaper coverage of IPVAW in Washington state, Bullock and Cubert (2002) found that though a handful of articles looked at the issue from a societal level, most covered the issue at the individual level. They also found that newspapers' word choices obscured IPVAW's "*importance as a broader social problem*" (p. 479). Maxwell, *et al.* (2000) also found that while the O.J. Simpson case increased coverage on cases of IPVAW, the stories presented them as isolated incidents, and made no connection to hegemonic social structures that allow violence against women.

Studies also found that journalists' choice of sources, language, and whether a history of violence in a relationship was provided impacted how IPVAW was perceived. For sources, journalists relied most on police in IPVAW cases and rarely interviewed medical experts (Taylor, 2009). This also gave the issue an episodic slant, framing IPVAW as a personal problem or a one-off crime (Richards *et al.*, 2011). Gillespie, *et al.* (2013) also found that the language used endorsed "*traditional representations of females or gender stereotypes*" (p. 226).

Meyers (1996) also found that news typically framed IPVAW as devoid of context because stories omitted history of violence in a couple's relationship. This lack of context also meant a heavy reliance on stereotypes that blamed victims, focused more on the perpetrator and his version of events, silenced victims, and did not frame IPVAW as wrong (Meyers, 1996).

Overall, in applying framing theory to newspapers' coverage of IPVAW, scholars consistently found frames that obscured, misrepresented, stereotyped, or downplayed its severity as a public, social issue. As no study so far has examined the issue in Nigerian newspapers, this study asked:

RQ1: Did the Guardian, Punch, and Vanguard newspapers report on intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) cases from 2015 to 2017?

RQ2: If they did, how did the newspapers cover and frame IPVAW news stories from 2015 to 2017?

METHOD

To answer the research questions, a sample of news stories from three national elite dailies in Nigerian, from 2015 to 2017, was analyzed. Quantitative content analysis was used because several studies in the literature used it. The method also fit this study because the researcher wanted to explore the characteristics and themes unique to Nigerian newspapers if any. The dailies were The Guardian, Punch, and Vanguard, popular English newspapers with daily print circulations of 80,000 to 130,000. Vanguard and Punch are the two favorite newspapers, while The Guardian is considered the most respected (https://answersafrica.com/top-10-nigerian-newspapers-most-read-online.html). These papers were also chosen because, according to Rogers & Dearing (1988), national and elite papers influence other media's coverage. Located in Nigeria's economic and mass media center, Lagos state, The Guardian, Punch, and Vanguard are among Nigeria's oldest and most influential newspapers. They are also available online. The online versions were used for the study because the researcher had no access to print versions. The study chose 2015 to 2017 because the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act that criminalized IPV was passed in 2015, and the celebrity incidents happened in 2017.

To be included in the sample, a news story had to be on an incident of physical and/or emotional/psychological act of violence (e.g., beatings/battery, assault with a weapon, sexual abuse, and murder) against a woman by a current or former male intimate partner that ran between 2015 and 2017. News stories were chosen because they are "*the major forum by which people keep abreast of local, national and global events*" and "*the most influential information source*" (Kimani & Yeboah, 2011, p. 433). To find articles, the researcher searched the newspapers' databases using 'domestic violence' because IPV is commonly called domestic violence in Nigeria. This produced results on

domestic terrorism and feature stories on gender-based violence. Therefore, the search was refined using keywords like 'man kills,' 'psychological abuse' and 'man beats'. This returned more than 5,000 news stories on different crimes and features of emotional trauma and abuse. The search was refined again, using phrases like 'man hits wife', 'man emotionally abuses woman', 'psychological abuse', 'emotional abuse', and 'man abuses woman' to find stories that met the criteria. These produced several news stories that met the criteria. The researcher went through the results and selected the ones reported from 2015 to 2017. Features were excluded because those found were opinion pieces on domestic violence generally or domestic violence events in Lagos state and did not meet the criterion. In all, 86 news stories were found and included in the sample.

Next, the researcher read nine (roughly 10%) articles from the sample to determine the news stories' major characteristics and create categories for coding. A coding sheet was created with the following categories (and sub-categories): type of intimate partner violence, type of relationship, the reason for intimate partner violence, sources, action taken against man, a result of the divorce case, history of violence, and primary news frame (episodic or thematic). *Table 2* has a breakdown of the categories and sub-categories. To ensure reliability, the researcher trained a colleague to identify the categories in the news stories. They pretested the coding sheet using 18 articles (20%). Information that fits these categories was coded using frequency counts. Using Krippendorf's coefficient, intercoder reliability ranged from .90 to 1.00, indicating high intercoder agreement for the sample. The researcher then read the articles three more times and coded the frequency of each category for the 86 articles. The researcher also took careful notes and paid attention to the headlines, themes, and general tone in each article to determine the muted or delicate meanings and inferences (Reason & Garcia, 2007). Articles were also read to see if psychological/emotional abuse (controlling or threatening behaviors) was described or suggested as the search produced only one news story with that keyword.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1 asked if the three newspapers reported on IPVAW cases from 2015 to 2017. They did. The newspapers ran 86 cases of IPVAW from 2015 to 2017. Of this number, 14 (16%) appeared in The Guardian, 42 (49%) in Punch, and 30 (35%) in Vanguard (see *table 1*). Most stories appeared in 2017 and Punch published more stories than the others.

The coverage increased almost 500% between 2015 (11) and 2017 (54). This suggests the Dikeh and Aigbe cases likely triggered increased coverage on IPVAW. Dikeh broke her story on January 1 and Aigbe's broke on April 16. The newspapers' coverage picked up gradually in 2017, with the first story appearing on January 3, two days after Dikeh's incident, in The Guardian. Thirteen stories appeared after that. Following Aigbe's incident, 42 stories appeared between April and December. Punch even called 2017 the 'Year of deadly domestic violence cases' in its December 31 review of 2017. This supports Maxwell *et al.*'s (2000) finding that celebrity cases can trigger media interest in social issues.

Generally, the writers used a facts-only reporting style, which meant giving readers a chronicle of events that answered the who, what, where, when, why, and how questions. The stories were short and descriptive, typically seven short paragraphs or fewer. The stories appeared either a day after the incident or after the man was arrested, bailed, arraigned, remanded, or punished. In addition, 69 stories (80%) came from criminal cases (murder and assault with a weapon) and 17 (20%) came from customary courts where women had filed for divorce on violent grounds. Headlines emphasized the victims' familial relationships with the perpetrator (e.g. wife, ex-girlfriend, girlfriend, lover) and emphasized the perpetrator's profession or gender (e.g. motorcyclist, man). The 17 divorce stories identified an assailant's familial relationship (sometimes combined with his profession) to the victim (e.g., "*My husband is a wicked man*" or "*My pastor husband fond of beating me, wife tells court*"). Only one case had a follow-up story because the man committed suicide two weeks later. The others did not.

The stories also shared several characteristics as *Table 2* shows. The reasons given for IPVAW were generally linked to a disagreement or quarrel over something. The singular most reported reason emphasized was infidelity (16.3%), then demands money (11.6%). Women suffered violence for miscellaneous reasons in 21 stories, including having only female children, refusing to worship

idols, rejecting a proposal, refusing to hand over property, getting pregnant, and not keeping the house clean. In 19 stories, no reason was given.

In terms of actions taken against perpetrators, the analysis showed that while arrests occurred in 18 cases (26%), no information was given on what happened to them in 32 others (46%). In the divorce cases, judges adjourned 13 cases to allow the couple to reconcile and granted divorce in four cases (in three of them, the men did not object. In the fourth, he did not appear after multiple adjournments), despite the women's testimonies on the severe beatings and maltreatment they suffered. For sources, the analysis showed that stories cited at least two sources each. As *table 2* shows, the police were the most quoted source (34%), followed by perpetrators. Reporters also used anonymous sources. It was observed that the victims' voices were primarily heard in court cases, but rarely in the non-divorce incidents.

RQ2 asked how the newspapers covered and framed IPVAW from 2015 to 2017. The three newspapers covered IPVAW as crimes when it was assault with a weapon or murder. Beatings were not framed as crimes unless it was excessive. The newspapers also framed IPVAW as isolated incidents. All the stories primarily illustrated and limited IPV to the individuals in the stories, and did not connect them to the high rates of IPVAW in Nigeria. Headlines emphasized the couple in the story (for example, "*Man hacks wife*" or "*Man kills girlfriend*"), as did leads (first paragraph) and sources. Overall, episodic framing dominated the coverage, with one exception. Vanguard's story on June 21, 2016, about a man who killed his wife over N100 (28 U.S. cents) quoted the coordinator of the Imo Women Network, an NGO on domestic violence, who complained about the "*increasing rate of domestic violence in Nigeria*" and asked the government to do something about it (Nkwopara, 2016). This quote carried a thematic frame.

The newspapers also framed IPVAW as only physical acts of violence, with murder receiving the most coverage (60%), despite Oseyemwen *et al.*'s (2019) finding that psychological abuse is also very common in Nigeria. Though one story used the term psychological/emotional torture and the victim briefly mentioned her husband's controlling behavior and verbal abuse, victims' (in court cases) and witnesses' accounts in other stories only recounted and emphasized physical acts of violence, especially beating, punching and hitting. They did not share examples of psychological/emotional abuse.

The newspapers also covered IPVAW as sensational, unusual incidents, and emphasized the dramatic elements in the stories. The papers did this through their use of clichés and flowery language to describe the incidents and create a dramatic flair. For instance, a story in Vanguard said: "*He allegedly pounced on her and gave her the beating of her life*" (Ozor, 2015). A breaking news story began this way:

> *Life, for 28-year-old Folashade Ayetan, a mother of four, has not been a bed of roses. Without respite, her life has been garnished daily with psychological, emotional, and physical torture.* (Onyegbula, 2015).

Another story described a victim's swollen cheeks as looking like she "*had eggs hidden in her mouth, thereby deforming the shape of a supposedly pretty woman*" (Adefaka, 2015). Another reporter wrote: "*For having the effrontery to retaliate when her husband slapped her, the woman received the second slap that sent her to the great beyond*" (Nkwopara, 2016). These quotes matched Soola's (2011) findings that Nigerian crime reporting uses words that "*make reports juicy, sensational, dramatic and sometimes, colorful*" (p. 4). The analysis also identified two major themes. These blamed the victim and excusing/exonerating the men.

Blame the victim

Much of the coverage framed the victims as directly responsible for the violence they suffered, including murder. The blame-the-victim frame appeared in some headlines, which emphasized what she did (e.g., "*Adultery: Man beats wife to death in Edo*," or "*Man on trial for beating wife over a late meal*"), and in the contents. When asked why they killed or beat their current or former intimate partners, perpetrators directly blamed victims for starting the disagreement that caused the violence. One story blamed the victim because she "*engaged her husband, Charles Oyibo, 50, in a heated argument*" (Ozor, 2015). The word engaged suggests she was combative. In another story, the perpetrator said his wife *"prompted him to beat her after several warnings"* (News Agency of

Nigeria [NAN], 2016). In two stories, the perpetrators said they stabbed their wives in retaliation for coming at them with a knife. A Guardian article said the "*deceased used a kitchen knife to stab herself after which he (accused), removed the knife and `helped' her to complete the act by slaughtering her*" (NAN, 2017b). In another, a man said despite his efforts to stop her, his wife drank poison (Sunday, 2017). The police discovered he beat her to death. Apart from perpetrators, family and friends also blamed the victims for the incident.

In a Punch article, a source blamed the victim for her death because "*she said she wanted her husband to kill her*" and also hid the violence in the marriage from her parents (Folarin, 2017). In another case, an anonymous source blamed the victim for her murder because she duped the perpetrator. The source said: "*We heard that the boy picked the bills for the girl's education, but that the girl later abandoned the boy and opted to marry another man*" (Nkwopara, 2015). The information was unconfirmed. In another story, the victim "*decided to endure the assaults because of her children*", suggesting she chose to remain in an abusive marriage (Hanafi, 2016). In a murder case, the police indirectly blamed the victim, because "*The suspect had angrily beaten his wife to stupor when the deceased stopped him from chasing after her alleged lover boy*" (Okutu, 2016). The story hinted at her alleged adultery with a younger man and suggested the lover, not the woman, was the husband's target. For letting him got away, the husband angrily beat her until she fainted and later died at the hospital.

The overall context of the stories also blamed the victims because reporters gave more information on the victim's character and emphasized the choice(s) she made that caused the violence. This focus also produced a good-bad woman dichotomy. For example, a man killed his girlfriend for "*allegedly infecting him with gonorrhea*" (Akenzua, 2016). However, much of the story focused on the victim and hinted at her 'bad' character. She "*deceived her parents*" about her whereabouts and went to have sex at a hotel (Akenzua, 2016). This suggested she was promiscuous and bad. In some ways, this frame also stereotyped women as capable of, and responsible for, stopping the violence because men would not beat or kill them if they were good wives and women.

Excusing/exonerating the men

The second theme of excusing/exonerating the men occurred in two ways, largely because the newspapers stressed the "*why he did it*" angle. In one way, the men's actions were excused because something was wrong with them. Men were generally described as angry, enraged, beasts, mental cases/mad, wicked, or obsessed. A story in Punch on August 22, 2017, described a man who killed his wife as "*mentally disturbed*" because he often hallucinated about people demanding blood from him (Folarin & Hanafi, 2017). No medical personnel or reports were used. Another story is called the man who killed his wife and two other women "*possessed*" (Hanafi & Olugbemi, 2016). A few headlines also framed the perpetrator or case as abnormal (e.g., "*Insane: Husband hacks wife to death for taking him to court*"). Another story described the perpetrator as "*having gone wild*" before violently pushing and killing his wife for questioning his mistress (Amobi, 2016).

A second-way men's actions were excused was through the absence of a history of IPV in 50 of the 52 murder cases. These stories did not explore or indicate a history of violence before the one that killed the women. Though victims, family, and/or neighbors said the violence was common in the relationship in two murders and all the beating/battery stories, these stories still excused the man's actions and concentrated more on the violence that made the case newsworthy. The absence of violence in the murder cases characterized such murders as one-time acts that went wrong or the man snapping because the victim provoked him.

For example, The Guardian had a story of a man who stabbed his wife because she slapped him. Explaining the event, the suspect said: "*As a man, I felt so humiliated and in anger, the knife we were using to peel oranges became my weapon, which I used to stab her. Unfortunately, she died*" (Akubo, 2017). The article described the suspect as "*remorseful*" immediately after his explanation. In another story, a man strangled his pregnant wife after she found out he impregnated their maid. The police source downplayed his actions, calling the incident "*unfortunate*" because the murder was unintentional, and blamed the "*alleged infidelity*," which the man had confessed to ("Man impregnates housemaid", 2017). In cases where the victim's fidelity was questioned, even when she was an ex or he was the adulterer, his action was minimized and/or excused. For instance, Punch's Jan. 25, 2017 story, "*Jealous lover kills cheating girlfriend, the boyfriend with a petrol bomb*," implied the woman

was adulterous. However, she was an ex-lover. While the story minimized the suspect's actions, it focused on the woman's alleged two-timing, saying the perpetrator was "*not happy over her alleged unfaithfulness*" (NAN, 2017a). The story blamed her for his actions and her murder.

Men also removed blame from themselves. They often blamed the devil or the victim for their actions, cited an unintentional mistake, or a "*little misunderstanding and annoyance*" (Nkwopara, 2016). Some stories also carried a "*love gone wrong*" theme that excused the men's actions and suggested the violence happened accidentally when the man wanted to show love. In a Vanguard article, a woman died because she refused her husband sex. After "*begging*" her, "*The husband attempted to forcefully have sex with her and while they were struggling, she got strangled*" (Olatunji, 2017). The story did not say he strangled her. Overall, the excusing/exonerating the men theme also indirectly justified IPVAW when women's behaviors appeared culturally inappropriate, such as alleged infidelity or disrespect. These findings have several implications for how readers who rely on these newspapers for information will perceive and react to IPVAW.

One implication lies in the small number of stories the newspapers covered. This small number does not match the high rates of IPVAW scholars have found in Nigeria. Therefore, people who read these newspapers may get a distorted perspective on the severity of the issue. The amount of media coverage a social issue receives is important because it can push policymakers to create policies for or against it (Yanovitzky, 2002). For instance, the increased coverage probably increased the issue's salience in 2017. Perhaps Lagos state's prompt passage of a law that criminalized domestic violence and sexual abuse in 2017 was connected to the increased coverage. The state also recorded 564 cases of intimate partner violence between January and September as more people reported it (Nwannekanma & Salau, 2017).

A second implication of the coverage lies in the lack of continuous coverage on criminal cases and the reliance on police sources. Crime stories are continuing stories that allow readers to gain insight into the judicial process/system (Chermak, 1995). These newspapers missed this opportunity because they ran only one report per case and left readers without a conclusion. No story told readers what happened to the men who escaped from the scene of the crime and whether those who were bailed stood trial. Thirty-two stories did not even tell readers if anything happened to the perpetrators. Only one case had a follow-up story, probably because he committed suicide in detention two weeks later and the murder was sensational (he killed his wife for money rituals). These gaps could make readers conclude most men are not punished or can get away with violence against women, especially as the Nigerian Police Force is perceived as corrupt (Madubuike-Ekwe & Obayemi, 2019). Trials could have corroborated or challenged assumptions on the men's mental states and testimonies as autopsy reports and medical sources are used there. Such gaps could further strengthen victims' distrust in the police and weaken people's "*faith in the ability of the system to bring the perpetrators to justice*" (Okulate, 2005, p. 1605).

Reporters also heavily relied on police sources, which could frame IPVAW as something only the police, not society, can resolve and limit the readers' understanding of it. This heavy reliance is also problematic because most of the Nigerian Police are men and as federal agents, they may not frame IPVAW as an issue requiring social attention and action. Rather, they will focus on the individual angle. In framing mostly murders as crimes, the newspapers also appeared to present IPV murders as "*just another homicide*," which, according to Bullock and Cubert (2002), "*sidesteps the issues of male control, manipulation, and abuse of women*" in Nigeria (p. 494). Only three assault cases involved the legal system and the men were bailed and the cases adjourned. Furthermore, not framing less severe beatings crimes reflects a common belief in Nigeria that wife-beating is acceptable and not violence (Adika *et al.*, 2013). In this way, the coverage articulated patriarchal beliefs about women and marriage.

A third implication lies in how this study's findings on Nigerian newspapers' framing of IPVAW was consistent with previous studies' findings. For one, episodic framing dominated the coverage as it did in Bullock's (2007), Bullock and Cubert's (2002), and Maxwell *et al.*'s (2000) studies. Nigerian newspapers isolated IPVAW to the individuals in the story and made no connection, except in one story, to the rate of IPVAW in Nigeria, neither did they provide information that portrayed the issue as affecting a large number of women in the country. "*By ignoring this perspective, media perpetuate the belief that IPV is an individual problem to be dealt with by the victim alone*" (Carlyle *et al.*,

2008, p.181). The episodic framing approach also meant coverage excluded health and IPV experts' perspectives and information on social, medical, and legal services available to victims. As Nigerians already see IPVAW as a private issue, episodic framing of IPVAW in Nigerian newspapers strengthens societal beliefs and may make it harder to challenge Nigerian patriarchal structures. Patriarchal ideology even appeared in the divorce cases as the judges expected the women to remain in violent situations and only granted the divorce when husbands did not object or failed to appear after several adjournments. Such judgments displayed a belief that IPV was something a couple could resolve or weak grounds for divorce. However, these adjournments could have cost the women their lives. For example, through a divorce case was adjourned "*several times for the parties to resolve their differences*," the man continued beating and raping his wife (NAN, 2017c).

Like Ilsa Evans (2001) found in her study on Australian newspapers, the Nigerian headlines emphasized the victims' familial relationships to the perpetrator and presented the perpetrator in his professional context. According to Evans (2001), such headlines strengthen societal beliefs that relegate women to domestic or relational roles. But unlike Evans' (2001) study, this study found some headlines that emphasized the perpetrator's gender and familial relationship to the victim. The latter was the case when the victims were the primary sources of information, suggesting Nigerian reporters highlighted a direct familial context for perpetrators and victims only when women/victims were the primary sources of information. However, these stories still blamed women for the marriage failing because they focused on the women's character as wives and why the men were violent.

In addition, the newspapers framed IPVAW as wholly physical, severe, sensational, and unusual. Perhaps this was because violence and sensationalism make IPVAW newsworthy (Meyers, 1996). However, this could teach women undergoing other types of IPV to identify their experience as unimportant or not even violent. The lack of information on psychological abuse may lie in victims' and reporters' understandings of what it is or resembles and this affects how society also defines such abuse. Perhaps deeper interviews with victims on how they are treated and IPV experts in news stories could close this gap.

In covering IPVAW in Nigeria, these newspapers also blamed the victim and exonerated/excused the perpetrator. This corroborated previous studies' findings on IPVAW using framing theory (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Maxwell *et al.* 2000; Evans, 2001; Gillespie, *et al.*, 2013). The problem with this frame is it is powerfully linked to patriarchal beliefs about women as the property of men and pushes violence as an appropriate punishment for women whose behaviors are culturally inappropriate. This perspective also excuses "*those guilty of violent crimes*," which is what journalists did when they did not provide a context, blamed the victim for the violence, or failed to seek further explanations from suspects (Steeves, 1997, p. 56). Moreover, some of the reporting created a good-bad woman dichotomy that not only framed women as responsible for their victimization, it also indirectly warned women of what could happen when they make culturally inappropriate choices like owning land, slapping their husbands, moving on/divorced, being the breadwinners and more.

The exonerating/excusing the perpetrator theme also corroborated Meyers' (1996) finding that newspaper coverage of IPVAW carries the myth that perpetrators are deviant or pathological in some way. This myth not only suggests men who abuse women are lone wolves, but it also removes the blame from a patriarchal system that permits men to use violence to control women. It also reduces the man's responsibility in the crime and could prevent a deep discussion on the societal structures that allow and support IPVAW in Nigeria. Some stories also framed the violence as examples of love going wrong. For instance, though two murder cases happened during marital rape, the papers did not call the incidents rape. Rather, they called them 'forceful sexual intercourse' and 'sexual intercourse' and framed the violence as accidents that occurred when the men showed love to their wives. In a court case, the victim called marital rape 'making love.' Implying husbands cannot rape wives also frames victims as refusing to perform their duties as wives and excuses husbands' use of violence. This is dangerous, considering Ola and Ajayi (2013) found some Nigerian men view rape as an acceptable way of retaining their power and position in the family as head and owner of their wives. In not calling the violent rape, or interviewing sources that challenged beliefs

on marital rape, the newspapers mirrored and maintained cultural ideologies on appropriate expectations, behaviors, and punishments for men and women in marriage.

Tables

Table 1. Number of IPVAW stories published in Newspapers

Year	Guardian	Punch	Vanguard	Total
2015	1	3	7	11
2016	2	12	7	21
2017	11	27	16	54
Total	**14**	**42**	**30**	**86**

Table 2. Characteristics of News Stories on IPVAW

Characteristic	N	%
Type of Relationship	***N = 86***	
Married	72	84
Dating	9	11
Ex	2	2
Estranged	1	1
Lovers	2	2
Cause of IPV	***N = 86***	
Sex	4	4.7
Infidelity	14	16
Money	10	11.6
Disrespect/rudeness	4	4.7
None stated	19	22
Fight	10	11.6
Alcohol	4	4.7
Miscellaneous	21	24.2
Type of IPV	***N = 86***	
Beating	29	34
Murder	52	60
Assault with weapon	4	5
Acid attack	1	1
Action taken against man	***N = 69***[1]	
Arrested	18	26
Looking for him	4	5.8
Bailed	6	9
Nothing stated/nothing	32	46.4
Remanded	4	5.8
On trial	1	1.4
Sentenced	1	1.4
Committed suicide	3	4.3
Outcome of divorce case	***N = 17***	
Adjourned	13	76
Divorce granted	4	24

Characteristic	N	%
Source of information	***N = 189***	
Perpetrator	50	27
Police	65	34
Victim	23	12
Neighbor	12	6
Court (judge, prosecutor)	16	8
Family	7	4
Anonymous	11	6
History of violence	***N = 86***	
Yes	32	37
No	54	63

[1] *One of the stories had a man who was arrested and bailed at the end of the story. Therefore, the percentage may not add up to 100.*

CONCLUSION

This study examined how three Nigerian newspapers covered IPVAW and provide important insight on mediated representations of intimate partner violence against women from a non-Western standpoint, thereby meeting its objective. Several key issues and characteristics found in this study mirrored past studies' findings on media coverage of violence against women.

The study also found evidence that supported framing theory's assumptions that journalists use specific frames to present information to readers. Nigerian newspapers used episodic framing, which focused attention on the individual couple and did not connect the incidents to the larger numbers and social structures that support and allow violence against women in intimate relationships in Nigeria. Therefore, media in Western and non-Western societies do not frame IPVAW as social and public issues. This is problematic, especially in non-Western societies where mass media are relied upon to reveal social issues, alert government, and offer solutions. Therefore, adopting thematic framing, having deeper interviews with men and women, following up on cases, including medical and IPV experts and historical contexts, and using language that does not sensationalize the incidents in news coverage could help Nigerian newspapers contextualize IPV and inform the public better. Hopefully, this research also shows that the Nigerian media must be engaged in the fight against IPV.

Future studies from a Nigerian context could broaden this one by examining coverage of IPVAW over a longer period and include tabloid newspapers and social media as this study was limited in this regard. Future studies could also examine the audience's perspective on IPVAW to examine if media coverage affects their knowledge and stand on the issue.

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