

## Speaking Up or Staying Silent? Citizens' Engagement of Pro-Biafra Protests and Farmers-Herders Crises in the User-generated Content of Selected Nigerian Online Newspapers

Babatunde Raphael Ojebuyi\* and Mutiu Iyanda Lasisi

### Abstract

*The public space provided by the Web 2.0 technologies where citizens freely interact and discuss public issues such as politics, security and national unity is one of the beauties of modern democracy. However, this freedom has produced some counter-value cultures. Existing studies on new media, citizen journalism and political discourse generally have focused largely on citizens' construction of nationhood, but with scant attention given to how the citizens use the comment sections of the news media to engage issues relating agitation for secession and security issues in Nigeria. This study, therefore, examined how Nigerians used the comment sections of selected Nigerian online newspapers to interact and discuss issues of agitation for secession and Farmers-herders crises in the country with a view to determining how the issues got the citizens to speak up or to stay silent. Textual and quantitative content analyses of the user-generated contents of Sahara Reporters and Premium Times show that generally, majority of the readers were found to be highly hostile towards other readers outside their ethnic groups while negotiating separation issues, but less hostile on the insecurity issues. To create fear of dominance, words within Exonyms classification were predominantly used by the readers while interacting among themselves on the insecurity issues. To evoke a sense marginalization, words within Endonyms category were employed by the readers to discuss issues of agitation for secession. Nigerian government should pay critical attention to the dynamics of the virtual community in its quest to ensure national peace and unity.*

**Keywords:** Nigerian online newspapers, User-generated content, Farmers-herders crises, Pro-Biafra Protest, Nigeria's Unity

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ejossah.v15i2.2>

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## **Background and Rationale**

There is no doubt that colonial administration of British government, which managed available natural and human resources judiciously, unified Nigerians towards common objective of advancing socio-economic and political indices of the country and theirs (Osita-Njoku, 2016). However, the 1966 Military coup, which interrupted democratic government instituted by British government and subsequent political issues under successive administrations, changed Nigerians' sense of collective identity. The concept of 'us' and 'them' are more pronounced and constitutive in socio-economic and political circles now than before. All ethnic groups are expressing their views on issues of national importance based on a past-oriented and subjective belief in common descent (Greifenhagen, 2001). Since the return of the country to democratic rule in 1999, socio-economic and political marginalization, and insecurity have been the two critical problems facing the country. The most recent of such issues are agitation for the creation of Biafran Republic by the Igbos, and clashes between the Fulani herdsmen and farmers. On one forum or the other, members of each region or ethnic group have voiced that the central government is marginalizing them in the areas of social capital provision and equitable distribution of proceeds from the national resources. These perception and agitations have led to a decline in deference and trust in established democratic institutions in Nigeria, which eventually resulted in crimes such as kidnappings, arms proliferation, armed robberies, banditry, drug and human trafficking, religious and political conflicts initially in the South-South and the South-East regions (Omede, 2011), and now in different parts of the country.

When British colonial, military and democratic administrations are compared, one could note that democracy has failed to curb ethnic agitations for self-socio-economic development and inclusive governance in Nigeria. The continued agitation is, however, premised on the heterogeneous and polyglot nature of the Nigerian society (Fatai, 2012). Across the country's six geopolitical zones, Nigerians are avid consumers of news related with socio-economic and political issues or development. The consumption is mostly through radio, word of mouth, television and the Internet, social networking websites and mobile apps (Broadcasting Board of Governors, 2014). On social media such as Facebook and Twitter, Nigerians, like their counterparts in other countries, react to various socio-economic and political issues that make news and get published by the national dailies on their official social networking sites using comment, reply and like sections. However, these sundry issues, based on their nature and potential consequences, attract different degrees of intensities and reactions from the citizens as they meet in the virtual space to negotiate their diverse opinions. This

changing and dynamic participation of citizens in socio-economic and political discourse, especially in the virtual community, presents an opportunity to study the willingness of these social media users to speak out or stay silent on issues of national significance. It is also imperative because the materialization of new media has revolutionized the patterns through which people from different ethnic backgrounds or groups in a country react to socioeconomic and political issues that affect them.

This trend has changed scholars' views on use of spiral of silence theory which was primarily meant to test people's perception about issue like abortion with the specific reference to gender dichotomy. For instance, Malaspina (2014) examined the relevance of the theory to people's willingness in terms of comments and posts to speak on social media about controversial political figures in Italy during 2013 general elections. Malaspina (2014) did not examine variety of issues on the studied politicians. This gap was later captured under different setting by Gearhart and Zhang (2015) with a view of establishing how the nature of issues affects and influences the dynamics of the spiral of silence processes. Joining the conversation, Stoycheff (2016) investigated perceptions of government surveillance influence on the relationship between people's perceived climate of opinion and willingness to express minority views. In a twist similar to the premise that facilitated the emergence of the theory, Dashti, Al-Abdullah, Hamed and Johar (2015) studied Kuwaiti women's online political participation on the conviction that the religion and culture of the country do not allow female to share their opinions offline (face to face). Primarily, the researchers examined the usefulness of the theory in predicting online participation of the women considering the religious and cultural limitation associated with the offline participation.

Some Nigerian studies (e.g. Ojebuyi, 2016; Oladapo, 2016; Osisanwo, 2017; Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2019) that focused on online readers' comments and social media users' engagement of national problems have generally examined the issues of negative rhetoric and counter-public identity construction as they affect national unity, and the discourse strategies deployed by readers, taking different stances on former President Goodluck Jonathan administration's fight against *Boko Haram* terrorism. These scholars have not addressed the variety of national issues citizens are likely to speak out about or be silent on, categories of words that might be used to tag another ethnic group or individuals, and how the citizens chose different modes of interaction deployed by readers to react to issues raised in the digital space, especially in the User-Generated Comment (UGC) section of Nigerian newspapers with online presence. Besides, there is a picture of predominant Western scholarly attention paid to the culture of online discourse (e.g. Hampton,

Rainie, Lu, Dwyer, Shin & Purcell, 2014; Stoycheff, 2016; Hoffmann & Lutz, 2017; Olson & LaPoe, 2017; Abril & Rojas, 2018), compared to the available studies from Nigeria. There is the need to complement the Nigerian perspective to the scholarly conversation on citizens' engagement of national issues through the digital platform. Therefore, to fill this gap, this current study examined how Nigerian online newspaper readers used the comment sections of selected Nigerian online newspapers to interact and engage national issues relating to agitation for secession and farmers-herders crises. This is with a view to establishing how these national issues got the citizens to *speak up* or to *stay silent* as they interacted in the digital space, the type of words the readers used to tag other ethnic groups, and the nature of interaction that existed among the readers. Specifically, we examined how readers (who are from the three dominant ethnic groups—Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) used certain words to establish superiority of their ethnic groups while reacting to the issues reported by the national dailies.

To achieve these objectives, we constructed four research questions: (1) *On which of the issues (pro-Biafra protest for secession and farmers-herders crises) do the readers speak up and stay silent?* (2) *What types of words do the readers employ to create fear of isolation and dominance?* (3) *How often do the readers see themselves as Nigerians and Tribes while commenting on national issues about secession and insecurity?* (4) *What is dominant mode of interaction among the readers?* The research questions provided the themes that guide presentation of results. In this study, we conceptualized *speaking up* as the readers' provision of relevant examples and evidences to strengthen their support for the issues reported and commented on, while *staying silent* is conceptualized as readers' intentional deviation from the issues reported and stipulation of irrelevant examples and evidences in support of their deviation.

The Spiral of Silence and Social Construction theories were adopted as the theoretic framework for the study, while quantitative content analysis and textual analysis methods were combined as the research design. We adopted quantitative content analysis in order to derive quantitative data to establish how the readers reacted to stories about Pro-Biafra protests and farmers-herders crises. We used textual analysis to provide qualitative evidence from readers' comments to explicate the viewpoints and identities that the online readers maintained in their discussions.

## **Literature Review**

In any communication context, it is possible for one of the interlocutors to remain mute, being forgotten, overlooked or silenced, especially when the interlocutors

are more than two. On other hand, an interlocutor could speak up when he or she is being challenged. In this situation, such a person is expected to be constructive to avoid being silenced by others. In specific terms, as envisaged by Bowen and Blackmon (2003), individuals are most likely to speak up when they realize that their position occasioned by the dominant opinion is being complemented and supported by others. On the contrary, when the setting and other speakers are against their positions, individuals may prefer to remain silent (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003).

The emergence of modern technologies has changed the mode of public discourse where people would usually gather at a particular location to discuss issues of common interests. Technologies have now made interrelations and connectivity of people more pronounced, and enabled civic participation in terms of social capacity for collective action (Dennis, 2007). The emergence of digital and Internet-enabled platforms has dramatically configured the dynamics of citizens' civil engagement and participation in politics. The public space created by the Web 2.0 technologies enables the citizen to have unhindered access to information that empowers them for democratic engagement. Citizens are now empowered to engage in online discussions where they are able to react to issues reported by news media. This reaction in online discussion is always done through content creation and social networking sites using words that could possibly describe the participants or classify them into groups. A recent study by Bryden, Funk and Jansen (2013) aligns with this observation. From the study, it is established that members of online communities could be characterized or categorized by their most significantly used words into groups they belong.

Isolation and domination of other participants usually characterize online discussion. As a manifestation of this culture, participants in the isolation category are the ones who lack ability of using words to express their feelings effectively or do not have the right information to support their arguments. Participants in the domination category do have the word prowess and are more informed about the issues being discussed. In other words, participants in the domination category have all the resources at their disposal and use them to their advantage mostly to suppress others, who are in the isolation category. When words are being used to tag persons or groups, they are either exonyms or endonyms especially if the issues are related to economic and political survival of entire society or group. In literature, much has not been said and empirically investigated about exonyms and endonyms as rhetoric strategies in online discourse. Essentially, it is difficult to find studies which have investigated the use of exonyms and endonyms in online engagements. Nevertheless, the support given to the rights of persons belonging to

national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities by the United Nations through its declaration in 1992 protects and encourages minority individuals towards the use of their language and by extension local dialects (United Nations, 2010a).

As documented, exonyms was first used by Aourousseau, the former Secretary of the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names of UN who categorized the English geographical names into two; a word could represent a place within England, while it would be seen as a jargon if it referred to a place outside England. Endonyms was not used by Aourousseau. Its usage was credited to Kronsteiner as geographical name used in a local official language (Bartos-Elekes, 2008). In today's civil participation context, how people use exonyms and endonyms to realize their particular goals differs. The study of Miyazaki (2016) established that people attempt to defend and justify their behaviour in a political participation by using an anecdote to persuade others towards accepting their decisions. The rhetorical purpose of each word differs within the context of the current study. Specifically, exonyms represent words used by the readers—through their social networking sites and the comment sections of online news media—to respond to national issues reported by the newspapers. Such words tag the three dominant ethnic groups—Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba—positively or negatively depending on the ethnic affiliations of the readers. Endonyms, on the other hand, indicate self-designation created by the readers' to establish the dominance of their ethnic groups over the other while reacting to national issues reported by online news media (United Nations, 2010b). In essence, while endonyms are words used by members of a group to positively describe their group and establish its superiority over other groups, exonyms are lexical items members of a group use to describe members of other groups mostly in rather derogatory manners especially when such other groups share different ideologies or values.

To construct their socio-economic and political world, and establish identities and values, groups or individuals need to deploy words in ways that create different patterns of engagement and identity. Depending on the situation that prompts the discourse, either in an offline or online community, words are usually used to include or exclude. In recent times, using words to exclude other participants in a community has become more pronounced in the online community than the offline. This is as a result of freedom associated with globalization, new media and technologies. This trend has also been linked to the fact that many online communities were created of both frustrations and possibilities of influencing policies with the likelihood that patterns of engagement

would be skewed towards negative symbolization or representation of parties or groups (Brett, 2004; Baran and Davis, 2010).

Apart from the Nigerian Civil War (1966-1970), pro-Biafra protests (struggle for an independent Biafra Nation) and farmers-herders conflicts are two of the major security issues that have negatively impacted Nigeria's socioeconomic development, and political stability, and seriously threatened the nations corporate existence recently. As a restoration of the Actualization of the Sovereignty State of Biafra (MASSOB), a pseudo-militant group, also known Biafra Zionist Movement (BZN), formed in 2000 and led by Ralph Uwazurike before it faded some years after, the pro-Biafra agitation is considered to be the largest and most violent separationist movement since the end of the Nigerian-Biafran War (1966-1970). The struggles are led and controlled by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Studies have identified perceived injustice, inequality and marginalization of the Igbo by the political leadership of Nigeria since the end of the secessionist attempt by Biafra in 1970 as the cardinal factors that fueled the protests (Amamkpa & Mbakwe, 2015; Atata & Omobowale, 2019). This perceived marginalization, as argued by Amamkpa and Mbakwe, was further heightened by the alleged under-representation of the Igbos in the present government of President Muhammadu Buhari. As reported by Maiangwa (2016, pp. 39-40), "IPOB became a prominent force of Igbo nationalism under the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu, who also serves as Director of Radio Biafra, a pro-Biafra radio station based in the United Kingdom." When he visited Nigeria in October 2015, "Nnamdi Kanu was arrested by the Nigerian security forces on October 15, and charged with crimes against the Nigerian state." This arrest triggered and escalated the pro-Biafra protests even beyond Nigeria.

While the pro-Biafra protests are confined to the South Eastern parts of Nigeria, the farmers-herders conflict has a more national outlook but with high concentrations in the North-central and few Southern states such as Plateau, Zamfara, Kaduna, Kogi, Benue, and Ebonyi states. Farmers-herders conflict in Nigeria has constituted the major security challenges threatening the peace and unity of Nigeria as nation. The conflict seems to have defied all efforts to resolve it as it has persisted for years rapidly assuming an ethno-religious dimension (Chime-Nganya, Ezeji & Ezegwu, 2017; Ezeogu, Ezugwu & Obi, 2019; Nwofe, 2019). The conflict has recorded thousands of human deaths as result of tragic frictions between farmers whose sole means of survival is farming and Fulani herders whose primary business is to graze their cattle on any available green space. The farmers are ready to defend their land, which they see as their only heritage, while the herders believe that they should be allowed to feed their cattle

on any of the farmlands. These dialectical dispositions have triggered fatalities especially on the parts of the farmers who own the land. For instance, in January 2018, in just one day, Benue State experienced the massacre of 73 people by herdsmen. Since January 2018, farmers-herders conflict has intensified and killed more than 1,300 Nigerians across different states (Ezeogu, Ezugwu & Obi, 2019). Up till now, different communities in the affected states in Nigeria are still experiencing killings and maiming as a result of the conflict.

Given their implications for peace and security of Nigeria, the two problems have attracted attention of scholars in the field of social sciences and media studies (Amamkpa and Mbakwe, 2015; Maiangwa, 2016; Omilusi, 2016; Abdulbaqi and Ariemu, 2017; Chime-Nganya, Ezeji and Ezegwu, 2017; Chiluwa, 2018; Nwofe, 2019; Ajiboye and Abioye, 2019; Nwabueze & Ezebuenyi, 2019). Literature is replete with the media coverage in the form of quantification of the issues and framing them in terms of who should be held responsible for the renewed agitation for self-independence by the people in the southern region and the incessant farmers-herders crisis pervading the northern region, which has been linked with factors such as forced migration, economic survival and terrorism. The main insight that could be gleaned from the existing studies is that the two issues are covered and framed differently. More spaces were devoted to farmers-herders conflicts than Biafra protests. Within the framing context, Biafra protesters have largely been seen as self-independence agitators and secessionists, while the prisms used mostly for framing farmers-herders conflicts remain those of ethnicity, terrorism, and struggle for survival (Chime-Nganya, et al., 2017; Chiluwa, 2018; Ajiboye & Abioye, 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the propositions of Spiral of Silence and Social Construction theories. The theories have been tested by a number of scholars (Liu and Fahmy, 2011; Malaspina, 2014; Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). Some have also discussed the theories from different perspectives (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009; Hochheimer & Al-Emad, 2013). Spiral of Silence is credited to Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, a German public opinion and communication scholar. One of the core propositions of the theory is that people keep mute or express their feelings as a result of perception of the climate of opinions and fear of being isolated especially when their opinions are in the minority. Noelle-Neumann has also made us realize that as people see more from others who reflect their own views or positions, they participate more freely and spiral grows from the inside out (Hochheimer & Al-Emad, 2013). Fear of isolation as one of the core concepts of the theory is



increasingly studied by researchers with a view to developing factors capable of decreasing people's fear of isolation and improving their willingness to speak out. Although Noelle-Neumann premised the possibility of spiral of silence on the power of the traditional media especially the television to influence the trend of public opinions, spiral of silence is also possible in the virtual community. This is because the advantages of anonymity and physical distance (Zhang and Kizilcec, 2014) provided by the virtual community may encourage people to speak more bluntly, violently or viciously (Blake, 2020) online than they would offline, and this could further fuel the fear of isolation and compel participants to remain silent on certain issues especially when they belong to the minority group or opinions on such issues being discussed. In essence, despite their concealed identities and absence of direct interpersonal relationship, individuals, through their expressed perspectives, always identify with certain groups or ideological leanings at different times. Thus, participants in the online discourse could decide to keep silent about controversial issues when they notice that they could be rudely attacked or addressed for maintaining views that are contrary to the opinion held by the majority of the commenters. Therefore, absence of interpersonal relationship or series of verbal cues in an online community could either increase or reduce minority participants' fear of isolation through words and supporting evidences depending on which side of the debate they find themselves (Malaspina, 2014). This is what makes the Spiral of Silence Theory relevant to the current study.

While the Spiral of Silence Theory is exclusively premised on expressing one's views on an issue or remaining mute on it, the Social Construction Theory is connected with the tenets of spiral of silence on the basis that the two theories become verifiable or otherwise through interactions in either online or offline settings. The focus of the Social Construction Theory is on the linguistic code each person uses during interaction to formulate the self that is germane for a particular moment. The self could be developed in multiple frames. This has been linked to the fact that no individual can employ the same way of talking in all contexts and each one has various means of selves relevant to different interactions (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). In an online setting, there is the likelihood that participants on issues of national importance can display identities as citizens and tribes in quick succession through words usage made unconsciously. When the citizen-identity is created, it means the individual is accommodating others' opinions, but when the linguistic choices tend towards supporting one group or ethnic over other, tribe-identity would be created and fear of isolation would evolve. This indicates participants are active by processing responses to the issues and thought over them

to know appropriate social roles and personal identities (Baran and Davis, 2010). The relationship between Spiral of Silence and Social Construction theories as they are used to construct the research questions for this study are presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Relationship between Spiral of Silence and Social Construction theories and how they are connected to the current study

<b>Theory</b>	<b>Assumption/Proposition</b>	<b>Formulated Research Question</b>
<b>Spiral of Silence</b>	People choose not to speak out for fear of isolation (Hampton, Rainie, Lu, Dwyer, Shin & Purcell, 2014)	<i>On which of the issues (pro-Biafra protest for secession and Fulani-herdsmen crisis) do the readers speak up and stay silent?</i>
	<p>Society will isolate those individuals who express opinions that deviate from the norm and that individuals will sense that isolation imposed by society (Liu &amp; Fahmy, 2011)</p> <p>An individual will positively monitor the public opinion climate at different levels before determining opinion expression strategies, while climate opinion deals with the public opinion in society at large (Liu &amp; Fahmy, 2011)</p>	<i>What types of words do the readers employ to create fear of isolation and dominance?</i>
<b>Social Construction</b>	The linguistic code each person uses during interaction helps to construct the self that is relevant for a particular moment (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009).	<i>How often do the readers see themselves as Nigerians and Tribes while commenting on national issues about secession and insecurity?</i>

	No one uses the same way of talking in all contexts, and everyone has a range of selves relevant to different interactions (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009)	<i>What is dominant mode of interaction among the readers?</i>
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## Method and Materials

Quantitative content analysis and textual analysis were used as the research design while a coding sheet containing analytical content categories were employed as research instrument. Online readers who commented on the selected national issues (Pro-Biafra agitations and farmers-herders crises) published by *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* constituted the human population for the study. Both the online newspapers and readers' comments for quantitative content analysis were chosen through purposive sampling and simple random sampling techniques, respectively. However, the readers' comments for textual analysis were selected purposively in order to account for different sets of groups among the online readers. The newspapers were selected because they were exclusively online, and they were the leading Nigerian online newspapers with active readers' comments sections where readers could engage national issues such as agitations for self-governance, and security matters. Editions of the online newspapers published between January and June, 2016 provided the corpus from which we selected the data for this study. The period was significant because Pro-Biafra agitations and farmers-herders crises were the trending national issues at that period, which was another post-transition phase in the political trajectory of Nigeria. President Muhammadu Buhari, a Northern Muslim from the Fulani ethnic group took over the political power from Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, a Southern Christian from the Ijaw ethnic group. This phenomenon and the personalities of the two actors were alleged to have aggravated the pro Biafra agitations and the farmers-herders crises at the post-transition era. The two issues (*Pro-Biafra agitations* and *farmers-herders crises*) were used as the search indexes to aggregate online news stories within the selected period. Only stories on the two subjects, and which attracted readers' engagements (comment), were selected. A total number of 127 comments were found to be strongly connected to the alleged Fulani herdsmen's attacks on farmlands, which we tagged *farmers-herders crises* in this study. Out of this number, 40% of the total was chosen representing 50 readers' comments. For the pro-Biafra agitation for secession, a total of 85 readers reacted to the issues. Using the same percentage, 34 readers' comments were selected for analysis. These samples were chosen through the compilation of the

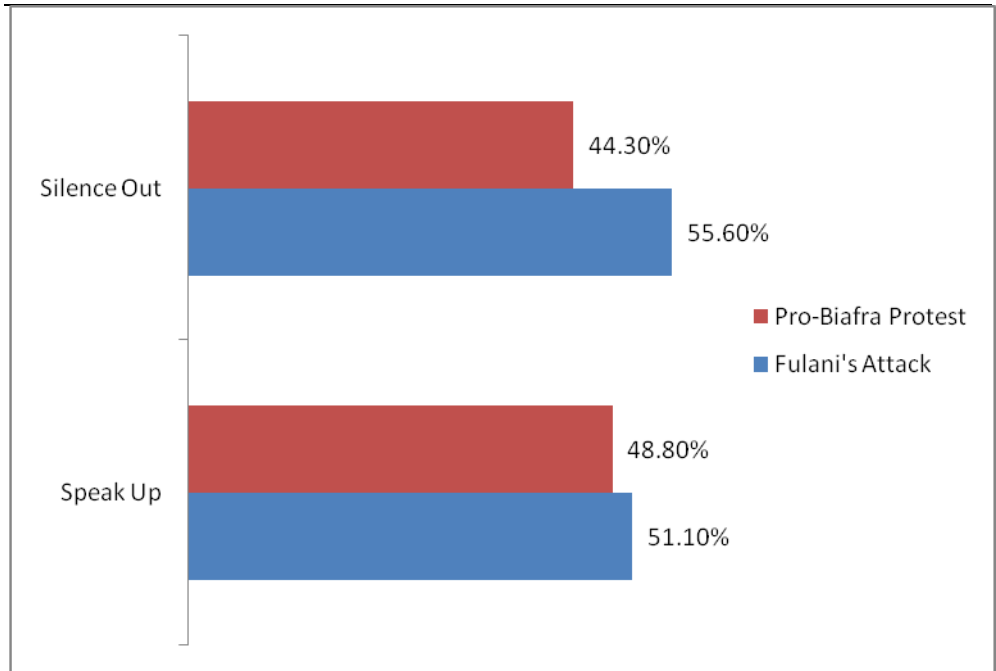
readers' comments as sampling frame and table of random numbers. The sampling frame for the Fulani herdsmen's attack and Pro-Biafra Protest had three and two digits, respectively. This necessitated the choice of the first three and two digits on the table vertically.

This method afforded the researchers opportunity of giving all the readers equal chance of being selected as sample. Nine categories were formulated for data collection. Two categories were devised for questions 1 to 3 while question 4 has three categories. For research question one, *speaking up* and *staying silent* were formulated. *Speaking up* was operationalised as the readers' provision of relevant examples and evidences in support of the issues commented on, while *staying silent* was defined as readers' deviation from the issues and stipulation of irrelevant examples and evidences in support of their arguments. *Exonyms* and *endonyms* formed categories for research question two. By *Exonyms*, specific words used by readers while commenting which portrayed the three dominant ethnic groups—Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo—positively and negatively—were examined. *Endonyms* indicates self-designation created by the readers to establish dominance of one ethnic group over the other in line with the issues being discussed. For research question three, *Nigerians* and *Tribe* were crafted as content categories. *Nigerians* indicates readers' choice of words which reflected collective efforts towards resolving the issues and see themselves as indivisible entity—as citizens with a common destiny. *Tribe* was used to represent readers' consideration of themselves as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo not as Nigerians. *Hostile*, *friendly* and *neutral* were created as content categories for research question four. *Hostile* was defined as intimidating situation which occurred among the readers while replying one another. *Friendly* and *neutral* signified mutual situation that existed during readers' conversation on the two issues. Data were analysed through descriptive statistics and textual explication.

## Results

In the following section, we present the findings and the discussion. Presentation and interpretation of results are done according to the research question we constructed to guide the study.

**Research Question One:** *On which of the issues (pro-Biafra protest for secession and farmers-herders crises) do the readers speak up and stay silent?*



**Figure 1:** Issues the readers speak up and stay silent on the most

Findings presented in Figure 1 show that majority (46=51.1%) of the readers of the selected online newspapers who commented on the two national issues published by the newspapers spoke up on farmers-herders crises more than pro-Biafra protest (44=48.8%). Surprisingly, a significant number of the readers (74=55.6%) were also found to stay silent on farmers-herders crises. It could be deduced from the findings that although a fair percentage of readers were seen speaking up about the pro-Biafra protest, more readers preferred to voice their views on the issues relating to herders-farmers conflict. This could be linked to the fact that farmers-herders crises, like Boko Haram insurgency in the north-east of Nigeria, constituted another threat to the security, unity and peace of the country. One of the readers captured speaking up as shown in excerpts 1:

### **Excerpts 1**

The position of the British Government during the Biafran War is a matter of historical record. Our position, which reflected the Charter of the Organization of African Unity, was to recognise the borders laid down at Independence. The UK fully supports the territorial integrity of Nigeria and President Buhari's commitment to work for a secure and prosperous Nigeria for all Nigerians. We are not aware of any institutionalised persecution of any people by the Nigerian authorities.

The commenter in the above extract was trying to silence the group that supports Biafra agitation by providing information that established the current union in the country and doubting any systemic persecution of the people in the south-south region. The provided information is a means to let the supporters of the agitation realise how the post-civil war crises were managed by the country and an international organisation. From the reaction, it is obvious that the commenter is calling for unity rather than disunity in the country. Also, instead of deploying his words to the Fulani's attack (i.e. farmers-herders crises) issue, one of the readers' diverted attentions of others to the corruption trial of Abubakar Bukola Saraki (the former Senate President):

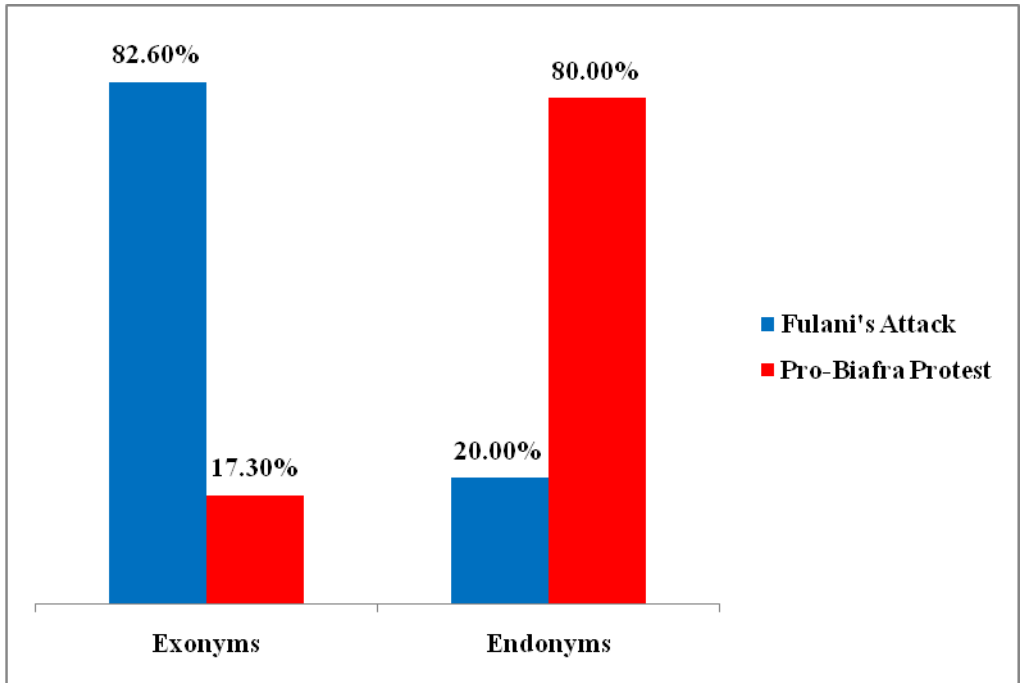
### **Excerpts 2**

It is funny that commentators on Saraki's trial have suddenly lost their voice. This is barbaric. These people are worse than pipeline vandals that Buhari swore to deal with the way he dealt with Boko Haram. They are Scoundrels masquerading as leaders.

The foregoing statement in Excerpts 2 indicates that the reader stayed silent on the Fulani's attack issue which might be linked to the fact that the reader did not have anything to add to the issues, did not support the view, or felt intimidated by others' comments and did not feel comfortable expressing his thoughts again. In a further attempt to stay silent on the issue, the commenter's

reaction highlighted poor leadership, restricting the country's development as another national issue worth discussing and finding solutions to than dealing with vandals in the Niger Delta region. With this position, it is not certain whether the citizens are ready for sustainable security and socioeconomic development in the region.

**Research Question Two:** *What types of words do the readers employ to create fear of isolation and dominance?*

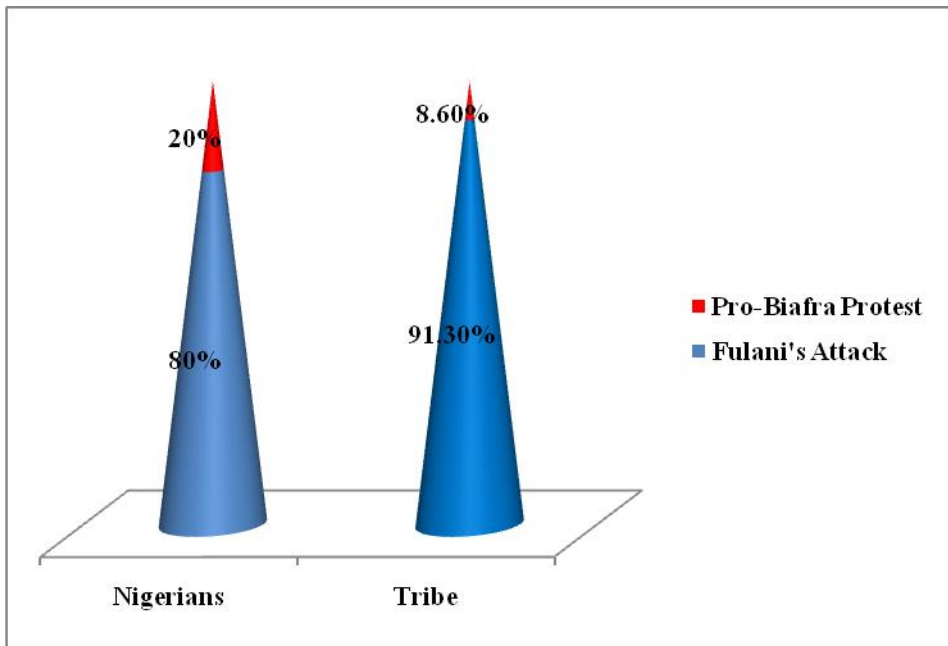


**Figure 2:** Word used to create fear of isolation and dominance

Figure 2 shows the proportion of specific words—Exonyms and Endonyms—used to create fear of isolation and dominance of the interaction as the readers speak up and stay silent on the issues of secession and Fulani-herdsmen attacks. As presented in Figure 2, words within Exonyms classification (19=82.6%) were predominantly used by the readers while interacting among themselves on Fulani's attack issue. For the pro-Biafra protest, words within

Endonyms category employed constituted 80.0%. Words under Exonyms include *Foolanis, marauding Fulanis, ethnic, and supremacist*. This finding suggests that readers deployed their word choice resource towards setting up Fulani's attack issue than the pro-Biafra protest, while words such as *band of bandits, terrorists, boju-boju, militants, real culprits, monsters, the baboons and the dogs, chronic hypocrites, fulani herdsmen apologist, my pikins, Islamist, gullible, barbarism, confusionist, muddled and confused, identity fraud, Omo Odua fraud, compromised Yoruba slaves, lunatic asylum, Biafraud, zoo nizooria, and armed militia* are used by readers to either isolate themselves or molest other readers suspected to belong to another ethnic groups as a result of the nature of their comments.

**Research Question Three:** *How often do the readers see themselves as Nigerians and Tribes while commenting on national issues about secession and insecurity?*



**Figure 3:** Readers' construction of themselves



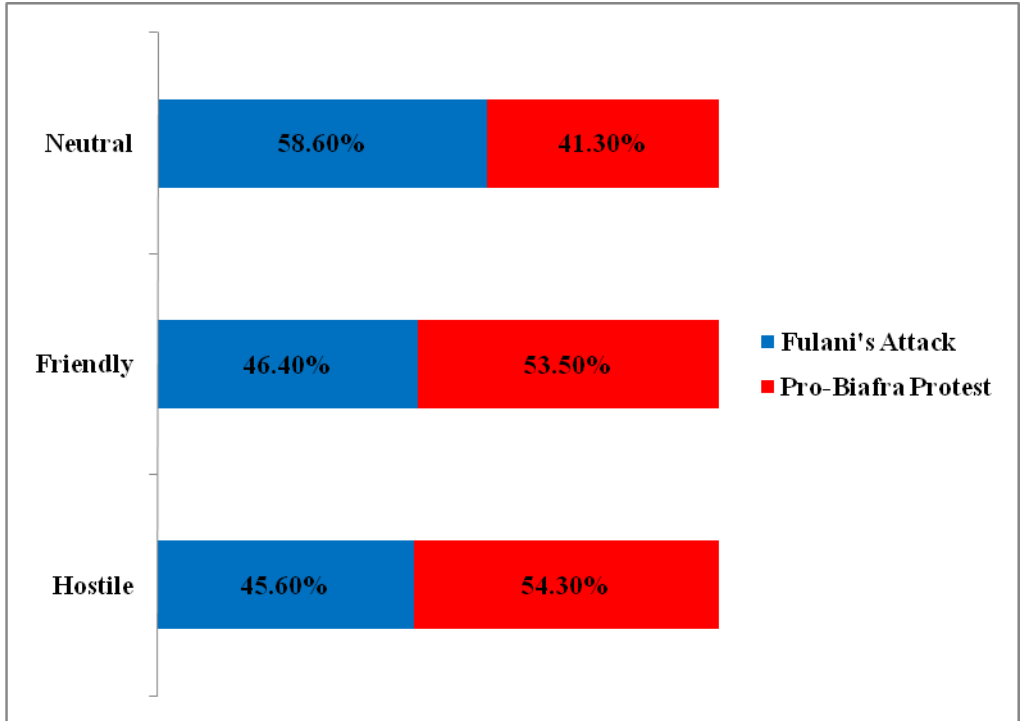
Figure 3 shows that majority of the readers see themselves as belonging to different ethnic groups while reacting to Fulani's attacks (21=91.3%). However, the ethnic differentiation is less pronounced while reacting to pro-Biafra protest (2=8.6%). This indicates that readers see themselves as an ethnic group while commenting and replying to comments on Fulani's attack than when commenting and replying to pro-Biafra protest. As presented in Figure 3, 20.0% (n=3) of the readers considered themselves as Nigerians believing that Niger Delta agitation for self-independence could be resolved collectively. "Biafrans and We are Biafrans" are echoed by readers perceived to be people in the South-South region where agitation for Biafra is more pronounced. On the other hand, comment of one of the reader's points to the fact that Nigerians need to be united against Fulani's attack thus:

### Excerpts 3

Is it today that Fulani Herdsmen have attacked communities in the East or South? Did they not also recently attack in Ekiti, Taraba, Oyo and Ondo? Stop bringing irrelevant comments into this issue just because it involves an Igbo community in this case. On this one issue **we Yoruba, the Igbos, Niger Deltans, and Middle Beltans and even minorities in the North East like Taraba**, are in full agreement. Stop trying to be provocative and start a race war. Let's say you're right, and this news report is false (it's not btw, it has been reported on two other news outlets), does it change the issue at hand? Does it change the fact that these same Terrorists have attacked other Igbo, Yoruba and Southern/Middle Belt communities before (last week even)? So please stick to the issue at hand. This is a grave national issue. You can start your anti-Biafra nonsense fight elsewhere.

The commenter in Excerpts 3 above confronted others with series of questions, wanting answers that could lead to solving the Fulani herdsmen's attacks across the country. The commenter does not believe that the attacks are being perpetrated, targeting the people in the south-south region (dominated by the Igbo ethnic group) alone. From the reaction, the commenter seems to be an advocate of peace and believing in collectively solving the crisis because it is a serious national issue.

**Research Question Four:** *What is dominant mode of interaction among the readers?*



**Figure 4:** Dominant way of interaction

Figure 4 presents the findings that show patterns of interaction predominantly noticed among the readers as they comment on news reports relating to pro-Biafra protest and farmers-herders crises in Nigeria. It is apparent from the Figure that majority of the readers (44=54.3%) were hostile in their reactions to other readers' comments or replies on pro-Biafra protest while they were less hostile on Fulani's attack (37=45.6%). The most striking result to emerge from the data is that a large number of the readers (15=53.5%) were friendly in their interaction on pro-Biafra protest which recorded higher number of hostile pattern. Findings also show that 58.6% of the readers were neither friendly nor hostile to other readers. These

patterns of interaction could be further understood from the analyses of the following UGC extracts:

#### **Excerpts 4**

##### **Neutral**

- I. *Maybe this needs to happen before Igbo know that Yoruba is not their problem. I just hope something is done by FG to curb this menace. If not, SE governors and legislators should wake up and speak up loudly about this.*

##### **Friendly**

- I. *But we said we are brave and energetic in Igbo land, why now running up and down because of ordinary few Fulani's' herdsmen. The truth of the matter is civil war has come and gone and there is no right thinking human being who experienced the war that will pray for another war in any part of this country.*
- II. *Speak for yourself. Going by Kanu's current picture, he looked like a man who is remorseful and beaten down.*

##### **Hostile**

- I. *And that smelly, soiled, starved and diseased thing will remained in my zoo, with the lion, permanently.*
- II. *Read your comment over three times and see if you make any sense. Igbo elders want to talk sense into a misguided young man and you call them a "bunch of clowns" for it abi? Had your drunkard elders in the South-South talked to your militant thugs maybe, your region wouldn't be the most polluted and backward region in the country today. Next time I catch your hypocritical ass advising me against cursing you wetback imbeciles I will rip out your anus and hand it to you with dripping blood. One after the other I'm catching all you pretentious bastards who come here to pontify about civility and decorum in public discourse... Stupid chump.*

III. *If someone puts an electric cord into your hole you will write and sign whatever that person wants. That's why he wrote whatever you translate as an apology. Me-ma, I made sure his gang did not take hold in Berlin that's why you will never hear of a Germany Director for pro-Biafra anything. Stupid of him to travel to Nigeria ill-prepared. Hey! Thought he's a British citizen, why is the UK Government not concerned about his plight? Consider smoking igbo with your UK passport pages... Lolz!*

The view in Excerpts 4 (Comment I) expressed under the *neutral category* suggests that the Igbo ethnic group always perceives the Yoruba ethnic group as the factor responsible for not realising their self-independence from Nigeria. Instead of attacking Yoruba and seeing them as the clog in the realisation of the Biafra as a country, the commenter chided political leaders in the region on their attitudes towards the agitation and need to tame the protest (*SE governors and legislators should wake up and speak up loudly about this*). On the *friendly category*, it is obvious that the commenter (perceived to be from the region) did not see reason for running after Herdsmen (Comment I). To the user, the region needs to be protected by applying appropriate security measures to contain few herdsmen terrorising the region (*but we said we are brave and energetic in Igbo land*). Besides, people in the region should remember consequences of civil war. Hence, they should desist from agitation that could lead to another civil war which could consume everyone and taking the region backward again. In Comment II under the *friendly category*, the commenter believes that Kanu (the leader of the Pro-Biafra) is regretting his actions having secretly left the country, warning other commenters of attributing their thoughts to the leader (*Going by Kanu's current picture, he looked like a man who is remorseful and beaten down*). From Comment I to III under the hostile category, users adopted words that isolated and provoked others to react to the pro-Biafra related news stories. The user in the Comment I rebuked another user from the Igbo ethnic group who defended the pro-Biafra protest with the negative words (*smelly, soiled, starved and diseased*) capable of making the user withdraw his or her opinion on the matter. In Comment II, the user believed that the leader of the pro-Biafra protest has been misguided by some group of people. To the user, calling elders from the region "bunch of clowns" by another user is out of the context. The attacking user further reinforced isolation tendency with the use of "drunkard elders" and "your militant thugs" (Comment II) believing that elders in the region failed to guide the youths constituting militants and contributing to underdevelopment. As if the user sees the other user, the

phrases that “your hypocritical ass advising me against cursing you wetback imbeciles” and “I will rip out your anus and hand it to you with dripping blood” (Comment II) are pointers to being isolated or reacted angrily to the accuser. The user in Comment III spotted holes in Kanu’s movement to Nigeria and used it to create isolation possibility on the part of another user. “Puts an electric cord into your hole” (Comment III) was used to depict the extent to which someone could be forced to commit what he or she does not intend to do. This was further stressed with “stupid of him to travel to Nigeria ill-prepared” and “considering smoking Igbo {Indian Hemp} with your UK passport pages...” phrases (Comment III) to indicate inferiority of the leader to the Nigerian state.

### **Discussion of Findings**

On the two national issues—pro-Biafra protest and farmers-herders crises—readers spoke up on insecurity than the marginalisation or separation. It was also discovered that they stayed silent on the insecurity. This indicates that readers, on the one hand, provided substantial information and were more vocal while reacting to insecurity (farmers-herders attacks). On the other hand, they provided less evidences or information, and were less vocal on the issue of pro-Biafra protest and demand for secession. The findings of the current study are consistent with those of (Hampton, et al., 2014) who found that Americans, who believed they knew a lot about the issues of the Snowden-NSA revelations and surveillance programme were more likely to join conversations than those who were not. On the other hand, those who said they had strong feelings about the Snowden-NSA matter were more willing than those with less intense feelings to talk about the subject. The findings are also in consonance with the spiral of silence’s proposition that people may choose not to speak out for fear of isolation (Hampton, et al., 2014). The current findings also resonate with Stoycheff’s (2016) and Meyer and Speakman’s (2016) findings that the individual’s climate of opinion had a significant negative influence ( $\beta = -.18, p < .05$ ) on not being silent on, while moderation of comments cannot prevent silent out or speaking up issues. As established in our current study, readers who suspected that their perspectives on the issues being discussed are contrary to the popular opinions held the majority of the readers and chose to stay silent on such issues.

To create fear of isolation and dominance during the interaction among the online readers, words within Exonyms classification were predominantly used by the readers while interacting among themselves on the insecurity issue. For the marginalisation or separation issue, words within Endonyms category were employed by the readers. These findings align with Liu and Fahmy’s (2011)

expression on spiral of silence theory's proposition that society will isolate individuals who express opinions that deviate from the norm. When this occurs, individuals will sense that society has imposed isolation on them. Therefore, readers that decided to stay silent did so as a result of the fear of being verbally attacked by other readers who held differing opinions.

Tribe self-identity was predominantly created by the readers while reacting to insecurity (farmers-herders attacks) whereas citizen self-identity was mainly formed by readers in their comments on the Niger Delta agitation for self-independence. This citizen self-identity stance suggests that the readers see themselves as citizens of Nigeria with a common destiny, and believe that the issue of agitation for secession could be resolved collectively. The findings have proved that no one uses the same way of talking and linguistic code in all contexts, and everyone has a range of selves relevant to different interactions (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009).

Despite the formulation of citizen self-identity towards separation issue, majority of the readers were found to be highly hostile to other readers. Strikingly, the study has established that readers were friendly in their online interaction on separation issues, to which they were likely to be mostly hostile in offline face-to-face discussions. This lays emphasis on the fact that individual readers consciously monitor opinion climate at different levels before determining opinion expression strategies (Liu & Fahmy, 2011) as the context of discourse determines the attitudes and stance of the interlocutors to the issues being engaged.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In this study, we examined how Nigerians used the comment sections of online newspapers to engage issues of agitation for secession and farmers-herders crises in the country. The study has established that the online readers who interacted in the comment sections of the selected Nigerian newspapers exhibited different voices and attitudes on the national issues examined. The participants, despite their diverse ethnic groups, were less hostile to one another while reacting to news stories about the farmers-herders crises, which could compromise the nation's security. However, the readers were more hostile in their engagement of the issues of agitation for secession, which had ethnic-inclination.

Although the derivation from the data set is not large enough to establish a pattern, findings of this study are useful as they could open new avenues for scholarly debates and more expanded research on the use of the comment sections of news media and other social media platforms by citizens to engage public issues relating to security and national unity. It is, therefore, suggested that further nation-

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wide studies that employ large sample population be conducted to establish patterns of citizens' discursive behaviours and attitudes while they engage national issues through different social media platforms.

### **Limitation**

We have to acknowledge that the samples selected for this study were not large enough to establish a pattern that could be conveniently generalised. One of the strengths of the quantitative design is a fairly large sample. However, in our current study, we adopted a mixed-methods approach where we used small quantitative data to complement textual analysis. This limitation notwithstanding, our study has been able to provide the basis for theorizing the Nigerian perspective on the affordances of comment sections of news media for citizens' engagement of national issues.

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