

Mass Media Reportage and Herders-Farmers Conflict in Nigeria

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Abstract

Considering the increase in violent confrontations, death, force displacement, and the destruction of livestock and agricultural produce as a result of herders-farmers conflict in Nigeria, this paper interrogates the micropolitics of the mass media in the contexts of language choice in reporting the conflict and the public perception of the reportage. Using mixed method, the study relied on Matthes and Kohring's (2008) approach to critically analyse the media reportage of four newspapers in Nigeria. These newspapers were purposively selected as they represent the publishing hubs in Northern and Southern Nigeria. The scope was limited to January 2021 and September 2022 because the period was regarded as the 'story moment' for the herders-farmers' conflict. Triangulating this with the content analysis of the observation and informal discussion with 30 members of the Free Readers Association of Nigeria and semi-structured interviews with two journalists, two academics, 12 representatives of Fulani ethnic groups, and 12 representatives of farmers, the study assessed public perceptions of the various media reportage of herders-farmers conflicts in Nigeria. The study showed that at the climax of the crisis between farmers and herders in Nigeria, the media failed to handle the reportage of herders-farmers' conflicts in a balanced way. The study concluded that media coverage influences the actions and reactions of the public. Consequently, the Nigerian government should play a role in managing media coverage of the conflict. The media should also strive to report what is professionally acceptable at all times to engender peace and harmony.

Keywords: Herders, Farmers, Newspaper, Conflict, Media, Mass Media Reportage, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

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Conflict – be it ethnic, political, or racial; or between individuals or groups – cuts across every sphere of human life. Conflicts occur in homes, marketplaces, religious, and secular organizations. Although several cases of conflict which include religious, political, ethnic, or economic have been recorded in Nigeria over the years, since the 1980s, the conflict between herders and the farmers has been prominent (Okotoni & Kugbayi, 2024). The conflict between herders and farmers in Nigeria is often portrayed as a conflict between two distinct groups – nomadic Fulani herders and settled farmers. However, this portrayal fails to capture the complex dynamics of the conflict. The herders involved in the conflict come from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, including Hausa, Kanuri, Tiv, Jukun, and Berom. Similarly, the farmers involved in the conflict come from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, including Yoruba, Igbo, and Fulani (Mountjoy & Hilling, 2023). Since the

return to civilian rule in 1999, several cases of conflict between herders and settled farmers have been recorded (Oli, Ibekwe & Nwankwo, 2018; Rachael & Eziamaka, 2018; Kugbayi & Adegbami, 2023).

SBM Intelligence (2016) posits that between 1997 and 2010, only 18 occurrences of Fulani herders and farmers' conflicts were recorded compared to 371 incidences between 2011 and 2015. Various scholars have carried out studies on the causes of herders-farmers conflicts in Nigeria (Li, 2018; Bukari, Sow & Scheffran, 2018; Mohammed, Umar & Hamisu., 2017; Adisa & Adekunle, 2010). Others focus on the effects of the conflicts on various sectors (Dasam & Ibe 2018; Ogbette, Attama & Okoh, 2018; Williams, 2018). Several studies have been carried out on mass media coverage. However, enough attention has not been given to the effects of mass media reportage of herders-farmers conflict on the populace.

The conflict has caused much havoc to both the farmers and the herders. The farmers, particularly, have experienced the loss of properties such as houses and farms (Gever & Essien, 2017). Mass media, being a major body charged with the responsibility of reporting, informing, and educating the public, must be efficient and highly cognizant in their efforts to prevent, reduce, and manage conflicts and the sufferings they bring. The composition of what is being chosen as news and the language of expression of issues related to conflicts shape public impression and assessment of any issue. Hence, mass media reportage directly or indirectly gives a direction to which conflicts will follow.

Thus, this study sets out to ascertain whether the languages adopted by the mass media in reporting the herders-farmers' conflict stir conflict between the two groups. If it does, to what extent does the language adopted in reporting conflicts stir conflict? If it does not, to what extent does the language adopted engender peace and tranquility? To find answers to the questions, the first part of the study provides a background to the work, the second section gives an overview of farmers-herders conflict, section three provides a theoretical underpinning, section four gives information about the methodology used while section five details the results and discussions on findings.

OVERVIEW OF HERDERS-FARMERS' CONFLICT IN NIGERIA

The Fulani are nomadic, pastoralist, and trade people who herd cattle, sheep, and goats over vast desert hinterlands, maintaining a somewhat separate life from the local

agricultural populace (Mountjoy & Hilling, 2023). Their ancestry is debatable, with some scholars claiming Judaeo-Syrian origins and others claiming North African origin (Anter, 2011; Bello, 2013). Some posit that the group might have migrated from the Middle East (Asogwa & Okafor, 2016). The Fulani have a big presence in Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea, Gambia, Mali, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Niger, Togo, the Central African Republic, Ghana, Liberia, and as far east as Sudan (Anter, 2011). Because of their nomadic lifestyle, wherever the Fulani are located, they rarely comprise the majority. They are mainly migratory cattle raisers who are always moving their herds of cattle in search of grazing pastures (Nwankwo, 2016). Through a series of events known as Fulani jihads, the Fulani captured a large portion of what would later become Northern Nigeria between 1804 and 1810 (Horton, 1972).

The Fulanis settled with Hausa and other ethnic groups in the northern part of Nigeria. These ethnic groups had coexisted and integrated before the existence of Nigeria. Immediately after the political independence in 1960, the wealthy among the cattle owners persuaded the Northern Regional Government, under the leadership of Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, to initiate a grazing reserve policy. In 1979, a group of cattle breeders and owners formed the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) to push for grazing reserves. In 1987, the first grazing reserve in Kachia was gazetted by the Ibrahim Babangida military regime. The actual owners of the herds are not the poor Fulani men who move around with their livestock, but members of MACBAN (Asogwa & Okafor, 2016).

The Fulani cattle herders, due to the nature of their job, are found in every part of Nigeria today. They move their livestock from north to south, west to east, and north to south in Nigeria where there are other dominant ethnic groups (Ubelejit, 2016). The herdsmen often come in conflict with farmers. Meanwhile, the pattern of the conflict has shifted recently. Fulani herdsmen are now allegedly using arms to kill farmers on their farms and in their houses (Ogbette, Attama & Okoh, 2021).

A myriad of issues, mainly the struggle for traditionalism and modernism, have colluded to put Fulani's economic livelihood in jeopardy. The herdsmen have resisted modernization. Their patterns of production and consumption have remained substantially unchanged despite the increase in population and modernization. The patterns of rainfall and seasonality as well as the extent to which this influences land usage are some of the major issues influencing the herders' economy. Closely related to

this is vegetation pattern as well as loss of the grazing reserves and routes as a result of farming activities (Awotokun, Nwozor & Olanrewaju 2020; Asogwa & Okafor, 2016).

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

Although the rising climatic and population changes are putting enormous strains on rural communities, the political leadership of the country has not been effective in handling the associated conflicts. The response of the government in the wake of the recurrent herders-farmers conflicts has been less than satisfactory by different quotas. The introduction of the Grazing Routes Bill appeared to erode public trust in government and give the perception of Fulani political dominance in other parts of Nigeria. The conflict is seen especially by non-Fulanis as a strategy for weakening other sections of the country (Nwankwo, 2016).

The conflicts have taken a terrible toll on the people. While many people have lost their lives as a result of the conflicts, several have been displaced from their ancestral homes, making them "exiles" and "refugees" in their own country. Also, the atmosphere of insecurity and instability created by the conflicts has reduced the ability of both groups to produce optimally, thereby contributing to the increase in poverty and reduction in quality of life. According to Corps (2015) "an average household in these conflict-prone communities would experience at least a 64 percent or potentially 210 percent decrease in income due to conflicts". This is because most of them would be afraid to pursue their livelihood due to insecurity.

FRAMING THEORY: A THEORETICAL REVIEW

Framing theory has its origin in the theory of mediation. The major thrust of framing theory is that the primary role of the media is to serve as a mediator between the people and society; between the audience and the outside world (Gavilán, 2011). The function of a mediator between the people and the reality is not just about the transmission of messages. Media messages are shaped by newsmaking. It involves the words, phrases, images, and presentation styles that are used to make news and the procedures that form its construction (Borah, 2011). Reese (2007) states that the concept of framing has received different theoretical perspectives in the literature. Specifically, the definition by Entman (1993) is appropriate for this paper because it captures the different perspectives of framing. According to Entman (1993), frames have at least four locations in the communication process: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture. Communicators make conscious or unconscious framing judgments in deciding what to say. The text contains frames, which are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments.

Entman (1993) states that frames in the news can be identified and examined by the inclusion or exclusion of some keywords, phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and “sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments.” Tankard (2001) presents 11 focal points for identifying and evaluating news frames. They include headlines, subheads, photos, photo captions lead, source selection, quotes selection, pull quotes, logos, statistics and charts, and paragraphs (Tankard, 2001). Apart from media framing, research on framing has dealt with how news framing influences information processing and decision-making processes. Kahneman and Tversky (1984) state that different presentations of the same information can affect the choices of people. They argue that individuals tend to take risks when risks such as “losses” are emphasized. However, when the “gains” are emphasized, people tend to ignore the risks. Druckman (2001) maintains that the “emphasis” approach to news framing validates that stressing certain discussions in a message can influence people's focus on those particular discussions. Other scholars reveal that it is not always easy to change a frame without manipulating some of the facts (Valkenburg, Semetko & de Vreese 1999; Druckman, 2004).

Scholars like Pan and Kosicki (2001) argue that news framing is not always elite-driven. The public takes part in framing by participating in public discussion.

People develop their perception of the media messages and talk about the issues at hand by making use of the materials made available to them by the media, common sense, and personal experiences. Framing takes a “multifaceted process in which influences travel in different directions” (Pan & Kosicki, 2001) Part of the things that influence news framing is the ownership influence. Udoudo and Bassey (2001) argue that fairness in framing as one of the qualities of a good journalist has been a subject of debate by many scholars. Whatever opinion that a reporter holds is justified for many reasons. One of those reasons is the ownership of the media house. The press tries to be fair as long as the report is not in conflict with the ownership interest. John and Enighe (2001) affirm the influence of ownership in news framing by stating that "Nigerian press are always used by their owners - private, party or government for the propagation of the interest of such owners". They added that "the principle of objectivity is always abandoned by the press in championing of the causes of their masters".

RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODS

Research Design

The study adopted mixed method research design. The study relied on Matthes and Kohring’s (2008) approach which involved identifying patterns of frame elements across several texts using cluster analysis to critically analyse the media reportage of newspapers in Nigeria. Triangulating this with the content analysis of the observation and informal discussion with some members of the Free Readers Association of Nigeria and semi-structured interviews with journalists, legal practitioners, representatives of Fulani ethnic groups, and farmers in Osun, Oyo, and Ondo States.

Sampling Technique

Four major newspapers were purposively selected for the study - Punch, the Guardian, Daily Trust, and Leadership newspapers. The Nigerian state is divided into ethnic and religious settings. So, the newspaper selected represented the major publishing hubs that covered the ethnic, religious, and political divides. The Punch and Guardian newspapers represented the publishing hub in Southern Nigeria while the Leadership and Daily Trust represented the publishing hub in the northern part of the country. The scope was limited to January 2021 and September 2022. This period was a ‘story moment’ for the herders-farmers’ conflicts. For instance, it was a time when the Governors from the southern part of the country banned open grazing in their region

and introduced Amotekun, a regional security network to strengthen the security of the region. In addition, the widely acclaimed Yoruba activist, Sunday Adeyemo, popularly known as Sunday Igboho, was moving from one place to another during this period to defend the people and he was also arrested in the neighbouring country and tried around this time. The news were retrieved from the various newspapers' websites using the basic frames: 'herdsmen', 'herders-farmers' conflicts', 'Fulani herdsmen', and 'the *Miyetti Allah* Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN).' The search generated 295 news articles. The researcher retrieved the 295 articles for the study. However, only 150 of the articles were relevant to the study.

In addition, data were obtained through informal "conversations," with 30 Free Readers Association across the Osun, Oyo and Osun States. The informal conversation was also supported by observation witnessed by the researcher while daily interacting with some members of the Free Readers Association of Nigeria between January 2021 and September 2022 across the major cities of the selected states. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two journalists and two academics, 12 representatives of Fulani ethnic groups, and 12 representatives of farmers in selected states to establish the effects of mass media reportage in reporting herders-farmers' conflict on public perception.

Data Analysis

With the use of Cluster Analysis, frames in the newspapers were identified. Thus, coding was done in line with the frame elements identified in the newspapers. Frames identified were grouped into three major themes- Demonisation of Fulani; Economic and Social Consequences; and Ethnic and Religious Dimensions. These data were analysed using frequency distribution and simple percentage. In addition, data gathered through informal discussions and interviews were analysed using content analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis and Discussion of the Mass Media Reportage on Herders-Farmers' Conflicts

The largest cluster, which has 41 articles, produces the frames that are tagged *Demonization of Fulani Ethnic Group as the Perpetrator of the Conflict*. It is frequent in the Punch and the Leadership newspapers. Few of the frames are found in the

Guardian and the Daily Trust newspapers. The newspapers cover the various conflicts between herders and farmers. They demonise the herdsmen from the Fulani ethnic group as perpetrators of the conflicts but present farmers as victims. Some of the frames are “killer Fulani herdsmen”, “Fulani herdsmen with Ak-47s”, “Fulani herdsmen killing”, “Fulani herdsmen attack”, and “Fulani Herdsmen”.

The second cluster consists of 57 frames. The cluster centers on the economic and social consequences of the conflicts on the state. All the newspapers selected analyze the economic cost of tackling the conflicts and the social implications of the conflicts on Nigerian society. For instance, one article states, “all Fulani herdsmen in Ondo State to vacate forest reserves within the state” (Sobechi, 2021). Another article claims that some action was taken without consultation and exhaustion of all processes of dialogue in dislocating a set of people from their age-long livelihood. A report published by the *Daily Trust* on May 19, 2021, on the economic implication of herders shunning nomadism states that:

Nigeria’s most comprehensive strategy is yet to encourage pastoralists to switch to ranching and other sedentary livestock production systems. Modernising the livestock sector is key to resolving the herder-farmer conflict, which threatens Nigeria’s political stability and food security (Nwabufo, 2021, par. 9)

In addition to the socio-economic implication of nomadism on herders, all the papers report the economic consequences of the conflicts on farmers and the setbacks in agricultural production the conflicts have caused. They capture the destruction of lives, properties, and farm produce as the socio-economic implications of the conflicts. An account of a farmer is captured in the *Punch* newspaper on February 19, 2021:

The Fulani herdsmen destroyed my barn, where I stored corn. Getting to the place I saw cows eating crops in the barn. I called on the herder who owns them. But instead of checking what the cows did, he rushed at me with a machete. If not that I used my hand to stop the machete before it severed my fingers, he would have cut off my head. As you can see, what can I use the hand for? Nothing. It’s hard to use my hand to work to feed my family. It’s my wife who is taking care of things now (Olatunji, 2021: par. 3).

The cluster analysis on the implication of the conflict on national development is in agreement with the position of scholars (Awotokun, Nwozor & Olanrewaju, 2020; Keghku, Alom & Fanafa, 2019; Idakwoji, Ojomah, Usman & Orokpo, 2018). It also reveals that both the farmers and the herders claim the “victimhood status”. This also captures the positions of scholars like Tade and Yikwabs (2019) who are of the view that farmers suffer the destruction of farmland displacement from local communities, loss of means of livelihood, and fatalities as a result of the conflicts; herdsman suffer victimization from their hosting communities, cattle rustling, and fatalities.

The last cluster of the analysis consists of 52 articles that identify herders-farmers’ conflicts as ethnic, political, and religious conflicts. The cluster sees the activities of the herders as the strategy for the Fulanisation of Nigeria, an expression of Islamic faith, and a manifestation of the divide-and-rule strategy of the elite class. For instance, some articles claim that power is given to the Fulani herders when the Minister of Defense says at the height of the Benue massacre that herders have no choice but to react when all the grazing routes in the country have been blocked as a result of development (Soetan, 2021; Agbedo, 2021). A report published by the Punch newspaper on January 28, 2021, captures the views in two of the newspaper articles in the cluster. The report states that:

The Federal Government came up with its RUGA and later cattle colony as a way out. Perhaps, this could have been embraced by other ethnic nationalities and states, particularly in the South, but for the antecedents of the regime, its undue favoritism of the Fulani herdsmen, its indulgence, and the fear of losing their ancestral lands to Fulani domination. But that should not have prevented the regime from starting the RUGA or cattle colony in the northern states that are eagerly receptive to the idea to serve as a model for other “doubting Thomas” states and ethnic nationalities to see a good intention as explained by the regime and possibly embrace it later (Soetan, 2021: par 6)

Ethnic frames are feasible in the reporting of all the newspapers. While the southern hubs echoed the radical views of the herdsmen and the protection they are receiving from the federal government, the northern hubs seem to be reporting the activities of the

southern governors in regulating the movement of the herders and policies that have been proposed by the federal government to address the conflicts.

Table 1: *Analysis of the Framings in the selected Newspapers*

Newspaper	Framing			Total
	Demonisation of Fulani	Economic and Social Consequences	Ethnic and Religious Dimension	
Punch	29	12	15	56
Guardian	0	17	15	32
Daily Trust	0	14	11	25
Leadership	12	14	11	37
Total	41	57	52	150

Appraisal of the People’s Perception of Mass Media Reportage on Herders-Farmers’ Conflicts

The perception of the public to the mass media reportage of farmers-headers’ conflicts is well represented by the observation and informal discussion with members of the Free Reader Association of Nigeria and herders in Fulani communities. The data gathered shows that the media coverage of news, to some extent, influences people’s perceptions. The case of Mr. Kazeem¹, a middle-aged member of the Free Readers Association of Nigeria at one of the newsstands in Ile-Ife, Osun state in an emotional manner after going through the news headlines states that the mission of the present federal government is to subject all the ethnic groups in Nigeria under Fulani. He believes that if that is not the aim of the federal government, it would have responded to the genocide going on in Benue State and other parts of the country. In an argument that lasted for two hours, all the members, including the vendor, did not base their discussions on any other headlines, but only on the herders-farmers’ crisis and killings in in the country.

Like Mr. Sanusi at a newsstand at Ijoka Road Akure, the killings started long ago but increased under the present administration, probably because their kinsmen are at the helm of affairs or they are trying to revenge what we do not know of or implement an agenda because these people are very calculative. Remember a prominent northerner once said that “anyone, soldier or not that kills the Fulani takes a loan repayable one day no matter how long it takes” (he tried to remember the year but could not get the exact year). Another member who usually comes to the newsstand at Mokola, Ibadan on a daily basis is Mr. Kehinde, a middle-aged man. He is a commercial cyclist. He has a reservation for the northern part of the country and

anytime he reads about the herders-farmers' conflicts, he always whispers, "any of my family members will never go to that part of the world". However, the opinion of Mr. Ojo differs. He always checks the number of causalities reported by various media outlets. He will compare it with the news he has heard on the radio before starting his judgment. He believes that the media are always biased in reporting herders-farmers' conflicts. At the newspaper stands in Lagere, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, Mr. Ojo argues with other members that the media have not been objective in reporting the conflicts. In most cases, he highlights that what the television, newspaper, and social media report are contradictory. To get objective news, the reader must read across the board and deduce the conclusion by himself.

In line with the perceptions of the members of the Free Readers Association of Nigeria in Akure, a farmer Mr. Gabriel states that the atrocities committed by the herders are being under-reported by the media. People are dying on a daily basis at the hands of herders. They are killing, maiming, raping, and kidnapping people. They are destroying farmlands. These are being under-reported by the media. For instance, how many times have you read about the killings in Saki and Ibarapa in Oyo State or the killings in Yewaland in Ogun State in the news? The killings are being under-reported. Meanwhile, some of the herders do not have access to the newspaper and most of them only listen to radio stations in the Hausa language. Mr. Muhammed, a man in his 50s from Kwara State but has been living in Osun state. Has been in the business of rearing livestock for more than three decades. He states that "I only listen to the news on Hausa radio stations". He further argues that even though he speaks Yoruba language fluently, he has reservations about the news in the Yoruba news hub because of the ways some of the hubs are reporting the conflicts. In like manner, Mr. Akinyemi, an elderly man in Ibadan Oyo state, reported that he has stopped going to the farm as a result of the activities of Fulani herdsman. In the farmers association, they have invited media houses and their voices have not been heard.

Essentially, the role of government includes regulating the activities of the media and ensuring balanced news. However, the people feel that the governments have not been sincere in playing this role. Many of them believe that the elite class owns the media and they use it for their interests. The opinions of the legal professionals, media professionals and academics interviewed are as follows: Dr. Kalejale, a lecturer and legal professional, argues that the elite own the media houses and use them for their interests. He states that the kind of picture the media houses in the southern part of Nigeria are painting is different from what the media houses in the core part of northern

Nigeria are painting. This kind of journalism has pitched ethnic groups against one another.

The implications of the public perception of media coverage of the herders-farmers conflict are significant. First, it may lead to increased polarisation and hostility between different groups, as well as a rise in violence. This may, in turn, impact the willingness of the parties in conflict to work together to resolve the underlying issues. For instance, farmers may be less likely to engage in dialogue with herders if they believe that the conflict is primarily caused by them. In addition, the language adopted in reporting the conflict may also undermine efforts to address the root causes of the conflict and to promote peaceful coexistence. Above all, the reportage may also fuel a cycle of fear and insecurity, which may further destabilise communities and make it more difficult to find lasting solutions.

CONCLUSION

The study has highlighted the language adopted by the media in reporting the herders-farmers' conflict and the public perception of the reportage. Using Matthes and Kohring's (2008) cluster analysis of the newspaper and informal discussions with some members of the Free Readers Association of Nigeria, the study revealed that dominant reports of herders-farmers' conflict involve demonization of members Fulani ethnic group as perpetrators of the conflicts. It highlighted the socio-economic impacts of the conflicts. It also covered the ethno-religious influence of the conflicts in Nigeria. The study revealed differences in reportage between the newspapers in the southern and northern hubs. While the media hub in southern Nigeria seems to favour farmers by highlighting the various atrocities committed by herdsman, the northern hub tends to protect the herdsman. In addition, the perception of the media coverage, to an extent, influences the actions and reactions of the public. While some people have somewhat lost confidence in the media, others believe in reading across the board to get evidence-based news. The study concluded that the mass media have not been handling the reportage of herders-farmers' conflicts in a balanced way. The work, consequently, suggests that the Nigerian government has a role to play in managing media coverage of the conflict and preventing the spread of misinformation and demonisation. The government Should work with media organizations to promote responsible reporting on the issue, and to provide accurate and balanced information to the public. The media on the other hand should strive to report what is professionally acceptable at all times to engender peace and harmony and to enjoy increase in people's trust.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The major limitation was the inability of the study to cover all aspects of mass media as the attention was on newspaper publications on the conflict. More methodological works are needed to robustly capture the reportage of herders-farmers' conflict by various media outlets in Nigeria. In addition, a relatively narrow but important question that was identified after data collection had finished is the long-term impact of mass media reportage on herders-farmers' conflict. Further research should interrogate this aspect.

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ⁱThe names of all the respondents have been changed to preserve their anonymity