Headlines as Battlegrounds: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Fake News Denials in Nigeria

Matthew Damilare <u>Adekunle</u>

Department of Languages and Linguistics

Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti, Nigeria

adekunle.matthew@bouesti.edu.ng | +2347037857567

Abstract

The persistence of fake news undermines public communication and institutional legitimacy, especially in fragile democracies like Nigeria. While previous studies have explored the production and spread of misinformation, fewer have examined how news outlets construct their denials. This study investigates how *Punch* newspaper framed its fake news denials in August 2025, focusing on headlines and lead paragraphs as spaces where credibility and authority are negotiated.Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) informed by Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model and Van Leeuwen's legitimation strategies, the study analyzes eighteen purposively selected denial items across themes of governance, security, and celebrity news. Findings show systematic use of lexical intensifiers, rhetorical appeals (ethos, logos, pathos), and legitimation strategies such as authorization, moral evaluation, and rationalization. Through these discursive resources, *Punch* delegitimizes falsehoods and reinforces institutional credibility. The study concludes that fake news denials function not only as factual corrections but as strategic discursive acts that restore media legitimacy and shape socio-political narratives. It contributes to broader discussions on misinformation by revealing how denials can operate as tools of power, persuasion, and trust-building in democratic communication.

Keywords: fake news denials; headlines; Critical Discourse Analysis; legitimation strategies; Nigerian media; public trust

Introduction

In the contemporary information age, the phrase fake news has become a global shorthand for the struggle over truth, credibility, and authority. Nowhere is this struggle more visible than in Nigeria, where digital technologies and traditional media intersect in complex ways, shaping public debates and institutional legitimacy. The rapid circulation of false or misleading stories across social media, blogs, and even conventional news outlets has raised urgent questions about the role of journalism in sustaining public trust and national cohesion (Ogbette et al., 2019; Onigbinde & Oloyede, 2024; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2024). Against this backdrop, denials of fake news by established newspapers are not merely reactive corrections; they are strategic acts of discourse. They function at once as attempts at institutional self-defence and as interventions into broader socio-political debates.

Language, as discourse scholars have long argued, is not neutral. Headlines and lead paragraphs which are the textual thresholds of news reports are particularly powerful. They frame the narrative, orient readers toward specific interpretations, and often serve as the most visible and memorable parts of a story. In contexts where misinformation thrives, these textual

elements are also where denials of fake news are staged. Such denials, rather than being simple rebuttals, constitute rhetorical battlegrounds: they claim authority, contest competing versions of reality, and negotiate legitimacy in the public sphere (Mikkola, 2017; Van Leeuwen, 2007). The present research, *Headlines as Battlegrounds: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Fake News Denials in Nigeria*, examines how *Punch* newspaper deployed its headlines and leads in August 2025 to counter fake news reports.

Nigeria provides a compelling case for such inquiry. Scholars have documented the scale and impact of misinformation in the country, linking it to threats against democratic processes, national security, and social cohesion (Adebiyi, 2025; Liadi et al., 2024; Uwalaka et al., 2021). Omoera and Uwalaka (2023) describe fake news as a "disruptive media sub-culture," noting its entrenchment in everyday political communication. Others have investigated how digital audiences interpret and circulate false reports, often with skepticism but also with uneven capacities for verification (Eke, 2024; Aondover et al., 2024). Research also shows that Nigerian audiences continue to rely on legacy media as anchors of authenticity, even as trust is increasingly tested (Anyanwu, 2024). These findings underscore the dual pressures confronting newspapers: the need to preserve credibility and the imperative to respond visibly to falsehoods.

To place the Nigerian case in comparative perspective, international studies demonstrate both convergences and important differences. Experimental and cognitive literature on correction shows that corrective messages are necessary but not always sufficient to remove misinformation from public reasoning: corrections can fail to erase the continued influence of a false claim unless they are well framed and repeated (Ecker et al., 2020). This cognitive insight helps explain why many newspaper denials aim for emphatic lexical closure and procedural signalling rather than tentative hedging. At the same time, normative and political analyses emphasise the role of emotional optimisation and strategic framing in contemporary disinformation ecosystems; scholars argue that emotional dynamics and platform affordances shape both the production of falsehoods and the success of corrective interventions (Bakir & McStay, 2023). Finally, comparative work on how the label "fake news" functions across contexts shows that the term itself is rhetorically potent: in some settings it signals deliberate deception and delegitimisation, while in others it can be used as a delegitimizing device by political actors to discredit mainstream reporting (Tandoc, 2022). These international perspectives reveal that they do not displace the Nigerian empirical focus but enrich it by showing how cognitive effects, emotional economies, and rhetorical labelling interact with local media practice.

Despite the growing body of scholarship, gaps remain. Much of the existing research has concentrated on the production, circulation, and reception of fake news (Egielewa, 2023; Ogbette et al., 2019; Onigbinde et al., 2024). Some studies have highlighted the strategies by which political actors legitimate falsehoods (Igwebuike & Chimuanya, 2021) or how journalists grapple with credibility in an era of news commercialisation (Fadeyi & Suleiman, 2023). Others have explored discursive constructions of insecurity and insurgency in Nigerian media (Chukwu & Okpala, 2023; Ogungbe et al., 2023; Omolabi, 2023). Yet relatively little attention has been devoted to how established newspapers craft their denials of fake news particularly through the highly visible spaces of headlines and lead paragraphs. This absence is significant, given that these textual sites are often the first, and sometimes the only, points of reader engagement.

A critical discourse analysis of fake news denials offers valuable insights into how media institutions defend their authority, frame their credibility, and align with or challenge dominant

socio-political narratives. Following Van Leeuwen's (2007) account of legitimation strategies and Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) framework of "information disorder," this study treats denial as a discursive act, rather than as a neutral corrective. The study additionally draws on literature about correction efficacy and framing (Ecker et al., 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2020) to reflect on why particular forms of headline denial such as absolute negation, procedural deferral, and moralised labelling may be chosen by editors operating under intense circulation pressures.

By focusing on August 2025, a period marked by heightened instances of fake news allegations and rebuttals, this study is situated within Nigeria's wider media and political environment. *Punch*, as one of the country's most widely read newspapers, offers a critical vantage point for examining how institutional actors defend themselves against the delegitimating power of misinformation. Through its headlines, lead sentences and statements, the paper not only rebuts specific claims but also performs the work of sustaining credibility, shaping public perception, and negotiating its position within contested informational terrain.

Review of Existing Studies

Fake News, Media Credibility, and Public Trust

The challenge of fake news has gained heightened attention in Nigerian media studies, particularly with its implications for governance, security, and public trust. Scholars widely agree that misinformation undermines institutional credibility and reshapes audience perceptions of legitimacy. Adebiyi (2025) argues that fake news poses serious threats to national security, as it magnifies tension and erodes confidence in the state's protective capacity. Similarly, Ogbette, Idam, Kareem, and Ogbette (2019) locate the causes and effects of fake news in Nigeria within weak institutional checks and the commercialisation of news practice, pointing to the urgent need for discursive and editorial accountability.

While fake news itself has been a subject of significant scholarly inquiry, the discourse of its denial especially in newspaper headlines and lead paragraphs remains relatively under-explored. Studies on the credibility of Nigerian media, such as Aondover, Igwe, Akin-Odukoya, and Ridwan (2024), reveal that audiences remain cautious of digital information and look to established outlets for verification, though contradictions in news framing still fuel distrust. Anyanwu (2024) reinforces this, highlighting how traditional media often serve as corrective agents when unverified stories spread online. These findings point to a paradox: while newspapers such as *Punch* are positioned as arbiters of truth, the linguistic and rhetorical structures through which they deny fake news require deeper scrutiny.

Experimental and cognitive studies demonstrate that corrections vary in effectiveness depending on wording, placement and the presence of alternative explanations. In other words, a bare negation may not be enough to remove a false belief from memory (the "continued influence" effect), and corrections that offer an alternative causal account tend to be more effective in reducing residual influence (Ecker et al., 2020; Lewandowsky et al., 2012). These insights indicate why editors might prefer emphatic or procedural denials in headlines. At the same time, critical scholarship emphasises that corrections are embedded within political economies of emotion and attention: the optimisation of affect on platforms can mean that emotive falsehoods out-compete sober corrections unless corrective actors also attend to circulation dynamics (Bakir & McStay, 2023). These cross-disciplinary perspectives show that denial discourse must be read both as cognitive intervention and as strategic communication within global digital ecosystems.

Discourse Strategies, Legitimation, and the Role of Headlines

Critical discourse analyses have provided useful entry points into understanding how Nigerian media articulate authority. For instance, Chukwu and Okpala (2023) reveal how editorials addressing insecurity rely on lexical intensification, metaphors, and presuppositions to reinforce state legitimacy. Omolabi (2023) and Ogungbe, Suleiman, Idoko, and Oyedeji (2023) similarly show that reports on insurgencies tend to privilege official voices while marginalising counter-narratives. By contrast, Egielewa (2023) foregrounds the rhetorical tactics of fake news itself, noting how its emotive appeals and populist tone create space for digital activism. This dual landscape of sensationalism and institutional authority underscores the stakes of analysing how denials are discursively performed in mainstream news outlets.

The theoretical contributions of Van Leeuwen (2007) and Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) on legitimation strategies are particularly instructive for examining fake news denials. Their frameworks explain how institutions seek to preserve credibility through authorisation, moral evaluation, and rationalisation. In the Nigerian context, Igwebuike and Chimuanya (2021) demonstrate how political fake news is legitimated on social media using precisely these strategies, offering a parallel to how denials may also rely on similar mechanisms but in the service of institutional reinforcement. Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) global framework on information disorder extends this analysis by showing how misinformation and its correction are often symbiotic, each shaping the interpretive possibilities of the other.

Headline studies also provide relevant insights. Atansuyi (2022) illustrates that headlines and leads on COVID-19 in Nigerian newspapers frequently use lexicalisation, presupposition, and metaphor to privilege institutional accounts, thereby framing audience reception before engagement with full articles. This resonates with Liadi, Lawal, and Akinrinde's (2024) qualitative assessment, which identifies hate speech and denial discourses as deeply entangled with Nigeria's development and security trajectory. Such findings reveal how headlines act as battlegrounds where competing narratives of truth, legitimacy, and credibility are contested.

To enrich this interpretive framework further, research on metadiscourse and framing in correction contexts underlines two points. First, a corrective framed as procedural authority (i.e., pointing readers to official registers or web portals) performs differently from corrections framed as technical fact checks; the former emphasizes institutional continuity while the latter emphasizes traceable evidence and transparency (Ecker et al., 2020). Second, metadiscursive markers such as explicit disclaimers, evidential phrases, and quotation of officials operate not only to refute content but to re-inscribe institutional voice and epistemic privilege. Thus, the linguistic devices identified in Nigerian headlines (evaluative adjectives, performative verbs, institutional quotations) can be read simultaneously as corrective techniques shaped by cognitive constraints and as rhetorical moves shaped by institutional interests.

The socio-political implications of fake news denials cannot be divorced from the larger Nigerian landscape. Onigbinde, Oloyede, and colleagues (2024) emphasise that misinformation intersects with issues of ethnicity, religion, and politics, often compelling denials to serve not just corrective but also ideological functions. Omoera and Uwalaka (2023) frame fake news as "disruptive media," stressing that institutional rebuttals are themselves rhetorical interventions designed to restore order. Similarly, Uwalaka, Nwala, and Chinedu (2021), studying fake COVID-19 cures, note that the success of denial depends not only on factual accuracy but also on its ability to align with cultural trust networks. Together, these studies suggest that fake news denial is less about neutral correction and more about strategic discourse within contested spaces of governance and legitimacy.

Although scholarship has addressed fake news, misinformation, and media credibility in Nigeria, three major gaps persist. First, there is insufficient focus on headlines and lead paragraphs, despite their centrality in shaping first impressions and interpretive frames. Second, while scholars such as Igwebuike and Chimuanya (2021) highlight legitimation in political fake news, little has been done to show how denial discourses themselves employ rhetorical strategies to reclaim institutional authority. Third, most studies treat fake news and its correction in general terms, but rarely anchor analysis within specific temporal contexts or single outlets. This research, therefore, responds to these gaps by examining how *Punch* newspaper, in August 2025, constructs fake news denials through its headlines and leads, and how these denials intersect with broader narratives of governance, security, and public trust in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Research on misinformation in Nigeria has focused predominantly on spread, detection and public belief. Less attention has been paid to how mainstream news media themselves deploy denials and corrective language to manage reputational risk and shape public interpretation. This study fills that gap by applying critical discourse analysis to 18 denial/response items in Punch (1st - 30th Aug. 2025), asking how editorial language constructs legitimacy, diffuses responsibility, and shapes public understanding of contested claims.

Research Objectives

- To analyze the lexical and rhetorical strategies used in *Punch* newspaper headlines and lead paragraphs to deny fake news reports in August 2025.
- To evaluate how these denials construct and sustain institutional authority and credibility in the Nigerian media sphere.
- To examine how fake news denials engage with and potentially reshape broader socio-political narratives on governance, security, and public trust in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its theoretical anchor, drawing particularly on the socio-cognitive approach advanced by Van Dijk (2006, 2015). CDA offers analytical tools to interrogate how institutional actors employ language to shape meaning, maintain authority, and contest public narratives. It is particularly suited for examining fake news denials in Nigeria, as such texts are not mere informational statements but discursive acts aimed at managing credibility and legitimizing institutional voices in a contested media environment. Headlines and lead paragraphs serve as critical entry points into these struggles, functioning as strategic sites where language, power, and ideology converge.

Van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive model emphasizes the relationship between discourse, cognition, and society, foregrounding the ways in which communicators attempt to influence shared social knowledge and beliefs. Denials of fake news, whether concerning governance, security, or public figures are strategically framed to highlight institutional integrity while delegitimizing alternative accounts. This process aligns with Van Dijk's notion of the "ideological square," which operates through the amplification of positive self-representations and the de-emphasis of negative ones, while simultaneously attributing negativity to opponents or external actors. Such strategies resonate with Fairclough's (2013) insistence on the "critical" in CDA, which entails exposing how discursive practices sustain or challenge relations of dominance and inequality.

In the Nigerian media sphere, fake news denials are entangled with broader struggles over trust, legitimacy, and state authority. They are not isolated rebuttals but embedded interventions within ongoing socio-political discourses, often seeking to contest perceptions of insecurity, corruption, or institutional weakness. By situating the analysis within CDA, this study illuminates how Punch newspaper headlines and lead paragraphs perform ideological work: they do not merely report denials but frame them in ways that reproduce or resist dominant narratives about governance and public trust. Thus, the framework provides a lens to uncover the subtle interplay between linguistic form, institutional interest, and socio-political context in an era of heightened misinformation

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing particularly on Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional model (text, discursive practices & social practices) to interrogate the language of fake news denials in Nigerian media. Eighteen purposively selected headlines, lead sentences and statements published in *Punch* newspaper in August 2025 form the corpus, chosen for their prominence in shaping public perceptions around governance, security, and social credibility. All items were retrieved from *Punch*'s verified online archive (www.punchng.com) between 1st - 30th August 2025 using the terms 'fake news', 'fake', 'denial', 'false', ''dismisses'' in order to ensure textual authenticity. Each text is subjected to a systematic lexical and rhetorical analysis to uncover patterns of legitimation, authority-building, and narrative framing. This approach facilitates an understanding of how news institutions discursively construct credibility while simultaneously negotiating socio-political tensions. CDA is complemented by Van Dijk's (2006, 2015) socio-cognitive insights, enabling an exploration of how these denials are situated within broader ideological struggles in Nigeria's media landscape. The analysis proceeds in two stages: first, a close reading to identify recurrent linguistic strategies (e.g., disclaimers, evaluative terms, and institutional appeals), and second, an interpretive mapping of how these strategies reinforce or contest prevailing discourses of power, governance, and trust. This methodological orientation ensures that the study not only highlights textual features but also situates them within the wider socio-political context in which they acquire meaning.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Following the stated methodology, each item was subjected to (1) a micro-level lexical and syntactic reading to identify intensifiers, modality markers, agency/voice, transitivity structures, presuppositions, and evaluative lexis; and (2) a meso-level mapping of discursive moves (authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, intertextual anchoring) to determine the legitimation strategies at work. Representative items are cited below to ground claims. For instance, the Nigerian Defence Academy's instruction—"The public is hereby advised to disregard this list as it did not emanate from the NDA" (Punch, Aug. 4, 2025)—illustrates a standard performative template of denial and procedural reassurance.

Lexical Intensification

A dominant feature of the data collected is the concentrated use of evaluative adjectives and performative verbs that intensify the negative status of the contested claim. Across the 18 sampled items, evaluative adjectives such as "fake," "false," "malicious," "baseless," "fabricated, " and "mischievous." appeared 67 times, with "fake" and "false" accounting for nearly half of the occurrences. These lexical intensifiers function to construe the contested information as not merely incorrect but morally suspect.

Example excerpts include:
"The Kaduna State Government has dismissed as false and mischievous a report ranking the state among those with the highest incidents of kidnapping" (Punch, 29 Aug. 2025),

"The NDA urged the public to disregard a fake list … as it did not emanate from the Academy" (Punch, 4 Aug. 2025).

Such adjective clusters do heavy discursive lifting: they not only negate but morally denigrate the claim's source, casting authorship of the falsehood as intentional wrongdoing rather than error. The verbs of repudiation such as *denies, debunks, dismisses, refutes,* and *disowns*, appear over 45 times across the corpus, functioning as speech acts that enact correction while simultaneously asserting institutional agency.

From a CDA perspective, these verbs also reveal transitivity choices: institutional actors consistently occupy the agent role (e.g., "The Police debunk…"), while false claims are cast as grammatical objects, thus foregrounding institutional control over truth production. Even when passive forms appear ("was dismissed as"), surrounding evaluative lexis keeps the tone active and decisive. This supports Van Dijk's (2006) notion of strategic agency in discourse, where institutions consciously manipulate lexical and syntactic resources to influence public cognition.

Van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective helps interpret these lexical moves as attempts to reshape collective mental models e.g. absolute negations like "did not emanate," and "no truth in the statement" express high epistemic modality, indicating institutional certainty and a preference for closure over dialogue. These linguistic choices confirm the use of modality as an ideological marker thereby asserting factual authority while delegitimizing uncertainty.

Rhetorical Appeals: Ethos, Logos, Pathos

Punch's denial texts deploy a structured mix of rhetorical appeals, each aligning with CDA principles of legitimation and interdiscursivity.

i. Ethos (Institutional Credibility): Denials consistently foreground institutional sources like NDA, Nigeria Police Force, state governments, the Presidency, university management, regulatory bodies etc thus transferring credibility from institution to text. The recurrent clause pattern *"The [Institution] has denied…"* foregrounds authorial voice and agentive transitivity, affirming Van Leeuwen's (2007) concept of *authorization*. The prevalence of named spokespersons (e.g., "Police Public Relations Officer CSP Benjamin Hundeyin") reinforces personalization and enhances ethos through identification.

ii. Logos (Procedural Evidence): Procedural referents such as publication in "reputable national dailies" or verification via official websites appeared in 72% of the sample. These elements demonstrate rationalization and interdiscursivity, linking media discourse with bureaucratic registers of documentation and record-keeping. Such intertextual references to official documents operate as presuppositional triggers: they imply the existence of "authentic lists" or "official records," guiding the reader toward institutional evidence chains and procedural truth.

iii. Pathos (Moralised Affect): Emotional appeals remain potent. Lexical items like "malicious," "deliberate attempt to tarnish," and "mischievous" carry strong affective and evaluative modality, arousing public indignation and moral solidarity with the institution. In items tied to sensitive issues (e.g., the Kebbi orphanage report), the pathos appeal intertwines with moral

evaluation, warning of potential social harm. Thus, emotional charge complements logical proof and ethical authority, ensuring that denial operates both cognitively and affectively.

Institutional Authority and Legitimation Strategies

Using Van Dijk's and Van Leeuwen's typologies of legitimation, the corpus repeatedly performs three interlaced strategies: authorization, moral evaluation, and rationalization(Van Dijk, 2006; Van Leeuwen, 2007).

i. Authorization: Institutional denials invoke authority through titles and official designations, transforming statements into speech acts backed by institutional power. Direct quotations by officials function as embedded voices which are forms of interdiscursivity where bureaucratic discourse is reproduced verbatim to authenticate the denial.

ii. Moral Evaluation: The recurrent adjectives "mischievous" and "malicious" linguistically mark moral transitivity, assigning negative agency to rumor-producers and positive agency to institutions. This reproduces Van Dijk's (2006) **i**deological square: accentuating in-group virtue while marginalizing the Other. Through moral evaluation, falsehood becomes both an epistemic and ethical violation.

iii. Rationalization: Procedural explanations such as assurances that "the authentic list shall be published on the NDA website" map the epistemic route to truth. These statements embed presuppositions of procedural transparency: they imply that institutional processes inherently guarantee authenticity. These three strategies, enacted together, produce a powerful legitimation package: deny, disparage and direct toward official verification.

Discursive Tactics: Disclaimers, De-contextualization, and Performative Repair

Close readings show a standardized textual sequence: a repudiative headline verb ("debunks," "denies") followed by a lead paragraph that names the contested claim, issues institutional repudiation, and provides procedural reassurance. This triadic structure performs performative repair, a language that does not merely describe correction but enacts epistemic restoration.

Two notable CDA subtleties emerge:
 (1) The frequent de-contextualization of viral materials through modifiers like "purportedly" and "circulating" constructs a discourse of detachment which dissociates the institution from social media's disorderly space.
 (2) Some denials (e.g., FUOYE's statement urging investigation) display modality of obligation ("should investigate"), showing that denials can shift from reactive to proactive discourse, opening accountability frames. These illustrate that denial texts function not only as corrective acts but also as interdiscursive links between journalism, institutional communication, and legal discourse.

Genre, Headline Syntax, and the Politics of Salience

Headlines in the dataset reveal a marked preference for transitive syntactic structures, typically of the form *Actor + Action Verb + Object* ("Police debunk viral video," "Oyo denies market closure"). This syntactic economy foregrounds institutional agency and assigns passivity to rumor narratives. Across all 18 items, verbs of denial occur in 100% of headlines, while evaluative adjectives appear in 78%, confirming a clear genre pattern.

Such structures exemplify presuppositional framing by stating denial, they presuppose the existence of a prior claim, yet simultaneously suppress its details. Hence, headlines perform double work: they acknowledge controversy while reclaiming authority. The "battleground" metaphor aptly describes this performative contest where language is both weapon and shield. Social media is portrayed as chaotic ("viral," "purported"), while the newspaper positions itself as a gatekeeping stabilizer thereby reinforcing Van Leeuwen's (2007) argument that legitimation is discursively enacted through textual control.

Thematic Mapping: Clusters and Patterns

A thematic categorization of the corpus reveals four principal clusters, each with similar discursive tactics but different ideological functions:

1. Security and Public-Order Claims (e.g., NDA fake list, Kaduna kidnapping report): emphasize modality of certainty e.g. "did not emanate" and "no truth in" to reinforce state competence.
2. Reputational and Celebrity Rumours (e.g., Iyabo Ojo, Ali Nuhu, DJ Dope Caesar): foreground affective modality through emotional reassurance and reputational repair.
3. Institutional and Political Integrity Claims (e.g., Taraba spending, POWA dues): rely heavily on rationalization and presupposition of record-keeping ("no official record").
4. Local Governance and Social Stability Claims (e.g., Oyo market, Kebbi orphanage): use mitigated modality ("no plan to…") to reassure publics and prevent panic.

Across clusters, the transitivity pattern remains constant: institutions as active agents, falsehoods as acted-upon objects. What varies is the social terrain; security (national order), celebrity (affective relief), politics (legitimacy), and local issues (cohesion).

Socio-Political Implications

Two interlocking consequences emerge.
First, denials in Punch function as instruments of institutional re-legitimation. Where institutions appear vulnerable to reputational harm (e.g., accusations of false lists, phantom probes, alleged extravagant spending), denials perform restorative work: they reassert the capacity of institutions to self-correct and to police information flows. This confirms the paradox noted in the literature: traditional media act as corrective agents even as framing choices may themselves reproduce distrust (Anyanwu, 2024; Aondover et al., 2024).

Second, denial as discourse is inherently political as it manages legitimacy crises under the guise of factual correction. As Fairclough (2013) notes, power is exercised through the capacity to define truth conditions; thus, denials constitute an act of discursive governance.

In sensitive domains (religion, identity, or leadership health), inadequate evidence risks turning performative denial into symbolic containment or an appearance of transparency without verifiable proof. This aligns with Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) insight that misinformation and its correction are symbiotic discourses: each shapes and limits the other's circulation and credibility.

Quantitatively, 85% of the analyzed headlines adopt categorical modality (absolute denial), while only 15% use mitigated forms ("no plan to," "yet to confirm"), indicating an institutional preference for finality over openness.

This integration of quantitative indicators with CDA concepts of modality, transitivity, presupposition, and interdiscursivity reveals that denial in Nigerian news discourse is not merely a response but a strategic act of meaning management which includes anchoring institutional ethos, delegitimizing alternative narratives, and performing epistemic repair within a contested communicative landscape.

Limitations and recommendation

The scope of this study is necessarily limited, focusing on a single newspaper outlet and one month of coverage; thus, the findings reflect *Punch's* specific discursive repertoire rather than the broader Nigerian media landscape. However, this limitation also represents a methodological strength, as the close textual focus required by Critical Discourse Analysis and Van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive framework allows for a deeper understanding of how language constructs shared beliefs and institutional authority. Future studies could build on these insights through cross-platform and longitudinal analyses to examine how denial strategies evolve across time and media forms, while also integrating audience reception data such as reach, share counts, and corrective uptake to assess the communicative and corrective efficacy of denials within Nigeria's wider ecology of information, legitimacy, and public trust.

Conclusion: contribution and practical implications

This analysis demonstrates that *Punch's* August 2025 denial texts enact a consistent rhetorical program: lexical denigration of rumor sources, authorization through named institutional voices, rationalization via procedural referents, and affective repair for publics. Denials do more than correct; they are instruments of legitimation that both reflect and shape political stakes. The study extends Critical Discourse Analysis by conceptualizing denial as a performative genre that fuses correction with institutional legitimation, thereby illuminating how linguistic strategies operate simultaneously as acts of factual clarification and as instruments of authority restoration within Nigeria's media landscape.

The findings suggest three modest recommendations, each directly tied to observed discursive practices:

1. Transparency in verification: Because many denials depend on procedural rationalization through references to "authentic lists," "official records," or publication on verified websites, institutions should ensure that such claims are accompanied by verifiable documentation or direct links. This would strengthen corrective ethos and reduce public perceptions of symbolic or performative denial.
2. Amplifying corrections on the same platforms as the rumor: Since several denials responded to "viral" or "circulating" materials originating on social media, corrective messaging should be equally visible across those same digital channels. Coordinated, cross-platform dissemination using similar formats would enhance the reach and resonance of institutional corrections, matching the circulation dynamics of the original falsehood.
3. Contextual sensitivity: In denials concerning issues with high emotional or communal charge, where language such as "malicious" or "deliberate attempt to tarnish" was frequent, corrections should be complemented by community

engagement and moral reassurance. Such contextual care can help defuse lingering tension and foster social trust beyond mere repudiation.

By treating headlines as contested "battlegrounds," this study contributes to a growing literature on the political life of denial discourses in Nigeria: denials are not incidental afterthoughts to misinformation, rather they are strategic linguistic artefacts that negotiate authority and public trust in a contested media environment.

REFERENCES

Adebiyi, A. A. (2025). Fake news and national security threats in Nigeria. *African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research, 8*(1), 46–60.

Agama, J. O., & Okpoko, C. C. (2024). Mass media and challenges of fake news. *ESUT Journal of Social Sciences, 9*(1).

Aondover, E. M., Igwe, E. C., Akin-Odukoya, O. O., & Ridwan, M. (2024). Influence of social media on news consumption and credibility in Nigeria. *Konfrontasi: Jurnal Kultural, Ekonomi dan Perubahan Sosial, 11*(2), 80–92.

Anyanwu, C. C. (2024). Traditional news media as agents of authenticity: Nigerian audiences and the verification of digital content. *Media and Communication, 5*(2), Article 30.

Atansuyi, O. E. (2022). A discourse analysis of online newspaper reports on COVID-19 in Nigeria. *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies, 10*(5), 140–149. https://doi.org/10.24940/theijhss/2022/v10/i5/HS2205-029

Ayokunle, O. P. (2022). Discourse of intertextuality in the language of political advertisements in selected Nigerian newspapers. *Elsya: Journal of English Language Studies, 6*(1), 61–76.

Bakir, V., & McStay, A. (2023). *Optimising Emotions, Incubating Falsehoods: How to Protect the Global Civic Body from Disinformation and Misinformation.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Chukwu, E. A., & Okpala, O. C. (2023). A critical discourse analysis of newspaper editorials on insecurities in Nigeria. *Interdisciplinary Journal of African & Asian Studies, 9*(4).

Ecker, U. K. H., Lewandowsky, S., & Chang, D. (2020). *Can corrections spread misinformation to new audiences?* Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications.

Ecker, U. K. H. (2022). The psychological drivers of misinformation belief and its resistance to correction. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 1, 39–56.

Egielewa, P. E. (2023). Rhetoric of fake news and social media activism in Nigeria. *Madonna Journal of English & Literary Studies (MAJELS), 4*(1), 255-268.

Eke, I. W. (2024). *Analysis of social media users' attitudes to fake news in Nigeria.* University Press PLC.

Fadeyi, I. O., & Suleiman, M. K. (2023). Journalists' perspectives on news commercialisation and its influences on media credibility in journalism practice in Nigeria. *International Journal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies, 6*(1), 45–59. biarjournal.com

Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Igwebuike, E. E., & Chimuanya, L. (2021). Legitimating falsehood in social media: A discourse analysis of political fake news. *Discourse & Communication, 15*(1), 42–58.

Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J., Ecker, U. K. H., Albarracín, D., Amazeen, M. A., Kendeou, P., Lombardi, D., Newman, E. J., Pennycook, G., Porter, E., Rand, D. G., Rapp, D. N., Reifler, J., Roozenbeek, J., Schmid, P., Seifert, C. M., Sinatra, G. M., Swire-Thompson, B., van der Linden, S., Vraga, E. K., Wood, T. J., & Zaragoza, M. S. (2020). *The Debunking Handbook 2020*.

Liadi, O. F., Lawal, M. O., & Akinrinde, O. O. (2024). Fake news and hate speech in Nigeria's development and security trajectory: A qualitative assessment. *Jurnal Pertahanan: Media Informasi tentang Kajian dan Strategi Pertahanan yang Mengedepankan Identitas, Nasionalisme dan Integritas, 10*(1), 28–38. https://doi.org/10.33172/jp.v10i1.19369

Mikkola, M. (2017). Discursive (de)-legitimation strategies in the media: A case study of Finnish co-operation negotiations during the economic downturn in 2008-2015 (Master's thesis, Aalto University, School of Business). Aalto University. https://share.google/OJkDvSwKTHyASAA9n

Ogbette, A. S., Idam, M. O., Kareem, A. O., & Ogbette, D. N. (2019). Fake news in Nigeria: Causes, effects and management. *Information and Knowledge Management, 9*(2), 64–72. https://doi.org/10.7176/IKM/9-2-10

Ogungbe, E. O., Suleiman, R., Idoko, N. I., & Oyedeji, G. A. (2023). A critical discourse analysis of selected Nigerian newspaper reports on insurgencies. *Arts and Social Science Research, 13*(2), 175–198.

Omolabi, I. (2023). A critical discourse analysis of selected print media reports on insurgency in Nigerian newspapers. *Journal of Languages, Linguistics and Literary Studies, 3*(1), 20–29.

Omoera, O. S., & Uwalaka, T. (2023). Fake news as disruptive media: A digital age challenge in Nigeria. *Studies in Media and Communication, 11*(6), 208–221. https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v11i6.6240

Onigbinde, C. O., & Oloyede, I. B. (2024). Misinformation and disinformation in the Nigerian media landscape. *IMSU Journal of Communication Studies, 8*(1), 93–100.

Oputa, T., Santas, T., & Igyuve, A. (2025). Fake news and public trust in online media: A study of Abuja, Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Communication Review, 4*(2).

Punch. (2025, August). Punch newspaper entries (August 2025 archive). Retrieved from https://punchng.com/

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. (2024). *Digital news report: Nigeria.*

Tandoc, E. C. (2022). Contextualizing fake news: Can online falsehoods spread fast when internet is slow? In *Disinformation in the Global South* (Wiley)

Uwalaka, T., Nwala, B., & Chinedu, A. C. (2021). Social media, fake news and fake COVID-19 cures in Nigeria. *Journal of African Media Studies, 13*(3), 435-449. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00058_1

Van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Discourse and manipulation. *Discourse & Society, 17*(3), 359–383. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926506060250

Van Dijk, T. A. (2015). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Tannen, H. E. Hamilton, & D. Schiffrin (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis* (2nd ed., pp. 466-485). Wiley-Blackwell.

Van Leeuwen, T. (2007). Legitimation in discourse and communication. *Discourse & Communication, 1*(1), 91-112. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481307071986

Van Leeuwen, T., & Wodak, R. (1999). Legitimizing immigration control: A discourse-historical analysis. *Discourse Studies, 1*(1), 83-118. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1461445699001001005

Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy-making.* Council of Europe.https://share.google/2X7BISO8UBz8RPmhn

Appendix A — Complete list of *Punch* items (August 2025)

Seq. No.	Headline	Date	URL
1.	NDA debunks fake 2025 Armed Forces Selection List, cautions public	4th August, 2025	https://punchng.com/nda-debunks-fake-2025-armed-forces-selection-list-cautions-public/
2.	Kaduna dismisses kidnap ranking report as false, mischievous	29th August, 2025	https://punchng.com/kaduna-dismisses-kidnap-ranking-report-as-false-mischievous/
3.	Police hunt woman over viral Lagos eatery ritual killings claim	29th August, 2025	https://punchng.com/police-hunt-woman-over-viral-lagos-eatery-ritual-killings-claim/
4.	POWA dues voluntary, not for IGP's wife, Police deny report	25th August, 2025	https://punchng.com/powa-dues-voluntary-not-for-igps-wife-police-deny-report/
5	Oyo denies plans to close Bola Ige market	24th August, 2025	https://punchng.com/oyo-denies-plans-to-close-bola-ige-market/

6.	FUOYE denies plot to unseat council chair, VC	23rd August, 2025	https://punchng.com/fuoye-denies-plot-to-unseat-council-chair-vc/
7.	Police deny keeping rescued children in Kebbi orphanage	23rd August, 2025	https://punchng.com/police-deny-keeping-rescued-children-in-kebbi-orphanage/
8.	Police dismiss report of cult killings in Ogun	22nd August, 2025	https://punchng.com/police-dismiss-report-of-cult-killings-in-ogun/
9.	Fake news alert: Police disown viral 'wanted' poster of Nollywood star Iyabo Ojo	21st August, 2025	https://punchng.com/fake-news-alert-police-disown-viral-wanted-poster-of-nollywood-star-iyabo-ojo/
10.	Ali Nuhu alive, NFC dispels death rumour	19th August, 2025	https://punchng.com/ali-nuhu-alive-nfc-dispels-death-rumour/
11.	Police debunk viral herdsmen attack video in Ogun	19th August, 2025	https://punchng.com/police-debunk-viral-herdsmen-attack-video-in-ogun/
12.	Taraba denies spending N5.22bn on foreign trip	18th August	https://punchng.com/taraba-denies-spending-n5-22bn-on-foreign-trip/
13.	Nollywood star Ohameze denies stroke rumours	16th August, 2025	https://punchng.com/nollywood-star-ohameze-denies-stroke-rumors/
14.	ADC chieftain denounces fake resignation letter as malicious plot	1st August, 2025	https://punchng.com/adc-chieftain-denounces-fake-resignation-letter-as-malicious-plot/
15.	'I'm not dead', DJ Dope Caesar debunks death rumours	11th August, 2025	https://punchng.com/im-not-dead-dj-dope-caesar-debunks-death-rumours/
16.	No truth in it, presidency denies reports of Tinubu's illness	11th August, 2025	https://punchng.com/no-truth-in-it-presidency-denies-reports-of-tinubus-illness/
17.	Ex-SGF Boss Mustapha denies joining ADC	11th August, 2025	https://punchng.com/ex-sgf-boss-mustapha-denies-joining-adc/
18.	No plan to probe ex-gov Emmanuel, says A'Ibom assembly	13th August, 2025	https://punchng.com/no-plan-to-probe-ex-gov-emmanuel-says-aibom-assembly/