

Media Representations of Farmer-Herder Clashes in Selected Nigerian Newspaper Headlines

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Abstract

The paper investigates how media narratives shape the understanding of conflicts between farmers and herders in Nigeria. It aims to analyze the portrayal of these clashes and the involved social actors through the lens of selected Nigerian newspapers. The objectives include examining the representation of farmer-herder conflicts in mainstream media and evaluating the thematic concerns in media discourses surrounding this issue and their implications for news consumers. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study compiled data from both primary and secondary sources, focusing on two prominent newspaper outlets: *Vanguard* and *Leadership*. A careful selection of twenty headlines, with ten from each publication, was analyzed purposively to ensure relevance to the research objectives. The framework for analysis was grounded in Marquis' (2015) Media Priming Theory, which facilitated the exploration of various priming types, including semantic, associative, contextual, and repetitive priming. The findings indicate that farmer-herder clashes have been ongoing and highly destructive, leading to significant consequences. These include substantial human and economic tolls, the rise of ethnic and religious militias, heightened inter-ethnic tensions, and detrimental impacts on Nigeria's agricultural productivity. Furthermore, the study indicates that media portrayals are often ideologically slanted, leading to biased representations of the conflicts. Specifically, herders are frequently depicted as violent and destructive, without adequate contextual understanding of their perspectives or circumstances. In conclusion, the study advocates for a more factual representation of conflicts in the media, urging journalists and news outlets to prioritise objectivity over ideological biases. It encourages readers to critically assess media narratives to avoid misconceptions and foster a more nuanced understanding of Nigeria's farmer-herder crisis.

Keywords: Farmer-herders crisis, media representation, media prime theory, news headlines

Introduction

The literature on farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria is diverse. Existing literature concerning farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria presents a multi-faceted analysis of these disputes' underlying causes and dynamics. For instance, Odunlami (2017) investigated the themes and key voices in newspaper coverage of the farmer-herder crisis, asserting that sensational reporting can provoke heightened political responses

and contribute to the politicisation of the conflict. Olabode and Victoria (2018) analysed how newspapers frame these disputes, finding that existing narratives may intensify ethnic tensions within Nigeria. Gever and Essien (2019) delved into the nature and tone of media coverage, with findings indicating a predominantly negative portrayal of herders and their actions toward local communities.

This study accentuates the necessity for a more balanced and constructive approach in media reporting to facilitate conflict de-escalation, advocating for language that promotes understanding over divisiveness. Similarly, Saheed (2019) analysed selected Nigerian newspapers, employing Leeuwen's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model alongside Halliday's transitivity model within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar. The findings illustrated a pattern of negative portrayal of Fulani herders, labelling them with terms such as "murderers," "gunmen," "illiterates," and "invaders." This negative framing, the study argued, incites fear, violence, and social division among the populace. The study concluded that such media representations are purposefully skewed, emphasising the need for government and regulatory bodies to impose stricter guidelines on reporting conflict-related news to promote social cohesion.

The political dimensions of newspaper discourse surrounding the farmer-herder conflict were explored by Nwankwo et al (2020) utilising a poststructuralist discourse approach informed by conceptual tools from Doty (1993). Their study illustrated the substantial impact of political and ideological influences on the media's representation of the farmer-herder conflict. They found that the newspapers' framing often lacks a coherent connection to actionable strategies for resolving the dispute, suggesting that while the discursive representations shed light on varying contestations related to the conflict, they do not effectively bridge the gap between discourse, identity, and policymaking. Nwankwo et al. advocated for a national dialogue to pursue sustainable resolution strategies and foster understanding among conflicting parties. Odiegwu-

Enwerem et al. (2020) analysed the coverage of the herders and farmers' conflict in Nigeria by examining content from six newspapers. The study aimed to identify the primary sources used, the prominence of conflict reporting, and the recurring themes in these narratives. Findings indicated that the newspapers predominantly drew on their correspondents and representatives of herders as primary sources, with themes of public condemnation, protests, and government intervention notably prevalent. This reliance on third-party sources raises concerns regarding the credibility and accuracy of journalistic reports. The study also reported the conflict in Benue and Enugu states, providing insights into localised coverage. Eke (2020) contributed to this discourse by examining the subjective dimensions of the conflict, particularly the impact of historical stereotypes surrounding nomadic groups on the portrayal of Fulani herders. Ogu (2020) further expanded the discussion by investigating the interplay of terrorism, politics, and ethnicity in exacerbating the conflicts between farmers and herders. Utilising a descriptive survey method, the study gathered data from law enforcement officers, village heads, experts, and groups of farmers and herders across selected Northern Nigerian states. The findings highlighted how political, ethnic, religious, and economic factors intertwine to complicate the conflict dynamics, suggesting that meaningful dialogue among the government, civil societies, and the conflicting groups is crucial for conflict resolution.

Further investigation by Igwebuike (2021) highlighted how Nigerian newspapers metaphorically portray herders as natural disasters and portray the conflict in terms of a religious war against Christian farmers. This framing contributes to a polarised perception of

the conflict, delineating clear roles of villains and victims. Similarly, Kolawole (2021) emphasised the media's pivotal role in shaping identities for the conflict's actors, thus influencing public perception and response. Essien (2022) comprehensively analyzed the violent clashes, indicating that land scarcity is the primary driver. Meanwhile, additional factors, such as population pressure, ineffective governance, climate change, and arms proliferation, exacerbate the situation. The study identified militant groups' activities as a key catalyst for the increase in violence, stressing that existing efforts to resolve the conflict have been inadequate. It calls for an effective governmental response to preempt broader inter-communal escalations.

In another study, Nwankwo (2022) utilized the "Grammar of Geopolitics" framework to explore the narratives surrounding these conflicts, integrating information from both press reports and independent bodies. The study revealed that the conflicts were influenced by ecological and socio-political factors that extend beyond local disagreements, linking them to regional political crises and global environmental challenges, particularly climate change. The Nigerian government's portrayal of this issue indicates a perception of deep-seated territorial disputes shaped by broader geopolitical dynamics. Chilwa and Chilwa's (2022) corpus-based study explored the dynamics of Boko Haram's activities alongside the tensions between nomadic herders and sedentary agrarian farmers in north-central and southern Nigeria. The research aimed to analyse representations of these primary actors within Nigerian and Western media, focusing on the ideological implications of these portrayals and their potential repercussions on peace and security in

Nigeria. The findings indicated that the conflict's representations in the Nigerian press were often sensationalised, divisive, and hazardous. In contrast, the foreign media tended to adopt a more objective stance, framing the conflict as 'deadlier than Boko Haram.' Nonetheless, these reports still tended to trivialise the conflict's severity and portrayed the actions of key actors from a viewpoint tailored for international audiences.

Abel and Oyigebe (2023) explored President Buhari's Administration's involvement in addressing Nigeria's farmer-herder conflict. Their findings emphasise the necessity of safeguarding the rights and freedoms of innocent individuals and suggest a collaborative approach between state and federal governments to foster peaceful resolutions. The authors advocate for a review of existing land accessibility laws to enhance equity in arable and grazing land distribution, thereby mitigating the potential for ongoing conflict. In contrast, Lamidi et al. (2024) conducted an empirical review focusing on the broader causative factors of the farmer-herder crisis across various Nigerian regions. Relying heavily on extant literature, they concluded that this conflict adversely impacts societal behaviour and impedes sustainable peace. The authors recommend bolstering governmental and non-governmental initiatives to combat the crisis and preserve civil harmony.

The reviewed studies provide valuable insights into the narratives, framings, and discourses surrounding the farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria, shedding light on the sociocultural, political, and media dynamics at play. This study argues that though the farmers-herders' crises have been examined widely from the perspective of media discourse, one aspect yet to

receive significant attention is the representation of the crises in news headlines. This stance is corroborated by the studies reviewed above, as none of the literature reviewed used newspaper headlines as study materials. Therefore, the present study will address this gap in the literature by exploring the representation of the farmers-herders' conflicts in newspaper headlines. Drawing its data from *Vanguard* and *Leadership* newspapers, the study considers how the representation of the clashes in the media affects public perception of the clashes and the various social responses it can attract. Using the Media Priming theory, captions of news headlines are extracted from two newspaper publications and analysed to arrive at the findings. The following are specific objectives of the study:

- (i) To analyse how the *Vanguard* and *Leadership* newspaper headlines represent the farmer-herder clashes.
- (ii) To assess the thematic preoccupations of media discourses on farmer-herder conflicts and their effects on news readers.

The following questions guide the objectives of the study:

- (i) How do the *Vanguard* and *Leadership* newspaper headlines represent the farmers-herders clashes?
- (ii) What are the thematic preoccupations of media discourses on farmer-herder conflicts and their effects on news readers?

The study significantly contributes to existing literature and scholarship because it addresses an aspect of the farmers-herders conflicts within the media discourse that has been underexamined. Consequently, news reports on the conflicts have been

explored, their stance projected, and their effects on society.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The present study employs the media priming theory to elucidate how media representation influences public perceptions of social actors and events. Initially articulated by Marquis (2015), the theory traces its roots to biology, medicine, and engineering before being appropriated by psychologists and eventually finding its place within communication studies. Marquis (2015, p. 1236) defines priming as a media influence mechanism utilized by mass media to establish boundaries through which the public can evaluate the performance of various societal actors. The way the press presents narratives delineates the mental concepts that audiences will likely access and retain. This suggests that media representation significantly shapes how news consumers assess the dynamics between farmers and herders, guiding their judgments through established frameworks. When media outlets report on conflicts, they effectively create mental constructs that listeners or readers employ in their analyses. According to this theory, the media primes the attitudes and behaviours of its audience by spotlighting "significant others," as reflected in the content disseminated (Marquis 2015, p. 1239). Consequently, by portraying farmers and herders, the media labels these groups as "significant others," significantly impacting public perception based on how the stories are presented.

The media priming theory offers various concepts applicable to analysing media texts pertinent to this study: semantic priming, associative priming, contextual priming, and repetition priming. Semantic priming involves exposure to a media message (the

"prime") that activates related concepts in the audience's cognition, enhancing their likelihood of engaging with associated information. For instance, a political advertisement emphasising a candidate's "experience" may prompt voters to reflect on that candidate's qualifications and leadership skills, demonstrating how semantic relatedness between the prime and the target enriches audience processing. Associative priming refers to the relationship between two words that are often linked in cognitive memory. Presenting one term, such as "cat," facilitates quicker recall or response when the associated term, like "mouse," appears. This cognitive linkage is instrumental in shaping audience reactions and interpretations. Contextual priming emphasizes how framing specific issues or viewpoints within media alters audience perceptions regarding related topics. This form of priming accelerates the cognitive processing of stimuli likely to arise in a given context, influencing how individuals conceptualise those issues. For example, media portrayals of particular groups can prime the audience to view those groups through a specific lens, which may reinforce existing stereotypes or biases. Repetition priming, or direct priming, refers to the phenomenon where repeated exposure to particular stimuli, such as recurring themes or issues in media coverage, intensifies the salience of those stimuli when the public forms opinions or makes judgments. For example, suppose a news outlet frequently reports rising crime rates. In that case, individuals may prioritise crime-related issues when assessing a politician's performance, even if their policies do not directly address crime. Leveraging the framework above, this study aims to explore the media's portrayal of semantic information regarding farmer-herder clashes, examine the associative links made in the narratives, investigate

contextual elements impacting the representation of these actors and actions, and analyse how repetitive media presentation shapes public interpretation of the involved parties.

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology to examine media representations of the conflicts between farmers and herders in selected Nigerian online newspapers. The choice of the qualitative research design is hinged on its flexible and inductive approach, which allows the analysts to adjust their approach based on what is discovered in the research process. Primary and secondary data sources were used. The primary data was gathered from two Nigerian-based newspapers: *Vanguard* and *Leadership*, whereas secondary sources comprised scholarly articles and online articles consulted during the study. Both data sources were integral to the overall success of the research. The *Vanguard* newspaper represents the southern part of Nigeria, while *Leadership* newspaper represents the northern part of the country. These online newspapers are known for reporting social, political, economic, and religious issues or themes across the country. The scope of the news headlines spans from January 2023 to December 2024. The news headlines were selected from the cover page of the selected newspapers. To fulfil the study's objectives, 20 news headlines were purposively sampled, 10 each from the two newspapers chosen for the study. The selected headlines underwent critical analysis through the lens of the Media Priming theory, as articulated by Marquis (2015). The study concentrated on four key components of the theory: semantic priming, associative priming, contextual priming, and repetitive priming. Notably, greater emphasis was placed on the study's first three types of priming.

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The analysis begins with the data presentation. This is followed by analysing and discussing the headlines using the Marquis (2015) media prime theory. The study and discussion of findings, categorised into four sections, using the four components of the theory (semantic, associative, contextual and repetitive priming), focused on how these four components shape the presentation of news headlines on the farmers and herders' conflicts and their understanding by the reader. The data for the study are presented below, beginning with news headlines from *Vanguard* marked as headlines 1-11 and those from *Leadership* newspaper marked as headlines 11-20.

Selected headlines from *Vanguard*

Headline 1: Farmers/Herders clashes reduced by 95 percent in Ondo— Amotekun

Boss (*Vanguard*, August 9th, 2023).

Headline 2: Scholars proffer solutions to the persistent farmers-herders crisis in Nigeria

(*Vanguard*, June 28th, 2023).

Headline 3: Confronting the herdsman crisis (*Vanguard*, September 19, 2023).

Headline 4: Tinubu inaugurates committee to resolve herder-farmer crisis (*Vanguard*,

September 15th, 2023).

Headline 5: Stakeholders proffer solution to farmer-herders crisis (*Vanguard*, September,

2nd, 2024).

Headline 6: Insecurity: 60,000 lives lost in farmers/herders clashes – Nextier

Page | 24

(*Vanguard*, January 22nd, 2024).

Headline 7: Gov Kefas to Journalists: Eliminates stereotypes in farmers/herders' conflict

(*Vanguard*, September 8th, 2024).

Headline 8: Three arrested over murder of 15-years old herder in Ogun (*Vanguard*,

September 9th, 2024).

Headline 9: Farmers-herders hold dialogue to end banditry in Katsina (*Vanguard*, July

12th, 2024).

Headline 10: FG moves in with water and light to end farmer-herder war in Nasarawa

(*Vanguard*, November 22nd, 2024).

Selected headlines from *Leadership*

Headline 11: Farmers Seek Protection as Herders Destroy Over 30 Farmlands in Ekiti

(*Leadership*, December 31st, 2023).

Headline 12: Farmers/Herders Clashes Have Taken Lives Than Most Crises – Ribadu

(*Leadership*, August 29th, 2023).

Headline 13: COP28: Benue Lawmaker Seeks Aid for Displaced Victims of Farmer-

Herder Conflicts (*Leadership*, December 7th, 2023).

Headline 14: Committee Proposes Livestock Ministry to Address Herders-Farmers

Clashes (*Leadership*, September 10th, 2023).

Headline 15: We'll Address Herder/Farmer Crisis – Ugbor (*Leadership*, September 12th 2024).

Headline 16: Northern Senators Kick as Senate Mulls Commission, Ranches to End Farmer-Herder Clashes (*Leadership*, June 5th, 2024).

Headline 17: Feed, Fodder Project to Tackle Farmer/Herder Crisis – Minister (*Leadership*, May 2024).

Headline 18: As Attackers on Farmers Escalate...18.6m Nigerians Face Acute Hunger (*Leadership*, March 27th, 2024).

Headline 19: Blame Current Hardship, Hunger on Insecurity, Farmer-Herder Conflict– Umahi (*Leadership*, February 7th, 2024).

Headline 20: Farmers-Herders Clash: IPOB Rejects Tinubu's Call for Govs to Donate Lands (*Leadership*, March 14th, 2024).

Semantic Priming in the *Vanguard* and *Leadership* News Headlines

The investigation of semantic priming in Headline 1 uncovers significant characteristics, including violence, destruction, and security response, which are crucial to understanding its implications. The expression "Farmers/herders clashes" immediately evokes connotations of conflict and violence. This phrase and its associated connotations are semantically connected, as it embodies the shared meaning linked to the indiscriminate destruction of lives and property. Such associations highlight the

broader societal issues stemming from these clashes and the urgent need for effective responses to mitigate conflict and ensure security. The reference to violence suggests a history of conflict between farmers and herders, indicating that there have been significant property damages as a result of these clashes. The choice of "Amotekun" relates to the Western Nigerian Security Network. Also, it alludes to interventions made by security experts to mitigate the frequency and severity of these disputes. The lexical item "Scholars" in headline 2 serves as a semantic prime, activating notions of expertise, knowledge, and authority. It shapes the readers' perspective, prompting them to engage with the topic more analytically and to anticipate a comprehensive and reasoned discourse surrounding the crisis. The phrase "proffer solutions" reinforces the theme of solution-seeking, guiding the reader to consider avenues for addressing the situation at hand. This aligns with Baderinwa's (2019) assertion regarding the involvement of non-state actors in attempting to mediate in the clashes, illustrating their active role in resolution efforts. The expression "persistent farmer-herder crisis" is a semantic prime indicating a protracted and complex issue, encouraging the reader to recognize the severity and intricacies involved. Ogunbode et al. (2023) support this notion by noting that the origins of these clashes can be traced back to the 1960s. Semantically, "herdsmen" in headline 3 evokes relations with rural livelihoods, agriculture, and livestock management, while "crisis" connotes urgency, danger, and societal conflict. This dual priming aligns with the concerns raised by Asogwa and Okafor (2016, p. 29), who highlight the alarming violence linked to herders-farmers conflicts in Nigeria, resulting in casualties, displacement, and extensive property destruction. Such assertions aver

that media representations effectively inform the public about pressing issues impacting their communities. Griffiths (2010) further supports this view by asserting that media representation constructs our understanding of various realities, encompassing cultural identities, events, and abstract ideas.

The vocative “Tinubu” in headline 5 evokes relations with Nigerian politics, whereas “herder-farmer crisis” brings to mind themes of conflict, agricultural practices, and rural challenges. Ogunbode et al. (2023) delineate some of these challenges, highlighting the widespread displacement of families and the destruction of livelihoods. The discourse surrounding the farmer-herders crisis, as captured in headline 5, reveals a multi-faceted approach to understanding the underlying dynamics and responses from various stakeholders involved. The choice of “stakeholders” encapsulates individuals and groups with vested interests, prompting readers to consider the diverse parties entangled in this crisis, including farmers, herders, government officials, and community leaders. The word “proffer” in the same headline further signifies a proactive and constructive disposition towards addressing the conflict, leading readers to anticipate innovative solutions to foster resolution. The headline encompasses several semantic components, such as the notion of clashes, a lack of peace, and a pressing need for peace restoration, all suggesting a heightened engagement from significant societal players committed to achieving harmony. Baderinwa (2019) corroborates this view, highlighting a dichotomy between the state's reliance on coercive military measures and the alternative mediatory approaches employed by non-state actors. In this context, Baderinwa proposes potential solutions from stakeholders, including

coercive and mediation strategies to mitigate the crisis. The term “Insecurity” in headline 6 triggers relations with danger, threat, and instability. The word effectively primes the readership to perceive an absence of safety and protection, setting an expectation for a hostile and alarming narrative within the article. Furthermore, the phrase “60,000 lives lost” underscores the severity and scale of the issue, thus prompting the reader to contemplate the human cost and tragedy accompanying these clashes. “Farmers/herders clashes” invokes imagery of violence, manslaughter, and destruction, especially in conjunction with the stark statistic regarding the loss of lives. In support of the assertions made regarding semantic primes, Asogwa and Okafor (2016) delineate various repercussions stemming from farmers/herders’ clashes, such as significant human tolls, the rise of ethnic and religious militias, heightened inter-ethnic tensions, and detrimental impacts on Nigeria's agricultural sector.

Headline 7 illustrates how language significantly influences perceptions and attitudes toward complex issues like the herders/farmers crisis. The lexical item “stereotypes” evokes ideas of oversimplification and misrepresentation. It encourages readers to consider the necessity for nuanced and accurate media reporting while highlighting the dangers of reductionist portrayals. This stance reinforces Cammaerts' (2018, p.101) definition of media representation, which examines how individuals and groups are depicted, emphasising the roles of genres, imagery, and language. The headline indicates that the media has inadequately represented the herders/farmers' crisis by perpetuating stereotypes. Furthermore, “farmers/herders’ conflict” suggests a profoundly intricate issue, prompting readers to

explore the diverse factors at play in the conflict. According to Francis et al. (2022), the varying perceptions of the crisis among involved parties are significant contributors. Additional causes enumerated by Baderinwa (2019) include the destruction of crops, cattle rustling, ethnic and religious differences, poverty, and instances of sexual harassment, all of which complicate the narrative. Ogunbode et al. (2023) identify the search for grazing lands as a primary cause of clashes, often resulting in farmland encroachment. Consequently, key meaning components within the headline encompass misrepresentation, violence, destruction, and bias in journalism.

The lexical item "murder" in headline 8 activates notions of violence, crime, and tragedy, guiding the reader's perception of the event's severity and gravity. This linguistic choice primes the audience to anticipate a detailed and sombre narrative. In alignment with Ogunbode et al. (2023), the report confirms that such clashes have led to the displacement of numerous residents and disrupted the livelihoods of many individuals. Also, the phrase "15-year-old herder" underscores the age and vulnerability of the victim and compels the reader to consider the human cost and emotional impact of the incident. "Arrested" implies a sense of justice and accountability, prompting the reader to consider the legal ramifications and law enforcement's response. Headline 9 reveals significant implications for understanding the dynamics of conflict resolution in the context of banditry, mainly through the lens of priming theory. The headline indicates a constructive shift towards addressing a persistent issue in the region, suggesting the potential for positive outcomes. Primarily, "dialogue" encompasses notions of

communication and negotiation, fostering a cognitive shift in the reader's perception towards optimism regarding conflict resolution. It encourages contemplation of peaceful avenues to tackle the issue, implicitly reconsidering the prevailing narrative surrounding banditry. Additionally, the phrase "end banditry" serves as a semantic prime that underscores the urgency and necessity of addressing this challenge, steering the reader's thoughts toward the importance of resolving such pressing societal concerns. The abbreviation "FG," representing the Federal Government in headline 10, serves as a prime that evokes notions of authority, policy, and intervention.

The discourse surrounding semantic priming, particularly regarding the meaning of headline 11, is characterised by several salient features, including violence, destruction, threats, fright, and displacement. The reference to violence inherently suggests a historical context of conflict between farmers and herders, alluding to prior clashes that have likely resulted in significant property damage. The features of semantic priming in headline 12 that culminate in its meaning encompass themes of violence, destruction, and ongoing fatalities. This headline illustrates the devastation wrought by the farmer-herder clashes, positioning these conflicts as more severe than other regional crises. Headline 13 foregrounds the relationship among violence, displacement, and human suffering, emphasising the implications of these elements in the context of contemporary crises. Headline 14 reveals several semantic associations crucial for understanding the ongoing crisis between herders and farmers in Nigeria. Key semantic elements, such as "long-suffering," "re-occurring clashes," and "quest for a

solution," emerge as pivotal in framing the discourse. Notably, the term "Ministry" acts as a semantic prime that evokes concepts of governance and authority. Meanwhile, "Livestock Ministry" conjures associations with agriculture and animal husbandry, shaping public perception regarding the relationship dynamics between herders and farmers. Furthermore, the phrase "Herders-Farmers Clashes" acts as a semantic prime that activates notions of conflict and violence, reflecting the gravity of the situation.

Headline 15 demonstrates the influence of media representation as defined by Cammaerts (2018). According to Cammaerts, media representation encompasses portraying individuals, groups, or events through various genres, employing specific imagery and language to shape public perception. Semantic priming is evident in the "Herder/Farmer Crisis" terminology, which evokes a network of meanings associated with conflict, violence, and social unrest. The term "crisis" is a powerful semantic trigger that suggests chaos and disorder in this headline. The phrase "Northern Kick" in headline 16 activates notions of conflict and opposition in the readers' minds. The verb "Kick" conveys strong connotations of resistance, disagreement, or protest, which can significantly influence readers' perceptions of the subsequent content. The various elements of the headline establish semantic relationships encompassing motion, resistance to motion, regional identity, and loyalty, among others. Griffiths (2010) and Aluya & Terver (2024) support this view by asserting that media representation constructs various aspects of reality, including people, places, events, objects, cultural identities, and abstract ideas. In the examined caption, multiple facets of the senators' reality are projected, such as motion, resistance, tribal

affiliation, and determination to achieve particular goals. The terms "Feed" and "Fodder" in headline 17 activate notions of nutrition and sustenance among readers. The verb "Feed" indicates furnishing food or nourishment, while the noun "Fodder" pertains specifically to nourishment intended for livestock. This linguistic choice encourages readers to consider animals' fundamental needs, emphasising nutrition's significance in addressing the farmer/herder crisis. This perspective aligns with Griffiths (2010), who posits that media representation is instrumental in constructing certain facets of reality, including people, places, events, and cultural identities. Ensuring sufficient feed for livestock could mitigate the conflict by reducing herders' mobility, thus lessening potential confrontations between communities. The expression "Attacks on Farmers" appears in headline 18 and serves as a semantic trigger that evokes a sense of violence and aggression in the public's minds. This phrase carries connotations of brutality, destruction of crops, and even the potential loss of life among farmers. The latter part of the phrase, "acute hunger," encompasses semantic features related to starvation, malnutrition, and poverty. Ogunbode et al. (2023) affirm that such clashes have led to the displacement of numerous households, crippling the livelihoods of many. The term "escalate" functions as a semantic primer, indicating a deteriorating situation that generates alarm and anxiety. Thus, "Attacks on Farmers" is not just a descriptive phrase but also an associative trigger that links the concept of violence to farming and agriculture, highlighting the inherent risks agricultural communities face in Nigeria. Asogwa and Okafor (2016) further assert that the ongoing clashes have had detrimental effects on the agrarian sector, demonstrating a troubling relationship between

violence and food production, which, consequently, can lead to acute hunger, banditry, malnutrition, and loss of life. Semantic priming in headline 19 highlights critical themes such as suffering, food shortages, and destroying food items. These elements collectively illustrate a concerning decline in food availability for the public, thereby underscoring the potential risks to livelihoods in Nigeria. This suggests a direct correlation between food security and social stability. The lexical items "violence," "destruction," "speech," and "resistance" in headline 20 effectively foreground the concept of semantic priming. This headline indicates that farmers and herders have a history of clashes primarily driven by the competition for dwindling farmlands and grazing areas. Ogunbode et al. (2023) support this assertion, highlighting that the quest for grazing lands has often led to farmland encroachments, severely threatening the country's stability. The President's attempts to resolve these conflicts through diplomatic efforts, specifically by designating land portions for both groups, are also mentioned alongside the resistant stance of the indigenous population. This reflects the notions of Onoja et al. (2022), which discuss the challenges of accessing discourse controlled by the Fulani ethnic group.

Associative Priming in the *Vanguard* and *Leadership* News Headlines

Headline 1 highlights Amotekun's role in enhancing security, associating the group with a steadfast commitment to safeguarding the land. The implications extend to the dispersion of herders and the notable reduction in confrontations, suggesting a significant shift in the dynamics of the conflict. This association invites contemplation of the insights presented by Onoja et al. (2022), which elucidate the

complexities of discourses orchestrated by the Fulani ethnic group. Their study unveils the intricate strategies employed to ensure "positive self-representation" while simultaneously perpetuating "negative representation of Others," thus reinforcing socio-dominance within the discourse. The phrase "farmer-herder crisis" in headline 2 evokes associations tied to conflict, violence, and instability, often linked to negative emotional responses like fear, anger, and sadness. Bello and Mustapha (2021) further affirm this perspective, highlighting that the herder-farmer conflict has resulted in acts of cattle rustling and banditry, ultimately threatening the security of local communities. In headline 3, "herdsmen" activates pre-existing notions tied to conflicts between herders and farmers and environmental challenges stemming from livestock practices. Correspondingly, Ogunbode et al. (2023) identify the multifaceted challenges posed by this crisis, which include the upheaval of numerous households and the destruction of livelihoods. Furthermore, the lexical item "inaugurates" in headline 4 evokes imagery linked to official events and governmental actions. This connection is reinforced through associative priming, where "Tinubu" resonates with notions of Nigerian leadership. Conversely, the "herder-farmer crisis" may conjure images of rural violence, displacement, and economic struggle. The expression "farmer-herders crisis" in headline 5 evokes notions of conflict, violence, and instability, conjuring negative emotions such as fear and anxiety within the readership. The word "crisis" carries implications of urgency and seriousness, galvanizing the audience's attention towards the issue at hand and the anticipated outcomes of proposed solutions. This sentiment is echoed by Asogwa and Okafor (2016), who contend

that the conflicts between Fulani herders and farmers constitute a significant risk to Nigeria's national security.

Similarly, "farmers/herders clashes" in headline 6 evokes a strong sense of conflict, violence, and bloodshed. The emotional responses typically associated with this phrase include fear, anger, and sadness, significantly shaping the reader's interpretation of the matter. The mention of "60,000 lives lost" further deepens the emotional resonance, associating the issue with tragedy, loss, and devastation. Asogwa and Okafor (2016:29) lend credence to this associative priming, noting the alarming violence in Nigeria related to the farmers/herders' conflict, resulting in fatalities and displacement, alongside the destruction of property valued in millions of naira. The expression "Gov Kefas to Journalists" acts as an associative prime, invoking a sense of authority and responsibility in headline 7. This association can skew the reader's perception by linking the issue to officialdom. This contrasts with Baderinwa's (2019) assertion that state responses predominantly focus on coercive measures through military and paramilitary forces. The positional framing steers the reader toward viewing state involvement as one of persuasion rather than coercion. The phrase "murder of 15-year-old herder" in headline 8 evokes shock, outrage, and sadness. The combination of words associates the incident with profound tragedy and loss, significantly influencing the reader's perception of the situation. Bello & Mustapha (2021) further support this stance by discussing the crisis's profound implications for public security and safety. Additionally, mentioning "three arrested" reinforces the themes of justice and accountability, potentially instilling a sense of relief and satisfaction in the reader.

Moreover, the associative prime "farmers-herders" in headline 9 reflects the conflict's duality, emphasising both groups' active roles. The emotional weight of terms associated with conflict, such as violence and displacement, is amplified through references to existing literature, including Asogwa and Okafor (2016), who articulate the alarming circumstances faced by communities in Nigeria resulting from the herders-farmers crisis. The repeated references to these conflicts in headline 10 may lead to what is known as associative priming, where the repeated exposure to specific phrases shapes public perception and recall of the government's priorities. This association is critical in understanding the government's role in mitigating the effects of conflict, particularly in the context of the highlighted "farmer-herder war." This phrase conjures imagery of violence, conflict, and rural socioeconomic issues, emphasising the urgency and gravity of the situation. Baderinwa's (2019) analysis reinforces that the government's involvement is multifaceted, often oscillating between coercive measures, such as military intervention, and efforts aimed at humanitarian relief, as suggested by mentioning "water and light." These terms not only signify necessities but also resonate with themes of progress and development, thus framing the government's initiatives as proactive responses to pressing national challenges.

The implications of the violence reported in headline 11 extend to the destruction of agricultural lands, underscoring the poignant associations evoked by the semantic features of the headline. Furthermore, notions of threats to life and the freight associated with farmers emerge as critical undercurrents,

culminating in what can be interpreted as a broader cry for help, indicative of a subordinate position within the socio-political landscape. Through associative priming, the headline 12 draws a parallel between two distinct groups—farmers and herders—linking them through the common characteristic of conflict, which is intrinsically tied to destruction and the relentless loss of life. Ogunbode et al. (2023) note that the ongoing clashes between farmers and herders have resulted in significant displacement and livelihood disruption. This acknowledgment leads to an associative priming effect in headline 13, establishing connections between the crises, the role of farmers, and the necessity for legislative alternatives. Notably, the exploration contrasts with Baderinwa's (2019) perspective, which critiques the government's reliance on coercive military measures to address conflict. The headline introduces the notion of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, particularly through legislation, highlighting a shift in governmental strategy toward more constructive approaches to conflict resolution. The association of the "Livestock Ministry" with agriculture in headline 14 emphasises the impact of the crisis on this vital sector, which includes heightened ethnic tensions, the rise of militia groups, and a detrimental effect on agricultural productivity. Similarly, "Herders-Farmers Clashes" amplifies the perceived urgency for solutions, nudging public sentiment towards a government-led intervention. The lexical items in headline 15 align with associative priming, linking the crisis to broader themes such as humanitarian issues, destruction, and urgent solutions. Ogunbode et al. (2023) support this view by identifying the displacement of families and the destruction of livelihoods as critical issues arising from the crisis. The phrase "address herder/farmer crisis" suggests a

first-hand awareness of the ongoing clashes and conveys the fear and insecurity experienced in the affected communities. Asogwa and Okafor (2016) elaborate on the repercussions of these conflicts, including heightened inter-ethnic tensions and the formation of militia groups, further exacerbating the region's instability. "Senate Mulls Commission, Ranches" in headline 16 illustrates associative priming, linking the ideas of a commission and ranches with potential resolutions to farmer-herder conflicts. This association can shape the thoughts of news readers concerning possible solutions to the highlighted issue. The text exemplifies how media narratives influence public discourse by connecting the subject matter of herder-farmer crises with different responses, ranging from violence and displacement to calls for solutions. Further, the senators' action in resisting specific measures aligns with the assertion by Francis et al. (2022) that perceptions surrounding these clashes are multifaceted.

The expression "Farmer/Herder Crisis" in headline 17 evokes a sense of conflict between farming and herding communities. This association shapes readers' perceptions, framing the situation as a multifaceted dilemma requiring comprehensive solutions. The term "Crisis" resonates with themes of chaos and disorder, invoking urgency for resolution. This aligns with the implications of destruction, violence, and dislocation, which prime readers to consider the need for immediate remedial actions. Ogunbode et al. (2023) underscore the severity of these clashes, highlighting the displacement of numerous individuals and the disruption of livelihoods. The phrase "18.6m Nigerians Face Acute Hunger" in headline 18 is an associative primer, linking the crisis directly to its

immediate effects and the estimated population impacted. Headline 19 connects the country's economic and security dilemmas with ongoing clashes between farmers and herders. This linkage reflects the intricate interdependencies between various aspects of human life, emphasising how economic strife can exacerbate social conflicts. The president's call for conflict resolution in headline 19 signifies an intention to alleviate tensions, while the resistance from groups like IPOB in 20 signals a determination to safeguard agricultural lands.

Contextual Priming in the *Vanguard* and *Leadership* News Headlines

From a contextual priming perspective, headline 1 reflects the contemporary situation in Ondo State, particularly during clashes between farmers and herders. The narrative implies a potential calming of tensions due to security initiatives, countering prevailing perceptions that violence is inevitable. Thus, the overarching context emphasizes a positive trend toward reducing conflicts and enhancing the efficacy of security responses in addressing the underlying issues. The lexical item "scholars" in headline 2 allude to the caliber of individuals working to proffer solution to the farmer-herder crisis in the country. The context of this headline suggests that the crisis is a national concern that necessitates a collaborative response from governmental bodies, organizations, and the populace. Additionally, the reference to Nigeria contextualizes the issue, pinpointing the affected region and aligning with Asogwa and Okafor's (2016) observation of alarming violence impacting the nation's agricultural sector. This geographical specification lets readers contemplate the broader social implications of the crisis. In headline 3, contextual priming underscores

the significance of the surrounding environment in shaping the interpretation of the presented stimuli. The framing of the media message suggests a pervasive atmosphere of chaos and destruction within the country. The committee's inauguration in headline 4 can be interpreted as a beacon of hope for peace and stability. This sentiment aligns with Baderinwa (2019), who notes that non-state actors increasingly adopt mediatory approaches in such conflicts. The formation of a committee indicates a systematic strategy to address the crisis, reflecting a commitment to finding resolutions beyond coercive measures. The context surrounding this news story is further supported by Turner et al. (2006), who assert that farmer-herder conflicts have become a persistent aspect of social dynamics in Nigeria. This narrative acknowledges an urgent national concern, suggesting that establishing a committee may foster a more structured approach to tackling these enduring issues. Including the term "stakeholders" in headline 5 emphasises active engagement in peacebuilding endeavours, thereby challenging the notion of government-led initiatives as the sole avenue for conflict resolution.

The contextual priming in headline 6 aligns with Griffiths' (2010) assertion that media representation constructs various aspects of reality surrounding people, events, and cultural identities. Through this lens, *Vanguard* has effectively shaped readers' perceptions of reality regarding these news stories. Moreover, the citation of "Nextier" as the information source primes the audience to expect an authoritative, expert analysis on the issue at hand. The contextual framing used by the media in headline 7 raises critical questions about the reliability of the information consumed by readers, emphasising the need for

scrutiny of media narratives. Contextual priming highlights the importance of headline 8 's publication in a reputable newspaper like *Vanguard*, suggesting that readers are likely to expect credible and trustworthy information. The reference to "Ogun" as the incident's location primes the audience to consider its regional and geographical implications. The contextualisation of headline 9 highlights the issue's seriousness and reaffirms the need for effective intervention strategies. Furthermore, the statement regarding the mediatory approaches employed by non-state actors, as noted by Baderinwa (2019), signifies a departure from coercive measures towards collaborative problem-solving. This pivot is essential in altering the reader's perception of the parties involved in the crisis, presenting them as agents of change capable of fostering mutual understanding. The description of them "holding dialogue" fosters a context of cooperation, inspiring a sense of hope among readers, potentially influencing public sentiment toward reconciliation efforts. Additionally, situating the dialogue in Katsina—a region acutely affected by banditry—connects the readers emotionally and geographically with the issue at hand, further priming them to engage thoughtfully with the potential solutions presented. This analysis underscores the intersection of language, context, and reader perception in framing critical socio-political issues. It highlights the profound role of dialogue in reconciling conflicts rooted in complex historical and social dynamics. When situated within the broader narrative surrounding the government's response to crises, headline 10 highlights specific initiatives and reinforces a perception of commitment toward resolving these entrenched conflicts. The historical context provided by Turner et al. (2006) illustrates that farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria have persisted

as significant socio-political issues. In this way, the interplay of language, historical context, and media portrayal becomes a critical lens through which we can interpret the government's actions and the public's reception of those efforts. Thus, while there may be assertions of coercion, the implications of targeted initiatives such as "water and light" suggest a plurality of strategies aimed at conflict resolution

The contextual priming situates headline 11 within the specific circumstances of Ekiti State, portraying herders predominantly as agents of destruction and violence. The narrative advanced by the headline poignantly reflects the overarching Nigerian context, wherein individuals endure a myriad of social, physical, and psychological adversities that can obliterate the essence of human existence. Regarding contextual priming, headline 12 accentuates the conflict by emphasising its detrimental effects relative to other contemporaneous crises. It categorises the clashes as the fastest and most lethal killers, thereby implying not only their frequency but also their profoundly destructive impact within Benue State. This multifaceted approach highlights the gravity of these confrontations and frames them as a significant issue in regional discourse. The language employed in headline 13, including "displaced" and "victims," evokes a sense of urgency and compassion, linking the ongoing humanitarian crisis to broader themes of aid and assistance. The timing of these discussions, coinciding with the international community's gathering for COP28, underscores the more significant implications of the conflict and emphasises the importance of a coordinated response. This scenario exemplifies contextual priming, where the surrounding context influences reader perception and understanding. Furthermore, the lawmaker's proactive

call for aid signifies an intentional effort to raise awareness about constituents' struggles and to counter perceptions of governmental neglect. Framed within a formal context, headline 14 proposed the establishment of a livestock ministry, which hints at the necessity for governmental involvement to resolve this complex issue. Initiating this proposal by a committee enhances its perceived legitimacy, suggesting that a structured approach may be both accepted and impactful in addressing the crisis. The proposal's timing, potentially linked to recent developments, signals a swift response to the immediate nature of the conflict. The contextual framing of headline 15 intensifies the situation's perceived urgency, prompting news readers to consider potential solutions to alleviate the suffering of those affected. The context, which references the Senate and proposed legislation to establish a commission, represents an instance of contextual priming in headline 16, shaping how the public and news consumers view the farmer-herder clashes as a political and legislative challenge. This framing underscores the actions taken by political leaders in addressing a pressing social problem. Contextual priming amplifies this issue by situating it within the destructive backdrop of interpersonal violence, portraying the crisis as a significant challenge that can be addressed through structured efforts. The term "Project" connotes planning and the allocation of resources, suggesting that successful outcomes could stem from coordinated action.

The context surrounding attacks on farmers and acute hunger in headline 18 amplifies a sense of urgency and concern, priming news readers to consider the repercussions of such violence on food security and

production. Using "escalate" within this context solidifies a sense of increasing severity, shaping public perception of the issue. Contextual priming in headline 19 situates the narrative within Nigeria's specific circumstances, amplifying the populace's suffering amid the farmer-herder conflicts. The portrayal of these clashes as overwhelmingly destructive hints at a broader narrative of violence and the erosion of agricultural resources. This depiction serves to magnify the profound hardships experienced by Nigerian citizens, particularly in regions where security responses to such crises have proven insufficient. In conclusion, the headline encapsulates Nigeria's multifaceted challenges, drawing attention to the urgent need for comprehensive solutions that address food security and social conflict resolution. Contextually, headline 20 encapsulates the prevailing hardships in Nigeria as the nation grapples with ongoing strife between farmers and herders, asserting claims over the land in dispute. This complex situation presents a multifaceted narrative of conflict, ownership, and resistance in the socio-political landscape of Nigeria.

Repetitive Priming in the *Vanguard* and *Leadership* News Headlines

The investigation into the discourse surrounding "farmer/herder clashes" reveals a significant reliance on this phrase, which appears consistently across various headlines and articles. This recurring terminology, often framed as "farmer/herder conflict" or "crisis," enhances its recognition and potential impact on public perception. The phenomenon of repetition priming suggests that this familiar phrasing can lead to a continued influence effect, where initial impressions formed by headlines persist, even in the face of nuanced perspectives presented later in the

articles. The long-lasting effects of such repetitive exposure to the term "farmer/herder clashes" facilitate easier retrieval and processing of information, minimising cognitive effort and allowing readers to integrate these concepts into their pre-existing frameworks of understanding. Turner et al. (2006) highlight how this repetitive engagement fosters a uniform portrayal of the crisis, reinforcing it as an enduring element of societal life. Supporting this notion, Tanikawa (2017) emphasises that the daily nature of newspaper reporting reflects the ongoing realities of these conflicts. Furthermore, Forsyth and Hendricks (2023) argue that the media's consistent representation of general and specific elements related to these clashes mirrors their prevalence in contemporary discussions. This perspective is further bolstered by Ogunbode et al. (2023), whose historical analysis traces the roots of these conflicts back to the 1960s, highlighting significant human and material losses over the years. The repetitive use of this language does more than inform; it incites urgency among readers to seek solutions and advocate for resolution strategies. Turner et al. (2006) suggest that framing these issues repetitively solidifies them as pervasive social phenomena, enhancing their visibility in public discourse and amplifying their influence on conversations regarding potential solutions. Moreover, this linguistic repetition cultivates a shared understanding among the audience, often skewing perceptions toward destruction and violence and underscoring the detrimental impacts of these crises on Nigerian society and human welfare. Language plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception, as strategically crafted headlines and phrases can elicit intricate responses, ultimately influencing how readers engage with these critical societal concerns. In summary, the dialogue surrounding the farmer/herder

crisis is significantly moulded by a complex interplay of lexical choices, contextual framing, and associative priming. This collective dynamic informs public perception and underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive understanding and constructive involvement from all stakeholders to address the underlying issues effectively.

Conclusion

The media is a crucial institution within society, facilitating communication and access to information. However, this study highlights a discernible bias in the media representation of events, particularly influenced by underlying ideologies. Reports concerning the farmer-herder clashes have predominantly focused on themes such as the rise of militia groups, the devastation of lives and properties, and the prevalence of violence, as illustrated in various headlines. This observation supports the assertion made by Asogwa and Okafor (2016, p. 29) regarding the alarming levels of violence in Nigeria stemming from herder-farmer conflicts, which have resulted in casualties and the displacement of individuals alongside the destruction of assets worth millions of naira. Moreover, a significant aspect of media portrayal involves searching for solutions to the ongoing crisis, as evidenced in additional headlines. Baderinwa (2019) substantiates this search for resolutions, indicating that the state has often resorted to violent measures, whereas non-state actors have pursued mediation efforts. Themes reflecting appeals for assistance and assurances to address the crisis are also prevalent in the media's coverage. The study reveals that media representations depict herders negatively, characterising them as violent and destructive, particularly in headlines reporting the devastation of farmland and properties. Conversely,

farmers are also implicated, as highlighted by reports of violence against herders. Furthermore, the media has been found to convey biased and misrepresented information, emphasising the need for scrutiny among news consumers regarding the accuracy of media reports. The persistence and detrimental impact of these clashes have been documented, indicating a long-standing struggle characterised by significant human and material tolls, the emergence of ethnic and religious militia groups, heightened inter-ethnic tensions, and adverse effects on Nigeria's agricultural sector. In conclusion, the study emphasises the importance of factual reporting in media representations over ideological biases and encourages readers to be discerning when assessing media narratives.

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