

# Headlines and misinformation in the Nigerian newspapers: Evidence from herder-farmer crisis and ENDSARS protests<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The increase in media proliferation as a result of the emergence of social media as alternative sources of news dissemination and consumption has led to many changes in journalism, such as declining gatekeeping and content scrutiny. Thus, headline construction and structuring play a crucial role in this new era of news. Like their counterparts all over the world, Nigeria's mainstream media are not left out of this raging redefinition of news construction and distribution in a hyperbolic and propagandistic format, despite their significant contributions to democracy since its return in 1999. The rise of insecurity and the attendance of political uproars, buoyed by online misinformation through pluralistic digital media, triggers intentional or inadvertent mistakes among the hitherto respected and credible mainstream media causing the need to respond to the salient issues in the media spaces without being out of the mainstream. Using the content

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analysis and process tracing methods, this paper explores the influence of the current media agenda on the gatekeeping of news that is increasingly spreading misinformation via clickbait on the headlines of the mainstream media.

## Keywords

Headlines, mainstream media, misinformation, clickbait, framing.

## Introduction

The news media proliferation as a result of the emergence of social media as alternative sources of news dissemination and consumption, has resulted in a series of positive and negative changes to professional journalism (Lunga & Mthembu, 2019; Pennycook & Rand, 2019). While social media allow freedom of expression, which is hallmarked by the growth of citizen journalism and the rebirth of press freedom in professional journalism, it has also led to declining of control, content scrutiny, and censorship, which is considered to be contributory to the massive spread of misleading information. Scholars have submitted to the fact that misinformation is an ‘unintentional behaviour that inadvertently misleads’ (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019); a key crisis in the information ecosystem of contemporary time (Efron & Raj, 2020); the existence of ‘alternative facts’ and ‘post-truth’ phenomenon, resulting into a world with an abundance of lies where the truth is no more of the priority of societal communication (Tsfati et al., 2020). The information pollution syndrome consisting of misinformation, disinformation (intended misleading information), or fake news (a news article that is intentionally and verifiably false (Shu et al., 2017; Simons & Manoilo, 2021), has become a contested concept. However, the focus of the current study is misinformation construed as misleading information disguising itself as legitimate in the headlines of the mainstream media.

Advancement in technologies and media proliferation, resulting in unbridled competition, has made headlines a key element of information dissemination for both the mainstream media and citizen journalists making them susceptible to disseminating sharable and clickable content linked to the main articles (Lagerwerf & Govaert, 2021). However, the use and functioning of headlines in the mainstream and other media have also changed in one way or another (Lagerwerf & Govaert, 2021), as Kuiken et al. (2017) submitted that the function of a headline was initially to give a newspaper reader a glimpse and clear overview of an article. These scholars further argued that contemporary headlines could go beyond the news requiring vigilance on the part of the readers in order to maintain a healthy information ecosystem.

With the changes that are redefining mainstream media activities, positively and negatively, and the spike of information pollution worldwide, the mainstream media in Nigeria are not staying aside from their role in shaping society. Today, the current level of unrest, due to ethnic, religious and political crises in Nigeria, is of great concern with the media happen to be playing a crucial role as a major source of information on the conflicts (Apuke & Omar, 2021). While misinformation has been described as a catalyst for the crisis in information systems across the world, through politics and other volatile issues in society, data on media reports on conflicts in Nigeria, particularly the herder-farmer crisis, depict biased newspaper coverage that tends to demonize a set of ethnic groups with minimal if any consideration for the possibility of inciting other ethnic groups against those who are demonized (Apuke & Omar, 2021). Suffice to say that the herder-farmer conflict is not the only national issue threatening Nigeria's unity and peaceful coexistence. The nation has been witnessing other crises, including secession agitations by various ethno-regional groups, which usually makes headlines from national, regional and local daily newspapers, giving them their inherent newsworthiness.

### **Statement of the problem**

Previous research has revealed the power of headlines, how they have been used to bait readers and how they can be easily susceptible to misinformation (Munger et al., 2020). Previously, before the domination and popularity of misinformation in news media, Molek-Kozakowska (2013) examined how sensationalism was used to cause ambiguity 'through specific illocutions, semantic macrostructures, narrative formulas, evaluation parameters, and interpersonal and textual devices' in news media, and they further set a framework for a language-oriented analysis of sensationalism in news media. Studies have also been carried out on the level of audience confidence in news headlines; how features of news headlines affect the accuracy of audience perception, how newspaper headlines are often interpreted and how journalists are further provided with tips on how to determine what to report (Blom, 2018; Smelter & Calvillo, 2019; Conklin, 2020). However, in the case of Nigeria, there is little if any existing literature on the role of mainstream media as a contributor to the crises and conflicts in the country through the dissemination of misinformation in headlines. Extant literature documents how media can be biased in their reports (Usigbe & Ilo, 2019), and how misinformation can be linked to headlines and news content through some features they may carry (Chiluwa & Chiluwa, 2020). For instance, Chiluwa & Chiluwa (2020) found that the constructions of the conflict and the main actors in the Nigerian press

are highly sensational, divisive and dangerous. From the literature, it is obvious that misinformation through mainstream newspapers headlines has not been investigated. Thus, the current study is aimed to supplement the literature by examining whether the mainstream media do spread misinformation via clickbait function in their headline structure.

## **Literature review**

### **Headlines as a key instrument of newspapers**

The significance of news headlines in mainstream and new media is incontrovertible (Ecker et al., 2014), as they present facts which influence readers' attitudes (Roy et al., 2019) and provide an opportunity to discern the overall content of articles and their desirability (Ecker et al., 2014). Ecker, et al. (2014) further noted that headlines provide context, help with comprehension and interpretation of content by activating the readers' relevant background knowledge, thus easing the meaning of the news (Bonyadi & Samuel, 2013). As the rapid change and advancement in technologies affect media production, much of newspaper content is consumed online rather than directly from the print forms (Kuiken et al., 2017). This shift also comes with more diverse challenges for mainstream media to meet up with competitors and deliver to their readers. Among these challenges are economic incentives (Olyneux & Coddington, 2020), pressure for meeting up with needs in sharing breaking news, and effective usage of advanced technologies.

There are many key characteristics of headlines that make them more attractive to readers. According to Roy et al. (2019), the use of verbs is a key characteristic of headlines, while others believe that the writer uses strong words as an objective norm to attract readers. According to Dor (2003), appropriate headlines should have such properties as shortness, clarity, ease of understanding, unambiguity, interest, novelty, and a design that is not confusing to readers, connecting the story with the known facts, events, expectation and assumptions. They show that headlines should not only bait the readers, but also offer them tangible information in line with their expectations of responsible media. However, the contemporary post-truth media ecology is changing the golden rules of the headline construction, as this important component of news is not a victim of information pollution like other parts of the news stories.

### **From informative to clickbait headlines**

As technologies change many aspects of journalism and news production, it has a great effect on some key areas such as headlines. Headlines, due to their

unique features, remain one of the most effective tools in the news production of today. According to Dor (2003) and Molyneux & Coddington (2020), despite all the changes that has occurred in news production, headlines have maintained many of their characteristics except for two that remain unchanged: ‘clear and unambiguous’, and the position that headlines should stand alone in summarizing the entire article without any accompanying words. In other words, these two areas have been heavily affected and used negatively, which makes it possible to question the key roles of headlines in the first place, which expose many to clickbait.

## **Causes for spreading misinformation through online newspaper headlines**

Most mainstream media make mistakes or are deliberately involved in it thinking that using the clickbait strategy is another new norm in journalism to meet the expectations of digital media, with the intention of using it to generate revenue or win the competition in the market. When in reality most of the features of clickbait strategies are things that go against the standard practice of journalism and can easily make the headlines susceptible to misinformation for two key reasons; they may be used mistakenly to convey misleading information to readers; or some readers with bad intentions can use and translate them for their personal gain. It is for this reason that the mainstream media cannot and should never compromise ethics, no matter what.

Looking at the changes in the headline formulation, one may ask whether clickbait and newsworthiness have become synonymous. Of course, there are some key similarities between the two but the differences are enormous. For example, Kuiken et al. (2017) note ‘simplification, spectacularization, negativity, and provoking content’ as some of the key characteristics of clickbait; and economic incentives (either monetary, minimization of word or information) to attract readers and stay up in competition is linked to the reason for using clickbait instead of creating newsworthiness by using certain techniques.

## **Metrics for clickbait**

The role of these metrics for online journalism is significant, as they have become determining factors in news production. Decisions are less based on instinct and more on actual data in attempting to attract more readers to their stories, editors and journalists have been changing the way they write headlines for their articles, by using words, phrases, and stylistic techniques that are known to perform well and attract more clicks (Kuiken et al., 2017). Questions

and figures have also been found associated with clickbait headlines and signal words such as ‘this’, ‘why’ or ‘what’ as features of clickbait (Kuiken et al., 2017).

## **Empirical review**

A number of previous studies have exclusively been conducted with the intent of revealing how news media misinform the public through their news reports. These studies largely used experimental surveys with the aim of establishing the accuracy of the reports within the context of fake news (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013; Blom, 2018; Efron & Raj, 2019; Chiluiwa & Chiluiwa, 2020; Pennycook et al., 2020). When the media reported fake news, studies have shown how the readers intended to spread such reports, though they did not have the ability and capability of determining the truthfulness of the reports through social networking sites (Efron & Raj, 2019; Pennycook et al., 2020). Efron & Raj (2019) found that ‘encountering misinformation makes it seem less unethical to spread – regardless of whether one believes it. Seeing a fake-news headline one or four times reduced how unethical participants thought it was to publish and share that headline when they saw it again’. The scholars further discovered that readers are most likely to share headlines that were repeated by news media than share a new headline associated with the reported issues. In our literature search, we equally discovered that studies have investigated readers’ ability to separate true news from false news headlines (Smelter & Calvillo, 2019). Smelter & Calvillo (2019) specifically found that when pictures accompany a news story and people are constantly exposed to it, the perceived accuracy of such news increased. The studies of Molek-Kozakowska (2013) and Chiluiwa & Chiluiwa (2020) significantly revealed the place of sensationalism in fake or false news construction, which according to the scholars, suggests news media intent of hiding truth from the public eye. In similarity to the findings of Smelter & Calvillo (2019), which established audience believability or otherwise of news reports, the study of Blom (2018) indicated that the relationship between perceptions of news source trust and news content expectancy determine acceptance of the accuracy of news headlines constructed for the reportage of illegal immigration in the United States of America. The study of Michael (2020) equally established that constructing news headlines in this way casts doubt on the innocence of a defendant. Therefore, there is a tendency that people who believe someone has really committed a crime is to be prosecuted for it. (Michael, 2020). Apart from the fact that journalists sensationalize the news, studies also shown that people did not understand the issues being reported due to the influence of personal attitudes, lack of access to the right information, low technical skills

and partisan bias towards newsmakers, which also plays a role in most cases (Hamid & Baba, 2014; Haselmayer et al., 2017). Hence, the use of features that misinform the readers comes in.

## **Theoretical underpinning**

As the issues of the paper focus on how mainstream media misinform the audience on particular issues, consciously or unconsciously through their content, this study is underpinned with assumptions and propositions of agenda setting, its framing, use and gratification. Agenda setting is a key element of media production as it looks into trending news topics and how they affect audiences' opinions, understanding and perspective (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007; Vargo et al., 2018). Vargo et al. (2018) noted that 'the first level of agenda setting asserts that the frequency in which news media mention and cover objects (e.g., issues and public figures) largely dictates what objects audiences think are important to society'. Invariably, the constant use of clickbait features has the propensity of influencing audience perception of the issues and newsmakers in the news. However, the rapid changes in the media ecosystem due to the technological developments has also been affecting the agenda setting in different ways as the media is not the only accountable institution, the audience is also responsible for the multiple-choice of sources, proliferation, and customization of information (Boynton & Richardson, 2016; Feezell, 2018). This means that the current situation gives the audience a kind of invisible power to dictate what and how the media should set the agenda, and this has a significant impact on the style of production, especially in the face of the era of information pollution.

Framing as a part of the theory of agenda setting proposes that journalists select salient parts of issues and report in ways that stress and elaborate the chosen parts to the public with the aim of making them interpret these parts in line with the selected frames or perspectives within a particular context (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Boynton, & Richardson, 2016). Obviously, news media are constructing headlines using clickbait features in relation to the intended agendas and frames through which they want the audience to see and interpret the issues. This position leads us to the theory of uses and gratification, which proposes that both the media and audience deploy media channels with the intent of gaining certain benefits (Turner & West, 2010; Valenzuela et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020). Since journalists know that audiences choose and use different media for different purposes, in this study, we argue that journalists will continue to use clickbait

and other features capable of misinforming the audience in headlines because of their own [journalists'] expected gratification [polluting public mind].

## Measures, data and methods

Following our earlier propositions, content analysis and process tracing were used as research methods for understanding how Nigerian newspapers are misinforming the public through headlines constructions within the contexts of conflicts and crisis reporting. We focus on two major areas that are currently shaping the political business of the media in the country. In this study, we used the herder-farmer conflict and ENDSARS protests as a security issue and social justice crisis respectively as cases to investigate how clickbait features in headlines serve as conduit pipes of misinformation dissemination by the online versions of the mainstream newspapers in Nigeria. These were the hits of 2020 that moved to 2021. Our consensus is that using the features only cannot adequately reveal the extent to which the features can establish misinformation being created and disseminated by the newspapers. Therefore, we developed the Misinformation Specific Criteria Index (MSCI) and the Misinformation Dominant Criteria Index (MDCI) as supporters of clickbait features as misinformation conveyors.

Headlines of the news stories of each selected case constituted our first data source. Sentences and paragraphs of each story formed the second data source for the study. Photos and other illustrations were the third data source. The needed headlines were gathered using Google News [a normalized news search portal of Google] and Search Section of *This day*, *The punch*, *The premium times*, *The vanguard* and *The Nigerian tribune*. A total of 467 headlines were extracted from the Google tool and the newspapers' search sections. Two hundred and sixty-four headlines were mined for the herdsmen crisis while 203 headlines were extracted for the ENDSARS protests. Content categories were adopted as a research instrument for the collection of the required data from the headlines. The rubric rating scale was employed as a research instrument for revealing the connection between clickbait features and the content of the news stories analyzed. Content categories on the scale were considered as relational content categories. This is premised on the researchers' intent of finding out the linkage between the clickbait features and news story content. Specifically, the researchers aim at confirming the features in the content of the news stories. Formulated content categories for the clickbait features were coded using binary option [Yes = 2, No = 1]. Relational content categories were coded using the same approach.



Table 1

**Content categories and rubric rating scale for headlines  
and misinformation determinants**

<b>Clickbait features in the headlines</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
	Why	Headlines that state reasons readers should believe the news story or intends to explain specific issues or persons in the news story
	What	Headlines that point a specific person or issue for the readers before reading the news story
	This	Headlines that establish the direction of the story or tell the readers what they should think about
	Number	Headlines that contain a figure which establishes the focus of the news story
	Question	Headlines that contain a question mark or are written in a question format
	Piggybacking	This represents headlines that have a well-known person, company and organization
	See	A headline that asks the readers to discern and deduce specific issues from a news story
	Possessive pronouns	Headlines that contain personal pronouns such as I, my, our etc.
<b>Misinformation specific criteria</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
	Inaccurate photo(s)	Presentation of photo(s) that do not relate with the issues reported in the news story
	Inaccurate photo caption	Titling photo using texts that do not conform with the objects or people depicted in the photo and related to the issues in the news story
	Contradicting statistics	Presenting numbers that are different from what was stated in the headline. This also represents the inconsistent numbers from one part of the story to another
	Satire	Using words, figures or objects to exaggerate issues in the news story or ridicule newsmakers or disrepute them
	Conflicting identities and construction of newsmaker and source	Using different frames to represent a newsmaker and a source

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Misinformation dominant criteria	Category	Meaning
	Absolute conformation	It aligns with misinformation features and meets 50% or more of the criteria for misinformation in a news story
	Moderate conformation	It slightly aligns with misinformation features and meets at least less than 50% of the misinformation criteria
	No conformation	It does not align with misinformation features and lacks all the misinformation criteria

Sources: Safran, 2013; Lai & Farbrot, 2014; Tenenboim & Cohen, 2015; Kuiken, 2017; Authors

Reliability of the content categories and rubric rating scale were conducted using Alpha Cronbach. From the total of 264 herdsmen and 203 ENDSARS headlines, 10 headlines were chosen from each case for the content categories reliability test. Simple random sampling procedure suggested by Riffe et al. (2019) as one of the means of ensuring the reliability of content categories when researchers use the same population instead of using external population was later used for the selection of the headlines. Overall reliability for herdsmen case with 17 content categories is .526 Cronbach's Alpha, while ENDSARS had .434 scores with the same number of content categories. The researchers accepted these scores as moderately reliable considering the fact that the less content categories were less than 20 items, which were expected to give more than 40% and 50% reliability percentage (Briggs & Cheek, 1986; Starkweather, 2012).

However, the individual reliability test reveals that within the herdsmen case *Why* had high-reliability score of .649 followed by *Satire, Question, What, This, Number, See, Conflicting identities of newsmaker(s) and source(s), Possessive pronouns, No conformation and Moderate conformation* which had more than 50 reliability score. *Contradicting statistics, Piggybacking and Absolute conformation* had less than 50 reliability scores. This falls within the moderate reliability score range, which also constituted a large percentage of the reliability scores for the content categories in the context of the ENDSARS case. These scores are expected to have an impact on the outcomes of the analyses that would be carried out on the data collected for each case. The collected headlines were subjected to binominal, Friedman tests and hierarchical logistic regression analysis. Binominal test was used for the purpose of revealing the dominant categories across the cases. Friedman test was adopted for analysis of the relationship that exists among the categories. Herdsmen and ENDSARS

were cases considered as groups in the Friedman test. Before the chi-square test, descriptive statistics were used to identify differences in the mean value of each clickbait feature. As a result, it is impossible to state that all of the attributes are relevant because the descriptive results show which of them has the greatest mean score. The presence of a chi-square only aided in the final outcome. The chi-square test was used to investigate all of the clickbait features as variables, with the goal of showing a strong relationship between the features. It is also important to state that the number of headlines in the analysis in some tables varied due to the fact that the used software (SPSS) only turned out a number of valid observations for each category/variable. The use of the hierarchical logistic regression analysis helped the researchers in understanding the specific linkages and variation of the independent variables [clickbait features and specific misinformation criteria] in the dominant misinformation criteria earlier discussed. The outcomes of the regression analysis, after using three models, led to the proposition of a theoretical model for the understanding of the extent to which Nigerian mainstream newspapers can misinform the public through clickbait features in their headline construction.

## **Results and discussion**

In this section, the results of the analyses are presented focusing on two levels of analysis. The first analysis entails the revelation of the dominant clickbait features in the headlines of the herdsmen crisis and the ENDSARS protests. The second level focuses on the presentation of advanced results from the first level, which points out the significant linkages between the features and misinformation.

Table 2

**Descriptive statistics of clickbait features, specific and dominant misinformation from Friedman test**

Clickbait features	N	Mean	Mean rank	Std. deviation
Why	464	1.02	3.70	.122
What	464	1.59	6.01	<b>.492</b>
This	464	1.08	3.97	.278
Number	464	1.17	4.30	<b>.372</b>
Question	464	1.02	3.71	.138
Piggybacking	464	1.75	6.65	<b>.432</b>
See	464	1.02	3.72	.145
Possessive pronouns	464	1.08	3.94	.264
Specific misinformation				
Inaccurate photo(s)	467	1.14	3.10	<b>.347</b>
Inaccurate photo caption	467	1.20	3.26	<b>.403</b>
Contradicting statistics	467	1.04	2.85	.193
Satire	467	1.06	2.89	.230
Conflicting identities of news maker and source	467	1.06	2.91	.245
Dominant misinformation				
Absolute conformation	465	1.04	1.59	.198
Slight conformation	465	1.17	1.79	<b>.380</b>
No conformation	465	1.73	2.63	<b>.443</b>

Source: Authors

Key: minimum = 1, maximum = 2

Table 2 provides the summary of the dominance of each clickbait feature, specific and dominant misinformation across the two cases. According to the data, among the studied clickbait features, *Piggybacking* (N=464, M=1.75, MR=6.65, SD=.432), *What* (N=464, M=1.59, MR=6.01, SD=.492) and *Number* (N=464, M=1.17, MR=4.30, SD=.372) were used predominantly by the newspapers. *Inaccurate photo caption* (N=467, M=1.20, MR=3.26, SD=.403) and *Inaccurate photo(s)* (N=467, M=1.40, MR=3.10, SD=.347) were the dominant specific misinformation, according to the analysis. Analysis further reveals that in terms of dominant misinformation, there were headlines that did not conform with misinformation (N=465, M=1.73, MR=2.63, SD=.443). At the same time, there were headlines that slightly conformed with

misinformation (N=465, M=1.17, MR=1.79, SD=.380). The clickbait features data were further explored in *Table 2*, where one-variable chi-squared test was used for the purpose of revealing significant relationship among the features.

*Table 3*

**One-variable chi-squared test from the Friedman test of the clickbait features of the selected cases**

N	464
Chi-square	1488.584
Df	7
<b>Asymp. Sig.</b>	<b>.000</b>

Source: Authors

It can be seen from the data in *Table 3* that the use of clickbait features by the newspapers was significant. This could be deduced from a chi-square value of 1488.584 at 7-degree freedom, which is significant ( $P < .000$ ) at less than the 0.05 level of significance. It can therefore be concluded that the newspapers used clickbait features for misinformation purposes. This evidence is explored further with the outcomes of a binominal test conducted to determine which of the cases had each of the clickbait features the most, using a 75% test proportion.

*Table 4*

**Binominal test of the clickbait features of the selected cases**

		Category	N	Observed prop.	Test prop.	Exact sig. (1-tailed)
Why	Group 1	Herdsmen	460	.99	.75	.000
	Group 2	Endsars	7	.01		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>467</b>	<b>1.00</b>		
What	Group 1	ENDSARS	277	.59	.75	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Group 2	Herdsmen	189	.41		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>466</b>	<b>1.00</b>		
This	Group 1	Herdsmen	427	.92	.75	.000
	Group 2	ENDSARS	39	.08		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>466</b>	<b>1.00</b>		

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Number	Group 1	ENDSARS	77	.16	.75	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Group 2	Herdsmen	390	.84		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>467</b>	<b>1.00</b>		
Question	Group 1	<b>Herdsmen</b>	<b>458</b>	<b>.98</b>	.75	<b>.000</b>
	Group 2	ENDSARS	9	.02		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>467</b>	<b>1.00</b>		
Piggybacking	Group 1	<b>Endsars</b>	<b>351</b>	<b>.75</b>	.75	<b>.493</b>
	Group 2	Herdsmen	116	.25		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>467</b>	<b>1.00</b>		
See	Group 1	<b>Herdsmen</b>	<b>456</b>	<b>.98</b>	.75	<b>.000</b>
	Group 2	ENDSARS	10	.02		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>466</b>	<b>1.00</b>		
Possessive pronouns	Group 1	<b>Herdsmen</b>	<b>432</b>	<b>.93</b>	.75	<b>.000</b>
	Group 2	ENDSARS	35	.07		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>467</b>	<b>1.00</b>		

Alternative hypothesis states that the proportion of cases in the first group < .75.

Source: Authors

Data in *Table 4* indicate that the features were more deployed by the newspapers in reporting the herder-farmer crisis than in publishing issues and needs around the ENDSARS protests. With the observed proportion exceeding test proportion [75%], why (N=460, OP=.99, TP=.75, P<.000), this (N=427, OP=.92, TP=.75, P<.000), question (N=458, OP=.98, TP=.75, P<.000), see (N=456, OP=.98, TP=.75, P<.000) and possessive pronouns (N=432, OP=.93, TP=.75, P<.000) were predominantly used by the newspapers for constructing herder-farmer crisis' headlines. According to the data, the observed and test proportion of using piggybacking (N=351, OP=.99, TP=.75, P<.000) tied in ENDSARS' headline construction, but not significant (P>.493). Overall, the results suggest that the newspapers are misinforming the public in their reportage of the herdsmen crisis than doing the same during the protests. This position is further explored with the presentation of other results in *Table 5*, which indicates the extent to which the features were used in framing the two cases and contributed to our conceptualized and operationalized absolute misinformation indicator.

Table 5

**Manifestation of clickbait features in absolute misinformation  
in the reportage of the cases**

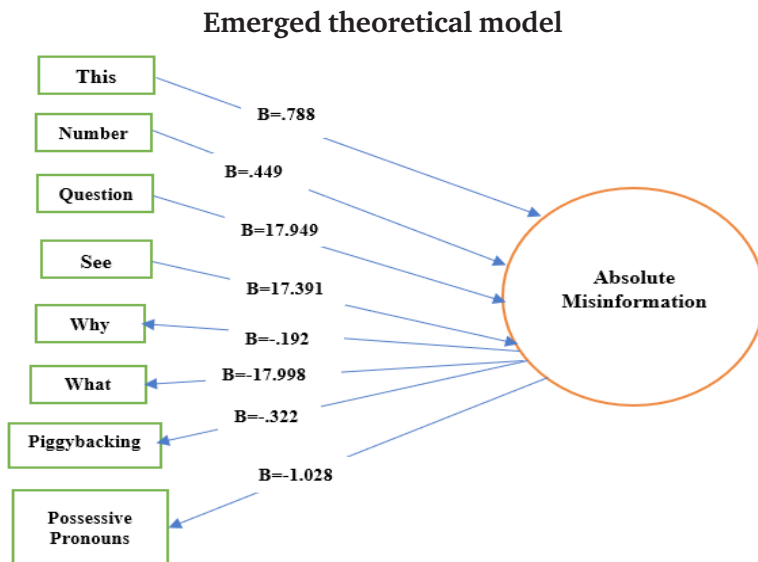
	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Why	<b>-.192</b>	.645	<b>.089</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.766</b>	<b>.825</b>	<b>.233</b>	<b>2.922</b>
What	<b>-17.998</b>	12206.252	<b>.000</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.999</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.</b>
This	<b>.788</b>	.607	<b>1.682</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.195</b>	<b>2.198</b>	<b>.669</b>	<b>7.226</b>
Number	<b>.449</b>	.779	<b>.332</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.565</b>	<b>1.566</b>	<b>.340</b>	<b>7.212</b>
Question	<b>17.949</b>	7312.799	<b>.000</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.998</b>	<b>62390960.055</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.</b>
Piggybacking	<b>-.322</b>	.490	<b>.432</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.511</b>	<b>.725</b>	<b>.277</b>	<b>1.895</b>
See	<b>17.391</b>	20057.394	<b>.000</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.999</b>	<b>35702624.776</b>	<b>.000</b>	<b>.</b>
Possessive pronouns	<b>-1.028</b>	.602	<b>2.915</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.088</b>	<b>.358</b>	<b>.110</b>	<b>1.164</b>
Constant	<b>-38.102</b>	21348.913	<b>.000</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>.999</b>	<b>.000</b>		

Source: Authors

Based on the data presented in *Table 5*, it emerged that possessive pronouns were more than two times used in both cases (Wald=2.915) while *This* (Wald=1.682), *Piggybacking* (Wald=.432) and *Why* (Wald=.089) were more than and less than one time employed respectively. Understanding the linkages from the beta coefficient perspective indicates that the use of *Why* and *Piggybacking* reduce the potential of the feature contributing to absolute misinformation by less than one unit. It was more than 17 and 102 units for *What* and *Possessive pronouns* features accordingly. Using the same perspective, data indicate the relative contribution of *Question* (B=17.949) and *See* (B=17.391) as dominant features facilitating absolute misinformation based on the coverage of the two cases by the newspapers. The results signify that when the features were used once, they increased absolute misinformation by more 17 times. This is also applicable to *This* (B=.788) and *Number* (B=.449) when they relatively conveyed misinformation based on their less than one unit of facilitating absolute misinformation. These results align with the earlier finding of Michael (2020) which establishes how the public casts doubt on the innocence of a defendant who was later justified by the court. Situating the predominant use of *This*, *Number*, *Question* and *See* features within the propositions of agenda setting, framing and uses and gratification theories indicate that the newspapers wanted the public to understand the two cases from the issues that

they considered important around the cases. Surprisingly, as we found, Kuiken, et al., (2017) had earlier discovered the linkage of questions and numbers with clickbait headlines and words such as ‘this’, ‘why’ or ‘what’ as features of clickbait. From the agenda setting theory, we have understood that news media select a certain aspect of happenings to consider significant and want the public to prioritize in their minds and while discussing the happenings (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Boynton, & Richardson, 2016). The framing theory, on the other hand, exemplifies the place of reinforcing the selected issues in ways that make the public have a more positive or negative concern about the happenings. The failure of *Why*, *What*, *Piggybacking* and *Possessive pronouns* to facilitate absolute misinformation could be premised on the fact that the media agenda, mostly the views from the newspapers [editorial] and the public agenda [those expressed by individuals through features and news formats] on the two cases, resonate with the agenda setting and framing theories’ propositions earlier explained. The analysis and interpretation led to the proposition of a theoretical model presented in *Figure 1*, where the positive and negative beta coefficients of the independent variables [clickbait features] are drawn along with our defined absolute misinformation. The model was tested using hierarchical logistic regression and presented in *Table 4*.

Figure 1



Source: Authors



The data in *Table 6* further enhanced the descriptive results presented in *Table 2*, where the dominant clickbait features, specific and dominant misinformation are established. The information in *Table 6* is the result of a Friedman test analysis performed on the specific and dominant misinformation categories.

*Table 6*

**One-variable chi-squared test from the Friedman test of specific and dominant misinformation in the two cases**

<b>Specific misinformation</b>	
N	467
Chi-square	139.960
Df	4
<b>Asymp. sig.</b>	<b>.000</b>
<b>Dominant misinformation</b>	
N	465
Chi-square	397.116
Df	2
<b>Asymp. sig.</b>	<b>.000</b>

*Source:* Authors

Data in *Table 6* can be compared with the data in *Table 3*, which shows the relationship among the clickbait features in the headlines of the newspapers. It is apparent from the data that significant relationship exists among the categories that formed specific (Chi-square value=139.960, df=4,  $P<.000$ ) and dominant (Chi-square value=397.116, df=2,  $P<.000$ ) misinformation. *Table 7* further illustrates which of the categories was mostly used by the newspapers in constructing headlines for the two cases. Similar to the percentage proportion used for determining this for the clickbait features, 75% test proportion was equally employed.

Table 7

Specific and dominant misinformation in the two cases

Specific misinformation		Category	N	Observed prop.	Test prop.	Exact sig. (1-tailed)
Inaccurate photo(s)	Group 1	Herdsmen	402	.86	.75	.000
	Group 2	ENDSARS	65	.14		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>467</b>	<b>1.00</b>		
Inaccurate photo caption	Group 1	ENDSARS	95	.20	.75	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Group 2	Herdsmen	372	.80		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>467</b>	<b>1.00</b>		
Contradicting statistics	Group 1	Herdsmen	449	.96	.75	.000
	Group 2	ENDSARS	18	.04		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>467</b>	<b>1.00</b>		
Satire	Group 1	ENDSARS	26	.06	.75	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Group 2	Herdsmen	441	.94		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>467</b>	<b>1.00</b>		
Conflicting identities of news maker and source	Group 1	Herdsmen	437	.94	.75	.000
	Group 2	ENDSARS	30	.06		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>467</b>	<b>1.00</b>		
<b>Dominant misinformation</b>						
Absolute conformation	Group 1	Herdsmen	446	.96	.75	.000
	Group 2	ENDSARS	21	.04		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>467</b>	<b>1.00</b>		
Slight conformation	Group 1	ENDSARS	81	.17	.75	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Group 2	Herdsmen	385	.83		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>466</b>	<b>1.00</b>		
No conformation	Group 1	Herdsmen	125	.27	.75	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Group 2	ENDSARS	341	.73		
	<b>Total</b>		<b>466</b>	<b>1.00</b>		

Alternative hypothesis states that the proportion of cases in the first group < .75.  
Source: Authors

Similar to the results presented in Table 4, the data in Table 7 show the case where the formulated specific and dominant misinformation occurred the most. In the specific misinformation classification, inaccurate photo(s) (N=402, OP=.86, TP=.75, P<.000) were predominant in herdsman crisis than in ENDSARS protests. It also emerged that contradicting statistics (N=449, OP=.96, TP=.75, P<.000) usage was accorded the same priority by the newspapers in

their herdsmen news content. This is also resonated with the use of conflicting identities of news maker and source (N=437, OP=.94, TP=.75, P<.000). The dominant manifestation of the conflicting identities of the newsmaker(s) and the source(s) implied in the news content of the herdsmen crisis indicate(s) the newspapers' intention to portray the key actors [herders] as perpetrators of every crime committed on farmlands, in remote locations, and elsewhere in the country. According to the data, absolute (N=446, OP=.96, TP=.75, P<.000) and slight (N=385, OP=.83, TP=.75, P<.000) misinformation existed in herdsmen crisis than in ENDSARS protests. The overall results presented so far are further reinforced in three hierarchical logistic regressions presented below.

Table 8

**Variation of three models in absolute misinformation  
in the reportage of the cases**

Model	Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R square	Nagelkerke R square	Overall accuracy prediction
Grammatical bait headlines	152.990	.013	.044	95.9
Human-number related bait headlines	51.715	.205	.711	97.4
Visualization bait headlines	7.271	.277	.961	99.6

Source: Authors

For more explication of the model presented in *Figure 1*, *Table 8* entails the outcomes of the model in line with the researchers' intent of knowing the extent to which the clickbait features vary in the defined absolute misinformation. For better conceptualization of the model, *Why*, *What*, *This* and *Possessive pronouns* clickbait features were considered as elements of grammatical bait headlines model [GBH] while *Question*, *See* and *Number* which are clickbait feature, were considered along with *Satire*, *Contradicting statistics*, and *Conflicting identities of newsmakers(s) and source(s)* which are specific misinformation criteria, as elements of human-number related headlines model [HNRH]. Visualisation model [V] basically entailed inaccurate photo(s) and inaccurate caption of the photo(s) by the newspapers. According to the data, the V model has 96.1% (Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup>=.961) propensity of facilitating absolute misinformation with an accuracy of 99.6%. HNRH model also has a better chance of contributing

to absolute misinformation (Nagelkerke  $R^2=.711$ ) than the GBH model (Nagelkerke  $R^2=.961$ , Accuracy=97.4%).

## Conclusion and recommendations

The study has increased our understanding and contributed to the existing literature that conventional newspapers like bloggers and social media users can also spread misinformation through headlines. It has also been revealed that spreading misinformation through headlines can differ significantly in line with the issues of the reporting or the newsmakers. In line with these, media practitioners and their managers need to revise the best practice of constructing headlines in times of crisis in order to avert being contributors to misinformation. This is imperative since the public prefers getting information from conventional newspapers because of the perceived credibility and ability to present balanced views of the newsmakers and actors in the news. The evidence that the newspapers misinformed the public in their reports on the herdsman crisis rather than doing the same during the protests has created the need for further study. The consideration of survey, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in the future study will help researchers in interrogating rationales behind the use of clickbait features in cases similar to what the study investigates. Could it be an ideological agenda, an oversight, or deliberate intent to pursue it due to its fragility for economic gain? Questions like this require robust data gathering and analysis using both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

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