

## **Analysis of Facebook Audiences' Comments on Herdsmen Attack News in Nigeria and Implication for National Unity and Security**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examined the dominant themes and frames in online audiences' comments on herdsmen attacks news in Nigeria and how such comments could impact on national security. The paper employed content analysis research method and quantitatively and thematically analysed Channels TV's Facebook audiences' comments on selected herdsmen attack related news stories from the five most affected states in Nigeria within January 1<sup>st</sup> to July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018, the peak of such attacks in Nigerian history. The paper purposively selected 311 most relevant comments out of the 500 online audience comments found on the Channels TV's Facebook wall within the period. Finding reveal that many online commenters believed that Political conspiracy, Fulanization of Nigeria, poor leadership/poor security, and Terrorism were responsible for the herdsmen attacks. There were more comments calling for war or reprisal attacks than those calling for peace and resolution of the conflict. The paper therefore concludes that audience comments on herdsmen attack news in Nigeria was laden with negative frames which could worsen the security situation in the country. The paper then recommends among others that online news audience should pursue objective, solution-driven and nationalistic goals in their comments on herdsmen attacks news in the country rather than being neutral or employing war frame that is capable of escalating the conflict.

**Keywords:** Facebook feedback comment, Herdsmen attack news, Channels TV, Framing, and National security

### **Introduction**

The advent of web 2.0 and the emergence of social media like Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, LinkedIn, etc have opened a new vista in the world of mass communication and are gradually transforming what was hitherto a one-way communication into a two-way, participatory and interactive communication experience. As such, the audience are rapidly transcending from their 'passive role' often limited to news consumption to a more 'active role' in the continuous production and consumption (*prosumerism*) of news contents. Audience could now engage the social media feedback handle of mainstream media organisations to (re)negotiate meaning and (re)expand the frontier of narratives on socio-political issues across the world, Nigeria inclusive. The nature and extent to which this had been deployed in online audience on national security especially the herders-farmers bloody clashes in Nigeria and its possible implication for national security in the highly polarized nation seems to have been underexplored in the available literature. Meanwhile, research has shown that language use by people affected by security threat (like the case of herdsmen attack) or terrorist attacks and others who, though not directly affected by the threat, but respond to the news about the situation by posting comments and responding to posted comments on the Internet (Chiluwa, 2016), could further make or mar the state of security in human society. The crux of this paper therefore is to interrogate the dominant themes in the audiences' comments on herdsmen attack news as reported on the Channels TV's Facebook wall and how such comments could impact on the nation's security. Specifically, this paper strived to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the dominant themes in Channel TV Facebook audiences' comments on herdsmen attacks in Nigeria? and

## 2. How does the frame used in their comments impact on the nation's security?

### **Nigerian Herdsmen's Attack in Perspective**

Before the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cattle rearing was common in places like the Guinea, Sudan and Sahel Savanna belts where crop production was not only seasonal but carried out on subsistence level. Meaning the cattle herders could access a larger grass land without clashing with farmers. Nevertheless, the advance in agricultural practice which saw the introduction of irrigation farming in the Savanna belt of Nigeria coupled with the increased withering of pasture during dry season has made pasture less available for cattle (Oli, Ibekwe & Nwankwo, 2018) thereby necessitating the movement of the cattle herders towards the Southern part of the country which is characterized with longer rainy season for fresh grass and water for their cows (Ofuoku & Isife, 2009).

Most often, this migration comes with encroachment into cultivated farm lands thereby resulting in conflicts of different magnitude depending on economic, environmental and other factors at play in such instances (Olaniyan, Francis & Okeke-Uzodike, 2015). Specifically, the rainy season which is often characterized by cattle breeding, more milk production and shorter grazing hours, equally witnessed increased farming activities and therefore mark the peak of farmers-herders clashes in the crisis prone areas of the country (Bello, 2013).

Although, the Fulani began to engage in cattle rearing in Nigeria as way back as 13 century and were reported to have been involved in different violent clashes with local farmers as far back as many centuries ago (Aliyu, 2015), there seems to be a steady increase in the number of such clashes in recent times. For instance, a report by the Global Terrorism Index released in 2015 listed Fulani militants as the fourth deadliest militant group in the world after killing 1225 people in 2014 alone. According to Amnesty International (2018), clashes between herdsmen and farmers communities resulted in more than 549 deaths and displacement of thousands in 12 states in 2017 alone and the figure seems to be higher in 2018 following the mass killing of members of some communities in Benue, Plateau, Adamawa, Taraba and Kaduna since the beginning of the year. Recall that 2018 also witnessed the killing and mass burial of over 70 people murdered during a coordinated attack on communities in Logo and Guma LGAs of Benue state between January 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018 (Ndujihe and Udochukwu, 2018). Generally, farmers and herders' clashes could be blamed on the fight over control of the scarce resource (land), cattle destruction of crops, farmers' encroachment on grazing reserves and indiscriminate bush burning by nomads which normally leads to loss of crops (Adeoye, 2017; Ofem & Inyang, 2014; Olaleye, Odutola, Ojo, Umar & Ndanitsa, 2010). In some quarters, the situation is perceived as mere farming, grazing land and water dispute; as well as reprisals attack in defence of livestock from banditry in farming communities (Eyekpimi, 2016; Mikailu, 2016). However, recent studies like Global Terrorism Index (2016); Adamu & Ben (2017); Idowu (2017); Nwosu (2017); Oli, Ibekwe & Nwankwo (2018); Mkom, 2018; Ahmed (2018); John (2018) Enor, Magor & Ekpo (2019); seems to look beyond the immediate causes of herdsmen attacks to interrogate terrorism, religion, criminal and political dimension of the conflict that has continued to shape public perceptions on Herdsmen attacks.

Whatever the causes of the clashes may be, the situation has some far-reaching implications for the country's security and peaceful-coexistence which invariably affects the actualization of the Sustainable Development Goals 1 and 2 that aimed at eradicating poverty and hunger respectively. The attacks equally portend economic implications for the affected states and the nation at large. According to the research report carried out by Mercy Corps, a Global Humanitarian Organization funded by the British Department for International Development (BFID), between 2013 and 2016 on the causes and effects of the perennial clashes between herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria, the country lost \$14 billion in three years alone. The report further revealed that the attacks are threatening the economic development of the country and if not well and urgently managed, could see further income decrease among the members of the affected communities. Another effect of the conflict on the nation is the loss of taxes (internally generated revenue) as the affected communities hardly generate sufficient revenue to pay their expected taxes. It has also been observed that the attack has also impacted negatively on trade

practice within the affected areas, as the communities equally continue to experience reduction in crop yield, suffered displacement and subsequent exposure to environmental and health hazards, loss of products in storage, and destruction of social amenities and private properties.

Besides, the attacks have equally affected the food security quest of the country. For instance, Ofem & Inyang (2014) reports short supply of food to urban dwellers like Calabar and increased in the price of the few available ones following the recurrent attacks on the Yakurr, the community reputed for farming in Cross River state. Also, other studies have indicated gross economic and human lose and displacement on the part of either the farmers or the herders in some cases (Ofuoku & Isife, 2009; Ofem & Inyang, 2014; Adelokun, Adurogbangba & Akinbile, 2015; and Umeh & Chukwu, 2016).

The dire consequences of the herdsmen attacks and the human angle inherent in the gory stories of mass murder would have accounted for the increased attention given to the attacks by the mass media and the generality of the populace. Over the years, the herders/farmer clashes or herdsmen attack have always formed part of the media agenda, and perhaps, public agenda. While the preponderance of herdsmen attacks portends security challenge, online audience use of language in their comments on the activities of herdsmen could have a far-reaching implication on national security.

### **Conflict Reportage: Media Language and Framing**

While there seems to be a relative dearth of literature on the use of language in war or crisis situations across board; it appears there is even a greater dearth of studies of internet or online language in response to violence or crisis situations in Africa and Nigeria in particular. This is in spite of the long-established nexus between language and war. For instance, while seeking for possible connection between language and war as far back as 1986, Galtung established that there actually exists a link between language and war, explaining that it was almost obvious to identify what words stand for at the semantic level, even though some remain masked in euphemisms (Galtung, 1986). Besides, when internal structures of texts are examined at a deeper level in most cases, research evidence has always shown some hidden message of peace or war so much so that during war, non-palatable truths are usually distorted and suppressed through language in order to protect the sensibilities of the war, or rationalise and justify acts of war such as pride, hatred, self-esteem or contempt for others (Chiluwa and Ajiboye, 2016).

Writing on *'Language of War and Peace'* in 1999, William Gay equally contends that 'language can be used to demean differences and inflict violence or to affirm diversity and achieve recognition' (p. 303). To this end, the author further argued that language and communication in a war situation, is often fraught with euphemisms and misrepresentations, used by the authorities to mask the extents of violence that take place as well as disguise official corruption and terrorist atrocities. This is in consonance with earlier study conducted by Elgin in 1995. Elgin argued that violence exerted by individuals or nations, was often preceded by some form of violent language. Therefore, in negotiating a more peaceful human relationships, Taylor and Hardman (2004), recommend a conscious attention to language use; for instance, through the use of alterative metaphors in everyday discourse, because 'our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical' (Lakoff & Johnson 2003, p. 3). Also, the connotative effects of paradoxes, naming and labelling, passivisation, among other discourse structures are key agents in the linguistic construction of violence and war. Thus, language, carefully chosen, can mask violence, and when it does not, is an active part of violence (Chiluwa and Ajiboye, 2016).

While recounting the Gulf war and identifying the 'jargons of war' or 'words of war', Watt & McCarthy (2003) and Shanker (2003) observe that language of war is characterized by creativity and is often replete with coinages, idioms and rhetorical devices. In instance of war, they explained that common words and expressions assume new contextual meanings. Moreover, Silberstein (2002) examining public rhetoric on the aftermath of the events of 9/11, earlier observes that through the carefully chosen discursive options, an act of terror became an act of 'war,' showing that there is an interaction between media representation, discourse choices and political decisions in times of crisis. In addition, through effective framing and pictorial eyewitness accounts or narratives, the media helped to construct a generally accepted seemingly altruistic

ideology in the minds of Americans, portraying the ‘intolerant other’ as the enemy which they (the Americans) were determined to fight. This explains Gay’s (1999) argument that war language is strategically chosen to mask the reality of an ongoing violence. When official discourse about war makes extensive use of euphemisms and misrepresentation, the war becomes legitimate (p. 303). In essence, ‘language has consequences, that through the use of language, we create and recreate particular worlds of understanding,’ (Silberstein 2002, p. 1). Closely related to language choice is the way conflict is being framed. Framing in journalism is often described as the “schemata of interpretation” which allows one “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” occurrences (Goffman, 1974, in Zhou & Moy, 2007, p. 80). News frames are embedded in the text itself, which are manifested by the inclusion or exclusion of certain keywords, images, and sentences that “reinforce clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The analyses of online audiences’ comment frame in the context of this study were guided by Adekunle’s (2014) categorization of conflict reportage into War and Peace journalism. According to him, War Frame leads – or leaves – readers and audiences to overvalue violence, as a response to conflicts and crises while Peace Frame on the other hand, creates opportunities for society at large to consider and value nonviolent, developmental responses.

### **Mainstream Media’s Online Feedback Comments/Reactions**

No time in the history of humanity is the world so close to Marshall McLuhan’s popular description of the ‘global village’ than this era of web 2.0 that permits public participation on an unprecedented level. The advent of social media allows people to form virtual communities and interact freely using different features of the media including the wall, timelines, comment section, and so on. The focus of this paper however is the application of the mainstream Facebook feedback/comment section by their news audiences in Nigeria. Generally, at the feedback section of the mainstream Facebook account, audiences are often at liberty to extend and contribute to narratives on any news items of their interest by commenting, sharing, liking, and so on. The feedback comments in the context of this study therefore refer to the mainstream media online audience’s reactions to specific news item of their interest. This section according to Chiluya and Ajiboye (2016, P. 40) ‘serves as a platform for public interactivity, which is comparable to the traditional media’s letter to the editor but different in the sense that they are usually unedited’. Nevertheless, the editors are often at liberty to remove any comment considered to be offensive or that runs afoul of their editorial guidelines (Unuabona 2012), thereby maintaining some level of censorship. Besides, the social media operators are also expected to filter off certain comments that go against the law governing the conversation like hate related posts in some countries.

Social media or Facebook feedback comments are deliberate comments and often related to the news stories the audiences are reacting to. The feedback comment may also entail intertextual references to other reported news stories and other readers’ posted comments; which make them a part of the communicative process, since they essentially serve as feedback (You, Lee, Oh, 2011). The Facebook feedback section of the mainstream media has therefore become a kind of virtual community where audience converge to discuss related issues thereby enhancing reader-reader communication as well as reader-mainstream media interaction. In some instances, audience serves as citizen journalist by providing updates to existing news or new angle to ongoing discussion. As such, mainstream media sometimes depend on such audience feedback to gather popular views, opinions and reactions from readers as active members of the public, especially during crises (Ajiboye 2013).

Besides the utilization of feedback section as a form of civic engagement by the audience, the platform has equally been utilized to educate one another and receive information or clarifications on pertinent issues in specific news. Audience could equally participate in public deliberation as they share their individual experiences and feelings on events and issues being discussed with other citizens (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). That notwithstanding, the volume and nature of reactions and comments a particular news item would generate from the online audience is largely a function of the level of topicality and nature of the news itself. For example, political or social topics as well as controversial stories in the news usually generate more comments than other forms of news (Tenenboim and Cohen, 2013). Similarly, when sensitive issues are discussed, Ajiboye (2013) notes that comments sometimes tend to be offensive and unrelated to the story.

To this end, the feedback platform has witnessed heated arguments among contributors on many occasions and some commenters have used the platforms to attack one another especially where two sides of an argument reveal different opinions or represent different group allegiances (Chiluwa and Ajiboye, 2016), as seen in some of the comments they analyzed which revealed ‘their writers’ position about social security; some even defended terrorism, while some generally assert their loyalty and support for or against national governments and institutions’ (p. 40).

As earlier noted, herdsmen attack has been part of the media and public agenda especially under the current political dispensation in Nigeria. Stories related to the attacks have equally attracted world-wide attention and varied reactions, most especially on the Internet as digital communication and social networks in particular continued to offer people the platform to express their concerns about social and political events that affect their wellbeing or the wellbeing of others around them (Smith 2010). From the Arab Spring to Brexit, and the prevailing social crusade against perceived social injustice across the world, news audience have been employing the opportunities available in online social media platform to reject repressive regimes and enthrone accepted ones; react against institutional crimes, terrorist attacks, and demand for greater protection against violent crimes. They are equally taking the advantage of the flexibility of social media platforms to demand for socio-political change that could impact positively on their lives.

A cursory look at the social media and Facebook particularly in Nigeria recently reflect an increasing awareness and renewed interest on issues related to herders/farmers clashes or herdsmen attacks in the country. Besides the citizen journalists who may happen to be a witness to herdsmen attack and report same on social media, often unprofessionally; the mainstream media depends on the social media to further spread their traditional media contents on herdsmen attacks which media audience contribute to and or share across different social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, etc thereby opening a vista of discursive deliberation on their feedback handle. In this study, focus is on Channels TV’s (the leading private TV channel in Nigeria) Facebook Wall. The Channels TV was founded in 1992, licensed in 1993 and started operation in 1995 with the aim of meeting the broadcasting yearnings of the Nigerian populace as well as to offer to her audience objective and fair news report. Currently, Channels TV has a listenership base of over 20 million people and heavy internet and social media presence comprising of 1,520,371 likes and 1,927,532 followers on Facebook; 1,170,000 subscribers on YouTube; 4,000,000 followers on Twitter; and 856,000 followers Instagram (<https://www.channelstv.com/aboutus/>, 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2020). How these population of online audience of Channels TV interact with the herdsmen attack news on Channels TV’s Facebook wall formed the thrust of this paper.

### **Research Method**

This paper employed content analysis. This was because content analysis enables the analysis of manifest contents of the selected comments. In doing so, themes and frames formed the content categories.

### **Sample Size and Procedure**

The data analysed were online feedback comments on five herdsmen attacks news on Zamfara, Taraba, Adamawa, Plateau, and Benue states between January 1<sup>st</sup> to July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018. The five stories were selected by searching through Channels TV Facebook posts within the period by adding the names of the five states (one at a time) to ‘Herdsmen Attack’. At the end, five herdsmen attack stories with the highest number of comments (one each from each of the five states) were selected as seen on table 1 below:

**Table 1: Herdsmen Attack News**

<b>Story</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Comments</b>	<b>Most Relevant</b>	<b>Reactions</b>
<i>Suspected herdsmen attack five communities in Adamawa, Taraba</i>	Adamawa	9/7/18	129	89	228

<i>Again, Benue Govt to hold mass burial for Herdsmen attack victims</i>	Benue	23/3//18	206	100	881
<i>Suspected herdsmen kill three in Plateau.</i>	Plateau	23/3/18	81	62	199
<i>Suspected Herdsmen Kill Four In Fresh Attack On Taraba Community</i>	Taraba	4/4/18	10	9	89
<i>We've Seen Too Much Blood! Nigerians Lament Killings After Zamfara Attack.</i>	Zamfara	2/16/18	74	51	308
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>		<b>500</b>	<b>311</b>	<b>1705</b>

Then a sample of 311 feedback comments on the selected stories were drawn from the 500 comments. The 311 comment represent the most relevant comments to the selected news stories as filtered by Facebook. These were taken from the Channels TV’s Facebook wall under the comment section of each of the stories.

**Unit of Measurement and Analysis**

For proper analysis, the unit of analysis was individual comments. The comments were coded using the following coding guide:

**CODING GUIDE**

**States**

Adamawa	1
Benue	2
Plateau	3
Taraba	4
Zamfara	5

**Frames**

War Frame	1
Peace Frame	2
Non-Align	3

**Perceived Motives**

Fulanization	1
Islamization	2
Political Conspiracy	3
Terrorism	4
Criminality	5
Reprisal	6
Resource Control/Communal clash	7
Anti-Fulani	8
Leadership/Security Failure	9
Disintegration	10
Non- story related	11
No clear motive	12

Source: Onoja, Bebenimibo, & Onoja (2020).

As seen in the coding guide above, each of the comments were assigned identification number starting from 1 to 312. This was automatically done by the Excel Microsoft used in coding the comments before transferring into the SPSS software for analysis. The five states were coded alphabetically into: Adamawa-1, Benue-2, Plateau-3, Taraba- 4, and Zamfara-5. The perceived motives (commenters’ perceived reason for the attack as could be seen in the comment) were coded into: Fulanization (when the comment identifies or blames Fulani ethnic group for overriding the settlers in the affected places)-1, Islamization (when the comment advances religion intolerance or Islamization as the reason for the attack)-2, Political conspiracy (when the comment blame politics for the attack)-3, Terrorism (when the comment sees the attack as act of terrorism)-4, Criminality (when the comment sees the attack as act of criminality)-5, Reprisal (when the comment describes the attack as a reprisal attack)-6, Resource Control/Communal clash (when the comment identifies the struggle over resources like water, land, etc as

the cause or when it describes it as communal clash)-7, Anti Fulani (when the comment describes the attack as an attack against the Fulani ethnic group)-8, Leadership failure/injustice/poor security (when the comment lists leadership failure, injustice or poor security as the cause of the attack)-9, Disintegration (when the comment blame the size of the country, the amalgamation, or not allowing secession as the cause of the attack)-10, Non-Story Related (when the comment does not relate to the story on which the comment is written)-11, and No clear Motive (when the comment did not mention any clear possible reason for the attack)-12.

Lastly, the comments were coded into dominant frames (this refers to how the comments were framed to promote peace or war) such as: War Frame (when the comment promotes conflict, war, reprisal attack etc)-1, Peace Frame (when the comment promotes peace or resolution of the conflict)-2, and Non-Align (when the comment neither promote war nor peace)-3. The intercoder reliability was determined using Hosti’s intercoder reliability formular:

$$R = \frac{2M}{N1+N2}$$

Where:

M= the number of coding decisions which the two coders agree.

N1 and N2= the number of coding decision by the first and the last coder respectively. Thus, the inter coder reliability was:

$$R = \frac{2(44)}{48+47} = 0.92$$

Therefore, the intercoder reliability (0.92 or 92%) was considered high meaning the coding was adequate and reliable.

### Method of Data Analysis

The data generated were subjected to both descriptive analysis (frequency and percentage) as well as thematic analysis. Under thematic analysis, the researchers identified dominant themes in the selected comments and evaluated them within the context of this study. In applying the thematic analysis, the researcher employed inductive approach by starting with a ‘precise content and then move to broader generalizations’ (Patton, 1990).

### Results/Discussion of Findings

Table 2: Dominant Themes Identified in Online Audiences’ Comments on Herdsmen Attack News

Factors	Adamawa		Benue		Plateau		Taraba		Zamfara		Total	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Fulanization	8	9	16	16	6	10	1	11	2	4	33	11
Islamization	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	0.3
Politics	10	11	19	19	3	5	1	11	10	20	43	14
Terrorism	6	7	2	2	3	5	0	0	0	0	11	6
Criminality	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	0	1	2	3	1
Reprisal	2	2	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	3	1
Resource Control	1	1	1	1	2	3	0	0	0	0	3	1
Anti-Fulani	5	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	2
Poor Leadership	18	20	0	6	1	2	0	0	9	18	28	9
Disintegration	5	6	0	0	1	2	1	11	3	6	9	3
No Clear Idea Expressed	32	36	62	62	37	57	5	56	25	49	161	52
Non-Story Related	2	2	0	0	5	8	1	11	1	2	9	3
Total	89	100	100	100	62	10	9	100	51	10	311	100

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Table 2 above present the data generated on the dominant themes that were advanced by the commenters on the selected herdsmen attacks news reported by Channels TV on her Facebook wall. According to the table, even though, majority of the comments (52%) did not express and clear idea or theme, 45% of the comments clearly identified major themes such as political conspiracy (14%), the drive to Fulanize the country (11%), poor leadership/poor security/injustice (9%), and terrorism (6%). Other themes like compulsory integration of the country (3%), hatred for Fulani (2%), struggle for resource/land control (1%), reprisal (1%), criminality (1%), and the drive to Islamize the country by the Fulani herdsmen (0.3%) only resonated among marginal number of the comments as seen in the table. This implies that four major themes (political conspiracy, Fulanization, poor leaders/poor security/injustice, and terrorism) dominated audiences comments on the herdsmen attacks news reported by Channels TV and are discussed thematically bellow.

**Political conspiracy**

Political conspiracy was alluded to by 14% of the commenters as seen in table 2 above. This was exemplified in many ways. For instance, one of the commenters described the killings as ‘...sponsored killing in the quest for power targeted at zones with vote advantages aimed at selling the current government as bad...’ Some equally attributed the killings to opposition party, People Democratic Party (PDP) and their members. For instance, one of them opines that: ‘I said it before that disappearing of Kanu [the Indigenous People of Biafra, IPOB, leader] into the thin air and [former President] Jonathan’s silence call for suspicious. if thorough investigation was done I believe whole heartedly that the duo has hand in this killing. no fire without smoke’. However, another commenter would rather describe the attackers as ‘PDP looters militias’.

Also, of interest in the explanation of the theme of political conspiracy is the comment posted by one of the commenters as seen below:

Buhari is a fool at night but wiser in d morning. The man is gradually achieving his target since Nigerian opposed his amnesty plans for Northerners. He has changed tactic by sprinkling them into groups. Boko haram and Fulani herdsmen. Boko haram has turned a Samaritan shuttle bus who operate pick and drop without ransoms be paid. Later FG will call both the kidnappers and kidnapping to villas for presidential dinner, and possibly ransoms negotiations and amnesty to US or UK. Now I ask, when would the so-called South West, South East and South, South seen or realize that this games by the Northerners politicians is yelling a significant result for them? Please let wake-up before things get worse for us and our upcoming generation.

This finding supports earlier findings by Enor et al’s (2019) and Ahmed’s (2018). For instance, Ahmed (2018, p. 54) argued that: “not only are Herdsmen attacks assumed to be political weapon to either bring down former President Goodluck Jonathan or to enthrone the President Muhammad Buhari (depending on the position one adopts), it could be engineered for the purpose of monetary allocations, just as the amnesty situation of militancy later became”. In the same vein, Enor et al (2019, p.279) assert that ‘herdsmen attacks are... political violence sponsored by some elements within the country, north or south of the divide, in other to advance their premeditated and unscrupulous agenda however defined’. The political conspiracy theories if not well managed portend some implication for the nation’s security as they undermine the peace, unity and ethnic cohesion in Nigeria.

**Fulanization of Nigeria**

Fulanization is an ideological belief which states that the Fulani ethnic group has been working secretly towards expanding their geographical territory and control over places that were not hitherto under their control. It is a process that has its root in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jihad war in the early history of Northern Nigeria. Going through the generated data, the Hausa/Fulani were framed as having an undisclosed



motive to expand their territory across the affected states in the country, hence the killing of Non-Fulanis across the five states and any other part of the country. This was seen in 11% of the 311 comments analysed in this study. This ideology was further advanced at the comment section of Channels TV's Facebook wall as seen in extracts like: "*they [Fulani] will soon wipe out Benue and take over your land.*"; "*Buhari want to conquer Benue state for his Fulani clan*" and "*Buhari wants to deliver Benue to foolani people!! that's the agenda*".

The Fulanization ideology in this regard lies in the perception that herdsmen are predominantly Fulani and the victims of their attacks are usually non-Fulani; the President of the country (Muhammadu Buhari) is by ethnicity, a Fulani man and his security architecture which seemed to have failed to address the situation is predominantly Fulani. More so, the patrons of Herdsmen's largest umbrella body (MACBAN) are Fulani, including the President who owns a herd and was once the patron of MACBAN. Therefore, it is assumed that there is an ethnic conspiracy by the Fulanis, from top to the herders, to use violence to strike fear among these farming communities in order to lay claim to land resources (Enor et al, 2019).

In some instances, the commenters blamed the North Central states like Benue and Plateau where the attacks were more for supporting the Hausa/Fulani's political dominance agenda by participating in the 1967-1970 civil war against the Southern Nigeria. As narrated by one of the commenters, "The Middle Belters who were used by the north to commit the most atrocious acts on the Biafrans have now been told in clear and unmistakable terms that they are not northerners after all and therefore cannot be protected by the Hausa/Fulani controlled security agencies. More mass burials will follow if the needful is not done" and "Lol mass burial in d zoo Benue all d zoo for killing Biafra's, now their Hausa brothers pay them back with death".

The narratives above were in support of the role the Northern Nigeria were believed to have played in the 1967 to 1970 civil war that claimed the lives of many people from the South Eastern part of the country. As far as most people from the Ibo dominated South East are concerned, the civil war was part of the bid by the Northern Hausa/Fulani to retain their political dominance in the country while the Yoruba dominated South West were betrayers who betrayed the Ibos along the line in favour of the Hausa/Fulani. To the South-Easterners still, the North central which has witnessed the highest level of herdsmen attacks was used as a stooge by the Hausa/Fulani to win the civil war. To this end, the ill fate that has befallen them through their 'political lord' (Hausa/Fulani) was more or less their reward for killing the 'Biafrans' in the civil war.

In view of this, the Fulani as an ethnic identity have been extremely securitized and are "endangered species" within and around areas most hit by the herdsmen attacks. Obviously, the security implication is that if not well managed, herdsmen conflict has the potential to set-off, within the country, an ethnic crisis with grave security consequences.

### **Poor Leadership/Poor Security**

The idea of leadership failure and inefficient security system reverberated through 9% of the 311 comments analysed. Commenters with this view questioned the sincerity of the federal government in bringing an end to the menace and so in some instances, accused the President of being the brain behind the attacks. For instance, one of them said he was 'so confused... not sure we have a government in this country'. This assertion is further substantiated by the narratives from other commenters who lamented that it was 'very unfortunate in a country where a leader cannot protect lives of his citizens, ...#we have no leader yet'; 'People are losing their lives daily, yet the government is not concerned about that, but they are busy sending troops with sophisticated weapons to Ekiti state where there's no crisis, hmm 9ja na like this we go dey go [meaning Nigerians, is it how we will remain?]'; thereby calling on all Nigerians 'to go down on bended knees and beg this government to work, be effective for once fight this criminals...'

Not even the governors in the affected states were spared from the blame. For instance, a commenter who observed that 'security is the duty of both the state government and the federal

government’, bemoan governor Ortom of Benue state who he said, ‘talks as if he has no part to play in the security of Benue state,...’. Similarly, another one lamented that ‘Organizing the best Mass burial is the legacy that governor Ortom will leave for Benue people to remember him as their past governor’. No wonder, one of them said ‘Na Ortom matter tire me pass oo. So that man cannot protect his people? He has decided to be doing undertaker job. Gov Ortom the undertaker’.

The security agents in Nigeria were equally repeatedly implicated in the herdsmen attack as seen in some of their narratives. Some relied on the opportunity to further the argument for state and community police. That the security personnel especially the police and the Nigerian Army were complicit in the attacks were clearly articulated in some of the narratives by commenters who reported ‘Influx of strange Fulanis in truck loads offloading in Takum and Ussa LGAs of Taraba state unleashing cows into cassava farms while allegedly protected by soldiers...’ Similarly, one observed that ‘Benue communities have turn to slaughter houses in the presence of law enforcement agencies deployed by the president to protect live and property...’ And another said ‘This IGP is the most wicked, stupid and foolish police officer in the history of Nigeria. His own policing is the protection of criminals, Fulani herdsmen and Rigging of elections’.

To this end, some of the commenters believed that ‘State police is the only solution to all these killings. Each state should be in charge of the security of their state. Not waiting for one olodo [fool]in Abuja to give order while people are being killed’. One of the commenters however called for community police instead. According to him, ‘Benue people una be mumu [you are foolish], why all of una [you] no carry guns, fight anybody even the army self...Nonsense’, and another thinks ‘Buhari should allow local vigilante to protect Benue people’. On the other extreme, some commenters believed that legalizing arm would solve the problem and urged the government to ‘Declare state of emergency in naija [Nigeria] and legalise arms for self defense to/by the defenceless citizens.’

**Attacks as act of Terrorism**

Terrorism is the process where an individual or group of individuals threaten or engage in act of threat to compel the target into submission or giving up his or her right. Many of the commenters constructed the Fulani ethnic group as terror group that should be handled like the Boko Haram and Independent People of Biafra (IPOB). For instance, one of the commenters sarcastically said Nigerians should ‘Clap for buhari and his Fulani headsmen terrorist in action’. The claim that the attackers (Fulani) were terrorists were therefore advanced by careful selection of names like ‘Fulani terrorist’, ‘Fulani herdsmen’, ‘useless Hausa/Fulani’, ‘animal in human skin’ ‘suicide bombers’, ‘national disaster’, ‘vampire’, among others to describe the herdsmen in some of the comments while selected positive words like ‘innocent people’ ‘victims’ and so on were used more frequently in describing the other people with whom the herdsmen often clashed with. The use of such nomenclatures could invoke image of terrorism in the minds of the readers. This finding supports Global Terrorism Index (2016) earlier submission that herdsmen were the fourth deadliest terror organization in the world behind ISIL, Boko Haram and Al Qaeda

**Table 3: Dominant Frame**

Frames	Adamawa		Benue		Plateau		Taraba		Zamfara		Total	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
War	26	29.1	47	47	5	8.1	0	0.0	10	19.6	78	25.1
Peace	4	4.5	19	19	1	1.6	0	0.0	2	3.9	26	8.4
Neutral	68	76.4	34	34	56	90.3	9	100	39	76.5	207	66.6
Total	89	100	100	100	62	100	9	100	51	100	311	100

The data in table 3 represent the frames used by Channels TV Facebook’s audience in their comments on herdsmen attack news stories reported by Channels TV on her Facebook wall. As seen in the table, while majority of the commenters (66.6%) were neutral, there were more war frame (those promoting war or reprisal attacks) (25.1%) than peace frame (those promoting peace and resolution) (8.4%). At the level of individual states, comments on Benue state’s herdsmen attack news story has the highest percentage of

war frame (47%) followed by Adamawa (29.1%), Zamfara (19.6%), and Plateau (8.1%) while Taraba has none.

As such, there were actual call for reprisal attacks and violent means of resolution of the crisis as seen in comments like: 'This is reprisal attacks... More reprisal attacks will come if they attack Fulani's camp again' and 'That is a sweet revenge do me I do you God no vest'; and 'Make una kill una selves!' when discussing Zamfara and Adamawa attacks. Commenting on Benue incident, some of the commenters also emphasized the need for reprisal attack as seen in comments like: 'my car spoiled somewhere in Benue last month then I knew them to be women in men uniform...comfortable with the intimidation of the Fulanis instead of waking up from sleep...' and 'I advise all indigenous population in this British contraption call Nigeria to rise up and emancipate their people, self-determination is the solution, the earlier the better';

This implies that while majority of the comments on herdsmen attacks were neutral and did not use frames that could contribute to peace or conflict, a number of them promoted war and reprisal attacks in their comments more than they promoted peace. Such frame however could portend great security implications for the country. This submission is in tandem with Elgin's (1995) assertion that violence exerted by individuals or nations, was often preceded by some form of violent language. This is because, language, carefully chosen, can mask violence, and when it does not, is an active part of violence (Chiluwa and Ajiboye, 2016). Therefore, in negotiating a more peaceful human relationships in situation like the current Farmers-Herders clashes, Taylor and Hardman (2004), recommend a conscious attention to language use.

## **Conclusions**

This study identified political conspiracy, Fulanization of Nigeria, poor leadership/poor security, and Terrorism as the dominant themes in the audiences' comments on herdsmen attacks news reported on Channels TV Facebook wall within the period under study; while compulsory national integration of the country, hatred for Fulani ethnic group, struggle for resource/land control, reprisal, criminality, and the drive to Islamize the country by the Fulani herdsmen were themes that only resonated among marginal number of the comments. Whereas, most of the comments used neutral frames in constructing their comments, a number of them employed war frame thereby calling for reprisal attacks or outright war against the Fulani ethnic group in Nigeria.

The paper therefore concludes that audience comments on herdsmen attack news in Nigeria was laden with negative emotions and representation of key issues which could worsen the security situation in the country while undermining peaceful co-existence among the various opposing groups in the country. The paper therefore opines that rather than sitting on the fence at a time of violent conflict or promoting conflict, war and reprisal attacks; online news audiences should employ the discursive features of social media to sue for peace and amicable resolutions by advancing objective, solution-driven and nationalistic goals in their comments on herdsmen attacks and other related vices in the country. Only through such approach will the country attain her national security objectives and continue to live together in peace and harmony.

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