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Discursive Representations of Gender-Based Violence, Feminist and Anti-feminist on Nairaland: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) and feminism are sensitive topic in Nigeria's online public debates, yet the grassroots digital conversations in which such issues are contested remain comparatively understudied. This study investigated the discursive representation of gender-based issues on Nairaland, a major Nigerian online discussion platform, identified major discursive patterns using van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Lazar's feminist CDA. The study employed a qualitative case study design. All publicly accessible threads on GBV, feminist and anti-feminist posted in 2024 were purposively selected with special focus on their relevance, participation and ethical attainability and were subjected to systematic coding and multi-level critical discourse analysis. The findings showed that GBV discourse was structured around competing claims of victimhood… a perceived neglect of male suffering relative to attention directed toward female victims while derailment, ad hominem attacks, pathologizing, victim-blaming and minimization were observed across threads. Feminist discourse is subject to severe boundary policing, with a "moderate" feminism defined against a delegitimized radical, while anti-feminist contributors emphasize patriarchal ideologies using ridicule, gender insults and appeals to tradition. In conclusion, the sampled Nairaland threads constitute a contested discursive space

in which patriarchal gender ideologies are both reproduced and challenged. The study recommends gender advocacy, policy involvement and engagements with online public discourse.
Keywords: Gender-Based; Violence; Nairaland; Feminism; Anti-Feminism; Digital Discourse

Introduction

Gender inequality and gender-based violence remain enduring challenges in Nigeria, revealing in forms such as inequality, discrimination, and violence against women and men, disproportionately affecting women and girls. A report of the Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey revealed that 30% of Nigerian young women had experienced physical violence and a significant fraction of these women have endured sexual violence at least once. These outcomes are likely underestimated due to fear of public criticism (National Population Commission 2009). In another report of the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap, Nigeria was ranked 123rd out of 146 countries with a high rate of deprivations in political participation, educational achievement, economic prospect and health outcomes (World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report, 2022). These deficiencies are further compounded by social norms as revealed in a national research survey that a significant fraction of women in Nigeria agrees wife-beating as justified under certain circumstances (Oyediran & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2005). The role of traditional media in shaping gender narratives in Nigeria has received considerable scholarly attention (Olorunpomi *et al*, 2025), the informal, participatory digital spaces interactions where Nigerians actively discuss, negotiate, and reimagine gender ideologies remain understudied. The importance of such gap in Nigeria's public sphere cannot be overlooked because of the significant online users. Nairaland, founded in 2005, is one of Nigeria's major online discussion forums, with over three million registered users and a vast unregistered readership (Chiluwa & Odebunmi, 2016). Its pseudonymous, largely unmoderated and text-based architecture

permit candour that formal media do not, making it an authentic archive of grassroots discursive practice. Discussions on the forum have supplied data for critical discourse studies of terrorism (Chiluwa & Odebunmi, 2016), ethno-religious conflict and everyday social life (Kuchaks & Egbogah, 2026), but sustained critical attention to its gender discourse is comparatively sparse. Previous Nairaland studies have mainly examined how Nigerians use the forum to discuss social, cultural, political and gender related issues, including representations of men and women and debates around gender relations.

Gender-based violence studies have largely examined the prevalence, causes, experiences, representations and how societal responses to violence against women and girls, including domestic and sexual violence. However, sufficient scholarship on how gender-based violence is discursively constructed and contested specifically within Nairaland discussions, particularly how Nigerian users use language to frame victims, perpetrators, responsibility, blame, consent and feminist perspectives and how these competing discourses reproduce or challenge patriarchal gender relation are the crux of this study.

The study addressed two main problems. First, the discursive mechanisms through which gender-based violence is represented, legitimized, contested or minimized in Nigeria's largest grassroots digital space are not well documented, even though such representations may contribute to wider public understandings of victims, perpetrators and possible interventions. Second, feminism the principal counter-ideology to patriarchal gender arrangements is itself an object of intense discursive struggle on the forum, and the strategies through which it is embraced, domesticated, policed or repudiated have not been systematically analysed.

The aim of this study was to examine discursive representations of gender-based issues on Nairaland. The specific objectives are to:

(i) To examine how gender-based violence, feminism and anti-feminism are discursively represented in selected Nairaland threads. (ii) To identify the recurrent discursive strategies, themes and ideologies through which these representations are constructed, contested and legitimized. Correspondingly, the study answered two research questions: (1) How are gender-based violence, feminism and anti-feminism discursively represented in selected Nairaland threads? (2) What recurrent discursive strategies, themes and ideological positions emerge from these discussions? The study is significant in academic and practical terms.

Academically, it extends critical discourse scholarship on Nigerian digital spaces beyond its established preoccupations with politics, conflict and religion into the domain of gender, and supplies empirical evidence from naturally occurring, unfiltered interaction rather than elite-produced media texts. The study also provides a discursive space on which gender advocacy must operate as a guide for policymakers, advocacy organizations as well as educators with specific strategies on victim-blaming, derailment, ridicule, boundary policing that advocacy messaging encounters in online spaces.

Literature Review

Discursive Representation and Gender

The term discursive representation has been defined in various ways. But more captivatingly, according to van Dijk, (2015), it refers to the ways language and associated communicative practices, argumentation, rhetorical strategy, narrative, silence, construct, sustain or challenge social meaning. Lazar, 2007 maintains that representations do not merely reflect a pre-existing social reality; they are instrumental in constructing it. Within the domain of gender, discursive practices carry particular weight: language is the principal site where gender norms are reiterated, policed or subverted, and where gendered identities are performed

and contested (Lazar, 2007; Parkins & Parkins, 2021; Iroth & Ali, 2026). According to Adebayo & Kolawole (2013), stereotypes is a principal discursive technique: simplified, frequently pejorative constructions of social groups that demarcate boundaries between an in-group and an out-group. In the Nigerian society, women are conventionally regarded as dependent, emotional and responsible for family orderliness, while men are seen as family providers, responsible actors or controllers of authority (Adebayo & Kolawole, 2013). Online discussion forums provide spaces in which gender identities and ideologies can be represented, negotiated and contested.

Digital Forums and Gender Discourse in Nigeria

The emergence of online platforms in Nigeria has provided new avenues for public discourse, allowing people from diverse background to interact and participate in debates on social, political, gender and economic issues. The interactive, pseudonymous format of these forums differ greatly from broadcast media, encouraging candid disclosure of experiences of discrimination and harassment alongside less constrained expression of controversial, discriminatory and exclusionary views (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018; Lee & Soonah, 2023). Digital platforms in Nigeria have enabled viral advocacy campaigns and survivor testimony, while simultaneously hosting misogyny, disinformation and victim-blaming that can take particularly explicit forms in some online environments. Online news framing of gender-based violence in Nigeria has been shown to sway between sympathetic and trivializing registers (Olorunpomi, *et al*, 2025), and social media discussion of GBV displays a comparable duality of solidarity and hostility (Silva *et al*, 2025).

Nairaland as a Site of Discourse Research

Nairaland's scale, longevity and openness have made it a productive site for Nigerian discourse studies. Researchers have examined the forum's role in online terrorist communication and

public response to Boko Haram (Chiluwa & Odebunmi, 2016), in the construction of everyday social interaction and identity (Kuchaks & Egbogah, 2026), and in the linguistic hybridity of Nigerian digital culture, in which English coexists with Nigerian Pidgin and indigenous-language code-switching. Nairaland is analytically appropriate for the study because it provides a large, publicly accessible, and socially diverse corpus of naturally online interactions in which Nigerians discuss gender, relationships, family, sexuality, work, politics and social norms. It has a significant richness of naturally occurring discourses and provides a large volume of diversity of data for research purposes. The forum's pseudonymity permits marginalized or dissenting voices to speak with reduced fear of retaliation (Adebayo *et al*, 2025), which simultaneously enables both frank survivor testimony and disinhibited misogyny. Existing gender-focused work on the forum is fragmentary, addressing specific motifs rather than offering a systematic critical account of how GBV and feminism are constructed in its threads. This study addresses that lacuna.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Critical Discourse Analysis, specifically van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, complemented by Lazar's feminist CDA. CDA is premised on the understanding that language is deeply intertwined with social power and inequality: discourse both reflects and actively shapes social relations (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Fairclough, 2013; Kopf, 2026). In van Dijk's (2015) socio-cognitive model, three relationships exist between discourse, cognitive and society. Discourse is the communicative event; cognitive comprises the mental models, attitudes and shared social representations of participants; society includes the structural and cultural dimensions within which discourse emerges. Central analytical instruments include the "ideological square", the systematic positive presentation of the in-group and negative presentation of the out-group and the identification of discursive strategies such as polarization,

legitimation, delegitimation and denial. These instruments are directly applicable to forum debate, in which contributors continuously construct an "us" and a "them" around gendered positions. Lazar's (2007) feminist CDA sharpens this apparatus for gender analysis. It directs attention to how taken-for-granted gendered assumptions are discursively produced and sustained, how patriarchal ideology can be re-inscribed even within apparently progressive or "empowering" talk, and how resistance is managed frequently by rendering it laughable or socially costly. The combination equips the study to analyse both the manifest content of Nairaland threads and the latent ideological work their language performs.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative case study design, appropriate where in-depth understanding of a complex social phenomenon within its real-life context is required (Isik, 2025; Bazen *et al*, 2020; Prawanti *et al*, 2025). It examined gender-based discussion on Nairaland between January and December 2024. CDA was suitable for the study because all the cases under investigations were achieved in their original states offering an authentic record of public communications unaltered by editorial interaction. The target population involved all publicly available posts and threads on Nairaland on gender-based cases within the period under investigation. Two thematic areas from the study were analysed: (a) gender-based violence; and (b) feminist and anti-feminist commentary. The sample was collected from publicly available posts from nairaland, Nigeria's online discussion forum, focusing on discussions concerning gender-based violence, feminism and anti-feminism. The post was purposively selected based on their relevance to the research objectives. The materials were collected because they constitute naturally occurring discourse through which Nigerian internet users construct and negotiate meanings about gender, violence, and feminism and gender relations. The selected posts provided the textual data for examining the

linguistic and discursive strategies through which particular representations, ideologies and power relations are produced and contested. The data were then subjected to critical discourse analysis, drawing particularly on Fairclough's approach.

Threads were purposively sampled (Isik, 2025) using three criteria: thematic relevance, established through keyword searches (e.g., "rape", "abuse", "feminism", "gender") and browsing of the Romance, Family and Politics sections; engagement level, operationalized as a minimum of fifty replies, as a proxy for multi-voiced argumentation and public salience; and accessibility and ethics, restricting the corpus to publicly viewable threads in line with internet research ethics guidance (Markham, 2012). Ten threads grouped in two subheadings (discursive representation of gender-based violence; discursive representation of feminist and anti-feminist commentary), based on their richness in relations to the research objectives were selected.

Each threat fulfilled the criterion of attracting at least 5 unique responses. Sampling continued within each domain until thematic saturation, the point at which no new analytical categories or discursive strategies were observed. Thread content was archived verbatim, preserving original spelling, emoji and paratextual markers that may carry discursive meaning and indexed with metadata (title, dates, number of contributors, sub-forum) (Guest *et al*, 2006; Secarã, 2011). All usernames reported in this paper are the contributors' own pseudonymous forum handles; no offline identities were sought or disclosed, and no private or members-only content was collected, this was done to preserve the true identities of the contributors. Analysis proceeded in layered stages. First, familiarization and initial coding generated codes for recurrent topics and discursive strategies, covering both manifest content and latent features such a tone, modality and rhetorical moves (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Second, codes were grouped into discursive themes (e.g., legitimation, resistance, solidarity,

minimization). Third, van Dijk's multidimensional framework was applied across textual analysis (lexis, argumentation), discursive practice (quoting, replying, confronting) and social practice (relation to wider cultural norms and power structures). Findings were continually triangulated against the theoretical framework and prior scholarship, and negative case analysis and constant comparison were practised throughout to restrain researcher bias.

Analysis and Discussion

Discursive Representation of Gender-Based Violence

Analysis of the GBV threads revealed six interlocking discursive patterns.

Reframing and competing victimhood. The opening post of the principal GBV thread, occasioned by national outrage over the killing of a female gospel singer, reframes the dominant discourse by foregrounding male victimization. The poster, "kingreign", first establishes moral credibility through inclusive self-positioning - "*as a husband, a brother, a son and a father… I strongly condemn violence of any kind*" - before introducing the contrastive claim that societal concern for GBV is "loop-sided" in favour of female victims. A recurrent strategy of *rebalancing* follows, in which the poster enumerates forms of male suffering - emotional, psychological, economic and physical - and alleges their systematic invisibility: male suffering is "*swept under the carpet*", the male gender "*left out in the cold to suffer… left in the dark to be battered by storms*". Institutional advocacy itself is indicted: "*which gender are [NGOs] protecting 80% of the time? Female gender!*" In van Dijk's (2015) terms, this constructs an ideological square in which men figure as a neglected out-group of a female-centred advocacy establishment, contesting the singularity of female victimhood.

Counter-discourse and gendered stereotyping. Female respondents alternately trivialize and challenge the claim. Sarcasm rules out male silence as pride - "*Story! Like ego won't allow you*

guys speak up!" - to which the original poster retorts "*A violent woman spotted!*", deploying a gendered stereotype to delegitimize criticism. Another contributor, "@Biglittlelois", impugns motive rather than fact: "*Y'all don't really want to be seen as victims, you just hate that all attention is on women and want a part of it*", before redirecting toward constructive action: "*You can start by campaigning vigorously for men to speak out…*". Coding surfaces here a theme of *gendered authenticity*: the legitimacy of victim status is tied to perceived motive - a genuine quest for justice versus attention-seeking - demonstrating that these discursive battles concern the politics of recognition and credibility as much as the facts of violence.

Negotiation of power and responsibility. Participants negotiate agency by redistributing responsibility. "@Biglittlelois" flips the patriarchal script - "*Men dominate this society… start by talking to your kind*" - implying that male silence upholds men's own suffering. Other contributors accept the invitation to self-organization ("*would play my own part… to voice this*"), a move coded as *self-advocacy* and *individual responsibility*, showing that the thread facilitates not only contests over victimhood but calls to gendered collective action.

Derailment, personalization and escalation. Exchanges recurrently escalate into ad hominem attack. One poster pathologizes dissent as personal trauma: "*Young lady, you sound embittered. What's the matter? If you have been disappointed… don't bring this bitterness into this thread*" - a classic strategy for delegitimizing opposing voices by reframing critique as damage (van Dijk, 2015). Derailment into unrelated provocation also occurs, as in "*if females are so bad why not turn to our own gender, maybe a GAY partner*", which simultaneously signals defensiveness and polices heterosexual relationships.

Normalization and minimization. In the companion thread on recent female fatalities, victim-blaming surfaces - "*what happened to you keeping your mouth shut and avoiding trouble?*" - though it is countered within the same exchanges by explicit condemnation of violence ("*hitting is a no no… slapping is not [what a] SANE individual should [do]*"). Minimization also proceeds by redefining abuse to encompass female behaviour toward economically struggling men: "*women that won't even near a guy that's not financially stable, mock and insult him openly… abuse na una get A1*". The coding here yielded themes of *justification*, *minimization* and *deflection*.

Ideological reproduction. Across both threads, male posters invoke female privilege ("*the female is more likely to get the job*") and societal disregard for male pain, constructing a discourse of endangered masculinity; female respondents counter by asserting entrenched patriarchal privilege and reading men's victimhood talk as attention diversion. These discourses are not merely oppositional but generative: they negotiate collective memory, social roles and moral hierarchies (van Dijk, 2015).

Discursive Representation of Feminist and Anti-Feminist Commentary

Analysis of the feminism threads yielded four principal patterns.

Boundary policing of "true feminism". The most prominent strategy is the discursive construction of an authentic, moderate feminism defined against a delegitimized radical Other. One contributor, "@MissJoy", articulates a feminism rooted in fairness and reciprocity - "*nothing wrong in helping out a man financially. There's nothing wrong in buying gifts for a man. There's nothing wrong in pampering a man & surprising him once in a while…*" - while anchoring its respectability in traditional femininity ("*sweet and gentle and cute*") and repudiating "*bitching*" and "*bad attitude*" that repel men. The out-group is othered in starkly derogatory terms as "*hungry, frustrated leeches*". This is textbook

in-group/out-group construction (van Dijk, 2015): by claiming authority over what counts as legitimate gender advocacy, the speaker simultaneously legitimizes certain beliefs and delegitimizes others - and, critically, re-inscribes patriarchal expectations of femininity while appearing to subvert them, precisely the paradox Lazar (2007) identifies in "empowerment" talk that remains subordinate to male approval ("*your independence should attract men to you not repel them*").

Patriarchal re-inscription and stereotype reproduction. Other contributors reject feminist claims outright through ridicule, gendered slurs ("*fake bitch*", "*tired-axe lady*") and sexual objectification ("*your leg… so epic… my favourite kind of lady legs…*"), stripping women and pro-feminist men of moral and intellectual credibility while redefining femininity as physical appeal and subservience. Overt anti-feminism is also articulated as doctrine: "*there is nothing like gender equality, Men are superior, and women should be submissive*", buttressed by appeals to tradition ("*That's how it should be*") and essentialist binaries. Approval reactions from other users reinforce these positions, demonstrating van Dijk's (2015) observation that online discourse reproduces social dominance by normalizing hierarchical relations.

Humour, ridicule and dismissal. Humour recurs as a device for managing ideological conflict. Sarcastic meta-commentary ("*I don't…read long notes…next!*") and mocking reaction markers lighten exchanges while foreclosing engagement, rendering feminist argumentation boring or laughable. This substantiates Lazar's (2007) claim that discourse undermines resistance by making it socially costly: the feminist contributor risks not refutation but trivialization.

Gendered affection and conditional validation. Expressions of affection - "*I love you… I logged in just to tell you this*" - are reserved for women who perform conformity to feminine ideals,

and even supportive posts carry instruction on how women should behave to remain desirable. Validation thus operates as a disciplinary mechanism, rewarding compliance and instructing deviation.

Discussion

The findings of this study, answered the two research questions which was formulated to guide study. The first response focused on gender-based violence on Nairaland and is presented as a contested avenue in which victimhood itself is a rare, fought-over status. Feminism is represented as a suspect ideology that demands domestication into reasonable form to claim legitimacy. In response to the second, the recurring themes are competing victimhood, gendered authenticity, individual responsibility, victim-blaming, minimization, boundary policing and conditional validation, and the underlying ideologies are a resilient patriarchal common sense - male authority, female submission, feminine desirability as woman's currency - persistently contested by feminist and equity counter-discourse. Two broader observations follow. First, the two-way nature of victimhood claims is analytically noteworthy: contributors challenge the stereotyping of women as sole victims and foreground male vulnerability, a pattern that is very rear in traditional Nigerian gender debate.

Yet the discursive execution of this challenge frequently proceeds through antagonism toward women and feminist advocacy rather than coalition with it, converting a potentially expansive empathy into zero-sum contest. Second, the findings confirm the theoretical expectations of both frameworks: van Dijk's (2015) triangle of discourse, cognition and society is visible in the constant traffic between forum talk and shared social representations (national GBV statistics, NGO conduct, religious and cultural norms), while Lazar's (2007) account of media spaces as everyday battlegrounds of gender ideology is instantiated in the forum's simultaneous reproduction and contestation of patriarchal hierarchy. These

grassroots dynamics mirror Nigeria's broader predicament, in which severe measured inequality (Idowu *et al*, 2023; Baridole *et al*, 2025) coexists with vigorous public argument over its meaning and remedy. The analysis revealed that discussions of GBV on naira land were characterized by computing representations of victims, perpetrators and gender relations.

Some participants condemned GBV while others shifted responsibility and blame towards the victims through their sexual relationships and personal conduct. The analysis also showed competing constructions of feminism. Feminist discourse was used to challenge gender inequality and patriarchal rights. While anti-feminist was represented as hostility towards men against pampering with gifts, disruptive of traditional gender relations inappropriate to the Nigerian context. From a critical discourse perspective, these presentations demonstrate that discussions of GBV on social media are not only exchange of individual opinions but are also sites where meanings about gender, morality and responsibility, power and social norm are negotiated. To answer the research questions, the findings indicated that GBV is discursively constructed in many ways and sometimes contradictory on naira land. Victims may be presented as deserving sympathy and protection but they may also be constructed as responsible for the violence they experienced. Similarly, feminism is represented as a threat to established understanding of gender relations.

Conclusion

This study investigated gender-based issues and how they are negotiated on Nairaland and identifies the ideological themes and structuring those representations. Using van Dijk's socio-cognitive CDA and Lazar's feminist CDA on purposively sampled 2024 threads, it found that GBV discourse is organized around competing victimhood, contested authenticity and recurrent strategies of derailment, victim-blaming and minimization, while

feminist discourse is subjected to boundary policing that domesticates it into patriarchally acceptable form and to outright re-inscription of male supremacy through ridicule and appeals to tradition. Nairaland thus functions as a genuinely contested digital public sphere: patriarchal ideology dominates but does not monopolize it, and resistant voices are persistently, visibly present. The findings carry practical implications. Gender advocacy and policy communication that ignore grassroots digital spaces cede the interpretive battlefield to the strategies documented here.

Advocacy organizations, policymakers and educators should engage such forums directly and dialogically; digital literacy interventions should equip users to recognize derailment, victim-blaming and delegitimation strategies; and campaign messaging should anticipate rather than be ambushed by the "competing victimhood" frame, including by taking male victimization seriously on its own terms so that it cannot function purely as a rhetorical counter to women's claims. Future research should extend the analysis to multimodal resources (memes, emoji, images), to comparative platforms, and to the relationship between online discursive patterns and measurable offline attitudes. It therefore concludes that the discourse plays an important role in shaping how gender-based violence and feminism are understood in Nigerian online spaces. The representation identified challenge and reproduce existing gender norms. Some discourses challenge patriarchal understandings and advocate greater gender equality, others reinforce convention al expectations concerning masculinity, feminist and responsibility for violence. The study contributes to scholarship by revealing the value of CDA in examining the ideological dimensions of online discussions. It also contributes to gender, digital discourse and GBV by demonstrating how linguistic choices can reveal underlying assumptions about power and gender relations in Nigerian online communication.

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