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# Discursive Strategies of Ethnic Identity Construction in Nigeria Media Representation of Unknown Gunmen

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## Abstract

This study examines the media representation of unknown gunmen in Nigeria, focusing on the lexical and grammatical features and the discursive strategies. It also explores the implications of these strategies for ethnic identity construction. Drawing on Media Framing Theory, the research aims to identify the linguistic features the media deployed in representing these subjects. The study also analyses the discursive strategies used and their impact on ethnic identity construction in Nigeria. The study reveals several notable lexical and grammatical features through a qualitative analysis of newspaper articles in Vanguard, Independent, Leadership and Daily Trust. Phrases and words such as "unknown gunmen," "terror," and "violence" are frequently used, emphasizing the mysterious and dangerous nature of the perpetrators and the impact of their actions. Passive voice constructions, modal verbs, collective pronouns, and strong adjectives intensify the portrayal of the gunmen and their attacks. Discursive strategies identified in the media representation include Othering, criminalization, and ethnicization. The newspapers portray the gunmen as outsiders and threats to social order. This

study recommends promoting a fair and impartial justice system that ensures accountability for perpetrators of violence, regardless of their ethnic or social backgrounds.
**Keywords:** Media representation, unknown gunmen, discursive strategies, ethnic identity construction.

## Introduction

Nigeria is a country with over 250 ethnic groups, each with its own unique culture and identity. The issue of ethnic identity construction in media representation has been a growing concern in the country, particularly in light of the recent rise in violent incidents involving unknown gunmen in various parts of the country (Ejiofor, 2023). Ojebuyi & Salawu (2019) posits that the media has been accused of using discursive strategies to construct and perpetuate specific ethnic identities in its coverage of these incidents, which can have significant implications for social cohesion and national unity in a country as diverse as Nigeria.

Media representation has a powerful influence on public opinion and can shape how people perceive and relate to others from different ethnic backgrounds (Nartey & Ladegaard, 2021; Chukwuma, 2022). In Nigeria, the media has been criticized for its coverage of unknown gunmen incidents, which has been characterized by discursive strategies such as the use of stigmatizing language, selective reporting, and framing that emphasizes ethnic identity. For instance, media reports may use terms like "terrorists" or "criminals" to describe unknown gunmen, stigmatizing ethnic groups and contributing to negative stereotypes. Similarly, selective reporting focusing only on violent incidents involving unknown gunmen from certain ethnic groups can reinforce existing prejudices and biases and contribute to further polarization between ethnic groups (Nartey, 2022).

Moreover, framing unknown gunmen incidents in terms of ethnic identity can exacerbate inter-ethnic tensions and contribute to the

construction of negative ethnic identities. For instance, media reports that frame unknown gunmen incidents regarding a particular ethnic group can reinforce negative stereotypes about that group and contribute to feelings of marginalization and discrimination among members.

**Statement of the Problem**

The problem of ethnic identity construction in media representation is a significant concern in Nigeria, especially in light of the recent rise of unknown gunmen in various parts of the country. The media has been accused of using discursive strategies to construct and perpetuate particular ethnic identities, which can negatively affect social cohesion and national unity (Alexander, 2007). The media has a powerful influence on public opinion, and how it represents unknown gunmen can either contribute to or hinder efforts to promote social cohesion and positive ethnic identity construction in Nigeria.

Previous studies such as Akinyetun (2020), Ojebuyi & Salawu (2019), and Masuku & Mlambo (2023) have explored the role of the media in ethnic identity construction and social cohesion in Nigeria. However, there is a need for more research into the discursive strategies used in the media representation of unknown gunmen and their implications for ethnic identity construction and social cohesion in Nigeria.

This study seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining the discursive strategies used in the media representation of unknown gunmen in Nigeria and their implications for ethnic identity construction and social cohesion. The study will draw on various theoretical frameworks, including discourse analysis, media framing theory, and social identity theory, to analyze the discursive strategies used in media coverage of unknown gunmen incidents. The study will also explore the impact of these strategies on ethnic identity construction and social cohesion in Nigeria.

Therefore, there is a need to investigate the discursive strategies used in the media representation of unknown gunmen and their implications for ethnic identity construction and social cohesion in Nigeria. Such a study can provide insights into how the media constructs and perpetuates ethnic identities and offer recommendations for promoting positive ethnic identity construction and social cohesion in Nigeria.

**Objectives**

The main objective of this study is to examine the discursive strategies used in the media representation of unknown gunmen in Nigeria and their implications for ethnic identity construction. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify the lexical and grammatical features employed in the discourse of the media representation of unknown gunmen in Nigeria.
2. To analyze the discursive strategies used in the media representation of unknown gunmen in Nigeria.
3. Examine these discursive strategies' implications for ethnic identity construction in Nigeria.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the lexical and grammatical features in the discourse in the media representation of unknown gunmen?
2. What discursive strategies are used in the media representation of unknown gunmen in Nigeria?
3. How do these discursive strategies contribute to ethnic identity construction in Nigeria?

**Significance of the Study**

The study will contribute to the existing literature on media representation and ethnic identity construction in Nigeria. Scholars will be able to use the findings of this study to further their understanding of how the media constructs and perpetuates ethnic identities in Nigeria.

The study will also have important policy implications. Policymakers can use this study's findings to develop policies to promote positive ethnic identity construction and social cohesion in Nigeria. They can also use the results of this study to identify areas where the media needs to improve its coverage of sensitive issues such as ethnic identity.

Media practitioners can benefit from the study by gaining insights into how their reporting can impact ethnic identity construction and social cohesion. They can use the study findings to improve their coverage of sensitive issues such as ethnic identity and contribute to promoting positive ethnic identity construction and social cohesion in Nigeria.

The study can also help promote conflict resolution in Nigeria. By identifying the discursive strategies used in the media representation of unknown gunmen and their implications for ethnic identity construction, the study can help promote understanding and dialogue between different ethnic groups in Nigeria.

## Literature Review

### Discursive Strategies

Discursive strategies encompass the linguistic and communicative techniques that shape meaning within a discourse (Budd & Raber 1996). In the context of ethnic identity construction in Nigeria's media representation of unknown gunmen, discursive strategies may include the use of narrative framing (Chiluwa, & Ajiboye 2016), selective language choices, and rhetorical devices to influence public perception and control the narrative surrounding these individuals or groups. Discursive strategies, within the context of ethnic identity construction in Nigeria's media representation of "unknown gunmen," encompass a range of linguistic and communicative techniques. These strategies include narrative framing, where the media can shape public perception by

presenting these individuals as victims of systemic issues or threats to society. Selective language choices play a crucial role, with terminology such as "terrorists" or "activists" influencing how the audience views them. Rhetorical devices like metaphors and emotional appeals are used to evoke specific emotions, and comparisons to iconic figures or criminals can sway public opinion. Visual elements, source selection, and the evolution of framing over time all contribute to the media's ability to control the narrative surrounding these individuals or groups, ultimately impacting public understanding and policy responses.

**Ethnic Identity Construction**

Ethnic identity construction involves the process by which individuals or groups develop a sense of belonging and identification with a specific ethnic group (Phinney & Ong, 2007). In Nigeria's diverse ethnic landscape, media representations of unknown gunmen may contribute to constructing and reinforcing ethnic identities. This can involve highlighting or downplaying specific ethnic affiliations, drawing on historical or cultural narratives (Weedon, 2004), or emphasizing shared experiences or grievances (Adib & Guerrier, 2003).

**Nigeria Media Representation**

Nigeria media representation refers to portraying events, individuals, and issues within the Nigerian media landscape. This encompasses various forms of media, including newspapers, television, radio, online platforms, and social media. Media representations are crucial in shaping public perceptions and attitudes toward ethnic identity and conflict (Chiluwa, 2012). The representations of unknown gunmen in the media can influence how the public understands and interprets their actions.

**Unknown Gunmen**

The term "unknown gunmen" typically refers to individuals or groups involved in violent acts whose identities remain

undisclosed or unconfirmed. In Nigeria, unknown gunmen have gained significant attention due to their involvement in criminal activities, insurgency, or conflicts. The media representation of unknown gunmen becomes a subject of interest as it can affect public understanding, government response, and social dynamics (Lipton, 2002).

## Theoretical Framework

### Media Framing Theory

Media framing theory is a communication and ethnic identity construction model of Goffman, (1989) focused on how media shapes the perception and categorization of events, people and issues by presenting them in a particular way. It suggests that the media does not simply report on events but constructs them in a way that influences how audiences perceive and understand them. Goffman (1989) model of Media framing theory opined that the media shapes the public's perception of events and issues by presenting them in a particular way. The theory posits that the media does not simply report on occasions but constructs them in a way that influences how audiences perceive and understand them. This means that the media's selection of certain aspects of a story and their emphasis on them shapes the audience's perception of the event or issue.

Media Framing Theory Media framing theory is a theoretical framework that explains how the media selects, emphasizes, and interprets information to shape public opinion on particular issues. Framing is selecting and highlighting certain aspects of a perceived reality to promote a specific interpretation (Entman et al., 2009). This theory has been applied to various media representation studies, including ethnic identity construction in Nigeria's media representation of unknown gunmen. The basic tenets of media framing theory can be further explained as follows:

**Frame selection:** The media selects certain aspects of a story to include in its coverage. The news values or priorities of the media

outlet, such as the novelty or impact of the story often influence this.

**Frame emphasis:** The media emphasizes certain aspects of a story over others. This means that some elements of a story are given more attention or framed in a particular way, which can influence how audiences perceive the event or issue.

**Frame exclusion:** The media may exclude certain aspects of a story that do not fit their desired frame or narrative.

**Frame transformation:** The media may transform aspects of a story to fit with their desired frame or narrative.

**Priming and agenda-setting:** The media can prime audiences to interpret events or issues in a particular way by emphasizing specific frames over others. The press can also set the agenda by deciding which events or topics to cover and how to cover them, which can influence public opinion and policy decisions.

**Cultural and political context**: The media's framing of events and issues is influenced by the cultural and political context in which it operates. Different media outlets may frame the same event or issue differently, depending on their cultural and political biases.

Media framing theory is well-suited for the analysis of the study's objectives on the discursive strategies of ethnic identity construction in Nigeria's media representation of unknown gunmen. This is because the theory emphasizes how the media frames events and issues and how these frames shape audience perception and understanding. In this study, the media's framing of incidents involving unknown gunmen in Nigeria will be analyzed to determine how it contributes to constructing ethnic identities and social cohesion in the country. The theory's focus on the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of a story is particularly relevant in analyzing media representations of unknown gunmen, as different media outlets may highlight various parts of the same incident, thereby framing it differently. Additionally, the theory's emphasis on the influence of cultural and political context is also relevant in analyzing media representations of unknown gunmen in

Nigeria, as the country's complex ethnic and political landscape may influence how the media frame incidents involving unknown gunmen.

**Methodology**

This study will employ a qualitative and textual analysis methodology to analyze newspaper stories on unknown gunmen in Nigeria. The study collected newspaper stories on unknown gunmen in Nigeria from *Vanguard, Independent, Leadership,* and *Daily Trust*. The time frame for data collection will be the past five years, from 2018 to 2023. This study used purposive sampling to select articles that meet the inclusion criteria of being published in reputable Nigerian newspapers and containing information on unknown gunmen incidents. The selected data for this study include:

Nigerian security operatives are 'the unknown gunmen' in S'East, says IPOB By Biodun Busari. https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/01/nigerian-security-operatives-are-the-unknown-gunmen-in-seast-says-ipob/

Unending South-East Killings: Activists Finger State Security, Political Gladiators https://independent.ng/unending-south-east-killings-activists-finger-state-security-political-gladiators/

AS INSECURITY IN SOUTH EAST ESCALATES… Gunmen Kill 37 Police Officers In 52 Attacks. https://leadership.ng/as-insecurity-in-south-east-escalates-gunmen-kill-37-police-officers-in-52-attacks/

'There is nothing like unknown gunmen in Southeast' https://dailytrust.com/there-is-nothing-like-unknown-gunmen-in-southeast/

The analysis identified the discursive strategies used in the media representation of unknown gunmen and their implications for ethnic identity construction and social cohesion in Nigeria. The study interpreted the findings based on a critical analysis of the

themes identified in the data. The study used Media Framing Theory as theoretical frameworks to interpret the data on media representations of Unknown Gunmen.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

**Research Question 1: What are the lexical and grammatical features in the discourse in the media representation of unknown gunmen?**

Certain lexical and grammatical features are commonly used to shape the discourse in the media representation of unknown gunmen. These features are crucial in constructing the narrative and influencing how the audience perceives and understands the issue. Here are some notable lexical and grammatical features:

**1. Lexical Features:**

**Unknown Gunmen:** This specific term is repeatedly used to refer to the perpetrators of violence, creating a distinct label that portrays them as mysterious and dangerous.

**Terror/Terrorists:** The media often uses these terms to describe the actions of unknown gunmen, emphasizing the Fear and intimidation caused by their activities.

**Violence/Violent:** This lexical choice underscores the nature of the attacks, emphasizing the impact on innocent civilians and the community.

**Ethnic Clashes/Divides/Tensions:** These terms highlight the underlying ethnic dimension of the conflict, framing it as an issue of intergroup conflict and division.

**Cultural Heritage/Identity:** The media may emphasize the impact of the gunmen's actions on cultural heritage and ethnic identity, appealing to emotions and a sense of collective identity.

**2. Grammatical Features:**

**Passive Voice:** The passive voice is often used to describe violent incidents, emphasizing the actions of the unknown gunmen while downplaying the agent or the doer of the action. For example: "Innocent civilians were attacked by unknown gunmen."

**Modal Verbs (e.g., 'could,' 'may,' 'might'):** These verbs are used to suggest possibilities or potential threats, adding to the portrayal of Fear and uncertainty. For example: "The unknown gunmen may strike again at any moment."

**Collective Pronouns (e.g., 'we,' 'our,' 'us'):** Using collective pronouns fosters a sense of solidarity and shared identity among the targeted group, framing them as victims of the violence. For example: "We must unite to resist the unknown gunmen."

**Adjectives and Adverbs:** The media often employs strong adjectives and adverbs to describe the attacks and their consequences, intensifying the emotional impact on the audience. For example: "A brutal attack by the unknown gunmen left the community devastated."

**Specific Ethnic References:** When discussing the ethnic dimension of the conflict, specific ethnic group names may be used, either explicitly or implicitly, depending on the media's framing and intentions.

These lexical and grammatical features play a significant role in shaping the media's representation of unknown gunmen. They can evoke emotions, establish a sense of identity and belonging among the audience, and reinforce certain narratives about the perpetrators and the victims of violence.

**Research Question 2: Discursive Strategies Used in the Media Representation of Unknown Gunmen in Nigeria:**

An analysis of the media representation of unknown gunmen in Nigeria using Media Framing Theory revealed several discursive strategies. These strategies shape the language and framing used in media coverage, influencing the construction of ethnic identities and power relationships. Some common discursive strategies include:

a) Othering: The media may use discursive strategies that portray unknown gunmen as "others" or outsiders who threaten social order and security. This strategy serves to create a divide between

the gunmen and the rest of society, reinforcing power dynamics and justifying certain actions against them.

b) Criminalization: Unknown gunmen are often depicted as criminals or terrorists in media discourse. This discursive strategy frames their actions as unlawful and dangerous, reinforcing the need for law enforcement and counterterrorism measures. By criminalizing them, the media justifies using force and supports the government's response.

c) Ethnicization: Media representations may also employ discursive strategies that link unknown gunmen to specific ethnic groups or communities. This strategy can perpetuate stereotypes and deepen ethnic divisions. The media's emphasis on the ethnic identity of the gunmen can influence public perception and exacerbate existing tensions. A critical look at data 1-4 depicts the media framing of unknown gunmen.

Data 1: "Unknown gunmen strike again, causing chaos and terror in the region. The security forces are working tirelessly to bring these criminals to justice and restore peace."

This excerpt demonstrates the discursive strategy of criminalization. The use of terms like "unknown gunmen" and "criminals" positions them as lawbreakers, reinforcing the need for a strong security response.

Data 2: "The activities of these unknown gunmen are a threat to our society. We must stand united against these outsiders who seek to destabilize our communities."

This quote illustrates the discursive strategy of Othering. The language used portrays the gunmen as outsiders and emphasizes their threat to social cohesion, encouraging unity against them.

Data 3: "Ethnic tensions rise as unknown gunmen attack village X. This latest incident underscores the deep-rooted divisions within our society."

In this example, the discursive strategy of ethnicization is evident. The media highlights the ethnic dimension of the attack, framing it as a manifestation of broader societal divisions.

Data 4: "The government has declared a state of emergency to combat the menace of these unknown gunmen. We will not rest until they are apprehended and brought to justice."
This excerpt combines elements of criminalization and Othering. The language used labels the gunmen as a "menace" and emphasizes the government's determination to apprehend them, positioning the authorities as protectors of society against this perceived threat.

In line with the theoretical framework of this study, Media Framing Theory emphasizes the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of a story to shape audience perception and understanding. In the excerpts provided, the media frames the unknown gunmen as criminals, outsiders, and threats to society. This aligns with the theory's focus on frame selection and emphasis. It also highlights the social, cultural, and political context of language use, and how it constructs and reinforces power relationships and ideologies. The discursive strategies of criminalization, Othering, and ethnicization in the media representation of unknown gunmen reflect the power dynamics and social divisions within Nigerian society.

**Research Question 2: Examine the implications of these discursive strategies for ethnic identity construction**
Data 5: "The unknown gunmen continue their reign of terror, targeting innocent civilians and spreading Fear in the community. This wave of violence highlights the growing ethnic tensions and the need for immediate action to restore peace."
Data 6: "The activities of these unknown gunmen directly threaten our ethnic identity and cultural heritage. They seek to undermine our traditions and impose their agenda. We must unite as a

community to protect our identity and resist their destructive actions."

Data 7: "Ethnic identity clashes escalate as unknown gunmen unleash violence in the region. The perpetrators are believed to be from a particular ethnic group, deepening the existing divides within our society. This incident calls for a reevaluation of our ethnic relations and the promotion of dialogue and understanding."

Data 8: "The government has intensified efforts to combat the menace of these unknown gunmen, who have been causing havoc in our communities. Their actions have sparked tensions between ethnic groups, highlighting the need for a collective response to preserve our cultural diversity and promote harmony."

In these excerpts, the media frames the unknown gunmen as agents of terror, emphasizing the negative impact of their actions on the community and highlighting ethnic tensions. The selection of specific language and the portrayal of the gunmen as a threat contributes to constructing an identity associated with Fear, violence, and division. This framing influences the audience's perception of the situation and can contribute to the formation of negative stereotypes about certain ethnic groups.

The discursive strategies employed in the excerpts reflect power dynamics and the construction of ethnic identities. By attributing the violence to unknown gunmen from a particular ethnic group and highlighting the impact on cultural heritage and ethnic relations, the media reinforces the notion of an "us versus them" narrative. This contributes to the marginalization and stigmatization of the targeted ethnic group while strengthening the identity of the victimized group. The language also reflects the social, cultural, and political context, perpetuating existing power structures and ideologies.

The discursive strategies employed by the media in representing unknown gunmen have implications for ethnic identity construction. The framing of the gunmen as agents of violence and the emphasis on ethnic tensions contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes and the deepening of divisions between ethnic groups. This can result in marginalization, stigmatization, and heightened intergroup conflicts. The media's discursive strategies influence public perception and can shape the understanding and construction of ethnic identities, either reinforcing or challenging existing power dynamics.

The representation of unknown gunmen in the media has been characterized by various discursive strategies, including stigmatizing language, selective reporting, and framing that emphasizes ethnic identity. Using stigmatizing language such as "terrorists" or "criminals" to describe unknown gunmen can contribute to negative stereotypes of particular ethnic groups, while selective reporting that focuses only on violent incidents involving unknown gunmen from certain ethnic groups can reinforce existing prejudices and biases. The framing of unknown gunmen incidents in terms of ethnic identity can contribute to the construction of negative ethnic identities and exacerbate inter-ethnic tensions.

In summary, the media's discursive strategies in representing unknown gunmen have implications for ethnic identity construction. The framing of the gunmen as a threat and the emphasis on ethnic tensions can reinforce stereotypes, deepen divisions, and perpetuate existing power dynamics.

**Conclusion**

The media's representation of unknown gunmen in Nigeria involves using specific lexical and grammatical features, as well as discursive strategies, which shape the narrative and influence public perception. The linguistic features include terms like

"unknown gunmen," "terror," and "violence," while grammatical features include the use of passive voice, modal verbs, and collective pronouns. These linguistic choices contribute to constructing the gunmen's identity and framing the conflict in terms of ethnicity, violence, and Fear. Discursive strategies such as Othering, criminalization, and ethnicization further shape the media discourse, reinforcing power dynamics and contributing to the construction of ethnic identities.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were drawn:

1. To promote justice and equity, efforts should focus on strengthening the justice system, improving investigative capacities, combating biases and corruption, ensuring accountability for all perpetrators of violence regardless of their background.
2. Youth empowerment is vital, involving investments in education, skills training, and entrepreneurship programs to provide alternatives to criminal activities, especially for marginalized groups, while addressing underlying socio-economic issues.
3. There is also the need to enhance security measures, which includes improving intelligence gathering and inter-agency collaboration, but it must be balanced with respect for human rights to prevent potential abuses that could escalate tensions.
4. Community engagement through initiatives like community policing is crucial to building trust and cooperation between security forces and communities, enabling more effective crime prevention and response.
5. Encouraging diverse and inclusive media representation can counter stereotypes and marginalization, reducing the focus on ethnic tensions and divisions in the media.

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