

Identity Erasure Strategies in Selected Fetish-Cybercrime Related Press Releases by the Nigeria Police Force

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Abstract

Previous studies have examined erasure primarily within media, political, and institutional discourse, highlighting how linguistic choices regulate the visibility of social actors. However, limited attention has been given to how identity erasure operates within Nigeria Police Force (NPF) fetish-cybercrime-related press releases, this study explores identity erasure strategies employed in NPF's press releases on fetish related cybercrimes, with the objectives of identifying the forms of identity erasure, the strategies used in NPF texts to realise the forms of identity erasure and to explain the functions of identity erasure in NPF press releases using Fairclough's (1995) triadic model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Representation Model for the analysis. The study employs a qualitative, descriptive method of data analysis, using 27 extracts purposively selected from the NPF website, the Punch Newspaper, and other reputable media outlets for the analysis. Findings revealed that in NPF reportage, identity erasure is systematically achieved through strategies such as passivisation, nominalisation, genericization, objectivation and collectivisation. These strategies contribute to the abstraction of agency, depersonalisation of violence, and reinforcement of institutional authority, thereby shaping public perception of fetish-cybercrimes as procedural matter, reducing human experiences. The study concludes that identity erasure in NPF press releases is not incidental, but a discursive practice embedded in institutional communication. The study recommends that law enforcement communication should adopt a more ethically responsible reporting practices that acknowledge human identities while maintaining procedural clarity.

Key words: Identity Erasure, Cybercrime, Fetishism, Press releases

Introduction

In the evolving scourge of digital criminality in Nigeria, cybercrime has assumed an intricate cultural dimension through its intersection with fetishism; a term popularly referred to as "yahoo plus". This term describes a category of internet fraudsters who combine ritual practices with online scams to ensure success, protection, or indistinctive. These practices are steeped in Nigeria's traditional belief systems and are often dramatized in media and institutional discourse as moral transgressions and spiritual perversions. The Nigeria Police Force (hereafter refer to as NPF) in its role as a law enforcement body, plays pivotal role in shaping public knowledge, perception, and understanding of these fetish-cybercrime narratives through its official press releases. These texts serve as tools for information dissemination, and as a strategic instrument of moral communication and institutional self-representation.

Existing scholarship has examined how the NPF construct the identities of offenders, and victims through linguistic strategies that dramatizes deviance and reinforce moral order (Fairclough, 1995; Adebani, 2005; Obadare and Olorunfemi, 2021; Odok and Okpeh, 2025), less

attention has been given to the inverse process of erasure or silencing of identity within the same institutional discourse. The selective omission or depersonalisation of particular social actors like victims of fetish-cybercrimes, communities, or the NPF themselves as a communicative strategy is identity erasure. This constitutes a crucial aspect of how power and ideologies are reproduced through official language, yet underexplored. Such erasures are not as a result of the absence of information, but are patterned discursively structured silence that serves institutional functions. They determine what is seen and unseen, what is said and unsaid within the official framing of crime and morality.

The phenomenon of identity erasure simply refers to the systematic exclusion, suppression, or backgrounding of social actors within discourse (van Leeuwen, 2008). In institutional communication, these erasures often function as mechanisms of control, allowing dominant institutions to regulate visibility, accountability and moral interpretation of NPF's communication or narratives. Within the context of NPF's communication, identity erasure may operate subtly through syntactic and lexical choices that obscures agencies, human presence or social context. This study recognises that such omissions are not merely grammatical conventions, but ideological acts that reflect and reinforce institutional authority.

This study employs Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, complemented by van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Representation Model to interrogate how identity erasure functions within NPF's press releases on fetish-cybercrimes. Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model provides an integrated lens for examining how textual forms relate to institutional practices and wider social ideologies. Van Leeuwen's (2008) model offers a typology for identifying forms of inclusion, exclusion, deletion and backgrounding in institutional discourse.

The NPF press release as a genre, occupies a hybrid communicative space between law enforcement and media representation. It is informative and performative. NPF construct narratives that delineate boundaries between legality and deviance, order and chaos, morality and immorality. However, in the construction of their narratives, certain voices and identities are strategically muted or erased. The humanity of victims of fetish-cybercrimes (FC) is often diminished while the individuality of offenders is subsumed under collective criminal identities (Odok and Okpeh, 2025).

This study therefore, investigates identity erasure strategies employed in NPF's press releases on fetish-cybercrimes (FC) in Nigeria. The objectives of this study are to: identify the forms of identity erasure employed in NPF's press releases on fetish-cybercrimes in Nigeria; examine the erasure strategies used in the selected NPF press releases to realise the forms of identity erasure; and explain the functions of these forms and erasure strategies within the press releases.

Review of Relevant Literature

This section examines key concepts such as identity, identity construction, identity erasure, institutional communication, fetishism and cybercrimes, while also reviewing empirical studies relevant to this study. One of the fundamental insights of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is that language is not a neutral vehicle for describing social reality, but a constitutive force that shapes who is made visible, who is marginalised, and how identities are socially constructed (Fairclough,

2015). As Fairclough (2015) observes, “identities are discursively constructed in texts and talk, and these constructions are tied to wider social and power relations” (p.21). this insight underpins the analysis of identity erasure in media, gender and institutional discourse such as police press releases, where omission or transformation of social actors can reflect and reinforce power structures.

Erasure as a concept has evolved as a critical category in discourse and social theory, describing the processes through which certain realities, actors, or identities are rendered invisible within a communicative practice. Broadly defined, erasure refers to the discursive omission, suppression, or backgrounding of information or participants in a text, resulting in their diminished presence or totally deleted from public consciousness (van Leeuwen, 2008). In discourse analysis, erasure is not perceived as a passive gap or oversight but as a strategic act of meaning-making, deeply implicated in the reproduction of power and ideology. Scholars have defined erasure in various, yet converging ways. Stibbe (2021) conceptualises erasure as a form of discursive deletion whereby people, species, or aspects of reality are removed from texts and conversation, thereby shaping what societies consider thinkable or visible. Stibbe distinguished three types of erasure: the void, where an entity is completely missing from the discourse; the trace, where it appears fleetingly or marginally; and the mask, where it is distorted or re-represented to fit dominant ideologies. Through these modes, language reflect and actively structures social visibility. Stibbe highlights the fact that erasure is not simply about silence, but about the management of presence and absence in communication. Stibbe’s position aligns with the study of identity erasure in NPF’s selected press releases.

Tannen (2008), Jaworski and Thurlow (2017) emphasise that silence is a semiotic resource that functions in institutional discourse as a form of control. By deciding what to withhold, institutions guide interpretation and protect their image. This image protection is peculiar to NPF in their report on fetish-cybercrimes in Nigeria. Thus, erasure and silence work hand-in-hand as strategies used for institutional communication that produce meaning by regulating visibility and directing attention of the public to its preferred area of focus.

It is then obvious that erasure is not merely an oversight, it is a discursive strategy of control and power. It enables institutions like the NPF to curate perception by privileging certain representations while concealing others. Within the context of law enforcement, such erasures can obscure the humanity of victims, the complexities of offenders, or the complicity of the institution itself. This study aligns with Stibbe (2021) and van Leeuwen (2008) in viewing erasure as a structured linguistic process, but extends their insights into the domain of Nigerian institutional discourse. The researcher argues that erasure in the selected NPF’s press releases is an intentional communicative strategy through which NPF manages moral authority and sustains legitimacy.

Lugg and Tooms (2010) frames identity erasure as a discursive practice, aligning with Fairclough’s (1995) view that language reproduces social ideologies. The study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry, drawing on the lived experiences of queer school leaders in the United State. Through interviews, they examined how participants articulate their experiences of concealment, surveillance, and negotiation of identity within institutional settings. The study revealed four interrelated themes: Normative professionalism and Dress code (that implies that queer leaders are expected to conform to gender norms of professional appearance and conduct); Silence and Survival (a situation where disclosure often threatens career advancement and

legitimacy); Negotiating “fit” and Authenticity (participants continuously navigate between authenticity and institutional acceptance, managing visibility to preserve authority); and Possibility of Resistance (where some leaders attempt to subtly challenge heteronormative expectations, though such resistance is often limited by institutional constraints).

The study offers insight into the exploration of identity management and institutional conformity, contributing meaningfully to leadership studies and queer scholarship. Its strength lies in exposing how institutional discourse constructs and discipline’s identity through everyday professional norms. The metaphor of the “shadow” is evocative, capturing the subtlety of institutional oppression. However, the study has methodological limitations. Lugg and Tooms’ concept of identity erasure is profoundly relevant to the study of identity erasure in selected press release on fetish-cybercrimes in Nigeria, albeit within different institutional domain, both contexts involve institutions that perform identity to sustain legitimacy.

Similarly, Neale’s (2023) study examines identity erasure as a fundamental outcome of domestic violence and abuse (DVA). Anchored on Goffman’s (1961) concept of mortification of self. The article conceptualises the abusive home as a total institution where women’s identities are systematically dismantled through isolation, coercion, and control. The study aims to understand how domestic abuse functions as a process of identity degradation and to expose mechanisms by which perpetrators suppress women’s autonomy, individuality, and agency. Using a qualitative approach, Neale conducted semi-structured narrative interview with fourteen women who had survived abuse from male partners. The study revealed that abusive relationships mirror institutional systems of domination, where control, surveillance, and emotional confinement are central to sustaining the abuse. The environment under the abuser’s control serves as an institution that deprives women of their freedom, and self-definition. Survivors reported feeling like “shadows” of their former selves even after leaving the abusive partners, reflecting the enduring psychological impact of identity erasure.

The article reframes domestic abuse as a symbolic violence that extends beyond physical harm to encompass linguistic and psychological domination. It offers theoretical link between identity, control, and institutional power. Neale’s conceptualisation of identity erasure is highly relevant to NPF’s identity erasure in fetish-cybercrimes in Nigeria. It illuminates how institutional discourse like domestic control can erase or reconstruct identities to preserve authority. Insights from this article can serve as a lens to uncover symbolic identity reconstruction in NPF communication on fetish-cybercrimes in Nigeria.

These studies suggests that identity erasure is both linguistic phenomenon and a social process embedded in power relation. Although their focus is different from the current study, but directly relevant to the analysis of Nigerian Police press releases on fetish-cybercrimes, where victims and perpetrators may be linguistically suppressed or reduced to abstract categories.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts van Lewen’s (2008) social actor representation model as its main analytical framework for examining identity erasure in selected NPF’s press releases on fetish-cybercrimes in Nigeria, complemented by Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (CDA).

Van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor representation model provides a systematic framework for examining how discourse constructs, includes, or excludes social actors to reproduce ideologies and power relations. Central to this model is the principle of inclusion and exclusion, where certain participants are either made visible or omitted through linguistic strategies such as suppression and backgrounding, thereby determining whose identities are foregrounded or erased in discourse. The model also emphasises role allocation, distinguishing between active and passive representations of actors to reveal how agency and responsibility are distributed. Through nomination and categorisation, actors are identified by name, title, or social label, allowing discourse to either personalise individuals or stereotype groups. Also, functionalisation and identification show how actors are represented in terms of what they do or who they are, linking professional or social roles to identity construction. Overall, the model exposes how discourse can legitimise authority, silence others, and shape public perception, making it highly relevant to the understanding of identity erasure in NPF press releases on fetish-cybercrimes in Nigeria.

While, Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of CDA examines how language reflects and shapes power and ideology. It operates on three level: the textual (vocabulary and grammar); discursive practice (production and circulation of texts); and social practice (broader cultural and context). This highlights discourse perspectives that are not neutral, showing strategies employed in institutional narratives and how these narratives construct, marginalise, or erase identities in their communications.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design using van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor representation model with Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as framework for interpreting institutional discourse within Nigeria's socio-cultural context. The data consist of official press releases issued by NPF between 2018 and 2025 that reports fetish-cybercrimes. Press releases were accessed from NPF's websites and verified news portals. The selection criteria include: explicit reference to ritual/fetish crimes or cybercriminal activities; complete textual availability to allow detailed linguistic and discursive analysis; and coverage across multiple Nigerian states to capture diverse socio-cultural representations.

The analytical procedure involves systematically identifying the forms of identity erasure, the strategies used and their functions, in line with the stated objectives. The researcher also examined how suspects, victims, communities and the police institution are linguistically represented or erased. The textual level (lexical choices, grammatical structures, and transitivity patterns) that contributes to erasure is examined using Fairclough's (1995) triadic model of CDA for its analysis and van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Representation Model.

The press releases were manually coded for the preponderant erasure forms and strategy, segmented sentence by sentence. Lexical items, syntactic structures and transitivity patterns were analysed to identify social actors and the strategies employed to erase them. Discourse patterns were also interpreted in order to link textual choices to institutional identity representation across fetish-cybercrimes in NPF press releases. Findings were presented thematically, highlighting recurrent identity erasure strategies and their implications. The study employed publicly available documents, ensuring that no private or sensitive data was compromised.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The analysis is presented in three sections with strict adherence to the set objectives. The first section deals with the identification of forms of identity erasure in the selected NPF's press releases on fetish-cybercrimes, the second is the description of how identity erasure is linguistically achieved through erasure strategies and lastly, the explanation of the functions of identity erasure and the possible impact and implication on public knowledge. These are presented in three tables below:

1. Forms of Identity Erasure Identified in NPF's PR

Interaction with the data reveals several recurring forms of identity erasure employed in the representation of victims, suspects, and institutional actors in Nigeria Police press releases on ritual-related crimes. These forms of erasures are systematically captured below through the lenses of van Leeuwen social actor representational theory and Fairclough's triadic model of critical discourse analysis (CDA)

Table: Identified Forms of Identity Erasure

S/N	Extract	Forms of Identity Erasure	Linguistic Strategies
1.	"Human Parts were recovered from the shrine during the operation"	Exclusion; suppression (deletion)	Passivisation
2.	"Several exhibits were recovered during the raid"	Exclusion; suppression (total deletion)	Passivisation; Agent deletion; objectivization
3.	"The body was discovered in the bush"	Exclusion; suppression	Passivisation; nominalisation; objectivation
4.	"The deceased was killed for money ritual"	Exclusion; suppression (partial deletion)	Agent deletion; abstraction
5.	"Upon investigation it was discovered that her head and palms were removed"	Exclusion; fragmentation and suppression	Passivisation; objectivation
6.	"Items recovered include ritual materials"	Materialisation	Nominalisation; objectivation
7.	"The shrine contained several ritual items"	Obscurity	Abstraction
8.	"The victim was invited on a date and has not been seen since"	Exclusion; backgrounding (partial deletion)	Abstraction
9.	"Her phone number was tracked and the result let to the arrest"	Obscurity	Abstraction; nominalisation
10.	"A 20-year-old man, Moses Oko, has been arrested by the police for	Inclusion (selection)	Nomination; Selective visibility

	allegedly killing a 300-level student of the University of Jos, for ritual purposes”		
11.	“...ten female handbags, two 25 litres of Gallon containing human meats, one axe, and two cement sacks containing human bones were recovered from the shrine...”	Materialisation, suppression, objectivation	Passivisation; lexical reduction
12.	“The suspect confessed to engaging in cyberfraud and ritual practices”	Genericization	Passivisation Categorisation
13.	“The Lagos state police command has arrested a gang of suspected ritualists”.	Activation	Collectivisation
14.	“The suspects were apprehended during a surveillance operation”.	Suppression of agency	Nominalisation; passivisation
15.	“Gory sights of what had the semblance of mutilated human bodies were spotted inside the well”.	Suppression; Objectivation	Sensational abstraction
16.	“It is the knife I used to remove parts of her body...eyes, tongue, lungs, intestine and some parts of her buttocks”.	Exclusion through fragmentation	Objectivation
17.	“He used a black and white cotton to wrap the calabash”	Agency obscurity	Abstraction
18.	“The native doctor who resides in Ibadan sent a driver and brought a calabash and a knife”.	Backgrounding	Indirect activation
19.	“The Ogun State Police Command has arrested an Islamic cleric for allegedly attempting to use a 15-years-old -girl for rituals”	Selective inclusion	Indirect activation
20	“...and removed what the native doctor told me to remove”.	Total Suppression (victim agency deletion)	Abstraction
21.	“The relative of the deceased later came to the police station and identified one of the ten bags that was recovered as the hand bag of the deceased”	Total suppression	Abstraction; nominalisation

22.	"20-year-old narrates how he killed Kogi varsity student for money ritual"	Re-personalization	Activation
23.	"...the remains of three unidentified bodies were removed..."	Exclusion through total suppression of agency	Objectivation; passivation
24.	"...suspect further confessed that on Aug. 7,"	Exclusion through suppression	Ellipsis
25	"...victim's fresh flesh was recovered"	Partial suppression	Objectivation; lexical reduction
26	"...confessed that they bought different types of human parts for money ritual from the 40-year-old suspect,"	Exclusion through agency suppression	Materialisation; commodification
27	"Domestic worker cuts off woman's genitals for money rituals in Anambra" 5th March 2023	Partial inclusion	Activation

The table revealed that identity erasure is a consistent, patterned representational feature across the selected NPF press releases on fetish-cybercrimes (FC). A close examination of the extracts presented showed the recurrent presence of exclusion through suppression, where social actors are omitted (partial or total); backgrounding, in which relevant actors are displaced from central clause positions; objectivation and fragmentation of victims, where persons are reduced to body parts or material evidence; abstraction of agency through passive constructions and nominalisations; and genericization and collectivisation of offenders through undifferentiated labels such as suspects, ritualists, or members of a syndicate. The distribution of these forms across the dataset indicates that identity erasure operates systematically but not incidentally. These patterns therefore fulfil the first objective of the study, which set out to identify the forms of identity erasure employed in selected NPF press releases on fetish-cybercrimes (FC).

2. Identity Erasure Strategies

Having identified the forms of identity erasure, this section addresses the linguistic strategies through which these erasures were constructed. Through the lens of van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Representation model and Fairclough's (1995) triadic model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study examined how identity erasure is realised through patterned grammatical and lexical choices.

Suppression of Agency through Passivisation:

A preponderant form of identity erasure in the data is the suppression of social actors through passive constructions, particularly in descriptions of crime scenes and police operations. This pattern is evident in the following excerpts:

- Extract 1: “Human Parts were recovered from the shrine during the operation”
2: “Several exhibits were recovered during the raid”
3: “The body was discovered in the bush”

These clauses employ passive verb constructions whereby the subjects are affected entities (human parts, the body). This reflects suppression, as the agents responsible for recovery or discovery are omitted from representation. The textual practice indicates a shift from agency to action performed, presenting the occurrences as institutional process, suppressing identifiable individual identities. This strategy erases identity by removing both perpetrators and institutional actors from discursive visibility, thereby depersonalising violent events.

Nominalisation and Bureaucratic Abstraction:

One of the strategies through which identity erasure is realised is nominalisation, working alongside with bureaucratic abstraction. Extracts presented below foregrounds this strategy:

- Extract 4: “the deceased was killed for money rituals”
Extract 9: “her phone number was tracked and the result led to arrest”
Extract 14: “suspects were apprehended during a surveillance operation”

By using passive voice, the killer was completely absent, deleted, shifting the focus entirely to the victim and the purpose for the killing. The victim was only referred to as “the deceased, reducing their identity again to their status or role after the crime.

Extract 9 intensifies this abstraction through the phrase “her phone number” which becomes the subject of the tracking, reducing agency and human element from the surveillance. The identity of the actors doing the tracking were suppressed or backgrounded making it appear as though the tracking device operate itself. This erasure strategy, functions to legitimise state authority through linguistic choices like “tracking” and “arrest”.

While in extract 14, the actors were pre-defined by their relationship with the law before a trial takes place. The use of lexeme “suspects” anonymised the actors, stripping them of agency while the choice of “surveillance operation” provides a justification for the “arrest” which is an institutional function. The state (NPF) is backgrounded while the passive construction focused on the operation. Nominalisation and bureaucratic abstraction work together to erase identity by replacing people with institutional categories as well as turning violent processes into technical procedures. Human suffering is linguistically displaced by evidential terminologies that allow the discourse to maintain and appear of neutral while minimising the social and emotional realities of the crimes.

Indirect Activation

Indirect activation occurs when a social actor influences, authorises, or initiates an action but is not grammatically realised as the doer of that action. The actor is activated through mediation, not direct material processes.

Excerpt 19: “The Ogun State Police Command has arrested an Islamic cleric for allegedly attempting to use a 15-years-old -girl for rituals”.

Within the social actor representation framework, the native doctor in Excerpt 19 is indirectly activated through verbal processes rather than material process, resulting in agent backgrounding; viewed through Fairclough’s triadic CDA model, this textual configuration contributes to discursive responsibility shifting and reproduces, at the level of social practice, an ideological pattern in which ritual expertise is insulated from accountability.

Sensational Abstraction

This is realised through the instrumental verb “use” and the culturally evocative but semantically vague phrase “for rituals,” which, from a social actor representation perspective, passivates and objectifies the victim while obscuring the concrete nature of the violence, and, within Fairclough’s triadic CDA model, operates textually by suppressing experiential detail, discursively by inviting a spectacle-oriented interpretation, and socially by reproducing ideological meanings that prioritise moral panic over the victim’s embodied harm.

Extract 15: Gory sights of what had the semblance of mutilated human bodies were spotted inside the well”.

The sentence “*Gory sights of what had the semblance of mutilated human bodies were spotted inside the well*” exemplifies sensational abstraction through its privileging of affective visual imagery over concrete representation of violence. The nominal group “*gory sights*” foregrounds horror as a spectacle, while the epistemic hedge “*what had the semblance of*” introduces uncertainty that distances the description from material reality. Within the social actor representation framework, the victims are impersonalised and passivated as indeterminate “*human bodies*,” stripped of individuality, agency, and social identity, while perpetrators are entirely suppressed. Viewed through Fairclough’s triadic CDA model, these textual choices obscure agency and action, shape discursive interpretation by positioning the reader as a spectator of horror rather than an ethical witness, and reproduce at the level of social practice an ideological pattern in which violence is consumed as sensational imagery rather than addressed as human harm requiring accountability.

Partial Exclusion through Objectivation

Another recurring form of identity erasure is the objectivation and fragmentation of victims, where human beings are reduced to body parts or material evidence. This pattern is evident in excerpts presented below: Why is your numbering not serial? Please make it serial.

Extract 11: “...human meats... were recovered from the shrine”

16: “It is the knife I used to remove parts of her body”

25: “victim’s fresh flesh was recovered”

From excerpts 11, 16 and 25, victims were linguistically reconstituted as physical fragments rather than social persons. Lexical choices such as *meats*, *parts*, and *flesh* strip victims of individuality, biography, and relational identity. This objectivation functions to suppress empathy and foreground sensational materiality while fragmentation erases biography, relational ties, and social presence, leaving only corporeal residue visible in the discourse.

At the textual level, objectivation is reinforced through nominalisation and material nouns, which convert lived bodies into countable items within an evidential inventory. The syntactic framing often aligns these body parts with inanimate objects (*handbags*, *gallons*, *axe*, *cement sacks*), collapsing the semantic boundary between human life and material property. This grammatical equivalence intensifies dehumanisation by positioning victims within the same classificatory space as tools and containers.

Fragmentation also performs an important narrative function within fetish-cybercrime discourse. By isolating specific organs (*eyes*, *tongue*, *lungs*, *buttocks*), the texts foreground ritual utility rather than human suffering. Body parts are implicitly framed as resources mobilised for ritual efficacy, aligning with commodification evident elsewhere in the data. This shifts attention away from victimhood and toward the process of ritual practice, thereby normalising extreme bodily violence as an instrumental progression.

The fact that objectivation is recurrent across multiple excerpts demonstrates that it is not an accidental stylistic choice but a representational strategy. The consistency with which victims are reduced to material fragments indicates a patterned mode of institutional storytelling in which identity erasure becomes a prerequisite for narrating ritualised violence. Through objectivation, the institution manages the contradiction between reporting extreme brutality and maintaining bureaucratic legitimacy.

Exclusion through Backgrounding (Partial Deletion)

Exclusion through backgrounding is another recurring form of identity erasure identified in the table where social actors are partially included in the discourse but their agency and responsibilities are minimised. This form is evident in excerpts where actors are present only peripherally, with actions narrated in ways that shift focus away from accountability. The pattern can be observed in the following extracts:

Extract 8: “The victim was invited on a date and has not been seen since”

18: “The native doctor who resides in Ibadan sent a driver ...a calabash and a knife”

20: “...and removed what the native doctor told me to remove”

Across these excerpts, social actors are neither fully excluded nor explicitly activated. In extract 8, the action of “*inviting*” is mentioned without identifying the inviter, leaving the event suspended without a responsible agent. The victim’s disappearance is narrated as an outcome detached from human intervention. While in extract 18 and 20, the “*native doctor*” is mentioned, yet his role is mediated through intermediaries (*a driver*, *told me*), resulting in indirect activation that weakens perceived agency.

At the textual level, backgrounding is realised through circumstantial framing and indirect reporting structures that displace responsibility. Discursively, this strategy constructs criminal

processes as long-winded and mediated, rather than coordinated and intentional. The narrative avoids sustained focus on central ritual facilitators, thereby softening the representation of organised ritual involvement. This partial erasure protects institutional coherence and limits engagement with the broader socio-cultural networks that sustain fetish-cybercrimes. The recurrence of this pattern across multiple excerpts confirms backgrounding as a stabilised strategy of identity erasure in NPF press releases.

Abstraction of Agency through Passivisation

The use of strategy of abstraction converts dynamic social actions into static entities, thereby erasing human agency from institutional narratives. In NPF press releases, this strategy contributes to the construction of policing as an impersonal, technical process rather than a series of actions performed by accountable individuals as revealed in excerpts 3 and 4:

Excerpt 3: “The body was discovered in the bush”

Excerpt 16: “It is the knife I used to remove parts of her body... eyes, tongue, lungs intestine and some parts of her buttocks.”

In the extract 3 and 16, the victims were somatised; represented as body parts while abstracting agencies of the victim, the discoverer and the perpetrator. This level of abstraction was used as a strategy to shift the focus from actors to action, highlighting the settings of the discoverer “the bush”, reducing the impact of the crime. But, the speaker in extract 16 used the active pronoun “I” during confession to the crime which also occurred as an abstraction through nominalisation of the form of the victim. In this case, the victim is presented as a collection of parts. The agency is abstracted completely as a crime that was committed against another person, funnelled through an object “the knife” with description of human fragmentation. From the textual level, the clause shifts the context of the discourse from the violence that produced the remains of the victim to institutional procedure of item recovery, thereby reframing brutality as routinised.

Suppression through Genericization

Genericization operates by collapsing individuals into undifferentiated categories, thereby erasing personal, social, and contextual specificity. In NPF press releases, suspects are frequently represented as collective entities, which facilitates moral simplification and institutional authority. This present in excerpts below.

Excerpt 7: “The shrine contained several ritual items”

Excerpt 12: “The suspects confessed to engaging in money ritual activities”

Excerpt 20: “... and removed what the native doctor told me to remove”.

Suppression operates as a distancing (backgrounding) that strips the narrative of moral weight that is replaced with institutional acts and action. By suppressing specific identities (the killers, the victims, the police), the narrative shifted from person consequence/responsibility to mechanical narration. For instance, instead of “John killed Marry”, the sentence was framed as “the suspects

confessed to engaging in money ritual activities”. This constructs a generic role such as “suspects” rather than naming them directly. This is preponderant in NPF communication.

Genericization also performs moral and ideological work. By presenting suspects as interchangeable members of a criminal category, the discourse simplifies complex social phenomena into a clear moral opposition between deviance and lawfulness. The presuppositional force of verbs such as “*confess*” further reinforces guilt and legitimacy of institutional action, even before judicial processes are concluded. This strategy strengthens the authority of the NPF by portraying its targets as already morally settled and socially distant from the public.

3. Functions and Ideological Implications of Identity Erasure

This section focuses on the functions that the identity erasure strategies used by NPF in selected press releases on fetish-cybercrimes (FC) in Nigeria. Within the integrated theoretical orientation, identity erasure is understood as a deliberate style for narrative control, power reproduction, and stabilisation of narrative within institutional discourse. These functions are discussed below:

Regulation of Social Visibility and Naturalising Power:

From the perspective of Social Actor Representation Model, identity erasure functions primarily to control social visibility. It functions as a mechanism for controlling who becomes visible and who remains invisible in NPF reportage. This visibility control is achieved through suppression and genericization where certain actors are rendered invisible, especially victims and in some occasions, perpetrators using passive referent to obscure their identities while the institution remain dominant in the narrative. Such suppressed actors/identities are denied discursive presence and by extension, they are denied social recognition. A typical example is in extract 1, 2, & 3, depicting suppression through passivisation, leaving only material outcome as identification. This textual deletion of agents shift attention away from human responsibility toward institutional process. Its systematically regulate what is to be seen, and how it is to be seen or perceived.

At the level of social practice, the regulation of visibility functions as a way to establish institutional power. The repeated omission of human agent foregrounds institutional processes and outcomes, obscuring agency. This frames law enforcement action as automatic, procedural, and unquestionable. By removing human actors from visibility, the text presents institutional power as neutral and self-evident rather than socially produced actions and outcomes. Consequently, the NPF emerges as an implicit but dominant authority whose actions require no justification because they are discursively constructed as routine outcomes of “operations” rather than human interventions.

Dehumanisation of Victims and the Normalisation of Extreme Violence

Another key function of identity erasure strategies is the dehumanisation of victims which contributes to the normalisation of extreme violence associated with fetish-cybercrime. Dehumanisation is achieved through objectivation, abstraction and lexical reduction as illustrated in excerpts 15,16 and 25. These extracts collectively illustrate how identity erasure functions to dehumanise victims as well as normalise ritual violence. The victims in all three extracts are represented through objectification and fragmentation (van Leeuwen, 2008), where human beings are reduced to physical matter rather than recognised as a social actor.

In extract 15, the phrase “mutilated human bodies” shifts attention away from individual identity toward visual display that sensationalises spectacle. The noun “bodies” removes markers of personal identity such as name, profession, gender, and other social affiliations and relationships while the modifier “mutilated”, defined the victims by the act of violence inflicted on them. Also, from the perspective of CDA, the clause foregrounds perception, turning the victims into objects of observation rather than subject of tragedy.

Extract 16 intensifies this dehumanisation through fragmentation through lexical choices that describes dismembered victims in phrases like “parts of her body”, presenting victim as fragments of the body. The pronoun “her” suggests a female victim, with a head noun “parts” that dominates the representation, shifting focus from identity to physical dismemberment. van Leeuwen (2008) identifies this as a reduction of social actors to bodily fragments, while also foregrounding the instrument of the violence (knife). The representational pattern performs ideological function of normalising such brutality. Such violence in selected NPF reportage is framed as material fact rather than moral crises. By dehumanising victims, the discourse reduces emotional engagement and allows for graphic acts of ritual killing to be institutionalised without disrupting its procedural tone.

Simplification and Categorisation of Offenders

Identity erasure also functions as a tool for simplifying the identity of offenders, turning complex individual behavioural pattern into criminal categories. Extracts 12, 13, and 14 demonstrates how offenders are discursively simplified and categorised in ways that erases their individualities and foregrounds institutional control. Offenders are represented through genericization and functional categorisation, while the textual practice reveals that these choices support institutional authority and streamline public interpretation of fetish-cybercrime (FC). The term “suspects” used in extract 12 function as legal label that replaces the offender’s personal identity with procedural status.

Details of offender is replaced, no mention of name, background, gender and so on, reducing their identity to their roles within the criminal justice process. This type of reduction is used to categorise the offender in a general way, where actors are represented as a class rather than distinct personality. The clause “confessed to the crime” textually presents already established guilt, pre-empting judicial outcome and guiding public opinion towards condemnation of offender. Extract 13 employs categorisation through the use of the noun “ritualist”. This label condenses complex identities into a single morally charged category associated with fetish practices and violence. From social actor representation model, this is viewed as functionalisation and culturalization, where individuals are defined solely by an attributed social practice. Across these extracts, offenders are presented as legal categories, deviant types (Odok and Okpeh, 2025), or as components of criminal groups. This simplification serves an ideological function of identity reduction to remove interpretive ambiguity, strengthens institutional voice and authority, while also positioning law enforcement as the primary agent of order.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study set out to investigate how identity erasure is employed in selected NPF press releases on fetish-cybercrimes, drawing on Fairclough’s (1995) triadic model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and van Leeuwen’s (2008) Social Actor Representation model, the analysis

revealed that identity erasure operates as a systematic and patterned feature of institutional crime reporting rather than incidental.

Findings also revealed several recurrent forms of identity erasure in the data such as exclusion through suppression, where social actors are entirely omitted; backgrounding, where actors are displaced from syntactic positions (subject); objectivation and fragmentation, where victims are represented as body parts or material evidence; abstraction of agency, where actions are viewed from identifiable human agents; and genericization and collectivisation, where offenders are reduced undifferentiated legal or moral categories. These forms are realised through identifiable linguistic strategies.

The study recommends that law enforcement agencies should adopt a more ethical and balanced communication pattern that maintain clarity while avoiding depersonalisation of victims and over generalisation of offenders. Training in discourse awareness for public relations officers could help foster more responsible representational practices. Future research can extend this line of inquiry to other institutional and legal texts, as well as comparative studies across national context to explore how identity erasure operates within official crime communication.

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