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Discourse and Visual Strategies in Framing Internet Fraudsters in Selected Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

Fraudulent activities on the Internet have become a challenge to unsuspecting internet users. Informed by the observation that the representation of internet fraudsters and their activities in the media still remains a blind spot for researchers especially within the ambit of linguistics and allied areas, this work critically examines the discourse and visual strategies that are deployed by selected Nigerian newspapers to frame internet fraudsters and their activities. Excerpts of news reports published by four national newspapers, *The Punch*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *Vanguard*, between January 2021 and May, 2021, which contained both texts and pictures about internet fraudsters, constitute the data for this study. Theoretical insights were gleaned from van Leeuwen's social actor approach to critical discourse analysis and Halliday's transitivity model. Four textual (identifying, stating, narrating and indicting) and visual (individualisation, collectivisation, location and colouration) strategies each were deployed in framing internet fraudsters as moneybags, youths, students, fetishists, impersonators and drug peddlers. Nigerian newspapers frame internet fraudsters as social actors whose actions have substantial socio-economic implications in the country.

Keywords: Linguistic strategies, visual strategies, discourse strategies, internet fraud, Nigerian newspaper

Introduction

Internet fraudsters have constituted a perennial source of nightmare for most law-abiding investors in different parts of the world, including Nigeria. They are con men that deviously appropriate the affordances of the internet to perpetrate a variety of crimes, especially inducement of their targets for financial purposes. Fraudulent activities on the

internet are collectively referred to as cybercrime (Taiwo, 2012; 2015; Jegede and Olowookere, 2014; World Bank and United Nations, 2017) while those who perpetrate them are alternatively referred to as internet fraudsters, con artists, cyber criminals or scammers (Chiluwa, 2009; Schaffer 2012; Taiwo, 2012; 2015; World Bank and United Nations, 2017). Although the Nigerian public calls these perpetrators 'yahoo boys', they are particularly referred to as internet fraudsters in the Nigerian media space. Print media as an institution "signifying power" (Fairclough 1995: 2) often deploys discourse and visual resources to frame social actors, including internet fraudsters. This deployment is central to the study of discourse, which accounts for a variety of ways language is used in text and context (Gee, 2010).

Nigerian newspapers with their signifying power have been staying true to the media values by satisfying the public and educating them on the activities of internet fraudsters. At the core of this research is the aim to investigate and explain how Nigerian internet fraudsters are represented in selected Nigerian national newspapers. The internet, one of the greatest inventions in human history, is a technological masterpiece with numerous facilities which enable its users to communicate and express their personal interests, opinions and ideas beyond any geographical and temporal limitations. More interestingly, viable resources for research, teaching and learning activities are best sourced from the internet. However, fraudulent activities on it have reached near-epidemic proportions. These activities have seemingly brought fear in the mind of every internet user. They are perennial dangers "deducible from the compromise of private or otherwise sensitive information valuable to the internet users" (Jegede and Olowookere, 2014:260).

As Jegede and Olowookere (2014:260) maintain, "cyber fraud participation only formed an aspect of the plethora of crime related activities endemic in Nigeria." It has become a recurrent socio-political issue that always attracts media attention in Nigeria. In other words, ample spaces in the Nigerian print media are usually allocated to news on the arrest and prosecution of internet fraudsters. Apart from their innate greed and lack of guilt feelings, Nigerian youths have taken cyber fraud as a form of safeguard from the debilitating Nigerian economy; hence there are a staggering number of internet fraudsters in Nigeria. They dubiously manipulate the internet as an "attempt to adjust

to the capitalism that characterised the world economy" (Jegade and Olowookere, 2014:258). Further, Adomi and Igun (2008) mention ease of access to the internet, anonymity offered by the internet, inadequate law enforcement, and availability of software as reasons Nigerians involve themselves in cybercrime. Their dubious manipulation of the internet culminates in what is generally known as advance fee fraud, "419" or "yahoo-yahoo", and it incorporates obtaining fund on false pretence, criminal conspiracy, and criminal breach of trust, document forgery, employment scam, ponzi schemes, impersonation, and so forth. Beyond international derision on Nigeria and her citizenry, their activities have aroused considerable anxiety and outrage in the Nigerian government that two agencies, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), were created to curb their activities and ultimately bring them to justice. This study sets out to examine how internet fraudsters as social actors and their activities as social actions are framed in the selected Nigerian newspapers

Existing studies and problem statement

Media discourse analysts have produced an impressive body of literature on different representational practices in the Nigerian print media. A vast number of works have concentrated on the representation of social actors and actions on terrorism and gender (Chiluwa, 2011; Osisanwo, 2016, 2020), agitations and communal clashes (Chiluwa, 2011; Adegbola, 2020; Osisanwo and Iyoha, 2020), Nigerian election (Osisanwo 2011, Oyeleye and Osisanwo 2013a, 2013b) and so forth; however, representation of internet fraudsters and their activities, despite its currency, still remains a blind spot. Interestingly, both the spate of violence and activities of the security operatives are often reported by the media. Recognising this, Chiluwa (2011) focuses on the representation of Nigerian government military troops, Joint Military Task Force' (JMTF) in the media. The study essentially uses critical discourse analysis to examine the role of the media in manipulating public opinion and people's perception of the roles of the JMTF in the Niger Delta crisis. The study finds out that the Nigerian press maintains sympathetic stance towards the activities of JMTF and represent it

positively regardless of their brutality on civilians. This finding will be instructive towards investigating and revealing the stances of the selected newspapers for this study towards internet fraudsters.

Representations of the dreaded Boko Haram in Nigerian newspapers are the concerns of Osisanwo (2016 and 2020). Interestingly, the submission of Osisanwo (2020) that "visual representations cognitively and imaginatively influence readers' experiences in relation to the activities of Boko Haram terrorists" resonates with one of the assumptions of this study that the inclusion of luxury properties in visual representations of internet fraudsters in Nigerian print media often shapes public attitudes and or opinions towards them. However, a study from the field of cognitive linguistics or cognitive psychology may be needed to better understand how such influence works on the public consciousness. For a fact, both studies provide clear procedures for analyzing representational strategies in the media. However, while they focus on the different frames given to Boko Haram group, this study focuses on internet fraudsters.

Apart from the Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria, the country still grapples with a spate of violence perpetrated by deviant groups such as bandits, unknown gunmen, Fulani herdsmen and local/regional militant groups. On another related social issue – Fulani herdsmen, Adegbola (2020) explores how the material process of Halliday's transitivity system is used to represent Fulani herdsmen in four Nigerian newspapers, *Leadership*, *Daily Trust*, *The Nation* and *Vanguard*. The aim of the study is to reveal the ideological implications of such representation. In direct similarity with the findings made by Osisanwo (2016) on Boko Haram, the study indicates that Fulani herdsmen are represented as killers, invaders, attackers, gunmen, destroyers and abductors. The representations from both studies suggest that Nigerian newspapers have generic representations to perpetrators of social evils.

While much has been written about internet fraud and scam emails in other disciplines, what is striking is the scarcity of published research on the linguistic representation of internet fraudsters and their activities in the print media. Existing studies on internet fraud such as Chilwa (2009, 2013) and Taiwo (2012, 2015) rather approached internet fraud somewhat holistically and largely overlooked how Nigerian internet fraudsters are represented in the print media. Other influential works

such as Blommaert (2005), Blommaert and Omoniyi (2006), Ofulue (2010), Schaffer (2012), Jegede and Olowookere (2014), World Bank and United Nations (2017) do not consider the representation of internet fraudsters in the media. For instance, Chilwa (2009) applies computer-mediated discourse analysis to study sixty-eight '419 emails' in order to interrogate their discourse structures and functions. The findings from his study that writers of these fraudulent emails "apply discourse/pragmatic strategies such as socio-cultural greeting formulas, self-identification, reassurance/confidence building, narrativity and action prompting strategies to sustain the interest of the receivers" are harmonious with the findings of other similar studies particularly Schaffer (2012) and Taiwo (2012). For Schaffer (2012) and Taiwo (2012), internet fraudsters employ persuasive strategies to obtain the trust of the victims and different forms of politeness strategies to bait their victims respectively. Notwithstanding the concentration of these studies on how internet fraudsters present themselves to their victims, a study on the representations of fraudsters and their activities in the print media is obviously lacking.

In sum, influential as these prior studies are on the different representations in Nigerian print media and the prevalence of internet fraud, evidence from them seems to primarily reaffirm the power of the media to frame and represent realities and the inherent perils in the use of internet, nevertheless still indicates no attention has been paid to the representation of internet fraudsters, social actors who currently provide one of the most important topics in the print media. This study, therefore, critically analyses how internet fraudsters are framed in the Nigerian print media because they are frequent discursive subjects in Nigerian print media and particularly because previous researches in media discourse have not focused on their representations. Additionally, it will identify and discuss the recurring discourse and visual strategies in the media representation of internet fraudsters.

Theoretical framework

Fairclough (2010:231) asserts that critical discourse analysis (CDA) as "critical social research aims to contribute to addressing the social 'wrongs' of the day by analysing their sources and causes, resistances to them and possibilities of overcoming them." There are other approaches

to CDA such as Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach, Norman Fairclough's socio-cultural approach and Paul Gee's approach that can be used as the theoretical framework for this study but van Leeuwen's social actors approach was chosen over them because it is essentially human-centered and also provides a social inventory of how social actors and actions are represented in texts (written and visual) can be empirically analysed. It is for the same reason it was preferred to other theories for visual analysis such as Roland Barthes' rhetoric of the image, Gunther Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, and Charles Forceville's visual metaphor. On the other hand, Halliday's transitivity system is a theory of how a language user's experience can be represented in diverse ways. It is preferred to other linguistic theories because of its functional view of language as opposed to others which essentially have formal views of language.

Social actor approach

Social actor approach is a comprehensive framework in CDA studies which focuses on human beings and their actions in a discourse. It "discusses how social actors can be defined and/or described in terms of the roles assigned to them either by reality or as represented in the given text" (Osisanwo, 2016:5). In this wise, it considers human beings as social actors and their actions as social actions, hence it is justifiable to state that this approach is human-centered. It presents a socio-semantic inventory which comprises a set of concepts and theoretical perspectives on how social actors and social actions are represented either textually or visually. Since this study aims to examine the representation of internet fraudsters along these two modes of representation: verbal and visual, this theory is suitable for such examination. From the inventory, only theoretical insights that are relevant to this study are selected.

Two fundamental concepts in this approach are **exclusion** and **inclusion**. They are fundamental because "representation includes or excludes social actors to suit their interests and purposes in relation to the readers for whom they are intended" (van Leeuwen, 2008:28). Exclusion has two forms of exclusion: *suppression* and *backgrounding*. In suppression, social actors are deleted without any trace or clue from

the text, while in backgrounding social actors and their actions are deleted from the text but with a trace or clue that can help the reader to make inference about the (deleted) social actors. **Role allocation** is another important concept in this theory, and it focuses on the roles social actors are given in a representation. Social actors can perform either active or passive role. When an active role is given to social actors in a representation, it is activation. Passivation, on the other hand, is when social actors are "represented as undergoing the activity or as being at the receiving end of it" (van Leeuwen, 2008:33). **Nomination** occurs when social actors are represented in terms of their unique identity while **categorisation** occurs when social actors are represented in terms of identities and functions they share with others. Nomination is typically realised by proper nouns, and it has three levels: formal, semi-formal and informal. When only the surnames of the social actors are mentioned with or without titles, it is formal. It is semi-informal if the representation includes first name and surname. Informal nomination occurs when only the first name is represented. **Functionalisation** occurs when social actors are referred to in terms of an activity which may be their occupation or role in the text. **Identification** occurs when social actors are represented in terms of who they permanently are, and it has three types: classification, relational identification and physical identification. Classification is the identification of social actors in terms of their age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc. Relational identification represents social actors in terms of their personal relationship or work with each other. Lastly, physical identification represents social actors in terms of physical characteristics which uniquely identify them in a given context. Each of these concepts are appropriate for the analysis of verbal representation of social actors.

For visual analysis, the concepts discussed below are suitable for it. **Exclusion** is concerned with the possibility of not including specific people or kinds of people in the representation of the groups in which they belong. That is, not representing people at all in contexts where, in reality, they are present. **Role** is concerned with whether the people in the pictures are shown as being involved in some actions or not. It also considers whether they are agent, the doer of the action, or patient, the people to whom the action is done. Other strategies are **Individuals**

and groups which instruct that in pictures, people can be depicted as individuals or groups. When depicted as individuals, their individual characteristics are shown differently but when they are depicted as groups, their characteristics are homogenised.

Transitivity system

Transitivity system provides lexico-grammatical structures for construing different experiences through different process types. "Each process type constitutes a distinct model or schema for construing a particular domain of experience as a figure of a particular kind." (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014:213). There are three components in the transitivity system: process, participant and circumstance. Transitivity system is the interaction of these components in a clause system. There are six types of processes, namely: material, mental, relational, behavioural, verbal and existential. These processes have been grouped into major and minor. The major ones are: material, mental and relational while the minor ones are verbal, existential and behavioural. **Material process** is the process of 'doing'. **Mental process** has these uses: perception (seeing), cognition (thinking), desideration (wanting) and emotion (feeling). **Relational process** entails the use of the verb *be* both in present form (is) and past form (was). **Behavioural process** is a mixture of both mental and material processes; hence its name as a hybrid process. **Verbal process** is the processes of saying, and it includes all modes of expressing and indicating whether verbal or visual. **Existential process** represents something that exists or happens. Lastly, circumstance adds information about time (when), place (where), manner (how), and reason/ cause (why, for what/ for whom).

Methodology

Four Nigerian national newspapers served as data sources for this study: *The Punch*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *Vanguard*. Specifically, excerpts of news reports which contained both texts and pictures about internet fraudsters in these newspapers were the data for this study. These excerpts covered news reports published between January, 2021 and May, 2021. News reports from this period were selected mainly because of their closeness to the time this study was being conducted.

The analysis was done qualitatively along two levels: visual and discourse. Overall, 48 extracts (43 texts, 5 pictures) were the relevant aspects of the news reports that were extracted for both textual (linguistic and discourse) and visual analyses. The whole analysis relied heavily on the theoretical propositions of van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor approach and Halliday's transitivity model (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014).

Analysis and Discussion

Data revealed six frames for internet fraudsters in the Nigerian newspapers: moneybags, youth, students, fetishists, impersonators and drug peddlers. Interestingly, four strategies each were identified to have been employed to drive these frames at both discourse and visual levels. Identifying, stating, narrating and indicting are the identified discourse strategies in the representation of internet fraudsters, and are realised through appropriate tools from van Leeuwen's and Halliday's inventory. Individualisation, collectivisation, localisation and colouration are the visual strategies identified in the representation of internet fraudsters at the visual level, and are realised through visual representation tools such as exclusion, role, specific, generic, individual, group and categorisation.

Internet fraudsters as moneybags

Reports from the Nigerian print media, especially *The Punch* and *The Tribune* boldly frame internet fraudsters as moneybags using Halliday's material process and two discourse strategies: indicting and inclusion. Moneybags are people who are wealthy. They are people whose lifestyles indicate wealth. Such wealth is often indicated by materials which make life easy for those who possess it. This life of comfort or ease that it endows on the possessors often drive people to source for it using different means, whether legal or illegal. The extracts below illustrate the framing of internet fraudsters as moneybags:

Extract 1:

'A statement on Monday by the EFCC Head of Media and Publicity, Mr Wilson Uwujaren, disclosed that the suspects were rounded up on January 21 at the Ziroc Residence Hotel, Lekki, by operatives who had been tracking their activities.' (*The Punch*, January 26th, 2021 pg 14)

Halliday's material process significantly features in this extract. The expression 'operatives who had been tracking their activities' serves as the actor while 'the suspects' serves as the goal. The verb phrase 'were rounded up' serves as the material process. The discourse strategy, indicting, comes to the fore through the expression 'tracking their activities' because it is an expression that is often used to capture the perpetrations of troubling social actors. However, that internet fraudsters are placed in the goal position of the material process does not conceal internet fraudster as moneybags. In fact, the reference to 'Ziroc Residence Hotel, Lekki' in this extract suggests the possibility that the fraudsters are really wealthy enough to afford to lodge in such Lekki area in Lagos, Nigeria. Lekki is one of the most expensive residential areas in Nigeria which is reputed for housing some of the wealthiest Nigerians. This location is also mentioned in extract 2 below:

Extract 2:

'The Lagos Zonal Office of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission has arrested 16 suspects in the Lekki area of the state for alleged Internet fraud.' (*The Punch*, January 26th, 2021 pg 14)

Unlike extract 1, the arrested fraudsters are explicitly indicted for internet fraud in this extract. Thus, indicting is used as a discourse strategy. **Indicting** has to do with the use of language to accuse someone of wrongdoing. Here, the indictment is clearly echoed by *The Punch* newspaper that reported their arrest. Although appraisement, a similar discourse strategy with more implicational value, is not explicitly used to indict them, it can be justifiably argued that the strategic arrangements of all words in this extract are deliberately designed to indict them as internet fraudsters. Moreover, on indicting as a discourse strategy, material process is used to place internet fraudsters in the object position in this extract; that is, internet fraudster occupies the goal position. It is customary for a process to contain process itself, participants and circumstance. The circumstance is often used to provide information about time, place, manner and reason of the action in a material process. Therefore, the circumstance in this extract is indicated in the phrase 'in the Lekki area of the state for alleged Internet

fraud.’ This phrase contains two forms of circumstance: place and reason. The circumstance of manner is indicated in the expression “in the Lekki area’ while the circumstance of reason is shown in the expression ‘for alleged internet fraud.’ Thus, the circumstance of reason in this extract allows the arrested internet fraudsters to be indicted for fraud.

Extract 3:

‘The Commission, however, listed some items from them as twelve cars which include three Toyota Highlander SUVs, one Mercedes Benz GLK 350 SUV, One Acura SUV, two Honda Crosstour, two Toyota Venza and three other Toyota. Other recovered items included phones, laptops and other devices.’ (*Nigerian Tribune*, January 22nd, 2021 pg 23)

In this extract, inclusion features as a discourse strategy to frame internet fraudsters as moneybags. The agency of this frame is the posh items which are included in their description, and the most recurring items are iphones, laptops and expensive cars. As shown in extract 3, the recovered items are very expensive. It is evident that they can only be owned by moneybags.

Extract 4:



A white Toyota Camry car recovered from an internet fraudster. *Vanguard*, February 22nd, 2021 (online version)

Again, the visual inclusion of an expensive property recovered from an internet fraudster in this extract also contributes to this frame. Here, there is a singular representation of one of the items, an expensive Toyota Camry car, which was recovered from an internet fraudster. While the specific owner is excluded, the car can be categorised as an indication that the owner is a wealthy person. Therefore, individualization is a visual strategy employed by the newspaper to frame internet fraudsters as affluent. As a visual strategy, it occurs when social actors and objects are represented individually. Although Osisanwo (2018), and in particular, Osisanwo (2020:106) maintains that “it has to do with the singularity of pictorial representation, that is the individual representation of social actors,” it has been extended here to account for individual representation of non-human objects. Additionally, the items such as phones, laptops and cars, mentioned in extract 3, are typical of moneybags. Finally, extracts 1 and 2 allow internet fraudsters and their activities to be identified and indicted for cybercrime. Thus, at the discourse level, identifying and indicting are the strategies that are used to associate internet fraudsters with illegal wealth. This representation has economic value which suggests that internet fraud is a lucrative enterprise. Hence, this frame underlies Jegede and Olowookere’s (2014:258) assertion that Nigerian fraudsters leverage internet fraud as an “attempt to adjust to the capitalism that characterised the world economy.”

Internet fraudsters as youths

According to the National Youth Policy (2019), youths are people between the ages of 15-29 years. Through Halliday’s relational process and stating strategy, many of the internet fraudsters are represented as being between this age bracket in extracts 5-8. Extract 5 specifically represents an internet fraudster as a youth while many of them in extract 6 are explicitly stated as being in the age bracket.

Extract 5:

‘However, the defence counsel, John Okhihiegebe, pleaded with the court to temper justice with mercy as the defendant was a first-time offender, a youth who had a future ahead of her and has shown remorse.’ (*Nigerian Tribune*, March 24th 2021. pg 21)

Halliday’s relational strategy comes to the fore in this extract through the phrase ‘was a first time offender.’ As shown in this extract, the arrested internet fraudster is specifically stated to be a youth by her counsel. This particular emphasis on her age carries an implicational value which is probably to stress the ambitious purposes associated with youth as a starting stage of one’s promising life.

Extract 6:

‘The suspects are: Akpotegho Profit, 20; Aseimo Prince, 21; Ekhaguere Favour,19; Ekhaguere Esewi, 25; Kelvin Ekhaguere, 25; Temola Adex,25; Ezuzu Happiness, 21and Ekhiyokwo Emmanuel, 25. Others are Mena Ejife Emmanuel, 25; Clement Ifietekhai, 29; Babatunde Ilori, 35; Ejoor Joseph, 22; Okunuwe Frank Durkio, 22; Agbaga Kelvin, 22; Ajayi Kehinde David, 25; Akinwale Taiwo, 30; Joseph Henry Junior, 25 and Agbaje Opeyemi, 31.’ (*The Punch*, March 29th, 2021, pg 27)

Extract 6 is different from the prior extracts as it has peculiar importance to the support of the framing of internet fraudster as youths. Here, the arrested fraudster ages and full names are presented. Semi-formal nominalisation comes to the fore in this extract because the internet fraudsters are represented with their full names while collectivisation is used to represent them as a personalised group of social actors. The mentioned names are the identities of the arrested internet fraudsters, and are ordered through the present forms of the verb *be*. Hence, the identifying subtype of relational process is used to represent the internet fraudsters with their names as identifiers. More interestingly, ‘identifying’ which is the appropriation of lexical items towards creating an identity for a social actor is a strategy realised in extract 6 through classification which is a subtype of identification to identify internet fraudsters along their ages.

Extract 7:



An internet fraudster arrested in Abuja. *The Nation*, 27th, March, 2021 (online version)

In extract 7, a picture of an arrested internet fraudster is shown as a mug shot. The mug shot contains his full name and details of his arrest. It is the usual practice of EFCC to represent internet fraudsters in mug shots. The internet fraudster is represented as performing a particular role: carrying a board which contains his details. Further, the representation is specific as it uses sufficient details such as EFCC logo and the pose of the subject to represent him specifically as an internet fraudster. Not only is individualization used in this extract as with extract 4, localization is also employed to visually frame this internet fraudster.

Localisation is operationally conceived in this study to mean the geographical or physical settings where the pictures were taken. In

extract 7, likewise extract 8, the setting is one of the offices of EFCC in Nigeria. Even so, the gloomy facial expression of internet fraudster in extract 7 and the uniformity of their roles in extract 8 validate these locations. Further, the locations in the extracts are given generic depictions because they all have the same geographical features which allow a full representation of internet fraudsters and items recovered from them as being in the custody of government forces.

Extract 8



A group of internet fraudsters arrested by EFCC. *The Nation*, May 19th, 2021 (Online version)

In this extract, internet fraudsters are represented as a group (collectivization). They are all given doer's roles, especially as they all raise their gadgets above their heads. Furthermore, the representations in the extract give them a generic representation as arrested internet fraudsters and they are mainly youths. Colouration as a visual strategy contributes to full presentation of their physical feature. As a visual strategy, it means using a perfect medley of colours to present an element. The idea behind this strategy is that a perfect blend of colours will give the appropriate representation of the pictured elements. The internet fraudsters and materials recovered from them in extracts 4, 7

and 8 were presented with perfect blend of colours. Thus, the representation gives them their true depiction. It goes without saying that without a very good colouration, there might be difficulties in giving their true representations.

In addition to the implicit identification of many internet fraudsters as youth by Jegede and Olowookere (2014), visual representations of the arrested internet fraudsters in extracts 7 and 8 reveal that majority of internet fraudsters are youths. More interestingly, the facial features of the internet fraudsters in extracts 7 and 8 qualify them as youths. Thus, the agency of this representation is their age and physical appearance. On a worrying note, the socio-economic implication of this representation is that any Nigerian youth who appears to be wealthy may be associated with internet fraud. This assertion may be validated by the different operations of the special anti-robbery squad (SARS), a defunct police unit, which harassed Nigerian youths with veneer of wealth. It can also be argued that many Nigerian youths are internet fraudsters because successive Nigerian governments have failed to provide the necessary promised “social, economic and political support to realise their full potentials” (Nigerian Youth Policy, 2019:25). Hence, many of them are worried by this glaring failure, and thus considered internet fraud as a prime site to realise their potentials. The representation may stir up the debate on the morality of Nigerian youths. In a concrete term, there might be hasty generalisation that many Nigerian youths are morally delinquent. Hence, they may not be immediately absolved of any capability of indulging in cyber fraud until there are sufficient proofs otherwise.

Internet fraudsters as students

Internet fraudsters are also represented in the newspapers as students of different higher institutions in the country. Extract 9 specifically uses different strategies to implicate internet fraudsters as students. The foremost strategy is Halliday’s material process that allows the circumstance of place and time to be featured in the expression ‘in some of the students’ hostels situated at the entrance gate of the University of Ilorin at about 3:00 am.’ Besides the fact that some internet fraudsters are represented in this extract alongside their school, many of them

whose schools are not mentioned belong to the common ages of students in Nigeria. Therefore, the agency of this representation is their age and academic affiliations.

Extract 9:

‘Tribune Online gathered that the suspects were arrested in a commando-style by the operatives of the EFCC in some of the students’ hostels situated at the entrance gate of the University of Ilorin at about 3:00 am.’ (*Nigerian Tribune*, May 5th, 2021, page 28)

In extract 9, it is specially identifies the captured internet fraudsters as students arrested in some students’ hostels. Because of their arrest at this location, it can be submitted that they are students of the University of Ilorin. That internet fraudsters are students can be explained through the discourse and visual strategies used to represent them. Through identifying, stating and narrating strategies, internet fraudsters are represented as students. A closer study of their faces at the visual level also reveals the same result. What this representation instructs is that many students in different higher institutions across the country have considered internet fraud as an enterprise that is more rewarding than their education. If this position is anything to go by, it becomes incumbent on governments at all levels and other stake holders in education to rescue Nigeria’s education sector from invasion from internet fraud. However, none of the previous studies on internet fraud gives either implicit or explicit representation of internet fraudsters as students.

Internet fraudsters as fetishists

Fetishism is the adoption of diabolical materials for different purposes. Reports from the selected newspaper constantly reveal it as one of the devious means Nigerian internet fraudsters use to defraud their unsuspecting victims. From the analysis, stating and collectivization are discourse and visual strategies that informed this frame that internet fraudsters are fetishists. While many of the previous studies on internet fraud found out that internet fraudsters mainly use persuasive strategies to defraud their victims and did not mention the possibility of using diabolical processes, there are have been various reports of how the defrauding of victims is hastened by diabolical means. For instance,

Adomi and Igun (2008) mention ease of access to the internet, anonymity offered by the internet, inadequate law enforcement, and availability of software as reasons Nigerians involve in cybercrime; no reference was made to the efficacy and involvement of charm in defrauding victims. Furthermore, there is a general belief in Nigeria that internet fraudsters have so much wealth because they often put their victims under certain inexplicable spell. Furthermore, social media also contains reports of people, mostly ladies, who have run mad as a result of being used for diabolical purposes by internet fraudsters. Ample evidence is also available on social media about internet fraudsters performing different sacrifices for the purpose of obtaining wealth through internet fraud. Therefore, this representation of internet fraudsters alongside charm establishes a strong reason to believe that internet fraudsters use fetish means alongside rhetorical strategies to defraud their victims.

Extract 10:

“Items recovered from them include 10 exotic cars, mobile phones, laptops, charms and several incriminating documents.” (*Nigerian Tribune*, May 5th, 2021, page 28)

In extract 10, charms are stated among several items recovered from the fraudsters. Stating as a discourse strategy is used in the extract to mean statements that are produced in present tense, and it is realised through relational process and inclusion. Likewise, fetish materials are pictorially represented in extract 11 below. The agency of this representation is the fetish materials recovered from the fraudsters.

Extract 11:



Fetish items recovered from internet fraudsters. *Nigerian Tribune*, May 5th, 2021 (online version)

Extract 11 presents a more interesting finding as it contains fetish materials that were recovered from the fraudsters. The materials are given patient role as they are shown as being examined by security operatives. Also, while their owner(s) is excluded from the representation, they are given a specific representation as fetish items. Visually, collectivization is employed to frame them as fetishists. Following Osisanwo (2020:107) who says “visual collectivisation is realised by plurality or representation of images of groups of people, shown to be pursuing a similar goal,” it is apposite to state that there is no restriction to the number of people who can be represented in a collectivised visual. The only glaring prerequisite before a picture can be classified as a collectivised visual is that the pictured subjects must be more than one. Moreover, collectivisation can also occur when different inanimate objects are represented in a picture. In extracts 8 and 11, internet fraudsters and objects associated with them are represented as groups.

Internet fraudsters as impersonators

Evidence abounds in prior studies on internet fraud that assuming different identities is one of the strategies internet fraudsters use to bait, win trust and scam their victims. In extract 12, an internet fraudster is framed as an impersonator who has assumed different identities to defraud his victims. This is pure identity theft, and it allows the impersonator to assume different identities with the intent to defraud anyone who transacts business with them on the basis of that identity. This representation can also be gleaned from extract 13 where internet fraudsters are represented fronting different identities such as students, artisans, farmers and businessmen. Thus, the agency of this representation is identity manipulation. Besides, functionalisation is also used in extracts 12 and 13 to exemplify this:

Extract 12:

‘He said: “During interrogation, Uche, who presents himself variously as Rachael Armstrong, Keanu Reeves, Rebekah Schwarzenberger,

Keanu Private, Elizabeth Hortman and Stefan Paulson, confessed to being into Bitcoin investment scam, romance scam and identity theft.’ (*The Nation*, 27th, March, 2021, page 34)

In this extract, narrating is employed as a discourse strategy to frame the arrested fraudster. Narrating has to do with the telling of actions that happened in the past. It is differentiated from stating in the sense that it is told in past tense and it involves an occasional reference to authority through the use of quotations. It is also realised through material, relational and verbal processes. Verbal process is used in extracts 12 because it allows the voice of the officials to be projected.

Extract 13:

‘According to it, the suspects, who variously claimed to be students, artisans, farmers and businessmen, are currently undergoing interrogation to ascertain their level of involvement in the alleged crime.’ (*Nigerian Tribune*, January 22nd, 2021, pg 24)

Besides the evidence that internet fraudsters are framed in this extract as impersonator, it will be useful to view it as a contribution to their framing as students. That this view is useful can be demonstrated by the direct reference to the self-disclosure made by the arrested fraudsters as students.

As a strategy, functionalisation allows the activity the social actor engages in to be illustrated in the text. As shown in this extract, the arrested internet fraudster assumes different identities for himself. Apart from persuasive strategies, impersonation is another strategy internet fraudsters use to defraud their victims. Almost all the previous studies on the activities of internet fraudsters have attested to this finding. More accurately, Ajiboye (2013) and Taiwo (2015) specifically identify impersonation as one of the various discursive strategies that is often deployed to defraud victims. Schaffer (2012) and Chiluya (2009; 2013) identify email as a major platform where internet fraudsters claim different identity in their messages to their victims/ recipients. Extract 12 evidences the ease at which internet fraudsters can take up different identities and attach sufficient credibility to it. A puzzling point from this finding is the trustfulness and hastiness of their victims to transact business with people of unverifiable identities. It is mysterious that

despite the news about the nefarious activities of internet fraudsters and their numerous strategies, some internet users still become their victims.

Internet fraudsters as drug peddlers

Drug peddling is one of the menaces being faced by the Nigerian society. While it is not as widespread and discreet like internet fraud, it is not surprising that some internet fraudsters may venture into it as there is a high likelihood that crimes breed more crimes. Narrating and indicting are the strategies that evidently informed this frame as shown in extract 14.

Extract 14:

‘However, the command said that the suspects had confessed to the crimes, just as they alleged that three laptops and three iPhones, as well as a substance said to be Indian hemp, were recovered from them.’
(*Vanguard*, May 24th, 2021, pg 31)

In extract 14, substances suspected to be Indian hemp are represented along with the arrested internet fraudsters. Thus, this representation suggests them as drug peddlers. The agency of this representation is possession of illegal substances. Since internet fraud itself is an illegal activity, it will not be far-fetched to find internet fraudsters to further be involved in other illegal activities such as drug peddling. Besides this, many of them have been found to be youths who belong to impressionable ages. If these facts are taken together, it becomes glaring why they are prone to use hard drugs. Similar to the findings that internet fraudsters are students and fetishists, none of the prior studies identify internet fraudsters as drug peddlers. The reason these studies gloss over this finding is probably because internet fraud is enough research engagement and attempts to interrogate other varieties of crime they involve in might be largely needless.

On the whole, the identified discourse and visual strategies have been analysed to present the diverse frames of internet fraudsters in Nigerian print media. On the one hand, the visual strategies that are used to represent internet fraudsters in the extracts allow the print media to give a holistic representation of the arrested internet fraudsters. That is, in contrast to other news reports where only the texts of the news are

provided, the inclusion of the pictures in the news reports will significantly aid the readers' appreciation of the news. In other words, the representation will allow the readers to conveniently relate the claims presented in the written texts to the presented visuals. Thus, it is safe to argue that these visual strategies are used as attempt to substantiate their reports with concrete evidence. They are used to add credibility to the reports. This is important because every print media knows the essential role of credibility in journalism. On the other hand, the discourse strategies are also very instructive to the findings made in this study. Identifying strategy allows their proper identification, stating allows the manner and reason of their arrest to be stated in present form, narrating allows the story of their arrest to be told albeit in past form and indicting allows the reason they are arrested to be shown to the readers. More importantly, it must be emphasised that these discourse strategies are neither self-sustaining nor mutually exclusive of the visual strategies. Rather, the two strategies informed the manifestation of the different frames given to internet fraudsters in the selected newspapers.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the discourse and visual strategies deployed by selected Nigerian newspapers to frame. Guided by theoretical insights from van Leeuwen's social actor approach and Halliday's transitivity model, excerpts of news reports on internet fraudsters and their activities, as published by four national newspapers, *The Punch*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *The Nation*, and *Vanguard*, between January 2021 and May, 2021, were subjected to discourse analysis. The excerpts contained both texts and pictures about internet fraudsters. The analysis revealed six frames for internet fraudsters in the Nigerian newspapers: moneybags, youth, students, fetishists, impersonators and drug peddlers. The frames were implicated by four discourse strategies: identifying, stating, narrating and indicting; and four visual strategies: individualisation, collectivisation, localisation and colouration.

A fact in the identified representations is that the selected Nigerian newspapers give a holistic representation of culturally objectionable social actors and events. This fact can be defended by the ample use of van Leeuwen's semi-formal nominalisation which allows internet

fraudsters to be represented with their full names. All other strategies at both levels of analysis, especially visual strategies, evidently demonstrate the fact that internet fraudsters are given holistic discourse representation by the selected newspapers. This conclusion helps to argue that internet fraudsters are represented in Nigerian newspapers as social actors whose actions have substantial socio-economic implications in the country; the representations they are given have higher social and economic values. In other words, the frames reflect popular opinion about their status and activities.

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