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Understanding the Effects of Social Media-Channelled Fake News on Conflicts in Nigeria: Case of Farmers/Herders Conflicts in Benue State

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts degree in Security Studies

Presented By

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DECLARATION

I, **Lt Cdr Ann Kemi OKWORI**, do declare that, except where otherwise indicated, this research entitled **"Understanding the Effects of Social Media-Channelled Fake News on Conflicts in Nigeria: Case of Farmers/Herders Conflicts in Benue State"** is entirely my own work and has never been submitted in whole or in part to any other university.

Name: Signature:

                                               Date:

SUPERVISOR ENDORSEMENT

This thesis entitled **"UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA-CHANNELLED FAKE NEWS ON CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA: CASE OF FARMERS/HERDERS CONFLICTS IN BENUE STATE"** was done under my supervision.

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…………………………………………………………………………….

SUPERVISOR

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my dearest husband; Abiodun Olasupo Esuruoso.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Acronyms/Abbreviations	Full Meaning
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
DSP	Deputy Superintendent of Police
EJN	Ethical Journalism Network
FGN	Federal Government of Nigeria
FMIC	Federal Ministry of Information and Culture
FMJ	Federal Ministry of Justice
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
LGA	Local Government Area
MACBAN	Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria
MSF	Medecins San Frontieres
NOA	National Orientation Agency
NTA	Nigerian Television Authority
USA	United States of America

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ABSTRACT

Fake news has over the years, become a tool for propagating hate speech in societies. Fake news is a potent weapon for deepening ethnic and religious differences especially in multi-ethnic and multi-religious countries like Nigeria. This study was therefore conducted to understand the effects of fake news shared via social media on the way conflicts are shaped in Nigeria. The study focused on the farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State, Northcentral Nigeria. A qualitative research was conducted with five interviews and 100 questionnaires administered to gather the primary data. This was augmented with secondary data from relevant literatures and research works.

Key findings from this study indicated that politics, ethnicity and religious biases were usually responsible for fake news in Nigeria. Also, the study revealed that many respondents do understand the dangers associated with not verifying social media stories. In terms of its effects on conflicts in Nigeria, they identified its potential to cause war, trigger conflicts, create chaos, incite communal clashes, and incite reprisal attacks among other things. The study equally established the impact of fake news on farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State. To this end, it was revealed that social media-channelled fake news indeed aggravated the farmers/herders conflict in recent times. Fake news circulated on social media helped to incite baseless attacks and reprisals by the belligerents in Benue State. This is simply because most news gotten from social media on the conflicts are rarely verified.

The study therefore recommended that, the Federal Government of Nigeria engages social media companies, and other stakeholders to check circulation of fake news. The National Assembly should institute policies to guide the use of social media while the Federal Ministry of Justice enacts a law to prosecute fake news. The National Orientation Agency should sensitize the public on their civic duties in curbing the spread of fake news. Lastly, the academia should research further into the subject.

CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1   Background to the Study

This study examines the impact of fake news channelled through social media on conflicts in Benue State, Northcentral Nigeria. Information is power and to this end, it has been described in many quarters as a double-edged sword. Information can either build or destroy, depending on the content and intent of the information. Society thrives on information and history has shown that information plays a vital role in the perception and behaviours of individuals or societies. What then is information?

Information has been defined by various scholars based on the context in which information is being considered. For the purpose of this study however, the definition by Koren (2014) will suffice, namely:

> Information is data presented in readily comprehensible form to which meaning has been attributed within the context of its use. In a more dynamic sense, the message conveyed by the use of a medium of communication or expression.

Information is disseminated with the aid of media or channels such as word of mouth, television, radio, newspaper, magazine, books, journals and most recently, the internet. The internet, (also known as the World Wide Web) and information disseminated on the internet are done with the aid of online-based and social media. For this study, social media is (are) the focus. Social media refers to "those digital media that are interactive, incorporate two-way communication and involve some form of computing" (Logan, 2016). The satisfaction of accessing information faster, cheaper and regularly through social media platforms, has made it arguably, the most patronised information channel in contemporary times. Some popular social media platforms used all over the world include Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, WeChat, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Instagram and many more. These applications are currently playing a major role in making the world virtually borderless and helping the human race become increasingly interconnected.

The internet is undoubtedly an innovation that has made life a lot easier for human beings. It has made it possible to communicate, do business and build relationships around the world in real time and at negligible costs. Describing the internet as a revolution, (Comer DE, 2019, p. 5) said "without the internet, you would feel cut off from the easy, instantaneous access to information that we take for granted." He added that "if we imagine life without the internet, we can see that internet services have become deeply embedded in our daily lives and that instantaneous access to information has changed just about everything." Notwithstanding the positive attributes of the internet however, it has also become a weapon of misinformation and fake news. Debatably, "for every challenge facing a nation, there exists scores of websites pretending to be something they are not" (Stanford History Education Group, 2016, p.4).

Based on the foregoing, one can deduce that the internet through social media platforms, plays a big role in the way people access information and the types of information they are exposed to in contemporary times. Social media has in recent times, aggravated the 'fake news' phenomena. The first time the term fake news was introduced to mainstream media was during the 2016 United States of America (USA) presidential elections. The Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) describes fake news as "information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehood or doubtful messages" (EJN, 2017). Describing its enormity, (Ogbette A.S., et al., 2019, p 96) said "fake news is a global issue right now; there is an ongoing discussion about fake news and its impact on global affairs."

Allegations abound about Russia planting fake news on the internet to influence the outcome of the US elections. Similarly, there was the 'Pizzagate' scandal against Hillary Clinton and her then campaign manager, John Podesta who was accused of leading a paedophilia ring in Washington DC. The story was however debunked by The New York Times and the Washington Post (Adeleke, 2016). Ever since, the spread of fake news has become a phenomenon on the internet. According to Ogbette, *et al.,* (2019, p 96), the phenomenal spread of fake news is "caused by the very nature of the internet which allows it to stay continually connected and the way speed is preferred to accuracy. He added that "internet content providers and

distributors are in Zero-sum, winner-takes-all battle for attention and advertising revenue, they will therefore, go above and beyond to boost traffic." According to Vasu, *et al* (2018, p. 16), people who are more exposed to politically motivated fake news than hard news, are more likely to believe the fake news as the reality. This is especially so because of easy access to the internet and non-existence of regulations which have provided a viable tool for criminals, fraudsters, terrorists and fake news merchants to peddle their wares undetected.

In Nigeria, the internet continues to feed the monster of fake news which has in turn, fuelled conflicts in various parts of the country. The incessant farmers/herders conflicts escalated in states like Plateau and Benue in Northcentral Nigeria with increased access to social media. In the particular case of Benue State, Abughdyer (2016) stated that between 2010 and 2014, 664.4 hectares representing 56.4% of farmland were destroyed in Agatu, Guma and Logo Local Government Areas (LGA). In 2018, the situation in Benue became quite precarious and almost resulted into a religious conflict. In their assessment, Ibrahim & Adamu (2016) and Pate & Idris (2017) determined that these conflicts "are facilitated by the revolution in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) that have democratised and simplified access and dissemination of information across space and time" (Ibrahim & Adamu, 2016; Pate & Idris, 2017). Presently, Benue state faces devastating human security challenges as a result of the conflicts. In an article published on its website on 16 October 2019, Medecins San Frontieres (MSF) said "the exact number of displaced people across Benue State and the wider region is unknown." The international humanitarian organisation further said that "many are surviving thanks only to the host communities, who share their houses, food and other resources. In exchange, the displaced people often work with and for them" (MSF, 2019).

On 13 November 2018, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) published an investigative report on how fake news circulated on Facebook has been fuelling the farmers/herders violent clashes in Plateau State, Nigeria. The BBC report referred to some images on social media falsely attributed to the violence in Plateau State which resulted in reprisal killings. According to Adekunle (2018) the gory pictures trending on social media which were falsely attributed to inter-communal violence are exacerbating already high tensions in the country (Adekunle, 2018).

The BBC report cited other examples of fake news like the "gruesome image of a woman face down in a pool of blood with a gaping shoulder wound purported to be from recent attacks which retweeted hundreds of times on Twitter. The picture turned out to have first appeared online in 2011 in a story about domestic violence in Nigeria. Similarly, an image showing about six persons killed in the attacks on closer inspection, revealed that the picture did not originate in Nigeria. It was actually the scene of a 2015 traffic accident in the Dominican Republic" (BBC, 2018). Another case highlighted by the BBC was when "major Nigerian news outlets ran a story claiming that Danladi Ciroma, a leader of the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN), said the attacks in Plateau were revenge for the loss of 300 cows. Mr Ciroma was reported to have said that since these cows were not found, no-one should expect peace in the areas. His comments drew widespread anger and swift condemnation, he has however denied ever making the statement" (BBC, 2018). These forgoing are but a few fake news stories outlined by the BBC which inflamed tensions in Nigeria.

The situation in Plateau state is similar to what is obtainable in Benue State, Nigeria. At the peak of the farmers/herders conflicts in Agatu, Guma, Gwer West, Makurdi, Kwande, Katsina-ala and Logo LGAs of Benue State, social media was awash with stories of carnage perpetrated by the herders on innocent farming communities. This situation went out of proportion and took dangerous political and religious dimensions particularly from 2013 to 2017. The table below shows statistics of attacks by Fulani herders on farming communities in Benue State from 2013 to 2017. In a research carried out on the effect of farmers and herders crisis in Benue state on food security, it was averred that despite huge resources budgeted for internal security by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN), "it appears that the farmers and herders crises in Benue State is intractable…"(Okoli, F.C. and Addo, H.A., 2018). The seeming intractability of these crises could be attributed to the spread of fake news on social media which practically gave the crises a religious connotation rather than a conflict caused by climate change and scarce resources.

Table 1:   Statistics of Attacks in Benue State from 2013 to 2017

Period	Agatu LGA	Buruku LGA	Gumma Gwer LGA	West Logo LGA	Tarkaa LGA	Turan LGA	Kwande LGA
2013	236		92				
2014	43		78	35	50		
2015	107	12	28		100		12
2016		10	513		8	6	
2017		7	20	10	41		
Total deaths	386	29	721	45	207	6	12
Net death	1406						
Percentage (%)	27.45%	2.06%	51.28%	3.20%	14.72%	0.42%	0.85%
From net death							

Source: Aluko IO. Urban Violence Dimension in Nigeria: Farmers and Herders Onslaught. 2016; 8: 187-206.

1.2   Statement of the Research Problem

Misinformation, otherwise (now popularly referred to as) "fake news" has become a ready tool for the spread of hate speech, thus deepening ethnic and religious differences in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country like Nigeria. Although there have been studies carried out on the effect of fake news on the Nigerian political landscape, the effect on national security has not been given required attention. It is therefore imperative to carry out a study on the ways to manage fake news peddled on social media as it relates to conflicts in Nigeria. If not adequately dealt with, the menace of fake news is capable of aggravating the rising insecurity in different parts of Nigeria.

In view of the afore-stated, it is pertinent to note that failure to stem the tide of fake news in Nigeria may potentially create many more conflicts around the country. It is against this backdrop that this study aims to understand how fake news is perceived in Nigeria and why some citizens are so easily influenced by it to the extent of taking up arms against each other. At the end of this study, it is hoped that implementable recommendations will be proffered to serve as a basis for further studies into curbing the menace of fake news in Nigeria.

1.3   Research Questions

a.   What factors do motivate fake news in Nigeria?

b.   How has fake news channelled through social media affected conflicts in Nigeria?

c.   How specifically, has fake news impacted farmers/herders conflict in Benue State?

1.4   Study Objectives

1.4.1   Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand the effects of fake news shared via social media on the way conflicts are shaped in Nigeria and Benue State in particular, with a view to making implementable recommendations.

1.4.2   Objectives

This study seeks to:

a.   identify and analyse factors that lead people to spread fake news in Nigeria.

b.   examine the effects of fake news propagated via social media on conflicts in Nigeria.

c.   assess the impact of fake news on the farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State.

1.5   Significance of the Study

Generally, this study attempts to fill some lacuna in conflict studies as they relate to the farmers-herders crisis in Nigeria. Many conflict studies have examined causes of conflict, not much has focused on the dimension of conflict caused by land hunger and struggle for this essential but scare resource (land), from two perspectives-Nigeria and the endless struggle for land between herders, who are the aliens and the farmers, owners of the land. There have been numerous news reports and analyses, but few scholarly researches and even at that, from other perspectives. This study therefore represents an attempt to fill that gap. In addition to the above, the findings

should be useful in terms of policy interest, academic significance and personal benefits of the researcher.

1.5.1   Policy Interest

This study is aimed at stirring discussions on the need for major policy reviews in the Nigerian media landscape. The finding will be germane to efforts at curbing the negative impact of fake news on National security and hopefully aid in suggesting possible short-term and long term solutions to the menace. The Federal Ministry of Information and Culture (FMIC) in particular, could utilise suggestions in this study as a guide to formulate national action policies on fake news in Nigeria. Similarly, this study will help the ministry develop strategies for social media regulation without infringing on the fundamental rights to free speech of citizens.

1.5.2   Academic Significance

This study will also be of particular significance to the academia in Nigeria. Findings will serve as a basis for research into the role of fake news in shaping conflicts in the country. Due to the enormity of trauma caused by violent killings in the country, it behoves on scholars to carryout researches that would help the Government understand the nature conflicts in relation to fake news and mitigate the underlying issues. In essence, this study will serve as a source of data with which further studies could be carried out to discover ways of countering the menace of fake news and its attendant effects on conflicts in Nigeria.

1.5.3   Personal Benefits

Lastly, this study will serve as veritable building block for the researcher in the areas of security, conflict resolution and media which are of interest to the researcher. Consequently, this study will serve as a stepping stone into further research on the social media phenomena and its influence on conflicts in Nigeria and Africa. In view of this, the study will help the researcher determine non-kinetic ways to mitigate the incessant violent clashes that have plagued Nigeria in recent times with a view to recommending ways to prevent further baseless crises.

1.6   Scope (Delimitation)

The recurring cases of violent conflicts in several parts of Nigeria have necessitated a study into one of the major drivers of the conflict, fake news. The increasing subscription to social media has made information more easily accessible to Nigerians hence increasing the propensity for fake news channelled through social media. This study thus focuses on understanding the effects of fake news spread via social media on conflicts within Nigeria.

The study will however be limited to the farmers/herders conflicts within Benue State, Northcentral Nigeria. Although the conflicts between farmers and herders in Benue State began tentatively around 1995, this study will cover conflicts that occurred between 2015 and 2019. The level of social media presence of Nigerians will be examined in relation to the most preferred social media platforms for news on the farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State. The study will aim to understand the influence of these social media on the users in terms of their reliance on the platforms for news, their reactions to such news and the spread of fake news.

In order to gather relevant data for this study, interviews will be conducted and questionnaires distributed to a population of at least 100 respondents. It will be distributed such that each of the major groups in the conflict; Benue State indigenes will have 20 respondents each while the 60 others will be distributed amongst people directly or indirectly affected by the conflict, military personnel, media experts, opinion leaders and ordinary citizens from different professional backgrounds. The sex of respondents does not matter as the conflicts affect all sexes. Respondents will be literate adults who are able to answer the questions rationally. Access to herders would be impossible since they are nomadic, are largely illiterate and are sometimes foreigners. However, efforts would be made to ensure that some respondents and interviewees are drawn from the Fulani ethnic group in Nigeria who are known to dominate the cattle herding business in the country.

1.7   Organisation of the Study

This study consists of five chapters which will cover the relationship between fake news on social media and conflicts in Nigeria with particular emphasis on

farmers/herders conflicts. The following is an overview of the content of each chapter:

- **Chapter One:** This chapter gives the background to the study. It traces the growth and relevance of the internet and social media. Its positive and negative effects on human lives and activities will also be considered. The chapter also traces the evolution of fake news and how the phenomenon has taken centre stage in shaping conflicts in Nigeria. The chapter establishes the research problem, its significance and scope amongst other things.

- **Chapter Two:** Chapter two is the literature review as well as conceptual and theoretical frameworks. It contains relevant academic writings that will aid understanding of the topic. It also validates the need for the study as it considers previous studies done in relation to the objective of this study.

- **Chapter Three:** This chapter is a breakdown of the methodology with which the study was carried out. It explains the research design, population, methods of data collection as well as data analysis that will determine the outcome of the study.

- **Chapter Four:** This chapter gives details of the study findings. It explains the result of data collected and analysed and in what way it addresses the thrust of the study which is to understand the effects of fake news perpetrated through social media on ongoing farmers/herders conflicts in Benue state.

- **Chapter Five:** Chapter five contains the conclusions arrived at after the study as well as recommendations for future studies and national policies.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1   Introduction

This chapter will review various literatures that are relevant to the effect of fake news on conflicts. The chapter begins with the clarification of key concepts that will aid in understanding the study. Thereafter, the chapter continues with a brief overview of Benue State after which a review of other scholarly works on the study in view will be examined as a means of validating the purpose for this study. The literature review covers the nature and causes of inter-ethnic conflicts in Africa; synopsis of farmers/herders conflicts in Nigeria; nexus between fake news and social media; impact of social media on conflicts. The literature review concludes by triangulating to the effects of fake news on farmers and herders conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria. This is followed by a conceptual framework that delineates the variables in this study and determines the way they influence each other. The chapter closes with a theoretical framework that discusses two media theories that further give credibility to the relationship between social media, fake news and conflicts.

2.2   Clarification of Key Concepts

The following key concepts will be defined in the context of this study in order to guide understanding. These concepts are conflicts, social media and fake news.

2.2.1   Conflict

In the book 'Theories of violent conflict', (Demmers, 2016) asserted that "contemporary research on violent conflict has typically focused on causes of conflict, with war and conflict differently defined in various datasets." The existence of various definitions of conflict makes it difficult to have an all-encompassing working definition for the term. For instance, Chris Mitchell in 1981, defined conflict as "any situation in which two or more parties (however defined or structured) perceive that they possess mutually incompatible goals" (Chris,1981 p.17). He added that any conflict consists of three component parts: goal incompatibility, attitudes and behaviour. This is the basis for Mitchell's triangle model which highlights conflict as a "dynamic process in which incompatibilities, attitudes and behaviours are constantly changing and influencing each other" (Chris, 1981). For the purpose

of this study however, conflict shall be defined as "a process of social interaction involving a struggle over claims to resources, power and status, beliefs, and other preferences and desires. The aims of the parties in conflict may extend from simply attempting to gain acceptance of a preference, or securing a resource advantage, to the extremes of injuring or eliminating opponents" (Bisno, 1988).

2.2.2 Media

The term media is simply the plural form of the word 'medium' which refers to a channel of communication through which people send and receive information. Breaking this concept down, Sociology Central (2011) clarified that "the printed word is a medium via which we are communicated to when we read a newspaper or magazine. Similarly, electronic forms of communication like the television, telephones, films etc are media (the plural of medium)" (Socilogy Central, 2011 p.2). The media which is sometimes called mass media, therefore, refers to channels of communication used in transmitting information to large and sometimes diverse audiences. In simple terms, Dictionary.com defines the media as "the means of communication such as radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and the internet, that reach or influence people widely" (Dictionary.com, 2020). The media is thus an umbrella term for electronic, print, online and most recently, social media which have an influential role in shaping audiences perceptions.

2.2.3 Social Media

The concept of social media has over the years attracted various definitions. Some earlier definitions of social media simply describe it as web 2.0 internet based social networking services. However, a recent definition of social media by the Merriam-Webster dictionary aptly captures the idea of social media in contemporary times. It defines social media as "forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and micro-blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)" (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

2.2.4 Fake News

The fake news phenomenon has been traced to Joseph Pulitzer in 1884 when he purchased the New York World. Although the term fake news itself only became popular during the USA presidential elections of 2016, the term 'yellow journalism' used to refer to sensational journalism known for exaggerated headlines and deliberate misinformation. With the advent of the internet, individuals are now opportune to publish articles that are accessible by a large audience. This has inadvertently given rise to a generation of fake news promoters. Fake news has attracted a lot of attention in recent times, one of which is that fake news is "the online publication" of false statements of fact (Klein & Wueller 2017, p.6). Another definition is by Darren Lilleker, a professor of political communication, who argues that "fake news is the deliberate spread of misinformation, be it via traditional news media or through social media" (Lilleker, 2017, p.2). In essence, fake news can be defined as intentionally contrived stories or news aimed at deception and intended to promote falsehood.

2.3 Brief Overview of Benue State

Benue State is a predominantly agrarian state located in the Northcentral region of Nigeria which has earned it the nickname, 'food basket of the Nation'. The state derived its name from the Benue River which is the dominant geographical feature in the state. Present day Benue State was created on the 3rd of February 1976 having been carved out of the former Benue-Plateau State. The state is home to three (3) major ethnic groups namely: Tiv, Idoma and Igede. According to the 2006 census, Benue State has a population of 4,253,641. Suffice to say that "with an average population density of 99 persons per km2, Benue state is the 9th most populous state in Nigeria". However, this statistic may no longer be accurate as the country has experienced an increase in population and there has been no census since the last one conducted in 2006.

Figure 1.   Administrative Map of Benue State, Nigeria
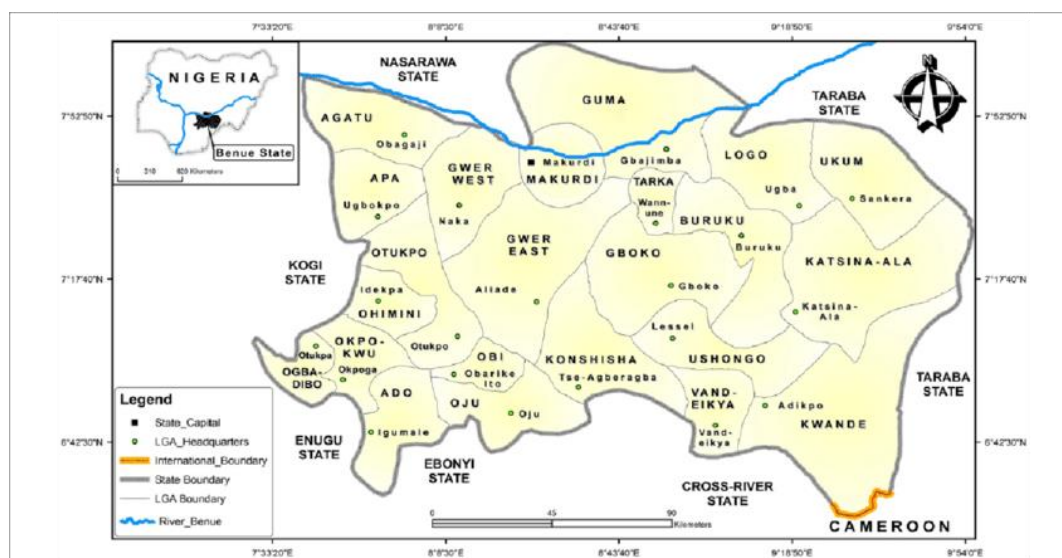
Source: Ministry of Land and Survey, Makurdi

The capital city of Benue State is Makurdi and the state is composed of twenty-three LGAs. Its geographic coordinates are on longitude 7° 47' and 10° 0' East, Latitude 6° 25' and 8° 8' North, it is bordered by Nasarawa State to the North, Taraba State to the East, Cross-River State to the South, Enugu State to the Southwest, Kogi State to the West and the Republic of Cameroon to the Southeast. Benue State occupies a landmass of 34,059 square kilometres and its natural resources include Limestone, Kaolinite, Baryte, Gypsum, Feldspar, Wolframite, mineral salts and Gemstone.

Benue State has one of the longest stretches of river systems in Nigeria. The Benue River possesses limitless potential for a viable fishing industry, dry season farming and an inland water highway. Benue State produces an abundance of food crops including yams, rice, beans, cassava, sweet-potatoes, maize, soybeans, sorghum, millet, sesame, cocoyam etc. It is pertinent to emphasise that agriculture is the mainstay of Benue State's economy and provides sustenance to over 75% of the population. This has been identified in some quarters as one of the reasons for the incessant clashes with herders who often roam into farmlands with their cattle and ravage crops to the chagrin of farmers.

2.4   Literature Review

Conflicts and information are two phenomena which have far-reaching impacts on the individual and the state. Just like conflicts often give rise to human security

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challenges, access to or lack of information could lead to either good or bad choices which also affect the wellbeing of citizens. Social media has increased access to information exponentially and has opened the Pandora's Box of fake news in countries like Nigeria. Thus, this study examines the link between fake news shared via social media and its attendant effect on conflicts with emphasis on the farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria. This section of the study therefore, reviews research works and scholarly publications on the subject of this study.

2.4.1 Nature and Causes of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts in Africa

There have been quite a number of studies carried out to ascertain the role of media in conflicts. This study will thus, begin by tracing the root causes of inter-ethnic conflicts in contemporary African societies. This is to aid understanding of the inter-ethnic nature of farmers/herders conflicts in Nigeria. Socio-cultural and economic issues usually form the basis for inter-ethnic conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa. This is because Africans often have deep sentimental attachments to their cultures, traditions, values, norms, practices, religious beliefs, status, and classes in society. Violation of one or more of these important features could give rise to inter-ethnic conflicts. The degree of such conflicts varies in size depending on the extent of divergence which comes from feeling cheated or disrespected by rival ethnic groups. Affirming this assertion, Aapengnuo (2010) said "the underlying causes of inter-ethnic conflicts are complex as they are deeply rooted into the socio-cultural beliefs of the society". Further to this, Juma and Simiyu (2019, p.454) state that "conflicts between competing ethnic groups mainly border on identity and are thus believed to be intractable" (Juma and Simiyu 2019, p.454). The scholars added that "once conflicts break out, ethnic identities and hatred tend to become cemented in ways that make cooperation and coexistence between the groups even more difficult, and these are the conflicts that are likely to recur over time" (Juma and Simiyu 2019, p.454). This statement clearly describes the complexities of the farmers and herders' conflicts in Nigeria.

Folarin (2014) accounts that "in terms of ethnic conflict, there have been: Igbo-Hausa feud that began after the military coup and counter-coup of 1966, culminating in the Civil War in 1967, Efik-Ibibio conflict, Tiv-Jukun debacle, Fulani-Birom clashes, and Itsekiri-Urhobo-Ijaw conflict in the Niger Delta. Intra-ethnic or inter-community conflicts include Ife-Modakeke, UmuleriAguleri, Andoni-Ogoni, and

Egba-Awori (Ota) clashes" (Folarin, 2014 p.5). These inter-ethnic clashes in Nigeria have been traced to several reasons ranging from religion to scarce resources amongst other things. The nature of these inter-ethnic conflicts in Nigeria could be validated with the structural theory of conflicts. The structural theory asserts that conflict as a product of the tension that arises when groups compete for scarce resources. This sociological theory basically argues that conflict is built into the particular way societies are structured or organised. Structuralists maintain that conflict occurs because of the exploitative and unjust nature of human societies or because of domination of one class by another (Folarin, 2014 p.7). The incessant farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State therefore, fit into the Structural theory of conflicts.

Inter-ethnic conflicts (such as the farmers/herders conflicts) have the potential to transmute into full blown war, genocide or pogrom. An example of an inter-ethnic conflict which degenerated into a repugnant genocide is the Hutu and Tutsi conflicts in Rwanda. In this particular instance, the media played a major role in aggravating the violence. Prior to the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis, hate messages were spread encouraging the killing of Tutsis in the country. This further fuelled the inter-ethnic conflicts that claimed the lives of more than 800,000 people (BBC, 2003). In relation to the farmers/herders conflicts, this remains an ongoing phenomenon not only in Nigeria but in the entire sub-Saharan Africa. The root causes of these conflicts have been attributed by researchers to "political, socio-economic and environmental factors" (Maiangwa, 2017, p.282). The conflict has however, assumed deadlier dimensions in the recent pasts leading to calls in several parts of the country for herders to be designated terrorists. One of the reasons for the change in perception about the conflicts is the use of social media and sometimes mainstream media to spread a narrative that the conflict was religious Jihad perpetrated by the Muslim dominated herders on Christain dominated communities in Nigeria.

2.4.2   Synopsis of Farmers/Herders Conflicts in Nigeria

Several scholarly researches have established that the incessant conflicts between farmers and herders in Nigeria began when disagreements erupted due to overlapping of farmlands and cattle routes. Recently however, these conflicts have escalated and taken ethnic and religious dimensions. In his study, John (2014) discovered that

media reportage and research articles of the conflicts have been skewed to project cases wherein herders fault farmers while tending to ignore the other side of the stories or highlight the farmers' losses (John, 2014). Expectedly, this aggravated the situation and added to the speculations while encouraging more allegations by herders against farmers. Conversely, Nformi et al (2014) revealed in their study that farmers' encroachment on cattle routes is indeed the root cause of the conflicts (Nformi et al., 2014). These different study results make it rather difficult to ascertain the guilty party and the best way to resolve the conflicts.

The dilemma associated with the farmers/herders conflicts in Nigeria is however not limited to the country as there are similar conflicts in Mali, Ghana and other sub-Saharan African countries. Studies have shown that "farmers and pastoralist in many localities and different countries make their livelihood within the same geographical, political, and socio-cultural conditions which may be characterized by resource scarcity (Braukämper, 2000) or political inequality" (Bassett, 1988). "These conflicts have been associated with dwindling land resource" (Blench, 2004). Other studies have attributed the conflicts to "the theory of eco-violence where environmental factors and exploitation of scarce resources leads to conflict and violence" (Okoli and Atelhe, 2014). In Nigeria however, the conflicts have also be exacerbated by ethnic jingoists and politicians particularly in less literate communities. False information is their most potent tool to achieve their divisive agendas.

In his study, Adisa (2012) explains that "dwindling grazing resources like land, pasture and water as well as poor management of existing grazing reserves in Nigeria are to blame" (Adisa, 2012). The rise in population vis-à-vis available land could also be a contributing factor as "the population growth rate of Nigeria per year is 3.2%" (National Population Commission, 2012) while land remains static. According to other researchers, the conflict is related "to the global climate change and the contending desertification and aridity that has reduced arable and grazing lands, forcing pastoralist to move southwards in search of pasture for their livestock" (Okoli et al., 2014). For example, the Fulbe herders in Nigeria are reportedly "faced with rapidly vanishing grass, forcing them to switch from the Bunaji cattle breed, which depends on grass, to the Sokoto Gudali, which readily browses" (FAO, 2001). Considering these cross-cutting issues surrounding the farmers/herders conflicts in

Nigeria therefore, it is a challenge that requires both government and individual efforts to curtail. The additional pressure of fake news certainly leaves a lot to be desired and requires urgent attention in order to curtail the apparent vicious cycle currently being witnessed in the conflict.

2.4.3   Nexus between Fake News and Social Media

Social media like information is a double-edged sword. This is so because social media is cheap, easy to access and provides opportunity for rapid dissemination of information. On the other hand, social media encourages the rapid spread of fake news which in the words of (Shu, et al, 2017), "has the potential for extremely negative impacts on individuals and society". Therefore, fake news has now more than ever, attracted studies and research works aimed at deciphering the phenomena and proffering possible solutions for the benefit of humankind.

In his work 'Faster is Different', Tufekci (2011) described social media as personal and social forms of media. Unlike the traditional forms of media, social media is increasingly blurring the line between media content creators and audiences thus offering a more personalised media experience to users. Tufekci added that, "the interactive web of social media devices also allows people to stay in touch with each other, collaborate, and share information in ways that increase the social nature of technology use" (Tufekci, 2011). Fake news is easily circulated via social media due to its obvious advantages in terms of speed, reach and its interactive nature.

In a 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, it is stated that "qualitative data suggest that users feel the combination of a lack of rules and viral algorithms are encouraging low quality and fake news to spread quickly" (Reuters, 2017). Fake news purveyors are usually motivated by the effects they expect to achieve from their actions which are aimed at satisfying particular goals they have. Consequently, they go out of their ways to mask their falsehood so much that at first glance it looks almost true. The falsehood is sensationalised with bold captions thus grabbing attention ab-initio.

It is no longer news that people are attracted to strange or outrightly bad news, hence the fake news mongers will ensure that fraudulent news is senstaional and sounds

like exclusive news borne out of painstaking investigative journalism. Careful audience can however detect fake news from the scant and often unverifiable sources presented by such news. Fake news thrives on audience ignorance and the less literate a society is, the greater the chances for fake news to spread and achieve its intended aim. To this end, Steinmetz wrote in Time Magazine that "fake news degrades truth and creates confusion of fantasy and reality in audience minds" (Steinmetz, 2018).

In a similar vein, Siapera (2018, p.57) attributed three significant factors to the present-day fake news. These factors are "ease of creating contents; distribution patterns across new and social media; lastly, the political economy of the online domain which rewards fake news with incentives". Adding that "internet access gives people the freedom to produce and distribute contents of any form and that people can avail of the various functionalities of computer software such as photoshop and create highly believable contents…. Fake news can travel very far on the internet" (Siapera, 2018, p.57). This illustration aptly captures the symbiotic relationship between fake news and social media and its tremendous potential to elicit misunderstanding and chaos in already volatile societies.

2.4.4   Impact of Social Media on Conflicts

The impact of social media on conflicts could be both negative and positive. Due to its capacity to increase social interactions, social media helps to channel information on conflicts. Regular individuals are now able to communicate directly with law enforcement and security agencies whenever they have security concerns and feedback is often almost immediate. In many societies like Nigeria, such social media interactions go a long way in helping the Police and other security agencies to trace criminals. Also, citizens are able to demand action from the security agencies. In conflict situations, accurate information has in some cases, have helped the Military prevent conflicts from escalating. These are some ways through which social media could impact positively on conflict situations. The ubiquitous nature of social media makes it a very useful tool for preventing conflicts and also enforcing social change in the 21st Century. A pertinent example of how social media enforced change was in the case of the Arab Spring in 2011 which was sparked and sustained by social media posts.

Conversely, social media is extremely vague and this is what makes it also very dangerous in conflict situations. It has proven to be a viable tool for terrorist groups who use "dedicated servers and websites to spread their propaganda" (Nsudu and Onwe, 2017). They have also been known to recruit, raise funds, conduct trainings and perpetrate diverse forms of cybercrime through social media. It is often hard to trace them or stop their activities which sometimes include inciting violence, social unrests and conflicts. According to Chukwuere and Onyebukwa (2018), Nigeria's insecurity is increasing with lives and properties being threatened on a daily basis. The authors added that this "insecurity is affected by the penetration and diffusion of social media" (Chukwuere, J.E. and Onyebukwa, C.F., 2018). This is largely due to the lack of control or censorship of the social media landscape.

Social Media has also been said to not only be of use to terrorist groups but is used by ordinary citizens to terrorise each other using fake news and fake postings to promote propaganda and fear (Chukwuere, J.E. and Onyebukwa, C.F., 2018). In Nigeria, whenever any form of attack or terrorist news is broadcasted, there is often immediate reaction from millions who proceed to attack one another based on ethnicity, religion, and tribe (Chukwuere, J.E. and Onyebukwa, C.F., 2018). These reflect aspects of the immense influence social media wields on societies and how it shapes conflicts both positively and negatively.

2.4.5 Social Media - Channelled Fake News and Farmers/Herders Conflicts in Nigeria

An article published on Guardian online by Hern, A. & Safi, M.(2019) stated that "WhatsApp's message-forwarding mechanics have been blamed for helping the spread of fake news in part because of the way the app displays forwarded messages. A text message that has been forwarded to a new recipient is marked as forwarded in light grey text, but otherwise appears indistinguishable from an original message sent by a contact." It further noted that critics say the design "strips away the identity of the sender and allows messages to spread virally with little accountability" (Hern, A. & Safi, M., 2019). This lack of accountability which is not limited to only WhatsApp, has largely fuelled the spread of fake news that have equally driven farmers/herders conflicts in Nigeria.

The farmers/herders conflicts in Nigeria and Benue State in particular received a lot of attention from both domestic and international media due to the religious connotations attributed to its cause. One of the most prominent and widely publicised attacks allegedly perpetrated by herders in Benue state happened in February 2016. Over 300 persons were purportedly massacred in Agatu village while over 7,000 were displaced. Reports circulated via newspapers, online news sources, twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp saying that the herders attacks were reprisals against the Agatu people for killing a prominent Fulani herdsman and stealing his cattle in 2013 (Ogbette A.S., 2018, p.47). These reports opened floodgates of discussions and viral messages on social media about the Fulani herders being on a genocidal Jihadist mission to Benue State. As expected, politicians jumped on the bandwagon and began to use this tragedy as a political tool. It was a whirlwind of accusations and counter-accusations on social media while attacks and reprisal attacks continued.

2.5   Conceptual Framework

Regoniel (2015) opines that a conceptual framework "maps out the actions required in the course of the study given his previous knowledge of other researchers' point of view and his observations on the subject of research). This implies that the conceptual framework of a research work is the way a researcher perceives how the independent and dependent variables in the particular study relate to each other. Thus, it is the map used by the researcher to pursue the study. For the purpose of this study, the dependent variables are Conflicts, Violence, and Insecurity whilst the independent variables identified are Fake News, Social Media, and Misinformation.

The study also outlined some intervening variables which serve as enablers for the dependent and independent variables. These include but are not limited to Unregulated Social Media Space, Politics, Religious Bias, Unverified Information, Lack of Public Awareness and Reprisal Attacks. It is pertinent to state that all the variables outlined in this study are related to Nigeria and the target population are Nigerians. Below is a diagram depicting the conceptual framework for this study.

Figure 2: Illustration of the Study's Conceptual Framework

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	INTERVENING VARIABLES	DEPENDENT VARIABLES
✓ Fake News ✓ Social Media ✓ Misinformation	• Unregulated Social Media • Politics • Religious & Ethnic Bias • Unverified Information • Lack of Public Awareness • Reprisal Attacks	✓ Conflicts ✓ Violence ✓ Insecurity
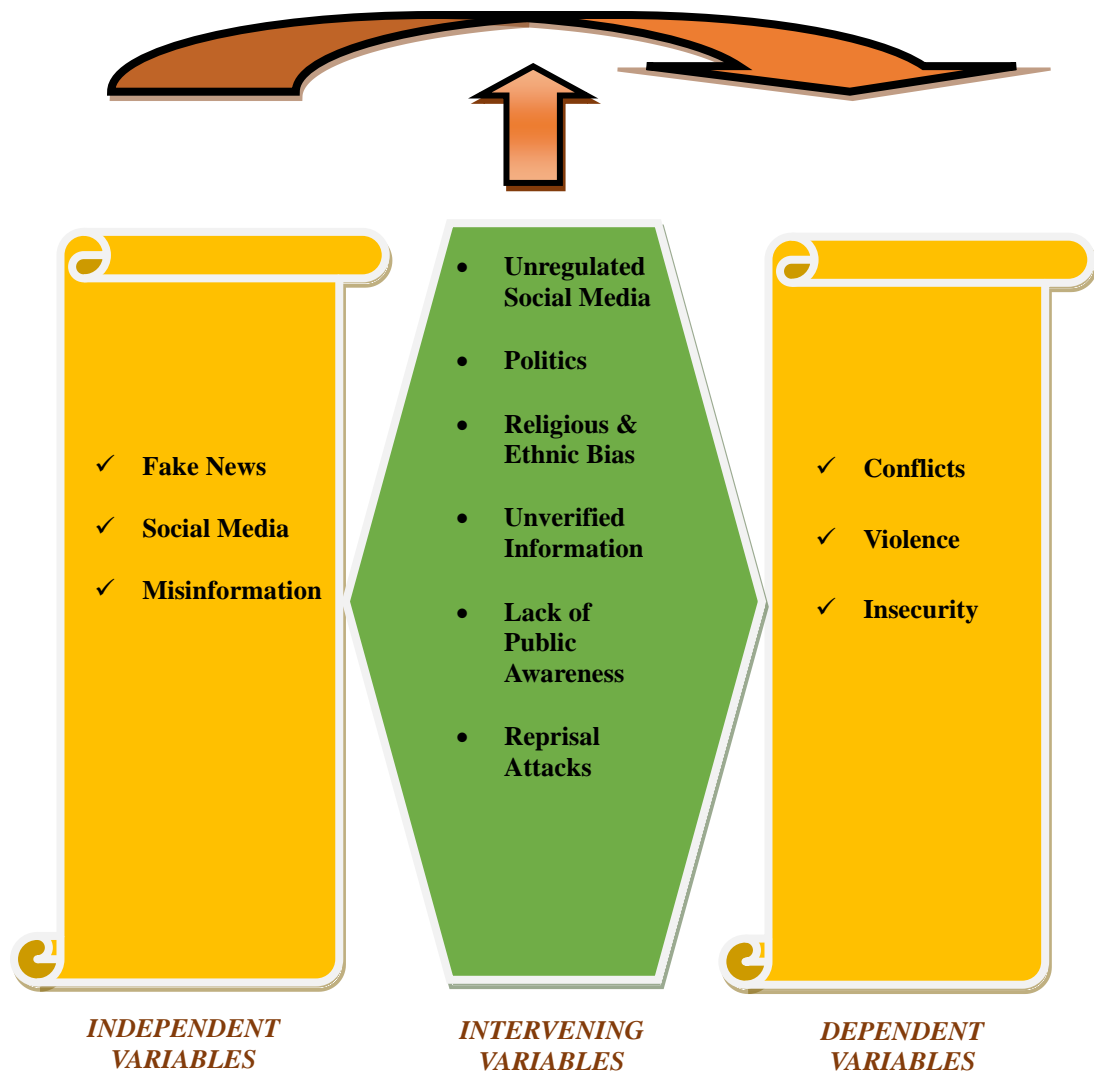
Source: The Researcher's Perception of the Study, 2020.

2.5.1   Dependent Variables

Dependent variables are the variables being tested and measured in an experiment, and are 'dependent' on the independent variable (McLeod, 2019). The dependent variables identified in this study are conflicts, violence and insecurity.

2.5.2   Independent Variables

Independent variables are the variables the experimenter changes or controls and are assumed to have a direct effect on the dependent variable (McLeod, 2019). The independent variables in this study are fake news, social media and misinformation.

2.5.3 Intervening Variables

An intervening variable is something that impacts the relationship between an independent and a dependent variable. The intervening variable is often caused by the independent variable, and is a cause of the dependent variable (Crossman, 2019). The intervening variables identified in this study include unregulated social media, politics, religious and ethnic bias, unverified information, lack of public awareness, and reprisal attacks.

2.6   Theoretical Framework

This study will be guided by the Hypodermic Needle and the Agenda Setting theories of communication.

2.6.1   The Hypodermic Needle Theory

The Hypodermic Needle theory also known as the Magic Bullet theory opines that the "mass media have a direct influence effect on passive audience". The theory was promulgated by Harold Lasswell in the 1920s and was tested based on the Nazi propaganda during the Second World War. The US also used Hollywood to produce films like "It Happened one night", "It's a wonderful life" and "Mr. Smith goes to Washington" in order to vilify Germany. This made an impact on the minds of Americans and in this case, the audience accepted the messages directly without hesitation. Like a magic bullet, the message hit tshe audience and elicited instant reactions from them (Lasswell, 1948, pp. 37-51). This raises the question of how direct the impact made by media content is on its targeted audience. This theory portrays audiences as passive but can that really be applied to the Nigerian context? To balance this up, the study will also consider the Agenda Setting theory.

2.6.2   The Agenda Setting Theory

The Agenda Setting theory was postulated by McCombs and it states that "the mass media possess an ability to influence the importance placed on topics of public agenda thus making them powerful" (McCombs 1993 p. 64).   This help in establishing the extent to which fake news circulated on social media influences the perception and choices made by the various actors in the farmers/herders conflict.

McCombs and Weaver (1973) also recognized that media influence rests on a psychological level, that is, inside every individual, since they identified significant differences across individual perceptions about the issues covered.

These two (Hypodermic Needle and Agenda Setting) theories deal with the impact of media messages on the audience and how they act based on media content. Does the media wield so much power as to determine the actions people take during conflicts? This will be decided at the end of the study.

CHAPTER THREE: STUDY METHODOLOGY

3.1   Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology and research design employed in this study in accordance with the topic and the objectives this study aims to achieve. Accordingly, the chapter highlights the study design, approaches, data collection methods and analysis, sampling/selection of respondents/interviewees, quality assurance measures, research ethics as well as limitations and mitigation strategies.

3.2   Study Design

A qualitative research was conducted for this study and it was principally aimed at discovering the direct or indirect link between fake news channelled through social media and farmers/herders' conflicts in Nigeria. The study was narrowed down to the incessant farmers/herders' conflicts in Benue State, North-Central Nigeria. It was carried out using a flexible design and purposive sampling as it was an exploratory study. The non-probability, quota sampling method was also employed in administering the questionnaires and conducting interviews.

3.3   Approaches

The approach taken for this study was a participatory one where some victims of the conflict were interviewed. Some Media practitioners and public analysts who followed the conflicts were also interviewed both face to face and via telephone conversations. Also, 100 copies of questionnaire were printed and administered within military establishments and barracks, amongst media personnel and to random Benue state citizens in Benue and Abuja. In addition to the foregoing, extensive desk reviews were carried on existing research papers, newspaper articles, books, and relevant materials obtained from credible internet sources. All information gotten from these sources were used to supplement information collected from primary sources through questionnaires and interviews.

3.4   Data Collection Methods and Analysis

To achieve the purpose of this study, primary data were collected through personal

interviews conducted on Benue State citizens as well as victims of the conflicts. Also, government officials, media practitioners and some members of the Nigerian Armed Forces/security agencies were interviewed. Telephone interviews were equally conducted to obtain data from people who were not physically accessible at the time of the study. Questionnaires were administered to 100 people to form part of the data collection methods. The questionnaires were divided into 3 parts containing dichotomous questions, alternative questions and open-ended questions.

Secondary data were also collected from published books, journals, articles, blogs etc. on the subject matter. Also, trusted internet sources were consulted for data when required while results of previous studies were accessed through academic writings on the subjects of media and conflicts with major emphasis on the Nigerian context. All data collected were analysed using qualitative methods of analysis.

All questionnaires were administered with the help of two research assistants in December 2019 and retrieved by March 2020. Collected data were interpreted in conjunction with a qualified statistician. Face to face interviews were conducted by the researcher on 27 and 29 December 2019 in Abuja. The telephone interviews were also conducted on 2 January and 28 February 2020 from Musanze, Rwanda. Analyses were done by the researcher.

3.5   Sampling/Selection of Respondents/Interviewees

The sampled population comprised Nigerians between the ages of 21 and 60 who are active social media users. The population also consist of Muslims, Christians, Traditionalists and Atheists drawn from different ethnic groups in the country. Data was collected from fairly educated people whose responses could not be influenced by other people. The broad category of respondents and interviewees were Benue State indigenes, media experts, conflict/security experts, and public opinion leaders resident in Benue and Abuja.

3.6   Quality Assurance Measures

Quite a number of quality assurance measures were taken in the course of this research to ensure the validity and objectivity of findings. To begin with, the focus

was on Benue state indigenes who had been affected either directly or remotely by the farmers and herders' conflicts so as to gain insight into their experiences. Also, all respondents were confirmed to be rational and able to answer questions posed articulately. Respondents were not hand-picked but questionnaires were randomly administered within selected locations like military barracks, radio and television stations, and relevant public and private organisations.

Interviewees and respondents were given the freedom to answer questions without the interference of the researcher. Furthermore, all questionnaires were carefully collated and copies made to prevent loss, damage and responses being tampered with. The researcher had no input whatsoever in the responses of participants.

3.7   Research Ethics

Principles of research ethics were applied in the course of this study. Principally, the study was not designed to cause physical harm, psychological or emotional distress to respondents. No sensitive questions were asked particularly as it concerns respondents' experiences in conflicts situations. Also, respondents were not being put under any form of pressure financially in course of carrying out this study. When required, all financial commitments were borne by the researcher.

Furthermore, in obtaining information/data, extra care was taken to avoid invasion of respondents' privacies. It is pertinent to note that the most commonly used device to propagate fake news is the personal mobile phone, however, respondents were not forced or coerced to part with information on their phones in the course of the study. Similarly, informed consents were obtained from respondents before they were interviewed or administered with questionnaires. No participant in the study was induced, cajoled, threatened or deceived into parting with information. Rather, participants had the right to withdraw from the study whenever they wanted to.

The identities of all participants were protected through the provision of adequate confidentiality and anonymity. No respondent was judged unfairly on the basis of their responses nor were their identities or experiences exposed to the public. Data collection was carried out strictly on volunteer basis. The purpose of the research was

explained to all respondents to avoid misunderstanding and when uncomfortable, they were free to decline to respond or withhold information they did not wish to share. The study was carried out by the researcher and all interviews also done by the researcher. However, the services of two assistants were employed to distribute the questionnaires as well as collate and sort out data from the questionnaires.

3.7 Limitations and Mitigation Strategies

The major limitation encountered in the course of this research was due to the location of the researcher vis-à-vis the area of the study which was in Benue, Nigeria. This challenge was mitigated through the maximisation of a two-week vacation of the researcher in December 2019. Most interviews were conducted during that period and questionnaires administered too. Due to the distance also, the researcher was unable to physically follow-up questionnaires hence, there was a need to employ the services of two research assistants who ensured that most of the questionnaires were filled, collated and analysed efficiently.

Another limitation was the fact that the study had to be limited to Benue State, Nigeria. This was due to the size of the country and the fact that most cases of farmers/herders' conflicts were recorded in the North-Central States of Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa, Kogi and Niger. All the affected states could not be considered for the study however, the choice of Benue was made to serve as a microcosm of the whole region. The choice of Benue was strategic owing to the extensive role played by fake news on social media in aggravating the conflicts. Also, the conflicts in Benue State took a very political and religious dimension at its peak largely as a result of misinformation. Hence, the choice of Benue State for this study was a mitigating factor to the large are of coverage

CHAPTER FOUR: EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CONFLICTS IN BENUE STATE - STUDY FINDINGS

4.1   Introduction

This chapter of the study presents and analyses data obtained from interviews and questionnaires administered to the respondents. In all, 100 questionnaires were administered but 92 were returned. Hence the analysis was done based on the 92 questionnaires returned. The questionnaires, containing closed and open ended questions were administered to four different categories of respondents, which are: Benue State indigenes and victims of the conflicts; conflict/security experts; media activists; and opinion leaders. These wider groups consisted of both men and women, and people from various professional fields including indigent farmers and Fulanis to cater for the nomadic herders. The questions were structured in such a way as to capture the objectives of the study, and in order to get relevant responses from the different categories of respondents in this study, the questionnaire was divided into two parts. Part one addressed general questions on the respondents' usage of social media platforms; while part two asked particular questions applicable to each category. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 21 was utilised to analyse the data.

4.2   Socio-demographic Profile of Respondents

The respondents for this study cut across a wide range of demographics. They ranged from ages 21 to 60 thus cutting across the most active crop of Nigerian citizens. The questionnaires were also distributed amongst various professions to reflect almost every member of the Nigerian society. It is pertinent to state that although Fulani herdsmen could not be accessed due to their nomadic way of life and very low literacy level, a number of Fulani citizens who engage in other professions were captured in the survey.

4.2.1   Distribution of Respondents per Age Groups

As shown in the table 2 below, majority of the respondents are within the age bracket of 31-35. The breakdown indicates that 10 (13.3%) of the total respondents are within the age range of 21-25; 19 (25.3%) respondents are within the age bracket of 26-30; 23 (30.7%) respondents are within the age range of 31-35; 16 (21.3%) of

them fall within 36-40 years of age; only 5 (6.7%) are between ages 41 and 45; and 1 (1.3%) each fall within the ranges 46-50 and 56-60. A total of 17 respondents did not specify their ages. The average age of the respondents in this study is 32.8 (33, approximately).

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Respondents by Age Bracket

Age Bracket	Frequency	Percentage	Mean
21-25	10	13.3	
26-30	19	25.3	
31-35	23	30.7	
36-40	16	21.3	
41-45	5	6.7	
46-50	1	1.3	
56-60	1	1.3	
Total	75	100.0	32.8
No response	17		

Source: *Researcher's Fieldwork (2020)*

4.2.2 Structure of Respondents per Professions

As regards the professions of the survey respondents, table 3 below shows that they were drawn from different professional fields. While many of the respondents are broadcasters/journalist, there are also many business men/women and entrepreneurs, amongst others. Specifically, the table shows that 4(5%) of the respondents are accountants/bankers; 13(16%) are broadcasters/journalists; 10(12%) are into business/entrepreneurship; 4(5%) each are civil servants, medical personnel, engineers; 3(4%) each are farmers, lawyers/politicians, public servants and real estate workers; 6(7%) of the respondents are military personnel/security experts; 5(6%) are lecturers/teachers/librarians/researchers; and only 2(2%) are students. Other respondents in the study indicated architecture, clergy, consultancy, customer service, fashion designing, food science, laundry, ICT, etc, as their professions.

Table 3: Frequency Distribution of Respondents by Profession

Profession	Frequency	Percentage
Accountant/ Banker	4	5%
Broadcast/Journalism	13	16%
Business/Entrepreneurship	10	12%
Civil Servant	4	5%
Farmer	3	4%
Lawyer/Politician	3	4%
Public Servant	3	4%
Real Estate	3	4%
Medical personnel	4	5%
Military personnel/ security experts	6	7%
Engineer	4	5%
Lecturer/Teacher/Librarian/researcher	5	6%
Students	2	2%
Others	17	21%

Source: *Researcher's Fieldwork (2020)*

4.3 Social Media Presence and Knowledge of Farmers/Herders Conflicts

This section presents the survey respondents' usage of social media and their level of awareness of the conflicts between farmers and herdsmen in Benue State. As reflected in table 4 below, 85(92.4%) respondents have social media accounts, while 7(7.6%) do not have social media accounts. This implies that most of respondents for this survey are available on one social media platform or the other. Also, table 4 reveals that majority of the respondents are very active on social media. 41(44.6%) indicated that they are very active, 39(42.4) are somewhat active and only 12(13.0%) are not active. Since most of them are active, it implies that they will be acquainted with the happenings on their various media platforms. This also underpins assertions that many people spend good part of their time on social media platforms, more so as the survey respondents of this study are averagely in their 30s (as shown in table 2 above). Furthermore, table 3 shows that 27(27%) of the respondents visit Facebook mostly; 15(16.3%) visit twitter mostly; 39(42.4%) mostly visit WhatsApp and 11(12,0%) none of the social media platforms specified. This implies that majority of the respondents are active WhatsApp users.

Table 4: Social Media Presence of Respondents

Questions	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Do you have social media accounts	Yes	85	92.4
	No	7	7.6
	Total	**92**	**100.0**
How active are you on social media	Very active	41	44.6
	Somewhat active	39	42.4
	Not active	12	13.0
	Total	**92**	**100.0**
Which social media App do you visit most	Facebook	27	29.3
	Twitter	15	16.3
	WhatsApp	39	42.4
	None of the Above	11	12.0
	Total	**92**	**100.0**

Source: *Researcher's Fieldwork (2020)*

Table 5 below shows the different types and combinations of social media platforms the respondents use. The table shows that almost all the respondents make use of Facebook alongside other social media platforms. While 14(15%) indicated Facebook only, other respondents indicated that they use Facebook alongside other platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Telegram, and others. The highest combination was Facebook and WhatsApp which accounted for 16%. Only 5 of the respondents did not indicate the types of social media platforms they use.

Table 5: Respondents' Choices of Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms	Frequency	Percentage
Facebook	14	15%
Twitter	1	1%
WhatsApp	2	2%
Instagram	1	1%

Gmail	1	1%
Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn	3	3%
Facebook, WhatsApp	15	16%
Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter	7	8%
Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram	14	15%
Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn	1	1%
Facebook, Instagram	1	1%
Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter	14	15%
Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn	2	2%
Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, LinkedIn	3	3%
Facebook, Instagram, Twitter	6	7%
Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram	1	1%
Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, LinkedIn	1	1%
No response	5	5%
Total	92	100%

Source: *Researcher's Fieldwork (2020)*

Table 6 below shows that most of the respondents are very much aware of the ongoing conflict between farmers and herdsmen in Benue State. Seventy-nine (85.9%) acknowledged their awareness of the ongoing conflict, 3(3.3%) were not aware and 10(10.9%) were not really aware. This implies that the conflict is a public issue with the majority of the people having adequate knowledge of it.

Table 6: Respondents' Awareness of the Farmers/Herders Conflicts

Questions	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Are you aware of ongoing conflicts between farmers and herdsmen in Benue state	Yes	79	85.9
	No	3	3.3
	Not really	10	10.9
	Total	**92**	**100.0**

Source: *Researcher's Fieldwork (2020)*

4.4   Description of Responses Based on Study Objectives

The data in part two of the questionnaires were presented and analysed based on the different respondent categories, as the questionnaires carry different sets of questions in the part two of the questionnaires. The broad categories of respondents are Benue State indigenes and victims of the conflicts; conflict/security experts; media activists and opinion leaders. The questions were designed to satisfy the objectives of the study which are to identify and analyse factors that lead people to broadcast fake news in Nigeria; examine the effects of fake news propagated via social media on conflicts in Nigeria; assess the impact of fake news on the farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State.

4.4.1   Reciept, Verification and Spread of Fake News

This segment of the study was conducted among a total of 37 Benue State indigenes and 20 Media Experts. The aim was to determine if the respondents recieved news related to the conflict via social media and if they verified such news before believing them or sharing them. This aspect of the research was limited to Benue State indigenes because they were the most directly affected respondents and would be easily influenced by whatever news they recieve on the conflicts.. Also, the media experts were chosen for this segment because they play a major role in the spread of information and are usually relied on by the public for credible information.

Table 7 below shows the response from Benue State indigenes/victims and Media Experts respectively. The table reveals that the of Benue State indigenes representing 22(59.5%) of the respondents follow social media stories or news on the conflict. Eight (21.6%) respondents do not follow the social media stories and 7(18.9%) sometimes do. Additionally, most respondents amongst representing 26(70.3%) said they sometimes believe the social media stories they read, 6(16.2%) actually believe the news and 5(13.5%) do not believe the stories. Also, table 7 shows that majority representing 19(51.4%) of the respondents verify the source(s) of the stories, however, 7(18.9%) do not verify the sources while 10(27.0%) sometimes do and only one respondent has never verified social media news sources.

The respondents therefore highlighted various risks associated with not verifying the stories in the open-ended section of the questionnaire. Risks identified by respondents includes: causes war, conflict, damages and killings; blowing the situation out of proportion; high risk of driving the country into chaos; inciting communal clashes and other social menace; leads to spreading wrong information; more damage is done and more lives are lost; reprisal attacks; spreading lies, rumours and tension. This underscores the fact that although citizens are aware of the consequences of fake news, they do not necessarily bother to verify social media news before believing them. Furthermore, 31(83.8%) of the respondents claimed that they have never shared unverified stories about the farmers/herdsmen conflicts, 4(10.8%) have actually shared such stories and only 2(5.4%) of the respondents sometimes shared unverified stories about the farmers/herdsmen conflicts.

Table 7: Views on the Receipt, Verification and Spread of Fake News

Questions	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Do you follow social media stories or news on the conflict	**Benue State Indigenes**		
	Yes	22	59.5
	No	8	21.6
	Sometimes	7	18.9
	Total	**37**	**100.0**
Do you believe the stories you read	Yes	6	16.2
	No	5	13.5
	Sometimes	26	70.3
	Total	**37**	**100.0**
If yes, do you verify the source(s) of the stories	Yes	19	51.4
	No	7	18.9
	Sometimes	10	27.0
	Never	1	2.7
	Total	**37**	**100.0**
Have you ever shared unverified stories about the farmers/herdsmen conflicts	Yes	4	10.8
	No	31	83.8
	Sometimes	2	5.4
	Total	**37**	**100.0**

Have you heard about fake news?	Media Activists		
	Yes	19	95.0
	No	-	-
	Not Sure	1	5.0
	Total	**20**	**100.0**
Have you ever believed any news before you confirmed it was fake news?	Yes	11	55.0
	No	4	20.0
	A few times	4	20.0
	Often	1	5.0
	Total	**20**	**100.0**
Have you ever participated in spreading fake news?	Yes	-	-
	No	17	85.0
	Not Sure	3	15.0
	Total	**20**	**100.0**
Have you ever received fake news concerning the farmers/herdsmen conflicts?	Yes	8	40.0
	No	8	40.0
	Maybe	4	20.0
	Total	**20**	**100.0**
If yes, how did you feel about spreading this fake news?	Indifferent	-	-
	Satisfied	-	-
	Bad	10	100.0
	Total	**10**	**100.0**

Source: *Researcher's Fieldwork (2020)*

Table 7 also represents responses by Media Experts and it reveals that virtually 19 (95.0) of the 20 respondents have heard about fake news, except for one respondent who was not sure. Thus, the respondents were asked to describe what they understood by fake news and the relevant following responses ensued: "it is any kind of news which does not have fact, it may put people into trouble"; "edited/modified information (disinformation) spread through social media"; "false stories about events on social media"; "it can be injurious to the bearer, and it is always perpetrated by mischief makers"; "it causes chaos and hatred; it is mostly rumour"; "it propels crises, as when it originates from a source known or unknown without

verification, it escalates already tense situation"; "I think fake news on social media is politically influenced"; "it can cause communal clashes and religious crisis"; and "they actually have elements of existing fact about the subject matter".

Table further reveals if the respondents have ever believed any news before confirming its authenticity or otherwise. Majority of the respondents – 11 (55.0%) indicated that they have believed news before they confirmed it was fake news; 4 (20.0%) indicated that they have not while 4 (20.0%) indicated that they have believed such a few times and only one (5.0%) often believes news before confirming its source. This implies that majority of the respondents do believe news before validating such news. Also, when asked whether they have ever participated in spreading fake news or not, most of the respondents representing 17 (85.0%) indicated that they had never participated in spreading fake news, while 3 (15.0%) stated that they were not sure.

Also, the respondents were asked if they have ever received fake news concerning the farmers/herdsmen conflicts. Eight (40.0%) identified they had received and another 8 (40.0%) said they had never received fake news concerning the farmers/herdsmen conflicts while 4 (20.0%) indicated that they might have (uncertain) received such news before. Since, only few of them indicated that they had received such fake news before, only 10 respondents expressed that they felt bad about spreading such fake news when they received them. Overall, this result is quite ironic because majority admitted to believing news before verification thus saying they had never spread fake news is rather illogical. This smacks of unwillingness of media practitioners themselves to take responsibility for their laxity in handling social media channelled news.

4.4.2 Fake News and Farmers/Herders Conflicts in Benue State

In order to determine to what extent the respondents think fake news influences the farmers/herders conflicts, responses from the 37 Benue State indigenes, 20 Media Experts and 19 Conflict/Security Experts were surveyed. These categories of respondents are directly involved in the farmers/herders conflict situation which informs their choice for this aspect of the study.

Table 8 below shows that majority of the Benue State indigenes representing 16 (43.2%) of the respondents are not sure fake news aggravated the violent clashes between farmers and herdsmen in Benue state, while 9 (24.3%) do not think so and 12 (32.4%) actually do think fake news aggravated the violent conflict between the farmers and herdsmen in the state. Some respondents however, gave examples of how fake news has aggravated the clashes. These include: most of the pictures were not connected to Nigeria but were depicted on Facebook to make citizens believe it was so; "heard that people were killed in Makurdi which was not true"; "my uncle who is a farmer told me that the herders had attacked our community while I was in school, then I started sharing the information based on what my uncle had told me. It sparked anger in more people, thereby inciting them to a reprisal attack"; "several pictures of attacks and pictures shared on whatsApp turned out to be fake, some stories were events that happened in other African countries"; "some unsuspecting members of the public are fed with fake news, they flee their houses and thieves take over their possessions".

In addition, most of the Benue State respondents - 33(89.2%) indicated that they have not acted violently based on stories they read on social media, while only 4(10.8%) indicated they have never acted violently based on such stories from social media. They made different suggestions on curbing fake news in Benue State which include: "any unverified news should not be shared on social media"; "government should stop arresting or killing innocent citizens during conflicts"; "seminars are organised in schools engaging them on the effect of fake news"; "in community clash not all social media should be allowed to carry the news, only government approved media should be allowed to cover the incident"; "social media should be allowed to operate freely as a platform for self-expression"; "sometimes social media is a channel toward advocacy for checkmating government excesses and to propagate positive ideologies of the country's image. Complete regulation is a bridge to fundamental human rights"; "government should do more in stopping all the conflict"; "we should get our fact before giving out information".

Table 8: Views on Effect of Fake News on Farmers/Herders Conflicts

Questions	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Benue State Indigenes			
Are you aware of ongoing conflicts between farmers and herdsmen in Benue state	Yes	34	91.9
	No	1	2.7
	Not really	2	5.4
	Total	37	100.0
Were you affected by the conflict	Yes	6	16.2
	No	15	40.5
	Not directly	16	43.2
	Total	37	100.0
Do you think fake news aggravated the violent clashes between farmers and herdsmen in Benue State	Yes	12	32.4
	No	9	24.3
	Not Sure	16	43.2
	Total	37	100.0
Have you ever acted violently based on stories you read on social media	Yes	4	10.8
	No	33	89.2
	Total	37	100.0
Media Experts / Reporters			
Do you think fake news is responsible for the unending farmers/herdsmen conflicts?	Yes	10	50.0
	No	5	25.0
	Maybe	5	25.0
	Total	20	100.0
Who do you think should be held responsible for fake news on the farmers/herdsmen conflicts?	Social media comp	8	40.0
	Users	5	25.0
	Public	2	10.0
	Government	5	25.0
	Total	20	100.0
Conflict/Security Experts			
Do you think farmers/herdsmen	Yes	8	42.1

conflicts could be better resolved if social media is regulated?	No	11	57.9
	Total	19	100.0

Source: *Researcher's Fieldwork (2020)*

With regards to responses from Media Experts, when asked if their opinion or judgment has ever been marred by fake news, most of them– 10(50.0%) stated that their opinions or judgments have never been marred by fake news. Another 6(30.0%) identified that they have been affected by it while 4(20.0%) of the respondents were not sure if their opinions or judgments had ever been marred by fake news. A significant disclosure from the results is that most of the Media Experts – 10(50.0%) think that fake news is responsible for the unending farmers/herdsmen conflict, 5(25.0%) do not think so and 5(25.0%) were uncertain. In addition, when asked about who should be held responsible for fake news on the farmers/herdsmen conflicts, most of the respondents - 8(40.0%) were of the opinion that the social media companies were to blame. Five (25.0%) each indicated users and government while 2(10.0%) said that the public should be held responsible for fake news on the farmers/herdsmen conflicts.

Finally, majority of the Conflict/Security Experts disagreed with the fact that the farmers/herders conflicts could be better resolved if social media is regulated. As shown in the table above, 8(42.1%) of them think so while 11(57.9%) do not think farmers/herders conflicts could be better resolved if social media is regulated. This implies that citizens consider social media as not bad in itself hence does not require government regulation. They however do acknowledge the danger associated with faker news on social media hence the suggestions for punishment of perpetrators rather than regulating social media in Nigeria.

4.4.3   Effects of Fake News on Conflicts in Nigeria

The data presented and interpreted on Table 9 below reflects responses on how social media-channelled fake news influences conflicts in Nigeria. The results also cover suggestions by respondents on how the fake news challenge could be curbed. The respondents for this segment of the study includes 19 Conflict/ Security Experts; 20

Media Experts; 37 Benue State indigenes and 16 Opinion Leaders which forms the 92 respondents surveyed for this study. The segment relates to conflicts and fake news in general which affects all respondents and as such responses from all 92 respondents was required to come up with key findings.

Table 9 below begins with the responses from Conflict/Security Experts. It shows that majority being 10 (52.6%) of the respondents think social media affects conflicts positively, while only 3 (15.8%) of them think it has negative effects and 6 (31.6%) are undecided on whether social media affects conflicts positively or negatively. Furthermore, respondents in the survey are of equal opinion on whether social media should be regulated in Nigeria to curb fake news. Eight (42.1%) of them agree that it should be regulated and also 8 (42.1%) disagree with it being regulated to curb fake news. The remaining 3 (15.8%) indicated that the social media should sometimes be regulated in Nigeria to curb fake news.

Table 9: Views on Conflicts and Fake News on Social Media

Questions	Responses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Conflict/Security Experts			
Do you think social media affects conflicts positively or negatively	Positively	10	52.6
	Negatively	3	15.8
	Not sure	6	31.6
	Total	**19**	**100.0**
Should social media be regulated in Nigeria to curb fake news?	Yes	8	42.1
	No	8	42.1
	Sometimes	3	15.8
	Total	**19**	**100.0**
Should fake news purveyors be punished by the law?	Yes	14	73.7
	No	5	26.3
	Total	**19**	**100.0**
Do you think farmers/herdsmen conflicts could be better resolved if social media is regulated?	Yes	8	42.1
	No	11	57.9
	Total	**19**	**100.0**

How urgent do you consider the fake news problem in Nigeria?	Urgent	6	31.6
	Not urgent	6	31.6
	Inappropriate rep	7	36.8
	Total	**19**	**100**
Has the Federal Government done enough to curb fake news?	Yes	1	5.3
	No	13	68.4
	Inappropriate rep	5	26.3
	Total	**19**	**100.0**
Have you had personal experiences with violent attacks triggered by fake news?	Yes	5	26.3
	No	14	73.7
	Total	**19**	**100.0**
Media Activists			
Have you ever reported any fake news on social media?	**Yes**	**3**	**15.0**
	No	**14**	**70.0**
	Not Interested	**3**	**15.0**
	Total	**20**	**100.0**
Benue State Indigenes			
Do you think social media should be regulated during conflicts?	Yes	14	37.8
	No	13	35.1
	Partially	10	27.0
	Total	**37**	**100.0**
Opinion Leaders			
Does the news you access on social media determine your opinion on the conflict?	Yes	2	12.5
	No	8	50.0
	Sometimes	4	25.0
	Most times	2	12.5
	Total	**16**	**100.0**
Do you take sides in the conflict based on social media news?	Yes	-	-
	No	11	68.8

	Some times	5	31.3
	Total	**16**	**100.0**
Do you think social media news and stories aggravate the conflict	Yes	8	50.0
	No	3	18.8
	Maybe	5	31.3
	Total	**16**	**100.0**
Who do you blame for fake news?	Government	8	50.0
	Military	1	6.3
	Media	1	6.3
	The public	3	18.8
	Internet User	3	18.8
	Total	**16**	**100.0**
Have you been affected by fake news in your role as an opinion leader	Yes	5	31.3
	No	10	62.5
	Maybe	1	6.3
	Total	**16**	**100.0**
Do you think there should be a national policy on curbing fake news in Nigeria?	Yes	10	62.5
	No	2	12.5
	Not Sure	4	25.0
	Total	**16**	**100.0**

Source: *Researcher's Fieldwork (2020)*

The Conflict/Security Experts therefore proffered some solutions for fake news on social media. They include: cyber security awareness; to identify the publisher and block the lines; information not from right source or authentic should not be passed on social media; news should be checked for authentication; proper and unbias regulations; punishment; suspension of accounts that carry fake news; users should verify news before spreading it; the regulatory bodies in charge of media should filter the information before anyone can circulate it; warning should be given for the first offenders; there should be regulatory bodies to monitor. Table 9 also reveals the Conflicts/Security Experts' opinions on whether or not fake news purveyors should be punished by the law. Most of them – 14 (73.7%) agree that fake news purveyors should be punished by the law, while 5 (26.3%) indicated that they should not be punished. Therefore, when the respondents were asked to suggest possible

punishments for fake news purveyors, most of them suggested the following: "fine, block their lines and accounts"; "jail terms"; "rehabilitation centers for information management; and warning".

The respondents were also asked how urgent they consider the fake news problem in Nigeria. The table shows that 6 (32%) of the respondents indicated that it is very urgent while 6 (32%) also indicated that it is not urgent. The other 7 responses were not appropriate answers to the open-ended question hence, they were disregarded. When asked if they thought the FGN has done enough to curb fake news, the above shows that most of the respondents 13 (68.8%) indicated that the FGN has not done enough, while only one (5.3%) indicated that they have done enough. Responses from 5 respondents were not appropriate or totally missing the point. As regards whether the respondents have had personal experiences with violent attacks triggered by fake news or not, most of the respondents 14 (73.7%) indicated that they had not had such experiences, while the remaining 5 (26.3%) respondents indicated that they had such experiences.

Table 9 continues with responses by Media Experts which shows that the majority – 14 (70.0%) have never reported any fake news on social media, while 3 (15.0%) respondents have done that before and 3 (15.0%) shows that they were not interested. On their part, 14 (37.8%) of the Benue State indigenes indicated that they think social media should be regulated during conflicts, while 13 (35.1%) do not think so, and 10 (27.0%) of them partially think the social media should be regulated during conflicts.

Table 9 further reveals that majority of the Opinion Leaders representing 8 (50.0%) do not base their opinions on news accessed on social media platforms. While only 2 (12.5%) respondents do so, 4 (25.0%) sometimes do and 2 (12.5%) most times have their opinion of conflict determined by news accessed on social media. Also, most respondents – 11 (68.8%) have indicated that they do not take sides in the conflict based on social media news and 5 indicated that they sometimes take sides based on such news. Furthermore, majority of the respondents – 8(50.0%) acknowledge that the social media news and stories aggravated the conflicts, while only 3 (18.8%) do not think social media stories aggravate the conflict and 5 (31.3%) were uncertain.

The Opinion Leaderss were further questioned on who they blame for fake news in Nigeria. Table 9 above indicates that most of them – 8 (50.0%) indicated that they blame the Government, one (6.3%) each blame the military and the media and 3 (18.8%) each blame the public and internet users. The respondents were therefore asked to give a brief justification for their choice of who to blame and they noted the following relevant reasons: that all news should be verified by internet users; government… keep Nigerians in the dark when they know the truth; government should be more focus in every channel of news; people should control what they hear and find out the truth before spreading it; often time people spread about what they are not fully aware of; public internet users have the freedom to publish whatsoever they like on social media; the media aggravate and overhype issues; and well, there is this opportunity given to every human being by nature, that is opportunity of verification which the public are not using before reacting.

Moreover, when asked about the roles expected of opinion leaders in curbing fake news, the respondents essentially indicated the following: disseminate the true news; educate the public; relate more with the people; sound warning to the people and set up good structures and platforms that will explain better to the people. As regards being affected by fake news in their roles as opinion leaders, most of the respondents representing 10(62.5%) submitted that they had never been affected by such, while 5(31.3%) respondents indicated that they had been affected by fake news in their capacities as opinion leaders and only 1(6.3%) respondents was uncertain.

The Opinion Leaders were also asked open-ended questions on what they think motivate the creation and spread of fake news. The relevant responses are as follows: fake news is motivated out of propaganda; fear and politics; hatred, envy, jealousy; ignorance and desire for evil; selfish interest to take over offices; lack of government openness; sentiments; and unscreened stories or news by the government and media personnel.

Table 9 above also shows the respondents' opinion on adopting a national policy on curbing fake news in Nigeria. Most of the respondents - 10(62.5%) think there should be a national policy on curbing fake news in Nigeria, while 2(12.5%) do not think so and 4(25.0%) are not sure. Thus, the respondents were asked to suggest

ways of achieving that, and some of their relevant suggestions include: government should set up committee to that effect; any account seen to be publishing fake news should be suspended; availing detailed and realistic news to the people promptly; there should be ascertained means of spreading news; follow the guidelines of disseminating news; and there should be laws guiding that.

4.5 Interviewees' Opinions on Social Media-Channelled Fake News and Conflicts

In the course of the study a total of 5 interviews were conducted. The interviewees were drawn from the media industry, the Police, the academia and Benue State. Three of the interviewees were from Benue State while the other two were from Ogun and Kogi States respectively. The interviewees were enthusiastic to be part of the study and gave their opinions. For the purpose of anonymity, only first names will be used when quoting any of the responders. Interviews are relayed and analysed in succeeding paragraphs.

4.5.1 Responsibility for Social Media-Channelled Fake News

Generally, all 5 interviewees were asked if they had social media accounts and how active they were and they all said they were active social media users. All interviewees were also most active on WhatsApp and Facebook than other social media platforms. Similarly, they were all aware of the farmers/herders conflicts in Nigeria and agreed that fake news plays a major role in inciting attacks and reprisal attacks.

When specifically quizzed on what factors they think motivate fake news on social media, there were different responses. Queen, a journalist who was interviewed on 27 December, 2019 in Abuja, Nigeria said: ***"I believe the social media companies are to blame because they ought to verify authenticity of information before allowing it to be posted on their platforms. The lack of control is what encourages fake news on social media"***. When asked if that would not negate the free speech provided by social media, she said it should be considered as the ethical part of social media because according to her ***"free speech should not endanger people's lives"***.

Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Musa was interviewed on telephone on 28 February, 2020 from Nyakinama, Rwanda as he resides in Asaba, Nigeria. On his part, *"people should be held accountable for the information they post or share on social media".* He shared his experience with fake news about herders attacking parts of the country. He said; *"sometime in 2017, we received a distress call that herders had attacked one of the farming communities in Otukpa, Benue State. On arriving at the village there had indeed been crises as people were seen hiding and properties destroyed. However, further investigations revealed that the crisis was actually a land dispute between two clans and there were no herders in sight".* He added that *"this crisis was days later, reported as herders attack on Facebook and several other social media platforms". Another interviewee is Mr Ola, a retired military personnel who follows media trends and social issues via social media. He was also interviewed on 27 December, 2019 in Abuja, Nigeria. In his opinion,* *"media houses and social media companies are to blame for the rising of fake news in circulation".* He further said that *"Nigerian journalists are lazy that is why they rely on fake news to sell their newspapers online".*

The afore-stated interviews indicate that people have varying ideas on who should be held responsible for fake news on social media. These range from the government to social media users, social media companies and media practitioners in Nigeria. This implies that it is necessary to come to a consensus as to who should play the most crucial part in tackling the fake news menace in Nigeria. Doing this will help the FGN and relevant agencies design the right strategy against fake news.

4.5.2   Fake News as a Catalyst for the Conflicts in Nigeria

Mrs Ruth is a teacher in Benue State who had a first-hand experience of herders' attack on her community in Makurdi, Benue state. During a phone interview conducted in Abuja on 29 December 2019, she recounted her ordeal thus; *"we were chased out of our homes at about 2am on the 15ᵗʰ of Nov 2017 by some Fulani herdsmen. I had to run into the bush with my two children but luckily we were not harmed or robbed. Although some neighbours were attacked and robbed".* When asked why she thinks the herders attacked, she said *"some months before then there were stories everywhere that Fulani herdsmen were planning to attack us but she*

we didn't know what we did". Mrs Ruth said social media was actually a good source of warning for people like her and she often believes the stories shared. When asked if she was sure that the stories were true, she said *"I'm not sure, but I think it is very reliable than NTA (Nigeria Television Authority) news".* Although she understood the impact of fake news on the ongoing conflicts in Benue State, the respondent blamed security agencies and government more for the farmers/herders conflicts.

Another interviewee from the academia in Benue State was Dr Adejoh. He is an active social media user and knows a lot about fake news. In the course of his interview on 2 January 2020 in Makurdi, Nigeria, he said *"social media has been both a blessing and a curse to Nigeria in terms of the farmers/herders conflicts. I know that social media has helped in some cases to avert bloodshed by sharing reports of impending attacks but on the other side, fake news has also led to many unwarranted reprisal attacks by both farmers and herders".* He accused politicians and religious bodies of aggravating the conflicts for their selfish gains, noting that *"the present Governor of Benue State rode on the conflicts to win a second term in office".* According to him, *"the politicians twisted the issue to look like it was a Jihad by the Fulani herdsmen against Christians in Benue".* He largely blamed illiteracy, poverty and politics for the conflicts caused by fake news in Benue State.

Ola on his part blamed the FGN for paying lip service to the ongoing farmers/herders crises. According to him, *"lack of political will is the reason why fake news has become so rampant".* He concluded that, *"fake news can create more chaos in Nigeria if it is not stopped".*

The overarching deduction from these interview responses is that indeed social media-channelled fake news plays a role in shaping the farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State. There is however, a general distrust of the government's willingness and capacity to manage the conflicts. Also, social media is considered as positive due to the fact that it sometimes helps to prevent casualties, however, its susceptibility to being manipulated for political, religious and ethnic biases is highlighted. Fake news on social media is therefore, identified as a catalyst for conflicts in Nigeria.

4.5.3 Curtailing Fake News in Nigeria through Social Media Regulation

Concerning the need to monitor social media in Nigeria as a means of curtailing fake news, Queen, during her interview on 27 December, 2019 said: *"that would not be acceptable as the Government may over-regulate and muzzle opposition voices in the process. Instead I recommend that fake news merchants should be identified and sentenced to community service if found guilty."* Conversely, DSP Musa in the phone conversation said: *"social media regulation and public awareness for members of the public is a panacea for fake news related conflicts so think social media should be regulated in Nigeria"*. Ola proposed that *"the FGN should create anti-fake news laws and monitor defaulters on social media"*. Meanwhile, Dr Adejoh proposed jail term for fake news purveyors When asked if the academia could help stop fake news, he said *"more research should be carried out to find the root causes of fake news and how best to deal with the menace especially amongst the youth in Nigeria"*.

The opinions of the interviewees on measure to curtail fake news indicate that most people are not comfortable with the government regulating social media for fear of losing their rights to free speech. Rather, Nigerians prefer legal frameworks to sanction fake news peddlers. Also, the need for more academic studies into understanding fake news in Nigeria was suggested.

4.6 Overview of Opinions on how Social Media-Channelled Fake News Shapes Conflicts in Nigeria

This segment of the study is aimed at drawing inferences from the research results and the objectives of the study with a view to answering the research questions. To achieve this, reference will be made to some literature in order to support the major findings of the study.

4.6.1 Social Media Usage and Fake News

The assessment of the results from the study reveals that many people rely on social media for news but many also said they verify the news accessed via social media. Some however acknowledged the fact that they do not verify such news. This shows

that social media has become a major source for many Nigerians and tendency for fake news to fester is obvious. Due to the availability of online sources and the difficulty in authenticating such sources, many Nigerians are constantly exposed to fake news.

A major contributing factor to the spread of fake news in Nigeria could be attributed to the affordability of smart phones and data in recent times. Misereor's Partners Intervention Report in Nigeria disclosed that "mobile phones began to be widespread in Nigeria from 2005 onwards, and they remain relatively cheap and practical, with good national coverage. Smartphones are common in urban areas, and Nigerians are enthusiastic adherents of social media" (Blench R, 2017, p.18). However, in recent times coverage has been extended to the hinterlands where farmers/herders conflicts often occur. This makes it possible for the major actors in the farmers/herders conflicts to hear and read what is being said about the conflicts.

For instance, Mrs Ruth on 29 December 2019, who in response to her knowledge of how authentic social media warnings on attacks were, said that: "I'm not sure, but I think it is very reliable than NTA (Nigeria Television Authority) news". Sadly, as clearly alluded to by DSP Musa on 28 February 2020, the accounts are mostly fake news about ongoing or impending attacks on either farmers or herders. Referring to the fake news he once received on an attack which was actually a land dispute he said: "this crisis was days later, reported as herders attack on Facebook and several other social media platforms". Fake news of this nature eventually spread and trigger attacks and reprisal attacks thus leading to the current vicious cycle of farmers/herders conflicts being experienced in Nigeria.

4.6.2 Effects of Fake News on Farmers/Herders Conflicts in Nigeria

In view of the afore-stated findings, it is clear that narratives drive the characterisation of the farmers/herders' conflicts in Benue and it depends on the interest of whoever is establishing the narrative. Most respondents attested to the fact that fake news contributes largely to the cyclical violence between farmers and herders in Benue State. Some respondents blamed the government while others blamed politicians, social media companies and only a few actually blamed the citizens who spread the fake news. The study reveals that many people know about

the conflict but no one seems to want to accept responsibility for the fake news that encourages it. Rather, it is reduced to either religious or political based on individual sentiments.

As rightly pointed out by Blench (2017, p.3), "From the point of view of the elites, it is important to characterise this as a struggle for resources, and secondarily as a Christian/Islam divide. But the evidence suggests that the situation is quite different from this surface appearance… there is little doubt that the attacks are partly funded by political and sectional interests who cloak them in quite different conflicts." The most potent tool used in driving desired narratives by the interested parties is the social media. The Misereor 2017 report on Benue conflict opined that "just as politicians in the North fund Islamic extremists in the quest for power, so further south, the narrative is the defence of Christianity against proselytization and conversion, the supposed goal of the herders. Until a more nuanced account of the events in Benue State is accepted, all types of work for reconciliation are likely to flounder" (Blench, 2017, p.3).

Some people believe strongly that the killing of Catholic priests and burning of churches is proof of the true intention of the marauding herders to Islamise Benue State. Dr Adejoh agreed with this notion during his interview in Makurdi on 2 January, 2020 when he said: "the politicians twisted the issue to look like it was a Jihad by the Fulani herdsmen against Christians in Benue". This erroneous notion was spread largely via WhatsApp broadcast messages by churches and religious organisations thus, aggravating already existing tensions.

Churches are naturally expected to "encourage peace and reconciliation and to diffuse a tolerant view of different systems in the interests of their congregations. However, in Nigeria, some churches take a strong view and their role is the reverse, it is rather to defeat the 'enemy herders', who are characterised as terrorists" (Blench, 2017, p.10). For example, posters by churches purportedly depicting the terror of herders and showing photographs from the internet which are certainly not from Nigeria, adorn the streets of Gboko, Benue State (Blench, 2017, p.11). The church has become one of the fiercest sources of fake news being circulated via social media thereby increasing the hate and tension between the predominantly Muslim herders and the predominantly Christian farmers.

4.6.3   Suggested Strategies to Eliminate Fake News in Nigeria

Considering the nature of suggestions as to how fake news could be curbed in Nigeria, many seemed not to favour government censorship of social media. Although many blamed the Government for fake news, they still wouldn't agree that social media needs to be monitored or regulated in Nigeria. On the other hand, some respondents supported the creation of a policy to guide the use of social media in Nigeria while a few others supported government regulation of social media during conflicts.

This result denotes the strong affinity Nigerians have to the notion of free speech which social media offers. This was succinctly expressed by Queen, during her 27 December, 2019 interview about government regulating social media: "that would not be acceptable as the government may over-regulate and muzzle opposition voices in the process". Also, a cursory look at the results indicates that people generally do not trust the government enough to solve the fake news problem. Interestingly, this was more evident amongst the military experts. Mr Ola further confirmed this on 27 December, 2019 when he stated that "lack of political will is the reason why fake news has become so rampant".

Most respondents however suggested that punishments should be meted on fake news purveyors but a few did not see the need for punishments. Queen said in her interview that "I recommend that fake news merchants should be identified and sentenced to community service if found guilty." This once again depicts the reluctance of citizens to take responsibility for their actions and in-actions as it concerns fake news. Until the average Nigerian is enlightened enough and willing to take responsibility rather than blame government, fake news may not be eliminated in the country. Rather, the possibility of fake news festering and escalating farmers/herders conflicts is quite high.

In terms of curbing social media excesses as a solution to farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State, the results showed that majority did not think regulating social media would reduce the violence. Although majority agreed that fake news via social media played a major role in aggravating the conflict, they thought the solution to the

conflicts was with the government and security agencies. This indicates that people are not willing to relinquish the freedom of speech derived from social media despite its negative effects on farmers/herders conflicts. It is imperative to note therefore, that most citizens need to be educated on the importance of making some sacrifices for the greater good. Until the populace begin to understand that free speech does not override national security, the menace of fake news may continue and the farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State could defy resolution.

CHAPTER FIVE: GENERAL CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the study, by outlining a summary of findings and confirmations or otherwise of the research findings. Suggestions are made to guide further research into social media and its attendant effects on societies. Recommendations are also proffered for the benefit of policy makers in Nigeria, further academic researches in related fields of study and for the researcher's personal academic interests.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

This study established the existence of an influential relationship between social media channelled fake news and farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria. It especially validates the agenda setting and the hypodermic needle theories which were used to guide the study. Findings from the survey carried out showed that many respondents rely excessively on the social media for information about conflicts. In the case of the farmers/herders conflicts in Benue state, the study population attested to the fact that fake news plays a significant role in aggravating tensions. The key findings of this study therefore, include the following:

- A large number of the sample population have at least one social media account. The highest proportion is those who have both Facebook and WhatsApp accounts. Also, they are very active on these platforms and many rely heavily on social media for news about the farmers/herders conflicts.

- The ongoing farmers/herders conflict in Benue State is known by many which qualifies it as one of national concern. Thus, the conflict attracts considerable media attention. This makes the conflict a very fertile soil for fake news as it has the potential of driving a lot of traffic on the internet.

- Many respondents actually understand the dangers associated with not verifying social media stories. They identified the potential of fake news to cause war, trigger conflicts, cause damages and killings, blow the situations out of proportion, create chaos; incite communal clashes and other social menace, cause reprisal attacks etc.

- A large proportion of the sample population believe news gotten from social media before validating them. However, many do not admit that they have participated in spreading fake news.

- Many do believe that indeed fake news aggravated the violent conflicts between farmers and herders in Benue State. However, not everyone blamed social media and as such they did not think social media should be regulated in Nigeria. Rather, they believe that social media companies and the Government should take responsibility for fake news on social media.

- Politics, ethnicity and religious bias were identified as responsible for most of the farmers/herders related fake news on social media.

In view of the above stated key findings, the study shed light on the crux of the matter which is to ascertain the effect of fake news channelled through social media on the farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State Nigeria. It was generally accepted that fake news needs to be curtailed in Nigeria as it could result in larger conflicts or war. However, it was observed that most people do not want the responsibility of stopping fake news to be for the social media users. Rather, majority pushed the blame to the Government which is quite illogical based on the finding that many do not want the Government to regulate social media.

5.3   Conclusions

Based on the key findings, the research conclusions are that:

- Social media is a popular source of news on the farmers/herders conflict however, Benue State residents rarely verify the news gotten from social media.

- Fake news channelled through social media has negatively imparted on the conflicts thus creating a vicious cycle of attacks and reprisal attacks.

- Benue state indigenes and residents understand the dangerous effects of fake news on the conflict but are not willing to take responsibility for checking its spread.

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- Politics, ethnicity and religion are major motivating factors for the fake news channelled via social media in Benue State, Nigeria.

- There is need for a national policy and sensitization against social media-channelled fake news in Nigeria.

5.4   Conclusions in Relation to Theoretical Frameworks

The power of media in setting agenda for its audiences could be seen in the way people perceived the conflicts after being exposed to fake news on social media. In some cases, it was observed that respondents did not verify stories about the conflict but went ahead to spread the story thus igniting reprisal attacks. This works well with propaganda and deliberate attempts at misinformation for the purpose of achieving particular ends. This study revealed that social media-channelled fake news is often used by politicians and sometimes religious bodies to set agenda. This was particularly evident in the way the resource-based farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State were manipulated by both politicians and religious leaders to set agenda that suited their personal gains. Thus, they influenced perceptions and behaviours of the already sentimental Benue State indigenes.

In terms of the hypodermic needle or magic bullet theory, the findings from this research revealed that media does not hit everyone like a magic bullet because not all audiences are passive. As a matter of fact, the passivity of people depends largely on the context or literacy levels of them target audience. In most cases, media audiences are active and are deliberate about how they react to information directed at them. Personal choices and biases often reflect in what actions people decide to take upon receiving information as could be seen in the findings. Respondents were aware of the possibility of some news being fake but went ahead to share such information. That did not indicate passivity as the hypodermic needle theory postulates. Rather it indicates that people are active about what choices they make for reasons best known to them.

5.5   Recommendations

It has been established that unbridled misinformation in the form of fake news on

social media have greatly endangered Nigeria's national security in relation to farmers/herders conflicts. Based on this premise therefore, the following recommendations are made:

- The Federal Government of Nigeria should collaborate with social media companies, internet providers, to monitor and filter fake news on social media before they are disseminated to the public.

- The National Assembly should formulate a policy to guide the use of social media in Nigeria which will not impede on the fundamental human rights of the citizens.

- The Federal Ministry of Justice should enact a law that would prosecute fake news peddling and distribution via all available media channels in Nigeria.

- The National Orientation Agency should develop a campaign to sensitize the public on their roles and civic duties in curbing the spread of fake news on social media.

- The academia should carry out further research into possible solutions to the fake news menace in Nigeria.

5.6   Areas for Further Research

The conduct of this study was constrained in various ways which the researcher believes may have had some effects on the outcome of the study. The challenges include limited time to conduct the research; inadequate funding to employ more research assistants; and most importantly, the inability of the researcher to access some government departments, farmers and herders organisations in the course of the study. Accordingly, the researcher would recommend that further research on this study area considers the following:

- Measures carried out by the FMIC and the NOA to curtail social media-channelled fake news in Nigeria.

- Most recent statistics on farmers/herders conflicts in Benue State based on records from the local Benue farmers and herders under the auspices of MACBAN.

- How fake news has impacted on the lives of herders in Benue State especially in terms of stigmatisation.

- Negative effects of social media addiction on patriotism in Nigeria.

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Appendix 1

<u>RESEARCH TOPIC</u>

Understanding the Effects of Social Media-Channelled Fake News on Conflicts in Nigeria: Case of Farmers/Herdsmen Conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria.

NAME:………………………………………………………………………………

AGE:……………………………………..PROFESSION…………………………

DATE:……………………………………SIGN……………………………………

<u>BENUE STATE INDIGENES</u>

<u>Part I</u>

1. Do you have a social media account? Yes / No

2. If   yes,   which ones?..

3. How active are you on social media? Very active/ Somewhat active/ Not active

4. Which social media App do you visit the most? Facebook/ Twitter/ WhatsApp/ None of the above.

<u>Part II</u>

5. Are you aware of the ongoing conflicts between farmers and herdsmen in Benue state? Yes/
No/ Not Really.

6. Were you affected by the conflict? Yes/ No/ Not directly.

7. If   yes,   kindly   give   a   brief   account   of   your experience…………………………………………………………………………

8.   Do you follow social media stories or news on the conflict? Yes/ No/ Sometimes

9.   Do you believe the stories you read? Yes/ No/ Sometimes

10.   If Yes, do you verify the source(s) of the stories? Yes/ No/ Sometimes/ Never

11.   What do you think are the risks associated with not verifying the

stories?..

12.   Have you ever shared unverified stories about the farmers/herdsmen conflicts? Yes/ No/ Always/ Sometimes.

13.   Do you think fake news aggravated the violent clashes between farmers and herdsmen in Benue State? Yes/ No/ Not Sure

14.   If   yes,   kindly   give examples…………………………………………………………………………….

15.   Have you ever acted violently based on stories you read on social media? Yes/ No.

16.   Do you think social media should be regulated during conflicts? Yes/ No/ Partially.

17.   Any   other suggestions………………………………………………………………………….

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS RESEARCH.

Ann Kemi Okwori

Appendix 2

RESEARCH TOPIC

Understanding the Effects of Social Media-Channelled Fake News on Conflicts in Nigeria: Case of Farmers/Herdsmen Conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria.

NAME:………………………………………………………………………………

AGE:…………………………………………..PROFESSION…………………………

DATE:…………………………………………SIGN……………………………………

MEDIA EXPERTS

Part I

1.   Do you have a social media account? Yes / No

2.   If   yes,   which ones?...

3.   How active are you on social media? Very active/ Somewhat active/ Not active

4.   Which social media App do you visit the most? Facebook/ Twitter/ WhatsApp/ None of the above.

5.   Are you aware of the ongoing conflicts between farmers and herdsmen in Benue state? Yes/
No/ Not Really.

Part II

1.   Have you ever heard about fake news? Yes/ No/ Not sure.

2.   If yes, what do you know about fake news?..

3.   Have you ever believed any news before you confirmed it was fake news? Yes/ No/ A few times/ Often.

4.   Have you ever participated in spreading fake news? Yes/ No/ Not sure

5.   Have you ever received fake news concerning the farmers/herdsmen conflicts? Yes/ No/ Maybe

6.   If yes, how did you feel about spreading fake news? Indifferent/ Satisfied/ Bad

7.   Has your opinion or judgement ever been marred by fake news? Yes/ No/ Not sure

8.   Have you ever reported any fake news on social media? Yes/ No/ Not interested

9.   Do you think fake news is responsible for the unending farmers/herdsmen conflicts? Yes/ No/ Maybe

10.   Who do you think should be held responsible for fake news on the farmers/herdsmen
 conflicts? Social media companies/ Users/ Public/ Government/

Others……………………...

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS RESEARCH.

Ann Kemi Okwori

Appendix 3

<div align="center">

RESEARCH TOPIC

</div>

Understanding the Effects of Social Media-Channelled Fake News on Conflicts in Nigeria: Case of Farmers/Herdsmen Conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria.

NAME:…………………………………………………………………(Optional)

AGE:…………………………………………..PROFESSION…………………………

DATE:…………………………………………SIGN……………………………………

<div align="center">

OPINION LEADERS

</div>

Part I

1.   Do you have a social media account? Yes / No

2.   If   yes,   which
ones?...

3.   How active are you on social media? Very active/ Somewhat active/ Not active

4.   Which social media App do you visit the most? Facebook/ Twitter/ WhatsApp/ Others…………………………..

5.   Are you aware of the ongoing conflicts between farmers and herdsmen in Benue state? Yes/   No/   Not Really.

Part II

1.   Do the news you access on social media determine your opinion on the conflict? Yes/ No/ Sometimes/ Most times.

2.   Do you take sides in the conflict based on social media news? Yes/   No/ sometimes.

3.   Do you think social media news and stories aggravate the conflict? Yes/ No/ Maybe/ Absolutely.

4.   Who do you blame for fake news? Government/ Military/ Media/ the public/ Internet users.

5.   Give   brief   justifications   for   your choice…………………………………………………………………………… ……………………………………………………………………………………..

6.   What   role   should   opinion   leaders   play   in   curbing   fake news?..

7.   Have you ever been affected by fake news in your role as an opinion leader? Yes/ No/ Maybe

8.   From experience what do you think motivates the creation and spread of fake

news?...

9.   Do you think there should be a national policy on curbing fake news in Nigeria? Yes/ No/ Not sure.

10.   If yes, suggest ways of achieving the above……………………………………………………………………………

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS RESEARCH

Ann Kemi Okwori

Appendix 4

RESEARCH TOPIC

Understanding the Effects of Social Media-Channelled Fake News on Conflicts in Nigeria: Case of Farmers/Herdsmen Conflicts in Benue State.

NAME:………………………………………………………………….(Optional)

AGE:……………………………………..PROFESSION…………………………

DATE:…………………………………SIGN…………………………………

CONFLICT / SECURITY EXPERTS

Part I

1.   Do you have a social media account? Yes / No

2.   If   yes,   which ones?...

3.   How active are you on social media? Very active/ Somewhat active/ Not active

4.   Which social media app do you visit the most? Facebook/ Twitter/ WhatsApp/ Others.

5.   Are you aware of the ongoing conflicts between farmers and herdsmen in Benue state? Yes/ No/ Not Really.

Part II

1.   Do you think social media affects conflicts positively or negatively? Positively/ Negatively/ Not sure.

2.   Should social media be regulated in Nigeria to curb fake news? Yes/ No/ Sometimes

3.   What solutions would you proffer for fake news on social media?..

4.   Should fake news purveyors be punished by the law? Yes/ No

5.   Suggest possible punishments for fake news purveyors…………………………………………………………………………

6.   Do you think farmers/herdsmen conflicts could be better resolved if social media is regulated? Yes/ No

7.   How urgent do you consider the fake news problem in Nigeria?...

8.   In your opinion, has the Federal Government done enough to curb fake news? Briefly explain your position …………………………………………………………

9.   Have you had personal experiences with violent attacks triggered by fake news? Yes/No

10.   If yes, please kindly elucidate……………………………………………………………………………….

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS RESEARCH.

Ann Kemi Okwori