



Digital Communication and the Discursive Construction of Domestic Violence Survivors' Identity on Nairaland

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Abstract

This study examined how the identity of domestic violence (DV) survivors is discursively constructed in computer-mediated communication on Nairaland, Nigeria's largest online discussion forum. Existing scholarship on Nairaland has concentrated on hate speech, political discourse, neologisms and impoliteness, while research on domestic violence in Nigeria has been predominantly epidemiological or legal; comparatively little attention has been paid to how survivors are linguistically positioned in digital interaction. Adopting Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis as its primary orientation, and drawing additionally on van Leeuwen's social-actor framework, positioning theory and the victim-survivor distinction, the paper theorises survivor identity as a contested, co-constructed accomplishment that emerges in the interaction between an original poster's disclosure and the responses it attracts. Because DV disclosure is sensitive and survivors constitute a vulnerable population, the study adopts a conceptual and illustrative design rather than reproducing identifiable posts; recurrent discursive patterns documented in the literature and observable across Nairaland's public Family and Romance boards are demonstrated through anonymised, constructed examples. The analysis isolates recurrent strategies through which survivor identity is built and disputed, including self-positioning along a victim-survivor continuum, agency-obscuring grammar, victim-blaming and skepticism, religious and cultural framings of endurance, and solidarity-based affiliation. The study argued that Nairaland operates simultaneously as a space of disclosure and of secondary victimisation, and concluded with implications for digital advocacy, platform moderation and future empirical research.

Keywords

digital communication, domestic violence, survivor identity, critical discourse analysis, Nairaland, computer-mediated communication

INTRODUCTION

Digital communication has reconfigured the boundary between private suffering and public discourse. Practices that were once confined to the household or to face-to-face confidants the disclosure of abuse, the search for advice, the appeal for validation are now routinely performed in semi-anonymous online audiences. Online discussion forums are central to this shift, functioning as informal counselling spaces, archives of intimate experience and arenas in which the meaning of personal events is publicly negotiated. Nairaland, founded in 2005 by Oluwaseun Osewa, is the largest of these spaces in Nigeria, reporting in excess of three million members and several million topics, and its Family and Romance sections host sustained discussion of marriage, courtship, separation and abuse (Raheem & Akande, 2019; Akinwande & Igbafe, 2024). The forum thus offers a rich site for examining how Nigerians talk about, and talk into being, the identities of those who have experienced violence in intimate relationships.

Domestic violence remains a pervasive problem in Nigeria. National survey data indicate that a substantial proportion of married and even single women report have experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence from a spouse or partner (Titilayo *et al*, 2017; Oseni *et al*, 2021), a pattern consistent with global prevalence estimates (Kolbe & Buttner, 2020). These experiences are shaped by deeply held cultural and religious norms that frame marriage as an institution to be preserved, valorise female endurance, and attach stigma and shame to disclosure. In such a context, the relative anonymity of online forums lowers the social cost of speaking, and many survivors turn to platforms such as

Nairaland to narrate their experiences and seek counsel. Yet the same publicness that enables disclosure also exposes survivors to judgement, disbelief and re-victimisation, making the forum an ambivalent space.

Studies of identity have increasingly treated it not as a fixed attribute that individuals possess but as something accomplished in and through discourse. From this constructionist standpoint, to be a “survivor” is not merely to have undergone abuse but to be discursively positioned, by oneself and by others, within a recognisable set of categories, evaluations and moral expectations (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Dunn, 2005). The vocabulary available for such positioning is itself contested: the shift from “victim” to “survivor” in advocacy discourse encodes a movement from passivity and damage towards agency and recovery (Dunn, 2005). On a forum such as Nairaland, this identity work is rarely the achievement of a single speaker; it unfolds interactionally, as an original poster’s self-presentation is ratified, qualified, doubted or overwritten by respondents.

Existing research on Nairaland has illuminated several discursive practices on the platform, including the production of coinages and neologisms, the strategies of hate speech and the dynamics of trolling and impoliteness (Akinsanya, 2024; Taiwo, 2010; Taiwo, 2014). Research on domestic violence in Nigeria, for its part, has been largely epidemiological, clinical or legal in orientation. The intersection of the two – how the identity of DV survivors is discursively constructed in Nigerian computer-mediated communication – has received little attention. This paper addresses that gap. It asks: (i) how do posters construct themselves along a victim–survivor continuum in DV disclosures on Nairaland; (ii) what discursive strategies do respondents use to ratify, contest or reconstruct that identity; and (iii) how are Nigerian cultural and religious repertoires mobilised in this negotiation? In doing so, the study contributes to digital discourse studies, to gender and language scholarship and to the growing literature on Nigerian online communication.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is anchored in Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), as articulated by Lazar (2005). FCDA extends the broader project of Critical Discourse Analysis – the study of how language reproduces, sustains and contests relations of power and ideology (Fairclough, 1995, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) by foregrounding gender as a central organising principle of social life. It treats apparently ordinary talk about relationships, marriage and abuse as a site in which gendered assumptions are naturalised, and as a site in which they may also be resisted. This orientation is well suited to domestic violence discourse, where questions of blame, credibility, endurance and agency are saturated with gendered expectation.

Within this orientation, the analysis draws on Fairclough (1995) three-dimensional conception of discourse, which directs attention simultaneously to the text (its lexical and grammatical choices), to discursive practice (how texts are produced, circulated and interpreted), and to social practice (the wider ideological and institutional context). The forum thread is therefore read not only as a string of words but as a communicative event embedded in Nigerian gender relations and in the affordances of the platform itself. To analyse how participants are represented at the level of the text, the study employs van Leeuwen’s (2008) framework for the representation of social actors. Categories such as nomination and categorisation (how survivors and perpetrators are named), activation and passivation (whether a participant is depicted as acting or as acted upon), and exclusion or suppression (whether an actor, typically the perpetrator, is grammatically removed from the scene) provide precise tools for tracing how agency and responsibility are distributed in DV narratives. A recurrent finding in the wider literature is that violence is frequently rendered through agentless or nominalised constructions that obscure the perpetrator (Adams *et al*, 1995), a pattern this framework is designed to detect.

Identity itself is theorised through positioning theory (Bamberg, 1997) and narrative-interactional approaches (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012), which conceive of identity as something speakers do rather than something they are, accomplished as they position themselves and are positioned relative to characters in their stories and to their interlocutors. Goffman’s (1963) concept of stigma – the management of a “spoiled” social identity – further illuminates why disclosure is risky and why survivors engage in pre-emptive credibility work. Finally, because the data are digital, the framework incorporates insights from computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004) and social-media critical discourse studies (KhosraviNik, 2017), which emphasise how platform features – pseudonymity, threading, quotation and audience metrics – shape what can be said and how identities are co-produced.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ETHICAL PROCEDURE

This is a qualitative study employing a conceptual and illustrative design. Its data domain is the publicly accessible Family and Romance sections of Nairaland, which contain dedicated and recurrent discussion of domestic violence, marriage and divorce (Akinsanya, 2024; Akinwande & Igbafe, 2024). Rather than assembling and reproducing a corpus of identifiable user posts, the study synthesises discursive patterns that are (a) well attested in the international literature on domestic-violence discourse and (b) observable in the public structure of these Nairaland boards, and demonstrates them through illustrative analysis.

This design is a deliberate response to the ethical demands of the topic. Survivors of domestic violence are a vulnerable population, and forum disclosures about abuse are sensitive even when technically public. Although publicly available social-media content is often treated as exempt from individual consent, the strength of that exemption weakens as the sensitivity of the content and the risk of re-identification increase (Burnell *et al*, 2021; Sugiura *et al*, 2017). Because verbatim online text can frequently be traced back to its author through a simple search, reproducing a survivor’s

exact words could expose that person to renewed harm. To honour these commitments, the illustrative extracts presented below are not reproductions of identifiable posts; they are anonymised composites, constructed by the researcher to typify recurrent discursive moves while protecting individuals, in line with established guidance on researching sensitive topics online (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Townsend & Wallace, 2016). A full empirical extension of this work would require formal ethical clearance, a transparent sampling protocol, and systematic anonymisation of any retained data. Analytically, each illustrative extract is examined through the combined lens of Fairclough (1995) three dimensions and van Leeuwen (2008) social-actor categories, attending in particular to naming, agency, modality, evaluation and the distribution of blame, and relating these textual choices to the gendered and religious repertoires that circulate in the Nigerian context.

Domestic Violence Discourse on Nairaland

Several features of Nairaland shape how survivor identity can be constructed on the platform. Pseudonymity allows posters to disclose abuse without revealing their offline identity, lowering the threshold for speaking while also enabling respondents to judge harshly with little accountability. The threaded, quote-reply architecture means that a disclosure does not stand alone: it becomes the first move in a public exchange in which other members append evaluations, counter-narratives and advice, so that the survivor's self-presentation is immediately subject to collective revision. Audience metrics and the sheer scale of readership convert an intimate account into a quasi-public adjudication, in which the legitimacy of the survivor's claim is effectively put to a vote of opinion.

Disclosures typically enter the forum through a recognisable advice-seeking genre, in which a poster narrates a relationship situation and explicitly requests guidance, often framed around the dilemma of whether to stay or to leave. Some accounts are first-person; others are reported on behalf of a sister, friend or neighbour, a third-party framing that can both protect the discloser and shift the terms of credibility. The responses these threads attract range across a familiar spectrum: expressions of empathy and solidarity, demands for further detail, expressions of doubt, moral and religious counsel, and outright blame. It is within this response that survivor identity is contested, and it is to the recurrent discursive strategies of that contest that the analysis now turns.

Discursive Construction of Survivor Identity: Illustrative Analysis

The illustrative extracts below are grouped into three movements: the survivor's self-construction; the construction of the survivor by respondents; and the co-construction, resistance and solidarity through which survivor identity is ultimately stabilised or destabilised. Each extract is a constructed composite, presented in italics, followed by analysis.

Self-construction of identity

Sample 1: *"I don't even know if I am doing the right thing. I have endured for the children's sake, but I can't take it anymore. Please advise me."*

This opening enacts a victim position. The hedged preface ("I don't even know why...") performs hesitancy and pre-empts judgement, while "endured" frames the self as a long-suffering patient of circumstance rather than an agent. The appeal "please advise me" cedes interpretive authority to the audience, inviting them to co-author the next chapter of the narrative. In van Leeuwen's (2008) terms the speaker is largely passivated; in Dunn's (2005) terms she occupies the "victim" pole of the victim-survivor continuum, a position that elicits sympathy but also exposes her to the question of why she has stayed.

Sample 2: *"It took me nine years, but I finally packed my things and left. I am rebuilding now. To anyone reading this and still inside it: you can leave."*

Here the same continuum is occupied at its opposite pole. Active, agentive verbs ("packed," "left," "rebuilding") reconstruct the speaker as the protagonist of her own exit narrative, and the direct address to fellow members ("you can leave") performs survivorship as a transferable, exemplary identity. The temporal marker "it took me three years" converts past passivity into a completed trajectory of recovery. The speaker positions herself not as damaged but as transformed, and positions her readers as potential survivors-in-waiting.

Sample 3: *"Things got physical again last weekend and I ended up in the hospital."*

This extract illustrates agency-obscuring grammar. The euphemistic nominalisation "things got physical" and the agentless outcome "I ended up in the hospital" suppress the perpetrator entirely: no one is named as having acted, and the violence is represented as a weather-like event that simply happened. As Adams *et al.* (1995) observe, such constructions diffuse responsibility and can normalise abuse even in the survivor's own account. The grammatical elimination of the perpetrator is consequential, because respondents frequently fill that vacated agentive slot with the survivor herself.

Construction of the survivor by respondents

Sample 4: *"What exactly did you do to provoke him? There are always two sides. No smoke without fire."*

This response performs victim-blaming through responsabilisation. The presupposition embedded in "what did you do to provoke him" treats the survivor's conduct as the causal variable, reactivating her as the agent of the violence she reports, while the proverb "no smoke without fire" adapts folk wisdom to lend the inference an air of common sense. The

respondent thereby reconstructs the survivor's identity from injured party to culpable party. This strategy exemplifies the secondary victimisation that the literature identifies as a hazard of public disclosure.

Sample 5: *"We are only hearing one side here. Let the husband come and tell us his own."*

Where Sample 4 reassigns blame, this response withholds credibility. By invoking *audi alteram partem* ("one side," "his own"), the respondent recasts a disclosure of abuse as an unresolved dispute between two equally suspect parties, suspending the survivor identity rather than denying it outright. The move trades on the forum's adjudicatory frame, treating the thread as a tribunal in which the survivor must first establish standing. The effect is to convert the burden of proof into a precondition for sympathy.

Sample 6: *"Marriage is patience and prayer. Submit, cover him in prayer, and God will change him. Don't use your hands to scatter your home."*

This response constructs survivor identity through a religious-cultural frame of endurance. Imperatives ("submit," "cover him in prayer," "don't scatter your home") prescribe a course of action in which the woman's proper role is to absorb harm and to labour spiritually for the perpetrator's reform. The valorisation of patience and the framing of departure as the destruction of "your home" locate moral responsibility for the marriage's survival with the survivor. Such framings, widely circulated in Nigerian discourse on marriage, position leaving as failure and staying as virtue, and so pull the survivor back towards the victim pole.

Sample 7: *"At your age and with children, where do you think you are going? Manage it like a mature woman."*

This extract polices gendered respectability. The rhetorical question "where do you think you are going" denies the feasibility of exit, while "manage it like a mature woman" ties adult femininity to the quiet management of abuse. Maturity and self-worth are thereby redefined as endurance, and the survivor who contemplates leaving is positioned as immature or irresponsible. The respondent reconstructs identity by attaching social cost to the survivor label and social reward to continued victimhood.

Co-construction, resistance and solidarity

Sample 8: *"I was where you are two years ago. Same words, same promises. Please don't wait as long as I did."*

This response performs affiliation through shared category membership. By aligning her own past with the poster's present ("I was where you are"), the respondent co-constructs a collective survivor identity that authorises her counsel and revalues the original poster's experience as legible and shared rather than abnormal. Solidarity disclosures of this kind build, within the thread, a counter-public that resists the blaming and endurance frames of Samples 4 to 7.

Sample 9: *"Nobody provokes a beating. The only person responsible for hitting you is the person who hit you."*

This extract enacts explicit resistance to victim-blaming. It directly reverses the agency structure of Samples 3 and 4: the agentless violence of "things got physical" and the responsabilising "what did you do" are answered by a clause that names and re-activates the perpetrator as the sole responsible actor ("the person who hit you"). In van Leeuwen's (2008) terms the suppressed social actor is restored to the agentive position, and with him, moral responsibility. Through such moves the forum becomes a space not only of judgement but of ideological contestation, in which dominant gendered scripts are challenged in real time.

Sample 10: *"Leave. — Don't leave, think of the children. — Document everything first and tell someone you trust."*

The advice register, here compressed across several voices, displays the survivor identity as an unresolved collective accomplishment. The leave/stay opposition is never settled within the thread; instead, competing imperatives position the survivor simultaneously as someone who should exit, someone who should endure for the children, and someone who should pursue a cautious, evidence-gathering middle path. The survivor's identity thus emerges as the contingent product of an argument among respondents, rather than as a fact she alone declares – which is precisely the point of analysing it as co-construction.

DISCUSSION

Read together, the illustrative extracts support three claims. First, survivor identity on Nairaland is not a property that disclosers simply assert; it is negotiated along Dunn's (2005) victim-survivor continuum through an interaction between self-positioning and audience uptake. A poster may present as an agentive survivor only to be repositioned as a culpable or non-credible victim, or may present tentatively as a victim only to be re-narrated as a survivor by an affiliating respondent. Second, the grammar of agency is a key battleground: the suppression of the perpetrator (Sample 3), his re-insertion as the survivor's reaction (Sample 4), and his restoration as sole responsible actor (Sample 9) are competing answers to the question of who did what to whom. Third, Nigerian religious and cultural repertoires of endurance, submission and home-preservation supply powerful resources for pulling survivors back towards victimhood, while solidarity and explicit anti-blame discourse supply countervailing resources.

The forum therefore functions ambivalently. It is at once a space of disclosure, recognition and solidarity – a counter-public in which silenced experiences become sayable – and a space of secondary victimisation, in which the same

publicness subjects' survivors to disbelief, blame and gendered policing. This double character has practical implications: for digital advocacy, it suggests the value of seeding and amplifying the resistant and solidarity registers; for platform governance, it suggests that moderation of DV threads is not a neutral act but an intervention in identity construction with real consequences for vulnerable users.

CONCLUSION

This paper has theorised and illustrated how the identity of domestic violence survivors is discursively constructed in computer-mediated communication on Nairaland. Treating identity as an interactional accomplishment rather than a fixed attribute, and reading the forum thread through Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis together with social-actor representation and positioning theory, it has shown that survivor identity is co-produced and contested through self-positioning along a victim-survivor continuum, agency-obscuring and agency-restoring grammar, victim-blaming and credibility-withholding, religious-cultural endurance frames, and solidarity-based affiliation. The study's design is conceptual and illustrative, undertaken in deference to the vulnerability of the population and the traceability of online text; its claims are therefore offered as a theoretically grounded framework rather than as findings from a sampled corpus. A natural next step is a full empirical study, with ethical clearance and a transparent, anonymised sampling protocol, that tests and refines these categories against systematically collected Nairaland data. Such work would deepen understanding of how Nigerians narrate intimate harm online, and would inform advocacy and platform practice aimed at making digital disclosure safer.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The author declares that there are no competing interests with anyone of any sort.

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