

Media Framing of Herdsmen-Farmers Conflict in Nigeria

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Abstract

There have been series of farmer-herdsmen clashes in various parts of Nigeria which have claimed several lives, displaced indigenes and destroyed crops on farmlands. Consequently, the media have been reporting these clashes. This study sought to investigate how the media framed the clashes between farmers and herders in Nigeria. Using framing theory, the study examined the story genres and the dominant frames employed by the four selected newspapers (Guardian, Daily Sun, Vanguard, The Nation) between November 2017 and April 2018. The newspapers were purposively selected and content analysed. The continuous week formula was used and each week was selected for the dailies making it a total of 42 editions. Findings show that Daily Sun had the highest stories on farmers-herdsmen clash and the story genre that was mostly used was the straight news format. It was concluded that the newspapers gave the farmers-herdsmen clash enough coverage and therefore recommended that grazing reserves should be built for the herdsmen.

Introduction

The Fulanis constitute the major breeders of cattle which is the chief source of meat in Nigeria. This main source of meat is the most available and a cheap supply of animal proteins consumed by Nigerians. The Fulanis own over 90% of the nation's livestock population which accounts for one-third of agricultural GDP and 3.2% of the nation's GDP (Eniola, 2007). The Fulanis who are dominant in the Sahel region are the most numerous and best known of all the pastoral groups in Nigeria. Local community security, safety and development are paramount to enhance governance and increase or decrease agitation for control of resources as well as encroachment on the rights of others. The above have implications for survival and struggles between or amongst communities.

There have been conflicts between herdsmen and farmers since the beginning of agriculture with increased or decreased intensity and frequency depending on economic, environmental and other factors. Conflicts between farmers and herdsmen have become a

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common feature of economic livelihood in West Africa (Tonah, 2006). According to Schama (1996), land, crops, livestock, water resources and vegetal resources play a key role in the development, maintenance and projection of socio-economic strength of a society. Hence, resource ownership and its utilization have resulted to disagreements involving man since time immemorial. Land has remained a great source of disagreement among Fulani herdsmen and farmers for agricultural use. The types of disagreements for survival between the Fulani herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria are different in form and intensity from one community to another. These disagreements are provoked by social and economic factors among Fulani herdsmen and farmers. These disagreements have constituted serious threats to the means of survival and livelihoods of both the farmers and herdsmen and what both groups are stubbornly protecting and projecting (Bello, 2013).

Another major cause of the clashes between farmers and herdsmen is the straying of cattle into farmlands that consume crops without the authority of the farm owners and destroy some crops while straying. The farm owners in annoyance harm the cattle which stray into their farmlands.

The conflict is becoming fierce and increasingly wide spread in Nigeria largely due to low technology employed in production activities (crop and animal) that are necessitated by increasing human population (Gefu and Kolawale, 2005; Fasona and Omojala, 2002). Some of these rural settlements have placed farmers in a situation that compel them to live with the Fulani herdsmen. These herdsmen still practise the free range system (grazing) moving from one place to another in search of pasture and water. This usually forces them to migrate from far north to Benue State where both pasture and water resources can be found. This has increased the competition for arable land between Fulani herdsmen and farmers resulting to hostility social friction among the two groups. Conflict between farmers and nomadic herders in Nigeria especially in Benue State usually results to loss of lives and properties (Tenuche and Ifatimehim, 2009). "Violence between herders and farmers has escalated killing more than 1,300 people since January 2018. The conflict has evolved from spontaneous reactions to provocations and now to deadlier planned attacks particularly in Benue, Plateau, Adamawa, Nasarawa and Taraba States." (Relief Web, 2018). The most affected States are the middle belt States like Taraba, Benue, Plateau (ThisDay, 2015). The majority of farmer-herder clashes have occurred between Muslim Fulani herdsmen and Christian peasants, exacerbating ethno-religious hostilities (Baca, 2015).

The boko haram terrorists could have a role to play in these frequent conflicts between herdsmen and farmers. Some of the boko haram terrorists who have been displaced from their strongholds have taken over the forest and started re-strategising. They displace the Fulani herdsmen in the bushes and become the new bushmasters. They also journey to conventional hot spots in the country like Plateau State, Southern Kaduna and Benue State and operate there. These places become easy targets as there had been a strained relationship between the communities and Fulani neighbours. Also in these settings, the Boko Haram terrorists manifest as redeemers to the herdsmen against the supposed assault of the communities. Manipulation of the parties open by rustling the cattle of the herdsmen and convincing the herdsmen that it was the handiwork of the host communities (Okonkwo, 2018). According to Okonkwo Kenneth (2018) also, the naive herdsmen would in turn provide intelligence for them and persuade their juvenile children to support them in the process. They use this trick to coach the younger herdsmen and co-opt them into their terrorist gang. When their plans are perfected, they unleash co-ordinated, unprovoked, guerrilla warfare style attacks on the host communities. They rape females, kill children and

men, and steal valuables from their victims. When the host communities wake up to the intensity of destruction on their communities, they suspect the Fulani herdsmen without knowing it was the work of the terrorists. The host communities then revenge by killing the innocent, defenceless herdsmen and their cattle thereby confirming to the herdsmen that they needed the services of the terrorists for protection. The cycle of violence thus continues!

When they get to the South, they mix up with the local criminals, militants, cultists and start kidnapping and armed robbery operations to loot the resources of the people. They provide the local criminals with sophisticated weapons. They are chiefly domiciled in the forests spread in the South.

One of the functions of the mass media is agenda-setting. The nature of coverage given to issues by the media makes people see such issues as important. "The more the media place emphasis on an issue or event, the more people see such an issue or event as important" (Agbanu 2013, p. 113). Also McQuail and Windahl (1981, p.62) posit that the mass media simply by the fact of paying attention to some issues and neglecting others will have an effect on public opinion. People will tend to know about those things which the mass media deal with and adopt the order of priority assigned to different issues. Audiences not only learn about public issues and other matters through the media, they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the mass media place upon it.

Political, economic and security agenda are set by the mass media through news coverage, editorials, opinions, commentaries, etc for the people and such issues as determined by the media dominates public discussion. The breach of security by the herdsmen is a major concern for Nigeria as anyone could fall a victim. The silence of our armed forces to this menace is also another concern for Nigerians. Lives, properties, crops have all been destroyed. It is against this backdrop that this study sought to (i) determine the story genres used in reporting herdsmen-farmers clash between November 2017 – April 2018. (ii) ascertain the volume of reportage given to this menace by Nigerian dailies. (iii) identify the frames employed by Nigerian dailies in reporting the stories.

Literature Review

Several scholars have studied farmers-herdsmen clashes from different perspectives like economy, security, religion. Nte, 2016 conducted a study on Fulani herdsmen and communal conflicts: climate change as precipitator. The study found that there is a relationship between climate change and communal conflicts caused by Fulani herdsmen. Nte, therefore, concludes that Fulani herdsmen are completely dependent on pastures which the desertification of the Sahel region has depleted and this makes them go all out to get these pastures thereby making them susceptible to resistance which they fight back and communal conflicts tantamount. The study recommended that government should come up with policies to create grazing reserves and dams for pasture and water in states that are predominantly Fulani's so that they don't stray long distances in search of pastures, which degenerates into conflicts.

Also, Ofuoku and Isife in 2010 did a study in Delta state where they investigated the causes, effects, and resolution of farmers' nomadic cattle herders' conflict. They found the secrets behind such conflicts and proffered solutions for future crisis. The authors employed the survey design method to sample 80 farmers and 20 Nomadic cattle herders from 8 communities. They unveiled the causes to include the destruction of crops, contamination of streams by cattle, zero grazing land, disregard for local traditional authorities, female harassment, harassment of nomads by host communities' youths others are bush burning,

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cattle theft and straying of cattle. Ofuoku and Isife recommended that the mechanism of local development plan should be established to reduce such conflicts or face-offs. They also suggested that compensation is agreed upon by parties (Farmer and Herder) at the local level.

In another study carried out by Tenuche and Ifatimehin in 2009, the duo assessed the resource conflict among farmers and Fulani herdsman and the implication for resource sustainability. The study describes the relationship between farmers and Fulani herdsman and the conflict of resource sustainability for the communities. The researchers argued that the trampling by the hooves of herds of cattle which leads to the compacting of the soil of farmland, destruction of crops by the herdsman, causes restiveness and it is understood that these conflicts have their roots in the land tenure system, where settlers and indigenes contest over land and misplaced development strategies of the government. The study concluded that the government should ensure proper land tenure system and provide a clear policy on grazing land.

For his part, Imo Chukwuechefulam in 2017, conducted a study on the demographic implications of nomadic herdsman and farmers clashes in Nigeria. The study revealed that Nigeria's population is dynamic and growing at a very rapid rate compared to land that is relatively static which constitutes the most important cause of pressure and demand for food resources. Whenever violent clashes occur, the nomadic herdsman attack and kill scores of villagers in the course of a contest for grazing fields and water and in most cases this action will necessitate reprisal attacks. Chukwuechefulam, discovered that this scenario has, time without number, thrown up tribal, ethnic, regional, religious and political sentiments that threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria. The study recommended that government should ensure that those involved in the allocation of land for farming should imbibe responsibility and not allocate along cattle route or over grazing lands to avoid encroachment by nomadic herdsman. The author argues that this will enhance productivity and achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 2, and 6, which emphasize the need to adequately achieve food security and sustainable management of resources for the teeming Nigeria population.

Rodney Ciboh (2017) posits that attacks by herdsman are understood to have become sophisticated in dimensions, with the use of new types of weapons and communication devices. The study revealed that the North Central region of the country is the hotbed of these conflicts, though the problem remains spread across different parts of the country. Ciboh argues that in Nigeria, media reportage inter-group conflicts has been associated with unprofessional acts of sensationalism, considerations of context, accuracy others are fairness, balance and completeness, integrity and responsibility. This study uses the content analysis as method for studying newspaper editorials and found evidence of such characterisations in newspaper framing of these armed attacks. The study employed descriptive method and in-depth interviews with journalists involved in reporting these conflicts. The study contributes to public understanding of newspaper reporting of specific social problems which relatively serves purposes of peace building, national security and development.

In their study, where they investigated newspaper coverage of the herdsman-farmers conflict in central Tiv Land, Benue State, Nigeria in 2017, Celestine and Coleman found that indeed that newspapers in Nigeria gave coverage to the issue, however, it was more episodic as it covered the issue as it happened and paid little or no attention to the victims of the conflicts. The study also showed that 71.3 percent of the stories on the conflict were published on the inside page. The duo therefore recommended that Nigerian newspapers should refrain from episodic reportage and set a proper agenda for the Nigeria public on conflicts. The gap in the literature reviewed is that the different studies talk about the

causative factors of the conflict and the coverage given to the issue. This study seeks to look into the frames within which these reports were made.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on the Framing theory. Framing according to Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) is based on the premises that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by its audience. According to McQuail (2010), framing is a term that has two pertinent meanings. Firstly, news content is shaped and contextualized by journalists within frames that are familiar and some latent structure of meaning. The second concerns itself with the effect of framing on the public. Mcquail argues that the audience adopt the frames of reference offered by journalists and see the world in like manner.

The theory was originated by Goffman in 1974 as cited by Tuchman in McQuail (2010, p.380). Goffman stated that a frame is needed to organize otherwise fragmentary items of experience or information. The idea of a frame in relation to news has been widely and loosely used in place of terms such as frame of reference, context, theme or even news angle. Entman (1993) cited in McQuail avers that framing consists of selection and salience. Entman went on to sum up framing by saying that frames define problems, diagnose causes, and make moral judgements as well as suggests remedies. Having stated the above, the theory houses the following assumptions that are vital to media studies as listed by <http://www.communicationstudies.com>:

1. Journalists select the topics they will present and decide how they will be presented. This determines the issues audiences think about and how they think about them.
2. Audiences interpret information through their own frames. Audiences' frames may overlap or contradict the media's frames.
3. Frames are reinforced every time they are evoked, whether positively or negatively.
4. Frame building is a systematic process that occurs over time.

The theory is appropriate for the study in that it helps in the defining the relevant frames within which the newspapers have reported the farmer-herder conflict that has seen to the death of many innocent Nigerians. There have been several studies that have adopted this theory such as (Van Gorp, 2005; McNair, 1988 and Horsti, 2003) in McQuail 2010.

Data and Methods

The method adopted for this study was content analysis. Content analysis is a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. In this study, the variables measured were the number of times the selected dailies reported on the Fulani-Herdsmen clash between November 2017 to April 2018, the story genres used and the frames used in the reportage.

Four Nigerian dailies (Guardian, Vanguard, Daily Sun, and The Nation) were selected purposively because they are national newspapers and widely circulated. Their deep investigative nature of reporting informed the choice of these newspapers. The content of the newspapers from November 2017 to April 2018 were analysed. This period was chosen because it was the peak of attacks and counter attacks between farmers and Fulani herdsmen. The continuous week formula was used in selecting a continuous week for each paper making it a total of 42 editions. The 42 editions were all used and out of the 42 editions, 84 stories were gotten. The units of analysis are straight news, interview, feature and opinion articles. The data for this study was analysed using frequency, tables and charts.

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The following frames were used in this study:

Security Frame: The security frame is defined as articles whose major focus is on the killings and counter-killings between the herdsmen and farmers.

Business Frame: This frame will involve articles that major on the loss of livelihoods of the farmers who live on agricultural produce.

Religious Frame: This frame is seen as any story that emphasizes on the clash as a Muslim-Christian clash, stories that see the clash as a way to cleanse Christians in order to Islamize the country.

Political Frame: This frame incorporates stories that report on blames and counter blames between political parties and groups, affected regions blaming the government and faulting its lackadaisical attitude towards loss of lives.

Land / Agriculture: This frame focuses on stories of land-grabbing, land dispute, destruction of crops, pollution of streams by cattle.

Economy: This frame includes stories that report on the consequences these clashes in the middle-belt have on the economy of the country.

Results

a. Volume of Coverage

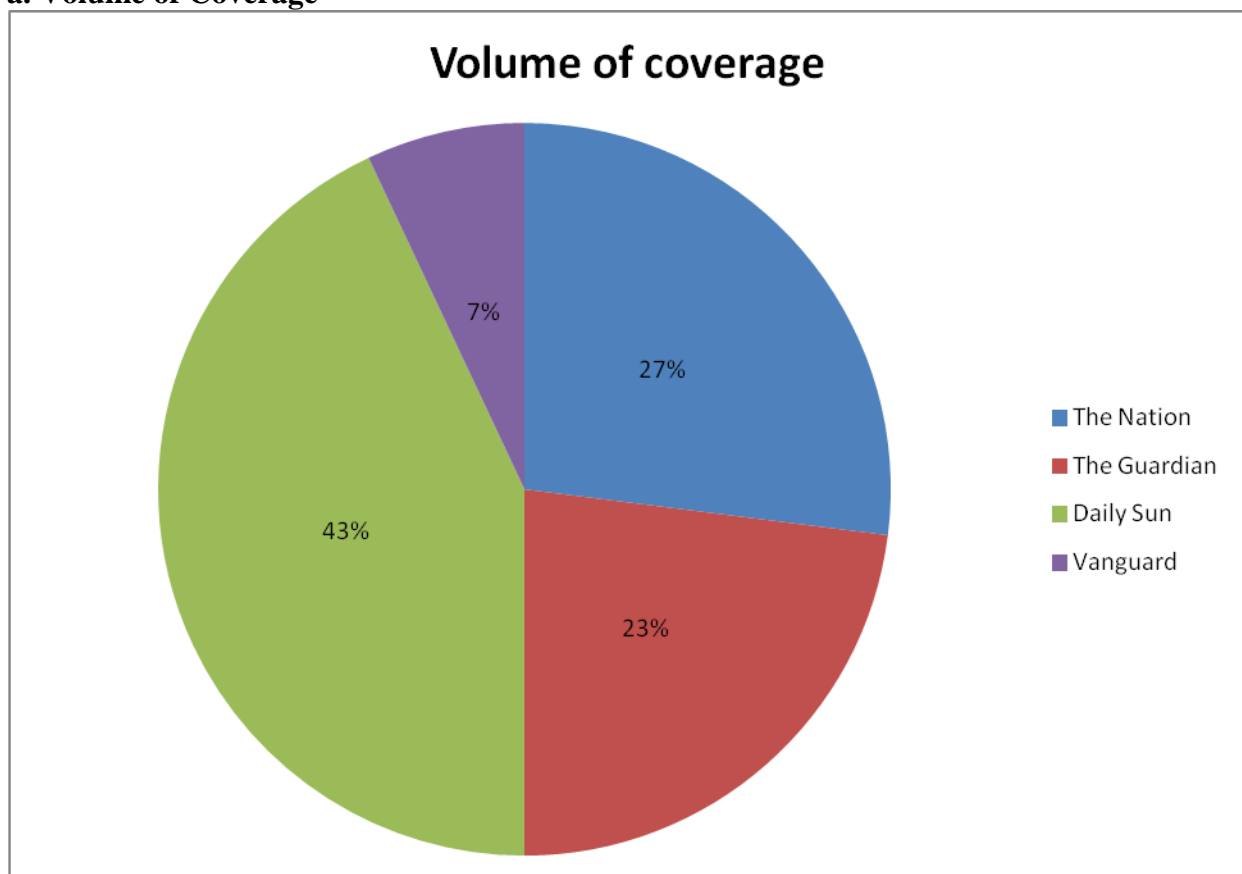


Figure 1: Frequency of coverage

From 42 editions studied, 84 stories were gotten from the selected dailies. Daily Sun had the highest stories on farmers-herdsmen clash with 36 (43%) stories.

b. Story genres

Story genres used in reporting the herdsmen-farmers clash from November 2017 – April 2018.

Story Genres	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Straight News	68	81
Interview	4	5
Feature	4	5
Opinion Articles	8	9
Total	84	100

The dominant story genre was straight news story

c. Frames

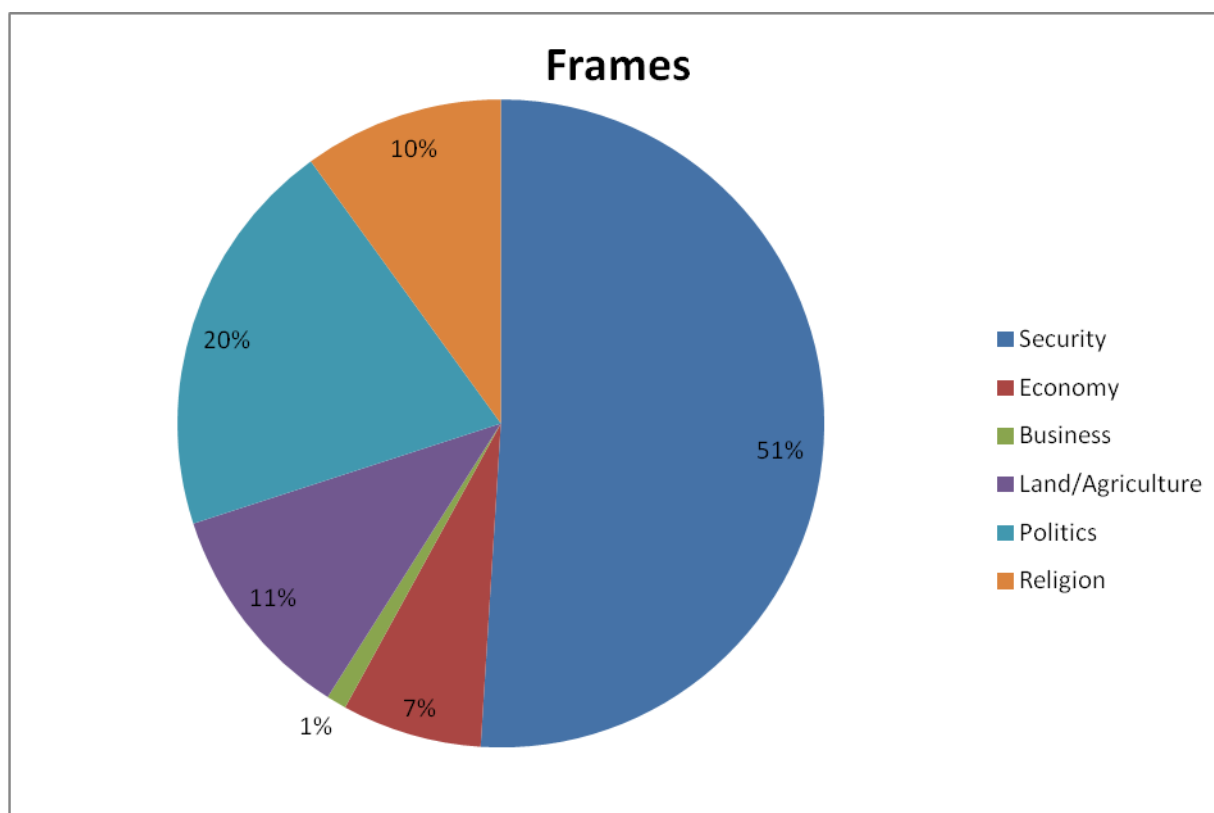


Figure 2: Type of frames used in reporting the Fulani herdsmen-farmers clash.

The result as presented in the chart above shows that security frame was the most used, followed by politics.

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Discussion

There were numerous reports on farmers-herdsmen clash. The findings show that the newspapers gave sufficient reportage to the farmer-herder clash within the period under review. The Daily Sun gave more coverage to the issue with 43% and Vanguard with the least coverage at 7%. The findings also show that the bulk of the reportage was on straight news with 81% and the least being interview and feature at 5% each.

The clash between farmers and herdsmen has degenerated from land possession to unwanted killings. These killings are as results of reprisal attacks, battle for supremacy in the regions and vendetta as shown in the security frame. It is now a mini-war in the middle-belt between farmers and herdsmen as seen in the security frame which was the most dominant. Rodney Ciboh (2017) lends credence to this in his study where it was found that attacks by herdsmen have taken a sophisticated dimension with the use of new types of weapons and communication gadgets. The killings have also developed a religious angle as the mini-war is now seen between Christians and Muslims as shown in the frame for religion. The target of the Fulani herdsmen being priests has shown that this has gone beyond land grabbing and now a religious war (Jihad).

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), yesterday, warned that war seems to be looming in Nigeria and called on the Federal Government to address the spate of killings and attack on innocent citizens before it degenerates into a religious war. CAN urged Nigerians to fight and defend themselves when attacked by the rampaging herdsmen and asked the international community to observe that Nigeria is on a free fall. General Secretary of CAN, Rev. Musa Asake while briefing newsmen in Abuja alleged that Islamic religious extremists in Nigeria, backed by powerful and influential people in government, with impunity commit acts of treason that jeopardise the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Nigeria. He condemned the inability of the President Muhammadu Buhari administration to curb and stop the murderous activities of Islamic insurgents in the country. (The Guardian, Saturday, April 28, page 6, 2018).

The audience may construe the above excerpt to be a religious war because of the way it was characterized in the news report. This agrees with Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) that posit that framing is based on the premises that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by its audience.

Some religious clerics from both faiths have condemned the act of bloodshed. Muslim clerics have accused farmers of cattle rustling while Christian clerics have accused the herdsmen of taking laws into their hands and unnecessary killings even in the church. As seen in a study by Ofuoku and Isife (2010), some causes of these killings are: cattle rustling, disregard for local traditional authorities among others.

The economy is also at the mercy of the ongoing war in the middle-belt as most crops destroyed on the farmlands are cash crops. These crops are exchanged for money in the process of selling to other States and sometimes outside the country which boosts the economy of the country. Families in the middle-belt whose businesses rely on these cash crops have lost their businesses to these herdsmen and left without any source of livelihood. Some farmers are scared to visit their farms and harvest their crops for sale as women are

raped and men are butchered by the herdsmen. Destruction of crops by the cattle has not only led to the collapse of agricultural businesses but is gradually leading to a famine. Farmers have vacated their farmlands and abodes for safety to neighbouring communities. Farming activities have ceased! These effects in Benue State as the food basket of the nation has a consequence of shortage of food supply on other States.

The killings have also taken a political dimension. Blames and counter-blames between political parties, political groups and regions in the country are ongoing. Groups like Ohaneze Ndi Igbo and others in the South-East, South-South and South-West have kicked against open grazing. They have accused the government of arming these herdsmen with the intention of cleansing some tribes in the country in the guise of grazing. Echoing this thought against open grazing in his study, Nte (2016) recommended that the government should come up with policies to create grazing reserves and dams for pastures and water in States that are predominantly Fulani's so that they do not stray long distances in search of pastures encroaching on other people's lands which causes conflict.

Conclusion

The clash between the herdsmen and farmers is claiming lots of lives. The newspapers gave the Fulani herdsmen – farmers enough coverage. The most used story genre was the straight news format. This shows that the media reported the events as it occurred. The government needs to come to the aid of those in the middle-belt as it is obvious they are losing their lives on a daily basis as seen in Rodney Ciboh (2017) the use of sophisticated weapons and communication gadgets by these herdsmen. Nte (2016) in his recommendation suggests grazing reserves (ranches) for these herdsmen as moving about through communities is likely to cause clashes.

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