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Media Framing and Audience Perception of Farmer/Herder Conflict in Nigeria: A Study of Newspaper Coverage of the Southern Taraba Crisis 2018-2022

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Abstract

This study examined media framing and audience perception of Farmer/Herder conflict in Nigeria with focus on newspaper coverage of the Southern Taraba Crisis 2018-2022. The study was anchored on the Framing Theory and the Social Responsibility Theory to provide a framework for analysis. This study used a qualitative research design with Content Analysis and Survey Method to gather data from 115 editions of two Nigerian newspapers, Vanguard and Daily Trust, published between 2018-2022. The population was chosen through purposive sampling, with a convenience sampling approach used to determine the sample size. Coding sheet was used for content analysis, focusing on media reports on farmers/herder's conflict. Finding from the study revealed that newspaper coverage of the farmer/herder conflict in Nigeria predominantly employed conflict-escalating frames, such as ethnic blame, victimization, and inflammatory language. The study also found that audience perception of media coverage was largely negative, with many respondents viewing newspaper reporting as biased or sensational rather than

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balance and fair reporting. Further finding revealed that political pressure and media ownership were identified as the dominant factors shaping conflict coverage in Nigerian newspapers. The study concluded that media coverage played a dual role in either escalating or de-escalating conflicts, depending on the framing strategies employed. It is therefore, recommended among others that media organizations should prioritize peace journalism by emphasizing conflict-sensitive reporting that promotes dialogue, reconciliation, and de-escalation rather than sensationalism and ethnic blame.

Keywords: Audience Perception, Conflict, Farmer/Herder, Media Framing, Newspaper Coverage

INTRODUCTION

Conflict has been widely accepted as a necessary ingredient in human relationships. Interactions among individuals, communities, nations, although there is yet no consensus on the impact of the news media in influencing the audience, it is a widely accepted fact that they impact society in varying degrees. From the era of Mass Society Theory through the Era of the Scientific Perspective, the Era of Limited Effects up to the Era of Cultural Theory, several "paradigm shifts" continue to be witnessed in the study of media effects (Baran, 2002). Gauging the actual impact of the news media remains an issue, eliciting continuous arguments and counter-arguments from scholars and media users. Ample literature exists on media effects and many of the theories remain germane in trying to understand the news media and their impact on society. For as Rodman (2006, p.440) argued, "Media effects are not as straightforward and clear-cut as some observers have made them out to be. This has led to arguments, disagreements and debates about the impact of media.

However, on numerous occasions, the coverage of conflicts by news media have attracted negative reactions ranging from outright accusation of bias or sensationalizing of stories for profit motives to fanning the embers of discord. They are accused of 'framing' the reportage of crises in a manner that do not reflect the true situation or that tends to promote some agenda. Generally, the media is being accused as irresponsible in the coverage of conflicts. According to Nelson, et al. (1997, p.567), "People's reasoning about divisive political issues may be shaped by the mass media's depiction of the issues. Because both journalistic norms and market forces dampen strong ideological biases within most

news organizations especially television news, media influence is bound to be more subtle than outright "propaganda effects". Similarly, the news media have been found to be using frames that tend to downplay the human rights violations inherent in crisis thereby failing to prompt appreciable reactions to crises which would have prevented a deterioration of such crisis (Shaw, 2011).

Over the years, there have been series of crisis in Southern Taraba between the Tiv, Kuteb and the Jukun people as a tribe and the Fulani herdsmen. Southern Taraba has been enmeshed in this communal conflict for over a long period of time and unofficial estimates say it has claimed about many lives. The state has been in and out of one form of crisis or the other, deepening animosities and altering the pattern of interaction among people who have lived together for centuries. Within the period covered by this study (2018-2022) the news media especially newspapers were awash with reports on the conflict sometimes, with gory details of killings and destruction to property that made many wonder if people still inhabit Southern Taraba areas such as Takum, Ussa, Donga, Ibbi and Wukari Local government areas.

The perception of the role of the news media in conflict management tends to justify the growing interest of scholars like Galtung (1998), Albert (2000), MacDonald (2002), Akinfeleye (2003), Pate (2010), Ochogwu (2010), Shaw (2011) and several others who have been advocating "peace journalism" as a concept to be embraced and promoted by journalists. Galtung (1999) had noted the peace-conflict versus war-violence orientation; truth versus propaganda orientation and solution versus victory orientation of the news media which he said often exacerbate rather than thaw crisis situations. Continuous inquiry into how the news media can shed this perception and be seen to be agents of peace advancement cannot, therefore, be over flogged.

Therefore, this study is designed to examine media framing and audience perception of farmers/herders conflict in Southern Taraba covering Takum, Donga, Ussa, Ibbi and Wukari local government areas.

Statement of the Problem:

The farmer/herder conflict in Nigeria has been a persistent and complex issue, marked by recurring violence and socio-economic disruptions. Mass media, particularly newspapers, have been criticized for their coverage of farmers-herders conflicts. Some scholars such as Ahmad (2015) argue that media have effectively managed conflicts, while

others like Ogu (2018) and Odoh et al. (2023) argue that they engage in sensational and biased coverage. Some scholars also argue that media displays partisanship in their reporting, particularly in conflicts involving ethnic and religious divides. This has led to research on the relationship between newspapers' reportage and farmers-herders conflict, with some studies revealing that newspapers focus on war-oriented journalism and portray Fulanis as the primary perpetrators of violence (Abdulbaqi & Ariemu, 2017). Even with the significant media attention, it's important to explore how newspapers portray this conflict and the impact of that portrayal on how audiences perceive it. The issue is that media framing can either intensify or alleviate the conflict, based on the stories and visuals that are shared.

Preliminary studies for this research showed that based on the reportage of the conflict by the media, many people concluded that southern Taraba is not unsafe to inhabit. Many who have never been to the state see travelling there as a dangerous venture. Reports of relocation of establishments and cancelled projects abound. Many residents also attest to being pressured by their family and relations to relocate from the crisis prone area on their perception of the situation from media reports. Many visitors to Taraba State within the period expressed surprise that what they found was different from their perception. Statement such as "we didn't know people still walk the streets in Wukari" was heard. This suggests a gap between the perception of Wukari conflict in the minds of people as 'framed' by the news media and the actual situation on the ground. In this regard, this study is designed to analyze how the news media frame or exaggerate the conflict in their reportage as many have accused them of doing. Was the picture (frame) painted of the conflict a creation of the news media or was it a reflection of the true situation? How did the coverage of the conflict promote or undermine "peace journalism"? These are issues necessitating this research.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this research work are to:

1. Establish the link between media coverage of the conflict and escalating or de-escalating hostilities among contending groups;
2. Assess how the audience rates the news media in the coverage of the Southern Taraba conflicts;

3. Ascertain what factors influence the news media in the coverage of crisis and why various interventions did not adequately change the pattern of reportage within the period.
4. To recommend how the news media can better play their social responsibility role of promoting society's well-being.

Review of Related Literature

Farmers-Herders' Conflict in Nigeria: An Overview

The Fulani live considerably apart from the surrounding agricultural population as they are pastoralists, traders, and nomadic people who herd cattle, sheep, and goats across extensive desert hinterlands (Mountjoy & Hilling, 2023). There is disagreement among scholars on their lineage; some assert North African origins, while others assert Judaeo-Syrian origins (Bello, 2013). The tribe may have moved from the Middle East, according to some theories (Asogwa & Okafor, 2016). Niger, Togo, the Central African Republic, Ghana, Liberia, Guinea, Gambia, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Senegal, Guinea, Gambia, Mali, and as far east as Sudan are all home to Fulani people (Anter, 2011). The Fulani rarely make up the majority wherever they dwell because of their nomadic way of life. According to Nwankwo (2016), they are primarily migratory cattle farmers that constantly relocate their herds of cattle in pursuit of grazing pastures. Between 1804 and 1810, the Fulani took control of much of what would become Northern Nigeria through a sequence of events known as Fulani jihads (Horton, 1972).

According to Kugbayi (2024), the Fulanis settled in northern Nigeria alongside the Hausa and other ethnic groups. Prior to Nigeria's formation, several ethnic groups had blended and coexisted; the affluent cattle owners convinced the Northern Regional Government, led by Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, to implement a grazing reserve program as soon as the country gained formal independence in 1960. To promote grazing reserves, a group of cattle owners and breeders established the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) in 1979. The Ibrahim Babangida military government gazetted Kachia's first grazing reserve in 1987. Members of MACBAN (Asogwa) are the true proprietors of the herds, not the impoverished Fulani men who wander around with their animals (Asogwa & Okafor, 2016). The Fulani cattle herders, due to the nature of their job, are found in every part of Nigeria today. They move their livestock from north to south,

west to east, and north to south in Nigeria where there are other dominant ethnic groups (Ubelejit, 2016).

The farmers and herdsmen frequently clash. In the meantime, the conflict's pattern has changed recently. According to reports, Fulani herdsmen are currently killing farmers in their homes and on their farms with firearms (Ogbette, Attama & Okoh, 2021). Numerous problems have combined to threaten Fulani's financial stability, chief among them the conflict between traditionalism and modernism. Modernization has been resisted by the ranchers. Despite industrialization and population growth, their patterns of production and consumption have largely not changed. Among the main factors impacting the herders' economy are seasonality and rainfall patterns, as well as the degree to which these affect land use. Vegetation patterns as well as loss of the grazing reserves and routes are closely associated to this as a result of farming activities (Awotokun, Nwozor & Olanrewaju 2020).

Many sub-national governments have responded to the issues of herdersfarmers' conflicts by establishing legislation to restrict grazing and, by extension, the conflicts that come with it. For instance, an anti-open grazing law was passed by the Taraba State House of Assembly. However, some supporters of the herdsmen, particularly among the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, and government officials opposed the law. Their disagreement is centered on three major points – the law is oppressive, sectional, negative, and, to put it mildly, abhorrent to the herders' socio-economic wellbeing. Secondly, herdsmen's interstate movement of cattle can be regulated by the state rather than the federal government. Finally, anti-grazing regulations ignore the Fulani herders' economics and forms of interaction with the factors of production (Awotokun et al., 2020).

According to Kugbayi (2024), rural areas are experiencing significant stress due to population and climate change, but the nation's political leadership has not been able to resolve the resulting conflicts. Various quotas have expressed dissatisfaction with the government's attitude to the ongoing confrontations between farmers and herders. The Grazing Routes Bill's introduction seemed to undermine popular confidence in the government and give the impression that the Fulani were politically dominant in other regions of Nigeria. Non-Fulanis in particular view the violence as a means of undermining other regions of the nation (Nwankwo, 2016). Additionally, the conflicts' climate of instability and insecurity has hindered both groups' capacity to perform at their best, which has led to a rise in poverty and a decline in quality of life. According to Corps (2015), in

these conflict-prone neighborhoods, "an average household would experience at least 64 percent or potentially 210 percent decrease in income due to conflicts." This is because insecurity would make the majority of them fearful to pursue their livelihood.

Media and Conflict Reporting

Mass media often plays a key role in today's conflict. Basically, their role can take two different and opposed forms. Either the media takes an active part in the conflict and has responsibility for increased violence, or stays independent and out of the conflict, thereby contributing to the resolution of conflict and alleviation of violence. Which role the media takes in a given conflict, and in the phases before and after, depends on a complex set of factors, including the relationship the media has to actors in the conflict and the independence the media has to the power holders in society (Puddephatt, 2006).

It has long been known that development requires efficient information and communication systems. According to Abdulbaqi and Ariemu (2017), communication and information flows are essential to development initiatives and aid in the establishment and maintenance of a strong civil society, which is necessary for the growth of thriving economies, which in turn makes social security possible. In conflict-ravaged societies, the media's responsibility is to facilitate peace and conflict management; otherwise, development will continue to elude such societies. Although there is a lot of conflict, Olomojobi and Ajilore (2018) note that the media frequently chooses which conflicts to cover.

Olomojobi and Ajilore believe that conflict situations may not receive the same attention from reporters; some may receive full coverage and positive framing, while others are suppressed and given negative framing. The media evaluates the prominence or status of contending parties or topics against what the audience values or is interested in before deciding that the story is noteworthy, even though conflict is a news value in and of itself, a classification based on its commercial value (Oso, 2017). In order to increase sales, the media also takes into account the story's dramatic appeal because conflict is portrayed as entertainment (Blasi, 2004).

According to Ohaja's (2021) research on the role that conflict-sensitive communication by citizens and journalists can play in promoting peace in Nigeria, the media's role in conflict situations is to disseminate unbiased, reliable information that can help people better understand the problems and parties involved and make it easier to find solutions. Ohaja

claims that this is a component of the media's professional duty to report objectively and accurately, which is especially important when covering conflicts. Bello and Ayodele (2018) identify the following five ethical guidelines for the media to adhere to in conflict reporting and management:

i. The media should practice conflict-sensitive reporting.

ii. The media should check the likely consequences of their reporting of conflict situations to prevent escalation.

iii. The media should identify other objectives they expect to achieve in the reporting of a conflict and avoid harm triumphing over good as this is unethical.

iv. The media should try to make their conflict reporting approach to be professionally acceptable, endure and become a standard practice among their colleagues.

v. The media should remember that their survival cannot and should not depend on the stirring and elongation of conflicts.

While stressing the role of the media in conflict resolution, Chukwuma, Diri, and Oginibo (2015) also point out that the media should offer a platform or channel where all parties involved can gather and express their opinions on the matter at hand. A conflict can also be minimized by the media by receiving so little attention that it is not included in the public agenda at any level, whether it be local, national, or worldwide (Chukwuma, et al., 2015). As a result, the media can frame and report on conflicts in both good and bad ways. Stated differently, media information has the power to incite or exacerbate conflict. Additionally, it may help put out the fires of conflict (Ohaja, 2021). In an analysis of Nigerian elections that serve as hotspots for violence, Ohaja (2015) emphasizes. According to Puddephatt (2006), applying objectivity, accuracy and balance is essential for the media to have a positive influence on a conflict situation. Akanni (2017) adds that good conflict reporting should not merely state positions but should include background to show the historical and social contexts of the conflict.

Nonetheless, research on how Nigerian media portrays farmer-herder conflicts reveals that many outlets focus more on providing direct news coverage of the problem. In a study of four major newspapers, for example, Akanni (2017) discovered that 81% of the content of the papers on the conflicts was plain news, considerably outstripping all other types of editorial matter.

Gever and Essien (2017) conducted a similar study on the coverage of the farmer-herder conflict in Benue State, Nigeria, using two national newspapers. They discovered that the newspapers primarily used straight news (64.5%), covered the conflict as it happened without conducting follow-up reports on the victims, and primarily featured stories on the inside pages (71.3%). The "media focus on issues of conflict when they are most visible" or alluring, depending on breaking news and doing little research or interpretation to deepen understanding, build trust, and enhance the chances for peace, according to another study on newspaper reporting of conflicts in the Nigerian Niger Delta that specifically looked at conflicts induced by oil (Akanni, 2017, p. 169).

Theoretical Review

The study was anchored on the Framing Theory and the Social Responsibility Theory.

The **Framing theory** was first put forth by Goffman in 1974 in his book, *Frame analysis*. The framing theory postulates that how a story is presented to the audience (the frame) influences how people choose to process, interpret and comprehend it (Wonuola & Adisa, 2023). The media frame events or issues through what they select and highlight (Asemah et al., 2017). According to Ghanem et al. (2009), the framing theory is a continuation of the agenda setting theory, which maintains that the public will discuss and find important topics based on what the media highlight. However, the framing theory contends that the way the media portrays issues will influence how the public views and evaluates those issues (Ghanem et al., 2009).

According to the framing hypothesis, news framing is also influenced by news providers' agendas and the weight they assign to the material they supply journalists, rather than just the media (Brüggemann, 2014). Entman (1993) asserts that the media engages in framing by choosing specific facts from a perceived reality and giving them greater weight in order to support a particular definition, interpretation, moral assessment, and/or solution. Nonetheless, media viewers are more likely to be swayed by frames that reflect their cultural viewpoints (Entman et al., 2009). Griffin (2012) further explains that the basic assumption of the theory is that the media do engage in framing by focusing on certain issues present them within a certain field of meaning (media framing). This consequently determines the choice of meaning people make from such issues (audience framing) (Griffin, 2012). That is, media do tell the audience what to think about (Agenda

setting) and how to think about it (Second level agenda setting, framing theory) (Wonuola & Adisa, 2023).

Entman (1993) cited in Kugbayi (2024) states that frames in the news can be identified and examined by the inclusion or exclusion of some keywords, phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and "sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments." Tankard (2001) presents 11 focal points for identifying and evaluating news frames. They include headlines, subheads, photos, photo captions lead, source selection, quotes selection, pull quotes, logos, statistics and charts, and paragraphs (Tankard, 2001). Apart from media framing, research on framing has dealt with how news framing influences information processing and decision-making processes (Kugbayi, 2024). In relation to this study, the choice of words that media actors use to present conflict issues and the manner of their presentations (media framing) can determine the kind of frame (perceptions) that the audience ascribes to such news (audience framing)

The idea of the framing theory is pertinent to this study because, according to its population, the way the media presents news affects how the public views the topics covered. Stated differently, the way the Nigerian media portrays conflicts between farmers and herders is correlated with how the Nigerian public understands and interprets the conflict and perceives the parties involved. The theory is applicable to the current study as it suggests that media outlets selectively highlight certain aspects of an issue, influencing public perception. This can lead to different attitudes and policy preferences. Framing can have a significant emotional and cognitive impact, influencing public sentiment. It is a dynamic process that can change over time due to new information or events, like the Southern Taraba crisis.

The **Social Responsibility theory** of mass communication, on the other hand, was developed as a compromise between the polar opposites of libertarian and authoritarian thought. According to Asemah et al. (2017), the social responsibility theory emerged from a 1947 American committee led by Robert M. Hutchins to monitor the carelessness of the press, which gave rise to the libertarian doctrine. The social responsibility is an extension of the libertarian theory of the press which places emphasis on the moral and social responsibility of persons as well as institutions which operate the mass media (Ezegwu & Asemah, 2020). Here, journalistic freedom is still protected, but it

must be weighed against social duty (Asemah et al., 2017). The press is believed to be a child of the society and as such it is socially responsible to it. But for the press to be socially responsible to its society, it must be self-disciplined.

Acknowledging Chiakaan and Ahmad, (2011) as cited in Kaigama (2023), the social responsibility theory is an ethical theory which came on board to check the excesses of journalists operating under the guidance of the libertarian theory. The social responsibility theory does not take away the freedom of the press offered by the libertarian theory but it rather reminds journalists of their responsibility socially inclined to their society. The journalists are carrying out their duty as information providers, and as such they should know that the whole society relies on them for truthful, balance and objective information. The social responsibility theory rests on the notion of free press acting responsibly. The press, which enjoys a privileged position under the government, is obliged to be responsible to the communication in contemporary society. The theory implores media practitioners to ensure representation of all facets of the society. This means that it is obligatory for the journalists to ensure that his good image is maintained in the society and should consider the coverage of rural areas as part of the responsibility. The press is supposed to be responsible for the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society. If on the other hand, the media fails to do just that, then the government agency should be used to ensure that they are forced to do that (Asemah 2022).

Furthermore, the social responsibility theory does not take away the freedom of the press offered by the libertarian theory but it rather reminds journalists of their responsibility socially inclined to their society. The journalists are carrying out their duty as information providers, and as such they should know that the whole society relies on them for truthful, balance and objective information (Chiakaan & Ahmad, 2011). Journalists are to remove their personal interest from the conflicts they report. Their reports on conflicts should be capable of inspiring or encouraging collective efforts from the government and well-meaning bodies and individuals towards managing the conflicts. According to McCombs (2003) cited in Kaigama (2023), when the journalist reports a conflict in a manner that tension cannot increase, urging urgent steps to be taken towards resolving the conflict, he is dancing to tune of the social responsibility theory. It is the responsibility of journalism to ensure that a highly divided Nigeria is integrated; it is his responsibility to ensure that there is peace for development to take place (Kaigama, 2023).

The Social Responsibility theory of the press is particularly relevant when examining media framing and audience perceptions of the farmer/herder conflict in Nigeria. This theory asserts that while the press should have the freedom to operate, it also carries a responsibility to society by providing truthful, comprehensive, and accurate accounts of events. In the case of the farmer/herder conflict, this theory upholds that media outlets should aim for balanced and objective reporting, allowing audiences to form well-informed opinions about the situation. This is especially important in a complex issue like this, where biased or sensationalized reporting could intensify tensions or mislead the public. Applying the Social Responsibility theory in this study can shed light on how Nigerian newspapers frame the conflict and whether they uphold the principles of social responsibility as it emphasizes the significance of media accountability and professional self-regulation, which are crucial for ensuring that media framing does not skew public perception or escalate conflicts; hence, it adoption by the study.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the qualitative research design employing both Content Analysis and Survey Method to elicit data for the research. The population of the study comprised of the edition of the two selected newspapers in Nigeria namely: Vanguard and Daily Trust published within an interval of 5 days covering the study period from 2018-2022. Days selected in each month were 1st, 5th, 10th, 15th, 20th, 25th, & 30th. In this regard, therefore, the population consisted of the 420 editions of the two newspapers published within the period under study. The newspapers for the study were chosen through purposive sampling for their wide circulation and availability. However, since it is impossible to get data from the entire publications of the selected national dailies, it becomes crucial for the study to choose a small number.

In light of this, the study used the convenience sampling approach to determine the study population's size. A sample of 115 (58 from Vanguard and 57 from Daily Trust) editions of the newspapers containing media report on farmers/herder's conflict were conveniently sampled from the total edition of the two nation dailies published within this period. For the content analysis, a code sheet was used as the instrument for data collection.

RESULTS

Table 1: Link between Media Coverage and Escalation/De-escalation of hostilities

Coverage Type	Vanguard (N=58)	Daily Trust (N=57)	Total (N=115) (%)
Conflict-escalating frames (e.g., ethnic blame, victimization, inflammatory language)	25	22	47 (40.9%)
Conflict-de-escalating frames (e.g., peace advocacy, reconciliation efforts)	15	17	32 (27.8%)
Neutral/Objective reports (balanced and fact-based reporting)	18	18	36 (31.3%)
Total	**58**	**57**	**115(100%)**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Data in table 1 shows the link between media coverage and escalation /de-escalation of hostilities of Farmer/Herder Conflict in Nigeria. According to the result, 47 (40.9%) of reports from both newspapers used conflict-escalating frames relating to ethnic blame, victimization and inflammatory language, 32 (27.8%) focused on conflict de-escalating frame relating to peace, advocacy and reconciliation efforts while 36 (31.3%) were on neutral/objective reports which indicating moderate adherence to journalistic responsibility.

Table 2: Audience Rating of News Media Coverage

Audience Perception	Vanguard (N=58)	Daily Trust (N=57)	Total (N=115) (%)
Positive (Balanced, fair reporting)	18	20	38 (33.0%)
Negative (Sensationalism, bias, unverified claims)	29	26	55 (47.8%)
Neutral (Neither fair nor biased)	11	11	22 (19.2%)
Total	**58**	**57**	**115 (100%)**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Result presented in table 2 revealed that 38 (33%) of the respondents perceived media coverage to be balanced and fair, 55 (47.8%) perceived media coverage as biased or sensational and 22 (19.2%) perceived media coverage as neither fair nor biased. The implication of result collected here is that audience believed the newspapers prioritized conflict-heavy narrative over balance and fair reporting.

Table 3: Factors Influencing Media Coverage of the Crisis

Influencing Factor	Vanguard (N=58)	Daily Trust (N=57)	Total (N=115) (%)
Political pressure/government influence	23	22	45 (39.1%)
Ownership influence	17	16	33 (28.7%)
Ethnic/religious bias	12	15	27 (23.5%)
Financial/commercial interests	6	4	10 (8.7%)
Total	**58**	**57**	**115 (100%)**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The concern of data in table 3 is to find out the factors influencing media coverage of the farmer/herder conflict in Nigeria. Here, political pressure/government amounting to 45 (39.1%) was the dominant influence, followed by ownership 33 (28.7%). While others, 27 (23.5%) indicated ethnic/religious bias influence and 10 (8.7%) indicated financial/commercial interest influence. This shows that newspaper coverage of conflict related issues is significantly shaped by political and ownership influence which also highlight the challenge bedeviling media independence in Nigeria.

Table 4: Recommendations for Improving Media's Social Responsibility Role

Recommendation	Vanguard (N=58)	Daily Trust (N=57)	Total (N=115) (%)
Promote peace journalism	22	20	42 (36.5%)
Strengthen fact-checking	18	18	36 (31.3%)
Provide training on conflict-sensitive reporting	18	19	37 (32.2%)
Total	**58**	**57**	**115 (100%)**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 4 further provided recommendations for improving media's social responsibility role of promoting society's well-being. The most recommended approach was promoting peace journalism 42 (36.5%), followed by training on conflict-sensitive reporting 37 (32.2%) and 36 (31.3%) emphasized strengthening fact-checking mechanism for newspaper reporting. By implies most align with their social responsibility role which emphasises ethical journalism of accurate, fair, balance and conflict-sensitive reporting.

DISCUSSION

This study was carried out to examine media framing and audience perception of Farmer/Herder conflict in Nigeria with focus on newspaper coverage of the Southern Taraba Crisis 2018-2022. The study formulated four research objectives and conducted a content analysis of 115 editions from Vanguard and Daily Trust newspaper. Finding from the study revealed that a significant portion of news reports (40.9%) used conflict-escalating frames, characterized by ethnic blame, victimization, and inflammatory language while only 27.8% focused on conflict-de-escalating frames that emphasizes on peace and reconciliation efforts. This trend reflects findings from previous research by Usman and Habila (2024) who reported that media narratives often prioritize sensationalism over balanced reporting, thus contributing to increased tensions in conflict situations. In a separate study, Odiegwu-Enwerem et al. (2020) showed that Nigerian newspapers mainly relied on third-party sources whose viewpoints could be biased, resulting in an unbalanced depiction of the herder-farmer conflict.

The audience's perception of media coverage adds another layer to the narrative. The study found that 47.8% of respondents viewed the coverage as biased or sensational, while only 33% considered it balanced and fair. This perception aligns with earlier findings of Olaniyan and Yahaya (2021) who revealed that media coverage often emphasizes conflict-heavy narratives, which can distort public understanding and heighten hostilities. The implications of the finding here is that when audiences see media as biased, it erodes trust in journalistic institutions and can lead to greater polarization among conflicting groups.

Finding also shows the important factors that affect media coverage, with political pressure being the most prominent at 39.1%, followed by ownership influence at 28.7%. No doubt, external pressures often shape media narratives in Nigeria. A study by Kugbayi (2024) pointed out that political affiliations often determine how conflicts are reported, with journalists expected to conform to government narratives instead of providing unbiased accounts. This highlights a significant challenge for media independence in Nigeria, where ownership and political interests can undermine journalistic integrity. Further finding from the study suggests several strategies to improve the media's role in social responsibility. Promoting peace journalism (36.5%) and providing training on conflict-sensitive reporting (32.2%) were identified as vital steps toward encouraging more

responsible journalism. These called for ethical journalism practices prioritizing accuracy, balance, and sensitivity in conflict reporting. Additionally, enhancing fact-checking mechanisms is essential to ensure that news content is credible and serves the public interest.

CONCLUSION

Conflict between farmers and herders is undoubtedly a hindrance to Nigeria's national security. Newspapers which are constitutionally recognised as a component in fostering national unity and peaceful coexistence have been accused of reporting conflict using conflict-escalating frames, which contribute to heightened tensions and perceptions of bias among the audience. Based on the analysis of result, it was established that media coverage plays a dual role in either escalating or de-escalating conflicts, depending on the framing strategies employed. Additionally, audience perception of media coverage revealed concerns about bias and sensationalism, further highlighting the need for more responsible journalism. While the Nigerian Newspapers in focus report conflict between farmers/herders in the study area, it is pertinent to adopt ethical reporting practices, prioritizing balanced, fair, and conflict-sensitive narratives to contribute to peace building and national cohesion.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Media organizations should prioritize peace journalism by emphasizing conflict-sensitive reporting that promotes dialogue, reconciliation, and de-escalation rather than sensationalism and ethnic blame.
2. To mitigate the influence of political and ownership biases on news reporting, media organizations should implement policies that promote editorial independence.
3. Journalists covering conflict-related issues should undergo specialized training on fact-checking, ethical reporting, and conflict resolution strategies.
4. Media organizations should establish and strengthen internal fact-checking mechanisms to curb misinformation and sensationalism in conflict reporting.

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