

# CYBERCULTURE AND DAILY TRUST NEWSPAPER REPORTING ON INSECURITY IN NORTH-WESTERN NIGERIA: A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC LENS

**Musa, Ibrahim**

## **Abstract**

This study investigates how cyberculture reshapes newspaper reporting of insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria, addressing a gap in media discourse studies that often overlooks the impact of digital affordances on meaning-making practices. While kidnappings, banditry and mass abductions dominate the media space in Nigeria, little scholarly attention has been paid to the contemporary media discourse investigations within the lens of social semiotics. Anchored in social semiotics, drawing on the concept of recontextualization (van Leeuwen, 2008), this study adopts a social semiotic multimodal framework to examine a purposive sample of selected Nigerian newspaper reports. Using social semiotic Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), the analysis focuses on the interplay between linguistic and visual resources, including headline, images, layout, and digitally sourced contents. Findings reveal that newspaper reporting is increasingly shaped by cybercultural dynamics such as real-time dissemination, platform-driven visibility, and the integration of content sharing. These affordances produce a hybrid discourse marked by fragmentation, affective intensification, and algorithmically influenced news values. This study argues that newspaper representations of insecurity are no longer mere reflections of events but actively reconstructed through multimodal and digitally mediated practices. It contributes to scholarship by extending social semiotic inquiry into cyberculture and foregrounding the transformation of security discourse in the global context.

**Keywords:** Social semiotics, newspaper discourse, security discourse, recontextualization, cyberculture.

## Introduction

Insecurity is today one of the major subjects of national discourse because it has reached very disturbing levels as can be seen in pervasive kidnappings, abductions, and violence. Insecurity, though widespread in Nigeria, its severity can be more visible in the Northwestern Nigeria, specifically Kaduna, Katsina, Kano, Jigawa, Sokoto, Kebbi and Zamfara States, where there seems to be inter-states road network. The devastations in the region can be seen in the high human cost, the negative economic impacts leading to higher rate of poverty, poor investments, fractured lifestyles; mass displacement of the population leading to disruptions of education, agriculture, food insecurity, psychological trauma, poor governance, humanitarian crises and the proliferation of dangerous weapons. And humanitarian disasters.

The media, particularly the print media, play a key role in how information about insecurity is disseminated. The traditional media, especially the newspapers, play critical role as agender- setters, a role that is now threatened and redefined by a high-tech cyberculture characterised and as manifested in the social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, Tik-Tok, etc., where citizen journalism and digital propaganda dominate the online space. This creates tensions between journalistic norms of verification and the speed and virality of digital information.

Social semiotic approach to multimodality emphasizes the social and cultural perspectives of communication. It is a social theory of meanings and communication, concerned with signs and sign-making. 'Making' as opposed to using signs, in this context, refers to the theoretical principle which recognizes agency as individuals choose the most appropriate resources for expressing particular meanings according to their interests as shaped by and in response to the particular social context, (Mavers, 2009, Kress, 1993, 1997). Social

semiotics strives to unravel how semiotic resources of varying affordances – with potentials and/or constraints – are deployed as tools by sign makers for serving their needs in given social contexts.

Language, according to Halliday (1978), is realized in three types of social meanings referred to as metafunctions (i.e., the ideational metafunction, interpersonal metafunction and textual metafunction). These metafunctions are also elaborated in the conceptualization of language in the visual arena in which the meaning functions can be realized visually by employing semiotic resources of images, through concepts such as composition, modality, and framing (Kress and van Leeuwen: 1996, 2001, 2006). Ideational metafunction, for example, deals with how the newspaper represents the “actors” e.g., are the bandits shown as faceless figures? Are the victims featured as central actors or marginalized? The interpersonal metafunction deals with the relationship between the newspaper and the readers e.g., what impact do the images create? Close-up photos of victims to create empathy or high-angle photos of burnt houses to create sense of detachment? Textual metafunction deals with the layout of the report e.g., how do the headline relate to the text of the news stories, the lead and the structure? What is the placement of the story on the page? This paper intends to address the following questions:

1. How do Nigerian newspapers represent the actors in the images of insecurity reports?
2. How do Nigerian newspapers visually frame insecurity in North-Western Nigeria?
3. What role does Cyberculture play in amplifying insecurity narratives in North-Western Nigeria?

## **Literature Review**

### **Insecurity in North-Western Nigeria**

Some scholars are of the views that insecurity in North-Western Nigeria is characterised by banditry, cattle rustling and mass abductions

which have evolved from local communal clashes into the more sophisticated criminal acts existing today; Ojewale (2024) and Bello et al (2025). Banditry, as seen in North-Western Nigeria today, is not ideological, in the way Boko Haram is seen; but it is driven by the struggle for land and other economic factors. Several scholars; Gaye (2018), Olaniyan and Yahaya (2016), Suleiman (2017) and Mustapha (2019), have advanced several factors for the cause and spread of banditry. These factors according to Olapeju and Peter (2022):

range from the fragility of Nigerian state, weak state institutions, especially the security agencies, availability of grossly ungoverned spaces, porosity of Nigeria's borders with its neighbouring countries and arms proliferation, weak leadership, corruption, unemployment, and mass poverty. Furthermore, despite the federal framework adopted by Nigeria's forefathers, Nigeria's security architecture since the incursion of the military in Nigeria's politics is contrived in such a manner that the control of every security outfit is placed in the hands of the President at the centre.

*These security challenges have devastating effects on Nigeria as a nation, thereby becoming issues of utmost concerns to all Nigerians. The mass media, particularly the print media, must deal with these various security issues. The images of victims who daily suffer from the ruthless and inhuman attacks from bandits, insurgents, kidnappers, gunmen and other criminals, are all over the pages of the newspapers. In most of the Nigerian newspapers, the language use (both verbal and visual), portray a country at war with and within itself. Security challenges facing Nigeria in recent times are, therefore, central to any public discourse especially as these challenges have tremendous effects on all facets of the national life.*

The focus of this study is the newspaper reports especially on security issues in North West of Nigeria, and the selected Nigerian newspaper The Daily Trust is to be examined with the view to analysing

its reports on the security challenges focusing on Nigeria, using the social semiotic analysis, which is a theoretical framework that can be used to analyse media discourse by examining how language and other semiotic resources are used to create meanings. The security challenges to focus on include banditry and kidnapping and all their related negative effects as reported by The Daily Trust.

### **The Era of Cyberculture and Re-semiotization of News**

The era of cyberculture, broadly speaking, refers to the cultural shift that emanated from the digital technology and the internet, which in turn, reshape how people think, communicate, create and form communities. It can also be defined as the social, artistic, philosophical, and political culture that emerged from computer networks, digital media, and cyberspace. According to Vicente & Amaral (2020:1): “cyberculture is an umbrella term for the emergent and evolving forms of engagement with the internet, the World Wide Web, and the vast array of virtual environments, digital networks, devices, interfaces, formats and software known as cyberspace.” Cyberculture entails the social, cultural, and technological phenomenon that cut across most disciplines. So, cyberculture can be seen as a culture of living inside man’s created systems, systems which shape man’s life.

### **Methodology**

The main linguistic approach used for analysis in this study is multimodality, with particular emphasis on social semiotics as established in Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). The framework spells out the basic tools for the analysis of both text and images. Only images of the selected news stories are analysed based on the following theoretical framework:

The following are steps for the analysis of image or visual data:

- Contextual Metadata (pre-analysis)
  1. Medium
  2. Date
  3. Location

4. Discursive context
- Representational Meaning (what is being depicted in the image)
  1. Participants (who is depicted? - individuals, groups, institutions, victims, suspects, officials, humanized or objectified?)
  2. Processes:
    - (a) Narrative processes - action-based (such as arrest, movement or interaction; gaze - vectors (such as gaze, gesture, direction)
    - (b) Conceptual processes (state-based) such as classification, analytically and symbolic
    - (c) Other issues to raise include analytical (what happened, identity construction), attributes and symbolism (clothing, objects, visual markers).
- Interactive Meaning (how does the image relate to viewer?)
  1. Contacted Contact (gaze) - demand (Direct gaze) vs Offer (no gaze)
  2. Social distance (Framing) - close-up, medium, long shot
  3. Attitude (Angle) - vertical angle (power), Horizontal angle (involvement), Modality (reality effect) -high vs low modality.
- Compositional Meaning (how meaning is organized)
  1. Information Value - Left = Given/Right = New, Top = Ideal/Bottom = Real, Centre = Core importance.
  2. Salience (what draws attention) - Size, Colour contrast, Position, Focus
  3. Framing - are elements connected or separated? Do they form a unit or distinct categories?
  4. Visual hierarchy - what is first, second, third?

- Other Multimodal Features to analyse include – text-image relation, Headline analysis, captioning and labelling, power relations, discursive construction, and ethical dimensions.

The data is selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability technique. The newspapers selected for analysis are the Daily Trust and the Guardian newspapers. The news stories and the news images to be analysed are covered by both papers:

1. **The Kuriga abduction of school children March, 2024**
2. **Federal university Gusau abduction of students November, 2023**

This paper essentially concentrates on the visual data, which include the headlines and the images used by the selected newspapers in their reports due to time, and space limitation. The news images selected for analysis are as follows:

**News Image 1: Kuriga Abduction of School Children: HEADLINE: Nigeria sends troops to rescue more than 250 kidnapped schoolchildren Guardian 08032024**

**(a) Source Context:**

- **Medium:** The Guardian Newspaper, Nigeria
- **Date:** 08 March 2023
- **Location:** Kaduna State

**(b) Discourse Context**

- **Discourse Being activated:** Mass Abduction of School Children
- **Possible frame:** Insecurity – fear, authority, criminality in Northwestern Nigeria

Figure 1 Military Base at Kuriga School



**(c) Representational Meaning (Who is depicted)**

The image 1 above shows Nigerian Army Vehicles outside Kuriga School and it has the following representational meaning:

- State response to the crisis.
- Militarisation (military takes charge to secure the vicinity)
- Crisis management (a kind of base or centre of command)
- Institutional intervention.

There is however, no sign of any rescued victim and this may indicate delayed response or institutional inefficiency. Expectations are may be very high.

**(d) Interactive Meaning**

The long-shot distance of the image creates emotional detachment with the viewer who is now placed as observer, instead of participant.

### (e) Compositional Meaning

Military vehicles dominate the foreground to suggest visual representation of authority. Information Value of the image shows the centre of the image are the military vehicles and the buildings of the Kuriga school which is empty as the children are yet to be rescued.

#### i. Source Context:

(a) **Medium:** The Daily Trust Newspaper, Nigeria

(b) **Date:** 08 March 2023

(c) **Location:** Kaduna State

#### ii. Discourse Context

(a) **Discourse Being activated:** Mass Abduction of School Children

(b) **Possible frame:** Insecurity – fear, authority, criminality in Northwestern Nigeria

#### iii. Representational Meaning (who is depicted)

This image is particularly important because it marks the introduction of different semiotic resource in the security narrative.

*Figure 2 Governor Uba Sani of Kaduna*



## (a) Participants

The image above depicts a political or a public figure (Governor of Kaduna State), speaking into a microphone, apparently at a public media-oriented event related to “the Kuriga School abduction”. He is presented as:

- Authoritative
- Legally empowered to address listener at the event.
- Leading a crisis communication situation

He wears traditional attire bearing ruling party’s dress code and a cap to showcase northern Nigerian cultural identity and elite authority.

The blurred background figures provide contextual support to make the political figure more prominent representational icon.

iv. Interactive Meaning (Relationship between image and viewer)

- Gaze: the participant does not directly gaze at viewers (this creates “Offer Image”) and according to Kress and van Leeuwen, the viewer is positioned as observer, listener or witness to official communication. So, the absence of direct gaze reduces confrontation while encouraging informational engagement.
- Social Distance: this close-up shot creates moderate intimacy and the viewer is brought close enough to recognise facial expression, perceive seriousness and sense emotional commitment, thereby trying to bring about trust between the governor and the audience.
- Angle: image is taken at eye level to suggest equality, realism and accessibility to imply democratic accessibility and public accountability.
- Modality: the image has high visual modality, it has realistic colour saturation, photographic clarity, natural lighting

with recognisable social setting, which add to the credibility of the image.

- v. Compositional Meaning (how meaning is visually organised)
  - (a) Salience: appearance of the governor is highly salient – central positioning, brighter clothing, facial visibility, microphone placement and sharp focus.
  - (b) Information value – the participant occupies the centre of the frame and this, according to Kress and van Leeuwen, signifies nucleus of information, symbolic importance and thematic centrality.
  - (c) Colour symbolism – white, green, yellow, and blue suggest political party of the governor.
  - (d) This image performs an ideological function within the newspaper narrative as it introduces governance, reassurance and institutional response.
- **Source Context:**
  - (a) **Medium:** The Guardian Newspaper, Nigeria
  - (b) **Date:** 22 September 2023
  - (c) **Location:** Kaduna State
- **Discourse Context**
  - (a) **Discourse Being activated:** Mass Abduction of School Children
  - (b) **Possible frame:** Insecurity – fear, authority, criminality in Northwestern Nigeria
- Representational Meaning (who is being depicted?)

Figure 3 Bandits. Picture by Daily Trust



Figure 4 Terrorists



1. In both images (fig 3 & 4), the participants presented are as they are presumed abductors, militarized, organized, powerful, and anonymous.
2. The masks hide their individuality to present them as group with collective criminal identity

3. Ammunition belts (fig 4) and guns (fig 3) signify violence, preparedness and power to unleash violence and heightens the discourse of danger.
  4. The mixture of traditional and military camouflage reflects hybrid criminal identities commonly found in cyber-mediated insecurity narratives.
  5. In fig 4, there is a formation arrangement which makes them look more of paramilitary organisation, but those in fig 3 look more random, disorganise and out of control.
  6. Fig 3 is captioned “picture by Daily Trust”, while fig 4 is captioned “Terrorists”, all these may mean that the images are only used to give certain “context” to the report but not represent the actual perpetrators of Kuriga abduction.
  7. Images are now recontextualized through social media and they digitally transferred across media outlets.
- Interactive Meaning (viewer – image relationship)
    - (a) The frontal positioning creates a confrontational relationship with viewers.
    - (b) The close social distance implies fear and immediacy.
    - (c) The eye-level angle suggests real and direct danger.
    - (d) The use of the images sensationalizes the reports as images like that create sensational fear among the viewers.
  - Compositional Meaning (how meaning is visually organised)
    - (a) The central placement of the masked figures in the two images gives high salience to terror and violence in anonymity.
    - (b) Weapons and ammunition symbolize semiotic resources with violent undertone.
    - (c) The camouflage, black masks and dusty background imply insecurity and ongoing conflict.

## Rescue The Zamfara School Girls

### (a) Source Context:

(d) **Medium:** The Daily Trust Newspaper, Nigeria

- **Date:** 03 October 2023
- **Location:** Zamfara State

### (b) Discourse Context

(a) **Discourse Being activated:** Mass Abduction of students

(b) **Possible frame:** Insecurity – criminality, insecurity and uncertainty

*Figure 5* FUG Gates



The gates of the university are now used as symbol and presence of the institution. The gates look deserted and empty. This is clear especially the main title of the story is, “Rescue the Zamfara School Girls”, the school in difficult period waiting for the rescue of their girls. The Daily Trust uses the image of the entrance to the university to tell the story. The abducted (24) students, mostly females, were abducted from off-campus rented houses. This picture is used severally by the paper to represent the authority of the university.

## Findings

The study employs Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) theoretical framework for the analysis of news images. This framework specifies three major aspects for the analysis:

- Representational Meaning
  - Interactive Meaning
  - Compositional Meaning
- (a) One major finding has revealed that both Daily Trust and the Guardian represent insecurity through militarized visual resources. The repeated foregrounding of weapons and military resources transform insecurity into militarized social reality,
  - (b) Through representational processes the abductors are visually framed as organised paramilitary actors and not as isolated criminals. The masked faces and the collective arrangement semiotically removed their individuality to construct collective criminal identity.
  - (c) The interactive resources (such as frontal angles, medium-close shots, eye-level perspective and direct gaze) establish psychological proximity between viewers and insecurity events. So, viewers are no longer only observers, some involved.
  - (d) Through salience, framing and central placement, the newspapers visually prioritized violence over victims or social context.
  - (e) The study has revealed that digital newspaper platforms circulate insecurity images not merely as documentary evidence but as cyber-mediated symbolic resources. And repeated use of armed-bandits images suggests that cyberculture encourages:
    1. Image recycling
    2. Rapid visual circulation
    3. Emotional sensationalism

The finding therefore, indicate that cyberculture depends less on original context, and more on circulation and recognizability. This study found that cyberculture facilitates the

transformation of insecurity images into recurring symbolic icons of fear and violence within Nigerian digital journalism.

- (f) The visual representations, from the datasets shows the construction of North-Western Nigeria as unstable, militarized, vulnerable and perpetually threatened, and the context of geographical semiotic framing contributes to national anxiety, regional stereotyping, and discursive construction of Northern insecurity identity.

## **Discussion**

From the findings of this study, it is clear that newspaper images are not neutral representations, rather, they are multimodal choices such as camera angles, framing, colour contrast, social distance, salience, and gaze function ideologically to influence public interpretation of insecurity. It is also evident that meaning is socially constructed through multimodal semiotic choices rather than naturally inherent in images.

## **Conclusion**

Nigerian newspapers use multimodal visual resources not only to report insecurity events, but also to construct ideological narratives of fear, authority, crisis, and accountability. This study has shown that newspaper reporting of insecurity in Northwestern Nigeria is undergoing great changes under the influence of cyberculture. Through the lens of social semiotics, we see how multimodal resources are employed and deployed in meaning making to shape public perception.

## **Recommendations**

This paper recommends that:

- Newspapers should adopt ethical multimodal reporting practices with contextual accuracy, visual verification, and responsible representation in reporting insecurity.
- Digital news platforms should strengthen visual fact-checking processes to ensure that insecurity images accurately correspond with reported events and location.
- There should be moderate repeated use and display violent related resources, scenes, and militarized visuals within cyber-mediated journalism.
- Newspapers should incorporate more human-Centred visual narratives that foregrounds victim and community experiences rather than paying attention to violent actors.
- Researchers should further explore cyberculture and visual insecurity discourse through comparative studies across regions, audience perception, insecurity discourse across social media platforms and AI generated conflict imagery.

## References

- Baldry, A. & Thibault, P. (2005), *Multimodal Transcription and Text Analysis*, London, Equinox.
- Bednarek, M. (2006), *Evaluation in Media Discourse: Analysis of a Newspaper Corpus*. London/New York: Continuum.
- Bednarek, M., and Caple, H. (2010). 'Playing with environmental stories in the news: Good or bad practice?' *Discourse & Communication* 4(1): 5-31.
- Bednarek, M., and Caple, H. (2012a). *News Discourse*. London/New York: Continuum
- Halliday, M. (1978), *Language as a Social Semiotic*. London, Edward Arnold.
- Jose van Dijk & Thomas Poel & Martijn De Waal. (2023) *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*
- Kress, G and van Leeuwen, T (1996), *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London, Routledge.

- Kress, G. (2009), *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to communication*. London, Routledge Palmer.
- Kress, G & van Leeuwen, T. (1998), *Front Page: the Critical Analysis of Newspaper Layout*, in *Approaches to Media Discourse*, Allan Bell & Peter Garrett, Blackwell Publishing Company.
- Kress, G. R. (1993). Against arbitrariness: The social production of the sign as a foundational issue in critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society* 4, 169–191. Kress, G. R. (1997). *Before Writing: Rethinking the Paths to Literacy*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Kress, G, & van Leeuwen, T. (2001) *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*, London Arnold.
- Liu Y. and O'Halloran, K. L. (2009), *Intersemiotic Texture: Analysing Cohesive Devices between Language and Images*
- Mavers, D. (2009). Student text-making as semiotic work. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 9, 141–155.
- Oluwole, Ojewale (2024) *Shadow of death: the criminal economy of banditry and kidnapping in northwest Nigeria*, *Security Journal*, vol37;4, pages 1680-1710, 2024/12, Palgrave Macmillan UK
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2005), *Introducing Social Semiotics*, London, Routledge.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Jewitt, C. (Ed.). (2010). *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*. London: Routledge.
- .