

FREQUENCY AND PROMINENCE IN THE REPORTAGE OF FARMERS-HERDERS CONFLICTS IN NORTH-CENTRAL, NIGERIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF *THE NATION* AND *DAILY TRUST* NEWSPAPERS, JANUARY-DECEMBER 2018

Lois Otse Adams-Osigbemhe, * Kwaghkondo Agber, *

* Department of Theatre Arts (Media Arts), Faculty of Arts, University of Abuja, Abuja

Abstract

This study examines the frequency and prominence of newspaper coverage of the protracted farmers-herders conflict in North-Central Nigeria, comparing two major national dailies - The Nation and Daily Trust, from January to December 2018. Drawing on content analysis of reported stories (n=234) and guided by Gatekeeping, Social Identity, and Resource-Based Conflict theories, the research investigates how often and how prominently each newspaper reported the conflict, and whether their reportage tended to escalate or de-escalate tensions. A mixed-method approach was adopted: quantitatively, the number of relevant news articles and their placement (headlines and editorials) were tallied; qualitatively, a sample of articles was analysed for tone and context. The findings reveal that The Nation published more stories (131) than Daily Trust (103) on the conflict, and gave the issue greater prominence (front-page and headlines). Both newspapers focused mainly on straight news reporting with very few editorials or opinion pieces, and notably refrained from using inflammatory images or language. This neutral reporting stance meant that their coverage did not overtly escalate the conflict. However, neither paper actively advocated conflict resolution interventions, as evidenced by the lack of editorials or in-depth analyses offering solutions. The study concludes that while Nigerian print media fulfilled their basic informational role during the period, they fell short of leveraging their platform for conflict resolution. It recommends that newspapers balance objective reportage with deeper analysis and that experienced journalists be assigned to conflict beats. In summary, the media coverage, though unable to resolve the crisis, set the tone for a national discourse on the farmers-herders conflict, highlighted the need for more proactive media engagement in peace building and instigated the government to act accordingly.

Keywords: Farmers-herders Conflict; Media Coverage; Frequency; Prominence; North-Central Nigeria

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Introduction

North-Central Nigeria has been enmeshed in perennial clashes between sedentary farmers and nomadic herders, leading to heightened insecurity across the country, (Francis et al, 2019, p.12). Over the past two decades of Nigeria's Fourth Democratic Dispensation, these conflicts have resulted in thousands of deaths, destruction of property, and mass displacement. For instance, in Benue State, a flashpoint of the crisis "many people have been gruesomely murdered, houses set ablaze and property worth

billions of naira destroyed" (Francis, 2019, p. 103). The violence often spikes during the dry season when herders (predominantly of the Fulani ethnic group) migrate southwards in search of pasture and water, sometimes trespassing on farmlands (Francis et al 2019, p. 16). This nomadic oscillation brings them into direct competition with local farming communities over land use, water resources, and crop damage, frequently triggering disputes. Historical factors have exacerbated the situation: colonial policies (such as the establishment of mining camps in the Jos Plateau)

attracted diverse groups to the region, intensifying pressure on land and igniting longstanding ethnic and religious tensions, (Mohammed, 2023, p.2). The human and economic costs of the farmers-herders conflict are severe, ranging from loss of lives and livelihoods to declines in agricultural output and food security, (Mohammed, 2023, p.3).

The media is capable of playing a crucial role in such conflict scenarios by shaping public perception and potentially influencing policy responses. The press serves as a watchdog over those in powers and as a conduit of information to citizens. (Gever & Essien, 2019, p.6). Responsible conflict reporting can create awareness of brewing crises so they can be addressed before escalation, as well as keep the public informed about on-going developments and relief efforts. According to Galadima (cited in Gever & Essien, 2019, p.6), the reportage of conflicts should aim to (i) create awareness to prevent escalation, (ii) assist community and religious leaders in conflict resolution, (iii) generate ideas for resolving or reducing the conflict, (iv) expose any hidden interests fuelling the conflict, (v) de-escalate rather than inflame the situation, (vi) publicize the plight of victims to solicit aid, and (vii) serve as an early warning for authorities. In practice, however, news media often struggle to fulfil all these ideals. Some observers argue that media coverage of the farmers-herders conflict has at times perpetuated negative stereotypes or one-sided narratives, potentially exacerbating intergroup mistrust. Others contend that increased media attention on the crisis pressures the government to act and brings much-needed national and international awareness to the plight of affected communities (Shoemaker, P.J., & Vos, T.P 2009, Pp. 5 &7).

Given this debate, a comparative analysis of different news outlets can reveal how media agendas and institutional biases might influence conflict coverage. This study thus focuses on two prominent Nigerian newspapers, *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* reportage of farmers -herders' crisis in North-Central. These papers were purposively selected because they represent the major geopolitical divides in Nigeria's media landscape. *The Nation* is based in Lagos (South-West) and has a largely southern/Nigerian readership, whereas *Daily Trust* is based in Abuja with strong circulation in Northern Nigeria. By examining both frequency (how often conflict stories are reported) and prominence (the importance given to those stories, as indicated by placement in headlines and editorials), the study seeks to understand whether regional background or editorial policies result in differences in reporting the same conflict. For example, did the southern-based *The Nation* devote more attention to the conflict than the northern-based *Daily Trust*, or frame it differently? And to what extent did either paper use its platform to promote peace and

accountability, or conversely, to inflame passions?

In the light of the above, the objectives of this study are to determine the frequency of reportage of the North-Central farmers-herders conflict in 2018 by *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* newspapers, and compare the volume of coverage between the two outlets, assess the prominence given to the issue in each newspaper, by analysing the placement of stories (front page headlines, editorials, back pages) and the space devoted to the conflict, evaluate whether the tone and content of the coverage in each newspaper tended toward escalation (using inflammatory language or one-sided narratives) or toward de-escalation/peace promotion (balanced reporting, avoidance of sensationalism, inclusion of conflict-resolving perspectives), analyse the findings through the lenses of relevant media and conflict theories - namely Gatekeeping Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Resource-Based Conflict Theory - to understand the underlying factors shaping the coverage, and contribute to knowledge on the media's role in conflict situations and offer recommendations for how reportage might better serve the public interest in conflict resolution.

By achieving these objectives, the paper sheds light on the performance of Nigerian newspapers in fulfilling their social responsibility roles during a period of intense conflict. The findings highlight whether reportage was balanced or biased, whether it was sufficient in drawing attention to the crisis, and how editorial decisions (what to publish, where, and how) may have impacted public discourse on the conflict. Ultimately, this research provides insight into how media coverage can either unite or divide in a fragile context, thereby offering lessons for journalists, media regulators, and policymakers in Nigeria and beyond.

A Review of Works on the Reports of Farmers-Herders Crisis in Northern Nigeria

To frame this study, there are three perspectives that help review the works on the reports of conflict: Gatekeeping Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Resource-Based Conflict Theory. In addition, relevant literatures on the media's role in conflict reportage, particularly in Northern Nigeria were reviewed. These theories and insights from prior studies form the basis for analysing how *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* reported the farmers-herders clashes. The press has long been regarded as a mediator of information and a guardian of the public interest in times of crisis. The notion of the press as the "*Fourth Estate*" underscores its duty to monitor and report on the actions of the state and other powerful entities. In conflict situations, this role becomes even more critical. Effective journalism can put a spotlight on unfolding crises, mobilize relief through public awareness, and hold leaders accountable for their responses (or lack

thereof). Siebert et al. (1956) in *Four Theories of the Press* emphasized that a free and responsible press is vital for transparency and good governance. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) similarly note that journalism's first obligation is to the truth and its first loyalty is to citizens, meaning that conflict reportage must be accurate, verified, and serve the public's need for information without bias or manipulation.

However, reporting on communal conflicts poses particular challenges. Journalists must balance objectivity with sensitivity, ensuring that their stories do not inadvertently inflame tensions. The language used and the decision whether to include graphic images or incendiary details can influence whether media coverage escalates a conflict or helps to calm it. In the context of Nigeria, research has shown that media narratives can sometimes reinforce social divisions. For example, a study by Gever and Essien (2019) on Nigerian newspaper coverage of herder-farmer clashes in Benue State found that newspapers mostly reported the conflict in episodic terms ("as it happened") with little attention to the deeper issues or the victims' stories. This event-focused reporting means that coverage often highlights violent incidents but may neglect analysis of underlying causes or humanizing aspects of the conflict. Gever and Essien (2019) also observed that such surface-level reporting does not typically explore solutions, which aligns with the concern that Nigerian media tend to report conflicts without providing context or follow-up on resolution efforts.

It has been found that the farmer-herder crises in Northern Nigeria have been extensively studied, with various factors identified as contributing to the conflicts. According to Abbass (2012), the crisis is largely driven by competition for resources such as land and water, exacerbated by climate change and population growth. Okoro (2018) notes that the conflicts have significant economic and social impacts, including loss of livelihoods, displacement of communities, and increased insecurity. Tonah (2020) highlights the role of government policies and institutional failures in exacerbating the conflicts, emphasizing the need for inclusive and sustainable solutions.

While this study does not directly apply the peace journalism framework, it is conscious of the distinction between *war journalism* (sensational, elite-oriented, victory-driven coverage) and *peace journalism* (solution-oriented, people-focused coverage). The observed avoidance of graphic images or inflammatory content by both *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* (as will be discussed in the findings) can be seen as a form of responsible journalism akin to certain principles of peace journalism, where the media chose not to publish content that could escalate hatred or fear.

Gatekeeping Theory is fundamental to understanding media coverage, as it addresses the processes by which editors and journalists filter and shape the news that reaches the public. Originally formulated by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s and later applied to journalism by David Manning White (1950), gatekeeping in the media context refers to the selection and omission of stories, as well as decisions about prominence and framing. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) define gatekeeping as "*the process through which information is filtered for dissemination, be it via media, interpersonal channels, or other communication modes*". Gatekeepers in a newsroom (editors and news directors,) decide *which events become news, what prominence to give them, and how to present them*. These decisions are influenced by numerous factors: news values (such as timeliness, significance, conflict, proximity), the media outlet's editorial policies, perceived audience interest, and occasionally the political or commercial interests of the media owners.

In the context of the farmers-herders conflict, gatekeeping decisions would include whether to report each violent incident (many occur in remote villages and might rely on stringers or wire services for information), how frequently to run those stories, and whether to place them on front pages or relegated to less prominent sections. Gatekeeping theory suggests that not all events get reported; those that do pass through "*gates*" where the gatekeeper applies professional judgments. For example, an editor might decide not to publish extremely graphic photos of massacre scenes to avoid inciting public anger or fear, this is a gatekeeping choice about content that could have ethical justifications (protecting the audience and moderating tension) or could be criticized as downplaying the severity of the violence. Gujbawu (2002) posits that editors as gatekeepers must adhere strictly to professionalism when reporting conflicts, carefully verifying sources and considering the consequences of what they publish. He argues that in conflicts like the farmers-herders crisis, gatekeepers should distinguish whether a story might escalate or de-escalate tensions and decide on the best way to present it. In other words, editors bear a "*herculean*" responsibility: they must ensure that the coverage is truthful and comprehensive, but also that it does not recklessly stoke the flames in an already volatile situation.

For this study, Gatekeeping Theory will help explain some key observations, such as the absence of certain types of content. Notably, both *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* had a policy of not publishing gruesome images of the conflict. This likely reflects gatekeeping decisions aimed at balancing news value with ethical responsibility. By examining what *was not* present in the coverage (e.g., no editorials, no letters to the editor on the issue), we can infer the gatekeepers' priorities or

concerns. Additionally, gatekeeping can shed light on differences between the two newspapers: each newsroom has its own chain of decision-making and editorial stance. If *The Nation* gave more front-page coverage to the conflict than *Daily Trust*, Gatekeeping Theory would prompt us to ask what criteria or influences led to that difference. Perhaps *The Nation's* editors deemed the story highly newsworthy for a national audience, whereas *Daily Trust's* editors, operating closer to the conflict region, might have had other concurrent security issues (such as the Boko Haram insurgency or other local conflicts) also competing for front-page space. Ultimately, gatekeeping reminds us that media output is not a neutral mirror of events, but a constructed reality shaped by human choices in news production.

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), provides a framework for understanding how group affiliations can influence perceptions and behaviour during conflicts. SIT posits that individuals derive a part of their identity and self-esteem from the social groups to which they belong (e.g., ethnicity, religion, nationality), and this can lead to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. In a conflict that broadly falls along ethnic or cultural lines - as the farmers-herders conflict often does, with Fulani (predominantly Muslim) herders versus largely non-Fulani (often Christian) farmers - social identities become highly salient. Each side may see the other through the lens of group stereotypes rather than as individual actors. Such dynamics can fuel a conflict further, as people rally around their group identity especially if they feel threatened by an out-group.

When applying Social Identity Theory to media reportage, the key question is whether media coverage reinforces or challenges these group identities and biases. Newspapers and their journalists are not outside observers; they too exist within the social fabric and may consciously or unconsciously reflect in-group biases. For example, a southern-based newspaper (*The Nation*) might be expected by some readers to sympathize more with the farming communities (often viewed as victims in the southern narrative of this conflict), whereas a northern-based paper (*Daily Trust*) might be expected to provide perspectives more sympathetic to herders or at least more attuned to the complexities involving the Fulani community. If each paper largely serves an audience that overlaps with a particular social identity, there could be subtle differences in tone or emphasis. Social Identity Theory would predict that each media outlet might exhibit some in-group favouritism - such as giving more attention or a more humanized portrayal to victims that belong to their primary audience's group, or using framing that aligns with their readers' sentiments.

It is important to note that professional journalism norms push against overt bias: both

newspapers officially aim for balanced reporting. In our analysis, we will consider whether *The Nation* or *Daily Trust* showed any evidence of bias or divergence that could be attributable to social identity factors. One indicator might be the volume of coverage: if one paper downplayed the conflict relative to the other, it could be interpreted (through an SIT lens) as a form of in-group protection (e.g., a northern paper being gentler in reporting on a conflict where members of a northern ethnic group are frequently implicated as perpetrators). Conversely, differences in reporting might not be due to bias at all but other factors like access to information or editorial judgment.

Social Identity Theory also underscores the potential impact of media narratives on group relations. If media emphasize the ethnic dimension of the conflict ("Fulani herders" vs "Tiv farmers", for example) in every report, they risk reinforcing an *us vs. them* mentality among readers. On the other hand, if coverage focuses on the conflict issues (land, resources, security lapses) rather than the ethnic identities of those involved, it might reduce the salience of group divisions. In reviewing content from 2018, we will look at whether identity labels were prominent and whether the newspapers made any effort to incorporate voices from all sides (e.g., quotes from both farmers' representatives and herders' associations, or commentary from neutral observers) to balance perspectives. Such choices relate back to gatekeeping as well, but SIT provides the insight into why it matters: media that only echo one community's viewpoint can intensify intergroup resentment, whereas more inclusive reporting can foster understanding.

Resource-Based Conflict Theory (also known as Resource Scarcity or Environmental Conflict theory) posits that competition over scarce resources - such as land, water, and food can be a root cause of conflict, especially in settings where groups rely on the same resources for survival. Scholars like Thomas Homer-Dixon (1999) and Cullen Hendrix & Idean Salehyan have argued that environmental stress and resource scarcity heighten tensions that can erupt into violence, particularly when compounded by population pressure and weak institutions. In the case of the Nigerian farmers-herders clashes, this framework is highly pertinent: at its core, the conflict is often driven by competition over fertile land and water. Prolonged droughts, desertification in the far north, and increasing farming activity in the middle-belt have gradually squeezed communal grazing routes and reduced available pasture. Herders seeking grazing land and water for their cattle migrate into farming areas, sometimes leading cattle to stray into crop fields. The resulting crop damage and water pollution become flashpoints for violence.

Resource-Based Conflict Theory helps situate the farmers-herders crisis not merely as an ethnic or

religious feud (though those aspects are real) but as a struggle for livelihood in a context of scarcity. It also emphasizes the role of institutions: strong conflict-management institutions (like effective land tenure systems, grazing reserves, or arbitration mechanisms) could mediate resource competition, whereas their absence or breakdown can allow disputes to escalate into open conflict. North (1990) and Ostrom (2005) highlight how institutional arrangements (laws, norms, policies) shape the way groups compete or cooperate over resources. In Nigeria, institutional responses have included anti-open grazing laws in some states and various committees to mediate farmer-herder relations, but implementation has been fraught with challenges.

For media coverage, the relevance of Resource-Based Conflict Theory lies in whether and how the newspapers contextualized the conflict in terms of resource competition and institutional failures. Did *The Nation* or *Daily Trust* explain to readers the underlying issues of land use, climate change, and grazing rights that fuel the violence? Or did they predominantly report each clash as a discrete incident without linking to these broader causes? Reporting that incorporates the resource-based cause (for example, referencing the scarcity of grazing land or government inaction on creating grazing reserves) could contribute to a more informed public discourse and steer narratives away from purely ethnic blame. It can also press policymakers by consistently highlighting unresolved structural problems. On the other hand, if coverage simply chronicles attacks and reprisals without analysis, it may not challenge readers to see the conflict's root causes, leaving room for ethnic scapegoating or fatalistic narratives.

By using Resource-Based Conflict Theory in our analysis, we aim to identify whether the coverage from the two newspapers remained at the surface level of *who did what to whom* or delved into *why* such clashes keep occurring. For instance, some of the articles might have mentioned disputes over specific grazing routes or government bans on open grazing; these would indicate attention to resource issues. We will also consider whether differences in coverage might reflect each paper's editorial stance on the conflict's causes. *Daily Trust*, being closer to northern stakeholders, might emphasize the herders' perspective (e.g., challenges faced by pastoralists, and claims of cattle theft) whereas *The Nation* might highlight the farmers' perspective (e.g., farm destruction, need for herders to restrict movement). Each perspective touches on resource aspects differently - herders might talk about lack of grazing land or water, farmers about land rights and farm productivity. Through the lens of Resource-Based Conflict Theory, these emphases (if present) will show how media discourse can either illuminate the real drivers of conflict or obscure them. Together, these

theories provide a framework: Gatekeeping explains editorial selection and framing; Social Identity sheds light on potential bias and representation; and Resource-Based Conflict examines structural context. Their combined application allows for an assessment of how *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* represented the farmers-herders conflict in 2018.

This study employed a mixed-methods content analysis to examine how two national newspapers - *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* covered the farmers-herders conflict in 2018. Content analysis was used to quantify and interpret the frequency, prominence, and tone of newspaper articles. The approach combined quantitative counts with qualitative thematic interpretation to provide a comprehensive assessment. A census of all conflict-related articles published between *January and December 2018* in both newspapers was undertaken. The timeframe was selected due to significant conflict activity during the year. *The Nation* represents a southern editorial voice, while *Daily Trust* reflects northern perspectives, making their comparison ideal for analysing regional variations in media framing. Articles were sourced from newspaper archives and included if they reported on the conflict in North-Central states - such as Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Kogi, Taraba, Niger, and the FCT. All formats were considered: straight news, features, editorials, opinion columns, and letters to the editor.

Data Presentation and Analysis on the Frequency and Prominence in the Reportage of Farmers-Herders Conflicts in *The Nation* and *Daily Trust*

Table One: Breakdown of Monthly reportage of *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* newspapers from January to December, 2018.

Month	The Nation	Daily Trust	Total
January	Not Available	11	11
February	3	7	10
March	34	17	51
April	32	21	53
May	18	10	28
June	14	13	27
July	9	6	15
August	6	3	9
September	4	5	9
October	6	3	9
November	4	3	7
December	1	4	5
Total	131	103	234
Percentage	55.9%	44.1%	100%

Source: Researcher's field work, 2024

Table Two: Units of Analysis and Content Categories of frequency in *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* newspapers (January-December, 2018).

Units of Analysis	The Nation	Daily Trust	Total
News	97	87	186
Regional Report	-	-	-
Feature	4	5	9
Opinion	5	1	6
Columns	1	-	1
Letters to the Editor	-	-	-
Total	107	93	200
Percentage	53.5%	46.5%	100%

Source: Researcher's field work, 2024

Table Three: Units of Analysis and Content Categories of prominence in *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* newspapers (January-December, 2018).

Units of Analysis	The Nation	Daily Trust	Total
Headline	23	10	33
Centre-spread	-	-	-
Back page	1	-	1
Editorial	-	-	-
Total	24	10	34
Percentage	70.5	29.4	100%

Source: Researcher's field work, 2024

A total of 234 articles were selected: 131 from *The Nation* and 103 from *Daily Trust*. A minor data gap occurred with unavailable January 2018 editions of *The Nation*, marked in the analysis as "Not Available." Each article was coded by content type (frequency category) and placement (prominence category), using the following scheme:

Frequency Categories:

- News: Straight reporting.
- Feature: In-depth articles.
- Opinion/Columns: Signed viewpoints.
- Editorials: Unsigned institutional commentary.
- Letters to the Editor: Reader contributions.

Prominence Categories:

- Front Page Headline
- Back Page
- Centre-spread
- Editorial Page

Each article was placed into one frequency

and/or one prominence category. A single-coder system was used, with a structured codebook to ensure consistency. To complement the quantitative data, a purposive sample of 46 articles was drawn for in-depth qualitative analysis. Two articles per newspaper per month were selected, focusing on key events or high-profile headlines. These were analysed for:

- Framing (ethnic vs. resource-based)
- Tone (neutral, alarmist, sympathetic)
- Sources cited
- Indicators of bias or balance

Direct quotations and narrative structures were documented to evaluate language use and potential editorial slant. Quantitative results were analysed using descriptive statistics, with data presented in tables showing monthly frequency, article types, and prominence. Qualitative analysis involved thematic coding to identify trends in tone, framing, and attribution. Triangulation between both datasets helped validate findings - for example, comparing the absence of editorials quantitatively with the tone of opinion columns qualitatively. As the study relied on published material, no human subjects were involved. All sources were cited in APA format, and content was quoted responsibly under fair use. Care was taken to avoid sensationalizing the violence described, with neutral and analytical language used throughout.

A total of 234 articles related to the farmers-herders conflict were published in 2018: *The Nation* accounted for 131 articles (56%), while *Daily Trust* published 103 (44%). Despite missing January data for *The Nation*, it consistently produced more stories throughout the year, particularly in peak months like March and April, when both papers increased coverage due to major incidents in Benue and Plateau States. This suggests *The Nation* placed greater editorial priority on the conflict, often doubling the coverage of *Daily Trust* during crisis peaks.

Most articles (93%) were straight news reports. *The Nation* had 97, and *Daily Trust* 87. There were few in-depth articles, with only 9 features in total. Opinion content was rare: *The Nation* published 5 op-eds and 1 column, while *Daily Trust* featured only one opinion piece. Notably, neither newspaper published any editorial on the conflict throughout the year. This indicates a strong preference for factual reporting over analysis or commentary, likely reflecting editorial caution due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

Table analysis revealed that *The Nation* gave significantly more prominence to the conflict:

- The Nation*: 23 front-page stories, 1 back-page.
- Daily Trust*: 10 front-page stories, 0 back-page.
- Neither used centre-spreads or editorials.
- This suggests *The Nation* sought to elevate the

issue in national discourse more consistently. In contrast, *Daily Trust* appeared more restrained, possibly due to competing northern security stories (Boko Haram) or concerns over stoking ethnic tensions.

Both newspapers maintained a neutral tone, avoiding inflammatory headlines or graphic images. Common phrasing included “suspected herdsman” or “clashes between communities,” with cautious attribution. Emotive language like “massacre” was rare, and casualty reports were often based on official sources. This editorial restraint reflects conflict-sensitive reporting and likely a conscious decision to avoid escalating tensions.

The Nation occasionally used ethnic identifiers (“Fulani herdsman”) and referenced victims’ religious affiliations. It was more likely to frame stories as security failures or political issues.

Daily Trust tended to downplay ethnic references, framing incidents as general criminality or communal violence. Both relied heavily on government sources, with limited voices from victims, community leaders, or herders’ associations.

Only a few articles - mainly features acknowledged underlying causes such as land disputes or policy failures. Structural issues like climate change or grazing laws were rarely explored in depth. Both papers avoided graphic imagery, using either generic photos or none at all. This aligns with stated editorial policies to prevent incitement and maintain sensitivity. Quantitatively, *The Nation* covered the conflict more frequently and prominently. Qualitatively, both papers maintained neutrality in tone and avoided inflammatory content, though *The Nation* showed slightly more urgency and victim emphasis. Neither outlet, however, offered in-depth analysis or editorial leadership on solutions.

The analysis reveals key differences in the way *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* reported the farmers-herders conflict in 2018, particularly in terms of frequency, prominence, and framing. *The Nation*’s higher volume and more prominent front-page placement suggest a deliberate effort to keep the conflict in the national spotlight. This aligns with Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), which argues that media influence what the public perceives as important. While *Daily Trust* also covered the conflict substantially, it was more restrained in both frequency and emphasis.

Differences in editorial judgment reflect core principles of Gatekeeping Theory. *The Nation* appeared more willing to headline the conflict, likely due to editorial priorities or its geographic distance from the crisis, making the story more “newsworthy” to its southern readership. *Daily Trust*, located closer to the conflict zones, may have had more competing stories (Boko Haram insurgency) or concerns about inflaming local sentiments. The complete absence of editorials in

both papers is notable. It suggests editorial reluctance to take public positions, likely due to the political and ethnic sensitivity of the conflict. While this approach ensured neutrality, it also reflected a missed opportunity to advocate for solutions or accountability.

Social Identity Theory offers insight into the nuanced framing choices. *The Nation* more frequently identified ethnic groups (“Fulani herdsman”) and framed stories around victims (largely southern farmers), aligning with its audience’s perspective. In contrast, *Daily Trust* often avoided direct ethnic labelling, reflecting sensitivity to its predominantly northern readership. These subtle identity alignments did not amount to overt bias but suggest that regional orientation influenced which perspectives were amplified or downplayed. *Daily Trust* was more likely to include quotes from herders’ associations, while *The Nation* focused on local officials or victims’ communities.

Despite covering numerous incidents, both newspapers largely failed to explore the structural causes of the conflict. This highlights a gap in applying Resource-Based Conflict Theory, which emphasizes competition over land and water as central drivers. Aside from a few features, most articles focused on immediate events without linking them to underlying environmental degradation, grazing policy, or institutional failures. This absence of deeper analysis limited the media’s potential to inform readers about long-term solutions or the systemic nature of the conflict. In this regard, coverage remained surface-level and reactive rather than explanatory.

Both newspapers demonstrated restraint in tone and imagery - hallmarks of conflict-sensitive reporting and overlapping with principles of peace journalism. Neither paper published graphic visuals or inflammatory language, nor both cautiously attributed incidents to “suspected herdsman” or “unidentified attackers.” This careful reporting likely helped prevent media-fuelled escalation. However, peace journalism also encourages coverage that highlights resolutions, peace efforts, and shared humanity - elements largely absent from the analysed articles. Neither newspaper regularly featured community reconciliation efforts, policy debates, or stories from peace builders.

Overall, the media played an informative but passive role. They reported events with basic facts, avoided incitement, and kept the conflict visible. However, they rarely engaged in critical journalism - no editorials, minimal investigative work, and little push for accountability. This cautious neutrality maintained professional standards but limited the press’s capacity to actively shape conflict discourse or promote peace. As such, both papers fulfilled their minimal social responsibility but fell short of their potential as agents of positive change. *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* provided substantial coverage of the farmers-herders conflict,

with *The Nation* offering more frequent and prominent attention. Both maintained a neutral tone, avoided inflammatory content, and exercised editorial caution - likely to prevent escalation. Yet, they missed key opportunities for advocacy, analysis, and peace building. Theories of gatekeeping, social identity, and resource-based conflict help explain their editorial behaviour and highlight areas where the media could contribute more constructively in future crises.

Conclusion

This study analysed how *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* reported the farmers-herders conflict in North-Central Nigeria during 2018. Using content analysis of 234 articles, it compared coverage frequency, prominence, tone, and framing, applying Gatekeeping, Social Identity, and Resource-Based Conflict theories. Findings show that *The Nation* provided more frequent and prominent coverage, suggesting greater editorial prioritization. Both newspapers relied heavily on straight news reporting, with minimal editorials, features, or opinion content. While the tone remained neutral and non-inflammatory, the lack of analytical depth and solution-oriented reporting meant that the media did not fully leverage their platforms for peace building.

Scope of Media Outlets: The study focused only on two newspapers and a single year. Other media platforms (e.g., broadcast, online, local press) may present different trends.

Content-Based Approach: The analysis assessed content, not media impact. It did not examine how audiences received or interpreted the coverage.

Qualitative Sample Size: Only 46 articles were analysed qualitatively. While purposive, this sample may not capture all nuances.

Archive Gaps: Missing *The Nation* editions from January 2018 slightly limited completeness.

Enhance Analytical Reporting: Newspapers should go beyond episodic coverage to explore systemic causes like land use, climate change, and governance failures.

Publish Editorials and Opinions: Institutional perspectives and external expert analyses can enrich public discourse and policy engagement.

Promote Inclusive Voices: Both parties to the conflict - and peace builders should be represented to foster understanding and reduce bias.

Strengthen Conflict Journalism Training: Journalists should be equipped with peace journalism principles to responsibly cover sensitive topics.

Future Research: Scholars should explore audience perceptions, compare media across

regions and formats, and analyse post-2018 trends.

Media coverage of conflict must balance truth-telling with responsibility. While *The Nation* and *Daily Trust* avoided harmful narratives, they also missed chances to influence resolution positively. As Nigeria continues to grapple with internal conflicts, the press must evolve from passive observers to active contributors in building peace.

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