The Effect of Silence on the Human Communication System

Anthony U. Utulu
School of Communication and the Arts, Regent University, VA, USA
David Bello
Splash FM, Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

Every communication encounter primarily starts because initiators aim to inform and influence others. Silence is a form of nonverbal communication that can be deployed by those communicating. Since nonverbal communication complements the verbal form of communication, it is expected that it is effectively used to enhance the sender-receiver's communication gains. This paper investigated if leaders' silence affects public perception, interpretation, and the meaning assignment to a communicated message, using the former Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, and the Nigerian public as cases. It adopted a qualitative approach-an in-depth interview method, using an interview guide as the instrument for data collection. The data analyzed showed that adopting silence as a form of communication, especially during a crisis, harms the human communication experience. Buhari's silence toward Fulani herders' attacks affected how the masses perceived, interpreted, and assigned meaning to his action. It allowed conspiracy theories to thrive as public opinion showed that his silence encouraged the herders' nefarious actions.

Introduction

The benefit of communication lies in how human beings connect, understand, and relate with each other and their environment. They share

ideas, views, and opinions at different times and about diverse topics as they try to inform, educate, and influence each other. Scholars such as Craig and Muller, 2007; Dutta, 2021; LisaM, 2009; Kreps, Frey, and O'Hair, 2009; Peters, 2008, have defined communication in various ways. One of the early definitions of communication states that communication is the exchange of information and the transmission of meaning (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Communication definitions point to the same angle—the sender-receiver relationship and experience. In other words, the sender sends a piece of information (words, symbols, images, et cetera), through a selected medium (airstream, electronic, et cetera), to a listener—receiver, encoder, or audience. Gold (2019) notes three ways communication encounters can occur. First, communication can occur through a variety of media. Second, communication can be fast or slow; third, communication can occur in different ways, for instance, in silence (pp.171-172). Whichever way communication occurs, through silence, among other ways, the sender hopes to get a positive interpretation of the message sent as they try to influence the listener.

Silence is a form of nonverbal communication that can be constructive or destructive. Virani (2013) states, "Constructive silence moves a conversation or discussion forward. Destructive silence shuts down communication and creates barriers that discourage speakers from expressing their thoughts. Thus, silences can be 'leaden,' and they can also be 'golden'" (para.1). In the communication encounter, messages can also be transmitted to others involved through silence. Silence could be a disinterest in relating with the other party. It could mean that a party does not understand the information passed across. It could mean a deliberate way of letting the other party have a whole part of the experience before sending feedback.

Every leader is expected to engage their followers through effective communication. For this reason, we have Presidents, for instance, organize consistent media chart sessions to share ideas, views, and plans about developments in their country with the citizens, especially in a democratic setting. Sometimes, when effective communication is missing, people complain about such leaders' silence, especially during crisis periods. For example, the past Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, has been accused of not speaking to Nigerians despite the increase in insecurity. Insecurity in Nigerian is multi-faceted. However, this study focused on the Fulani herders and farmers crisis that snowballed into incessant killings, kidnappings, armed robberies, and banditries during Buhari's civilian regime (May 29, 2015 - May 29, 2023). The menace caused economic hardship, among other socio-political issues that Nigerians believed needed the government's urgent attention.

Silence can lead to a destructive atmosphere, especially during crisis periods, because it gives room for speculations, rumors, et cetera. In the case of Nigeria, which is the focus of this study, it was established that the President's silence led to a series of misinterpretations, speculations, insinuations, rumors, and confusing conclusions. This action seemed to have caused the myriad worrying national issues the country is facing, aside from the Fulani herders and farmers crisis. Over time, the situation snowballed into other strata of the country.

During this period, there was a conspiracy theory that Buhari's silence emanated from the fact that those perpetuating most of the evil acts were the people of his tribe—Fulanis, primarily the herders. It is presumed that they indulge in destroying farmers' crops, killing, maiming, kidnapping, and rapping, among other evil vices in the country (Okibe, 2022; Ruqayyah, 2019). Owing to this conspiracy theory, government officials have also engaged various media and stakeholders to defend the President's action— silence noting that the President is not silent; instead, he is doing all his powers to calm the crisis (Ekpei, 2023).

Research Questions

RQ 1: How did President Buhari's silence influence Nigerians' perception of his position about the Fulani herders crisis in the country?

RQ 2: How did President Buhari's silence help spread conspiracy theories about his thoughts on the country's Fulani herders crisis?

Study Objectives

First, the objectives are to establish if President Buhari's silence influenced how Nigerians perceive his position about the Fulani herders crisis in the country. Second, to reveal how his silence aided the spread of conspiracy theories about his thoughts on the country's Fulani herders crisis.

Problem Statement

Scholarly works have shown that communication could be verbal, written, or nonverbal. Some such studies have also demonstrated that nonverbal communication helps to complement the spoken form of communication. For example, Joo, Bucy, and Seidel (2019); Wasike (2018); Valaitis, O'Mara, Wong, MacDonald, Murray, Martin-Misener, and Meagher-Stewart (2018) and Isenhart, 2009; Craig and Muller (2007). Silence carries meanings even though words are not uttered, or signs or symbols are not engaged in the communication encounter. With the number of known studies on communication as a field, a few have focused on discussing silence as a form of communication and how it affects sender-receiver relationships and experiences.

For this reason, this study examined this vital form of communication and how it influences how the receiver perceives, interprets, and assigns meaning to a sender's message. Nigeria was selected as the study area using the county's President Mohammadu Buhari's silence amid Fulani herders' crises claiming lives and properties in the country as a case. Consequently, this study investigated how the President's silence influenced Nigerians' perception and interpretation of his position on the menace the Fulani herders became in the country.

During this study's period, it was observed that Nigerians reacted to the President's silence. His action generated a series of conspiracy theories, such as concluding that his silence was because he is a Fulani. Had the President addressed the Nation since the crises began, would there have been a generation of such conclusions about his position on the situation? The data gathered and analyzed in this study answered this question.

Study Significance

This study is significant because it revealed how silence influenced the outcome of human communication processes. Leaders would learn how important it is to engage in other forms of communication to communicate with citizens rather than be silent because silence allows the generation of speculations, rumors, and misinterpretations. Scholars and students in the academic fields, especially in Arts and Social Sciences, shall benefit from this study's rich literature and findings. The results will help correct leaders' communication system dynamics. This thought is consistent with Patton's (2015, p. 8) submission. Finally, it would expand the communication field's knowledge, data, and conversation storehouse.

Definition of Terms

In the context of this study, the following concepts are defined for clarity and to match the purpose of the study. The concepts are:

1. **Silence**: an act of not communicating by a sender when the receiver expects a perceived response.
2. **Ordinary citizens**: anyone that does not fall within the three categories set by this researcher, that is, politicians, journalists, and academics, but with sufficient knowledge of the subject matter.

Literature Review
Silence as Nonverbal Communication

Communication is to share ideas, views, and norms between two persons, a group of persons, among others. The essence is to inform, educate, and influence the receiver toward acting in a specific way—asserting one's power or resisting that of another (Gardezi, Lingard, Espin, Whyte, Orser, &

Baker, 2009, p. 1391). According to Kidwell and Hasford (2014), "Most effective leaders, salespeople, and consumers, often proficient and discerning as interpreters of intentional or unintentional nonverbal communication, use nonverbal communication" (p. 526). People also adopt silence to complement other communication forms. It is a form of nonverbal communication. It lacks words or physical symbols yet carries specific messages and meanings. It is used by parties involved during in-person exchanges for different reasons. When this is the case, the receiver is left with the choice of interpreting the sender's intention. This scenario was why Hardy, Boliek, Aalto, Lewicke, Wells, and Riegera (2020) asserted, "It is also important to begin to understand the contribution of nonverbal communication behaviors…." (p. 933). It is believed that understanding nonverbal communication would aid positivism in the interpretations stemming from the deduced stimulus received from the sender at any given time.
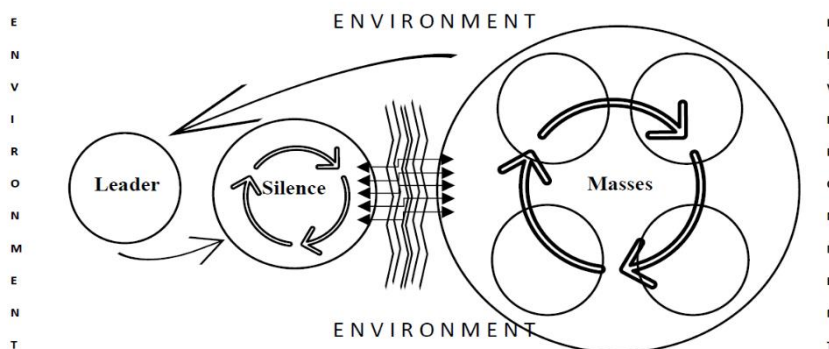
Silence may pose a danger during any communication encounter as it may allow speculation, distrust, rumors, and conspiracy theories. It could be associated with negativity, passiveness, impotence, and absence (Bruneau, 1973; Dauenhauer, 1980; Saville-Troike, 1994, in Ephratt, 2008, pp. 1910). For instance, the Nigerian President was silent when Nigerians eagerly looked forward to him addressing the Fulani herders and farmers crises. It was discovered that the President's silence allowed the surge in conspiracy theories in the country. Citizens gave diverse negative interpretations to his silence for as long as it lasted.

Leaders influence their followers in diverse ways because they control resources and decisions about changes to the status quo (Chiaburu, Lorinkova, and Van Dyne, 2013, p. 299). For this reason, among other edges they have over their followers, leaders are expected to master the art of effective verbal and nonverbal communication to foster excellent relationships between them and their followers. For instance, based on comments on various media channels, it could be deduced that the masses were not pleased with how the President ran the country's affairs (Ojo, 2018). Most of the reactions stem from his silence amid the crises claiming many lives and destroying properties. Whether leaders engage their followers verbally or nonverbally, it is expected that they create an atmosphere that would improve their followers' levels of trust, confidence, positive psychological capacities, positive ethical climate, and relational transparency and foster positive self-development (Guenter, Schreurs, & van Emmerik, 2017, p. 53). Adequate and effective communication is one of the best ways to achieve this goal.

In their study of silence in an Operation Room, Gardezi et al. (2009) posit that "Research suggests that inadequate communication is a primary

cause of medical errors and that communication among the professions in the operating room (OR) is essential to patient safety" (p. 1391). Though this is an operation room case, the same scenario can occur in our everyday life because, as humans, we understand each other better and most effectively by communicating verbally and complementing the process nonverbally. It shows that communication cuts across all fields. Consequently, due to President Buhari' silence, which is believed to have caused the hike in insecurity, Nigerians, especially the majority of those from other regions — Eastern, South-southern, Western, and Middle belt, may not categorize President Mohammadu Buhari, a Northern and Fulani born as an effective and or authentic leader in line with Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, and Peterson's (2008) description. The authors posit that "…authentic leadership is composed of four dimensions, namely self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective" (p. 94). Leaders are expected to learn and develop these dimensions to foster effective -leader-follower relationships and experiences. The model below explains how silence affects the receiver's desired sender's feedback and overall communication satisfaction. It visually explains the scenario investigated and discussed in this study. It will also speak to related communication research investigations.

Fig. 1. The Silence Effect Model (SEM) shows how the choice of silence over other forms of communication can be detrimental to the overall communication experience.

Source: Utulu 2023

This model explains the silence effect on a communication encounter. It can be adapted to other related conversations about the detrimental impact of adopting silence as the form of communication by senders—leaders, for example, especially in crisis circumstances. It explains how the leader's silence affects the receivers' plights during transmission. The receivers send feedback based on the information received (long curved arrow). They expected to get the leader's feedback, which is familiar with effective communication. However, the leader's response was silence (locked in the

circle with broken cyclical arrows). The broken arrows represent ineffective transmission emanating from a sender's silence. The feedback remained intrapersonal to the leader. This experience shows stocked information—the wobbled arrows and the vertical lines standing as distortion walls against the transmitted message (wobbled arrows) due to the nonverbal response in silence. So, the receivers' options were to interpret and assign meanings to the leader's feedback based on their experience of activities (crisis in this regard) in the environment. This situation is represented by more pronounced broken cyclical arrows within the receivers' bubble. It shows how silence allowed insinuations, presumptions, speculations, and conspiracies in the polity (environment) (Grice, 1989).

Crises in Nigeria: The Case of the Fulani Herders
      A series of crises have bedeviled Nigeria since its independence on October 1, 1960. The situations have ranged from the tussle for power between the regions that make up the country to equitable sharing of the proceeds of the countries' primary natural resources—oil. Other causes include an imbalance in the national political positions among the regions, marginalization, the Niger Delta crisis, and Boko Haram, to mention a few. More recently was the rise of the Fulani herders and farmers crisis.
      Interestingly, the Fulanis contribute substantially to the country's economic growth. However, the unprecedented crisis that has caused the country a considerable loss of lives and financial gains, among other economic progress, has marred the country's favorite spot of the Fulanis. Regarding their positive contributions, Ndubuisi (2018, p. 1) posits, "They make cattle meat affordable and readily available at the doorpost of Nigerians. Their animal meat constitutes a huge source of protein for the citizens."
      It is purported that the Fulani herders crisis lingered because the former President—Mohammadu Buhari, a Fulani, remained silent by not openly condemning the herders. It was noted that during their nomadic pastoral activities, the herders had changed tactics from mere land grazing to barrel-induced land grazing (Akinyetun 2016, p. 39). Their actions were characterized by killing and kidnappings, destruction of farmers' plantations, settling and taking over of small villages, sexual harassment of human life, small arms proliferation, sour national social relationship, and high cases of rape and other menaces (Bello 2013; Okereke 2012; Ajibefun 2018). In the words of Ajibefun (cited in Duke & Agbaji, 2020, p. 345), "The major implications of the Fulani herders menace were the reduction in output and income of farmers/nomads, loss of produce in storage, displacement of farmers, scarcity of agricultural products, loss of house and properties and infrastructural damages." It would be generally accepted that no leader is

expected to be silent when a sect's activity or any harmful activity is causing tremendous loss to a country, institutions, or organizations they are leading when it involves the loss of human lives and property. A government's primary objective is to protect life and property.

It was believed that President Buhari's silence caused a series of conspiracy theories and speculations about his position regarding the subject matter based on the data gathered for this study. For instance, it was taken that he had remained silent because, as a Fulani, he regards Fulanis more importantly than people from other regions. Also, his silence was presumed as part of the plan to Islamize the country, among different beliefs. This action could be considered a demerit to adopting silence in the human communication system, especially in a crisis. When this happens, tensions escalate, and everyone interprets the situation based on either personal subjective or sentimental reasoning. But when feedback is effectively communicated in the oral or written form, such gaps that allow conspiracies—speculations, rumors, et cetera, would have been bridged. A leader's effective communication demonstrates care, empathy, dedication, commitment, and equity, which lead to public trust and confidence (Slovic, 1999, cited in Gesser-Edelsburg & Hijazi, 2020, p. 2986).

Crisis Communication

The crisis is inevitable in societies, institutions, and organizations because of divergence in thoughts, opinions, views, norms, traditions, and culture. Whatever strategy is adopted to avert a crisis whenever it breaks ends up helping minimize it and its effect on people and society (Cikotić, 2021; Marsen, 2020). It could also be said that no matter how effective a government is, there will always be issues that will generate a crisis (Cikotić, 2021). It could be artificial or race-based, such as the Fulani herders crisis in Nigeria, natural disasters—flood, fire, epidemic, or pandemics such as the break of covid-19 pandemic and others.

When any of these breaks, governments or leaders are put on their toes because they would have to engage all arsenals to control the spread and negative effect of the crisis on the state and citizens (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997). One of the best ways to stem the situation's impact is to communicate effectively with the masses and all stakeholders, making communication the key to managing crises. This period is never a time for leaders to be silent or adopt a silent form of communication, as witnessed with Buhari. It is a period for effective, strategic, and continuous engagement and communication through all the available media or channels (Garfin, Silver, and Holman, 2020; Coombs, 2019; Benoit, 2013). In line with this assertion, Coombs (2019) says, "Communication is essential to the crisis prevention

process. Communication helps to locate warning signs and relay that knowledge to the relevant units" (p. 50).

Because of the negative consequences of the crisis, Watkins and Clevenger (2021, p. 6), citing (Boin, 2009; Comfort et al., 2020, & Körösényi et al., 2016), asserted that "Leaders must make important decisions that will necessarily affect lives, and they must communicate their decisions to a frightened and vulnerable public." The Nigerian government under Buhari did not meet Comfort, Kapucu, Menoni, and Siciliano's (2020) components of the adaptive decision-making process that leaders consider during a crisis. The components are cognition, communication, coordination, and control (p. 617). Nigerians demanded Mr. Mohammadu Buhari, the President and Commander in Chief of the country's Armed Forces, to address the Nation and the Fulani herders crisis that lingered, spread beyond the bothers of the Northern region to other regions, and was seen as the precursor to the hike of insecurity in the country (Seeger, 2006). It shows the importance of communication in humans' everyday life. People appreciate talking and enjoy being spoken to, making communication cyclical.

Method and Instrumentation

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study using an in-depth interview method to elicit information from respondents. It helps to gather information through people's experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Paton 2015, p. 14). An in-depth interview guide served as the instrument for data collection. These approaches are consistent with Mutsvairo and Columbus' (2012: p. 123) assertion, "Focus groups and in-depth interviews are considered the most commonly used and efficient methods of gathering data qualitatively." The authors further cited (Marshall's & Rossman's 2006) assertion, "…when thoughts, feelings, belief, values, and assumptive worlds are involved, the researcher needs to understand the deeper perspective worlds that can only be captured through face-to-face interactions" (p. 123). These thoughts provoked the rationale behind this researcher's choice of in-depth interviews as the best fit among other methods for data collection. Also, the interview method was adopted because it is useful when the participants cannot be directly observed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 188). The study's respondents were purposefully selected Nigerians that represented the overall population of the study using a purposeful sampling technique for selection. Selections were based on the categories set by this researcher: politicians, journalists, academics, and ordinary citizens.

Population and Area of Study

Due to the nature of the in-depth interview approach, twelve Nigerians, a mix of politicians, journalists, academics, and 'ordinary citizens,' were selected and interviewed. A brief pre-interview was conducted with the respondents to determine these categories. It helped the interviewer determine who was suitable for the interview sessions (Morse, 2010, cited in Patton, 2015, p. 264). The overall distribution was three (3) respondents for each category. The interview sessions were conducted in Ibadan, Oyo State, based on the proximity factor. Also, Ibadan is one of Nigeria's capital cities and among the most populous cities. According to the 2021 World Population Review, Ibadan is one of Africa's most populated cities, with a population of over 3 million. The responses generated from the interview sessions were transcribed and analyzed using the narrative analysis under the inductive analysis approach (Patton, 2015, pp. 47; 592).

Justifications

The justification for the researchers' adoption of a qualitative research approach is that it helps the researchers access the study's elements' reactions through their responses to interview questions. Nigerians' reactions to President Buhari's silence during crisis periods and how it influenced their perception and interpretation of his position about the state of the Nation cum the Fulani herders issue were collected and analyzed. Also, the approach allowed the researchers to select appropriate knowledgeable best-fit respondents that provided the responses that answered the research questions.

Theoretical Framework
Conspiracy Theory

Conspiracy theory generates around happenings relating to organizations, institutions, and most times around leaders and the people in government; hence, its choice over the spiral of silence theory for this study. Conspiracy theory submits that a secret of great importance is being kept from the public (Aupers, 2020; Goertzel, 1994). To van der Linden, 2013 (cited in van der Linden, 2015), "A conspiracy theory purports that some covert and powerful individual(s), organization(s) or group(s) are intentionally plotting to accomplish some sinister goal" (p. 171). In the case of Nigeria, some people believe that President Buhari remained silent while "his people"—the Fulani herders were unleashing mayhem—destroying farmers' crops, kidnapping, and killing other citizens from other regions of the country because of plans to allow Fulanis gain more settlements in the country. Another conspiracy theory points to the deliberate intent to Islamize

the country, hence, having Fulanis from other countries flocking into the country unchecked.

However, some individuals, especially those in Buharis' government, may question these thoughts since human beings relate to stimuli differently. The experience may be associated with Weigmann's (2018, p. 2) assertion that psychologists argue that people may be deceiving themselves through several cognitive biases that impede rational judgment and logical thinking that could be based on unsubstantiated reports about the issues. It might be the case with Nigerians who have lent their voices to the problems the country was grappling with under Buhari's government. That notwithstanding, the conspiracy theory helped explain how President Buhari's silence determined how the masses perceived, interpreted, and reacted to his body language as he remained silent and reserved in the face of the herders' crisis.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study posed two research questions to deepen the understanding of how silence can influence individuals' thoughts and behavioral communication patterns during direct or indirect communication encounters using a political leader's action as a case. It investigated how President Buhari's silence engendered Nigerians' perception and interpretation of his position on the Fulani herders crisis in the country. Second, it probed how President Buhari's silence aided conspiracy theories about his position on the Fulani herders crisis in the country. Thus, investigating silence as a communication form and its effect on the human communication system revealed how silence can impact people's interpretation and meaning assigned to the message received from a sender. Respondents' responses analyzed provided answers to the two questions posed.

Respondents' responses were collected through audio recording. These responses were collated, transcribed, and analyzed to answer the research questions. Regarding the first research question, results reveal that President Mohammadu Buhari's silence allowed Nigerians to interpret and assign meanings to his position about the Fulanis and the Fulani herders crisis based on how they perceived his actions—being silent amid the country's situation. In other words, responses showed that Nigerians believed Buhari's silence indicated that he supported the Fulani herders' nefarious actions because they were his people, not minding what the mayhem was costing the country during the crisis. Although, President Mohammadu Buhari's spokespersons faulted this position at various fora. They submitted that the President was not happy about the problem and was doing all he could to quell the situation and other challenges the country was facing.

Drawing from respondents' responses (public opinions) obtained from the academic category, to show the effect of President Buhari's silence, a university don, a Professor of Political Science, and a Senior Lecturer of Mass Communication had similar opinions consistent with public opinion. In his response, he asserted:

> [sic] I will say yes because, since I have said earlier on, people take direction from what is coming from the government in terms of communication. So, people have taken his silence to mean support for the herdsmen, so ordinarily, he is supposed to present himself as neutral and present himself as not happy with whatever, whether his relatives or people from other tribes, he is supposed to speak out. So, he is not speaking out is giving a kind of an impression, a wrong impression, or a correct impression that he is in support of the Fulani herdsmen. So I can say, not with all assurance, but that there is an indication that his silence is leading to people agitating for their rights, freedom, and other things. They are saying it clearly that Buhari has an agenda, and the agenda is to allow the Fulanis to take over the entire Nigeria. So, his silence indirectly instigated some of the crises.

Another respondent, a highly profiled journalist, said:

> [sic] Absolutely, absolutely, don't forget that the President is a Fulani man by tribe. He has this history of being pro-Fulani in a very extreme way in the past. In fact, to a lot of people, it was the reason why he was rejected three times when he contested because they felt he was not Pan-Nigeria enough in his worldview…. now that he is in office and doing the exact thing people feared the most about him. I would say it has greatly influenced how we assess him, especially on issues that are very sensitive and issues around farmers-herdsmen crises. Then, the President, who is the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, as a Fulani man himself, a Patron of Myetti Allah to have kept quiet; there was a conspiracy of silence, which made people believe that maybe he was actually the secret hand nudging them to go ahead with that kind of notorious and nefarious activities.

In addition to these submissions, the politicians interviewed gave similar responses. One of them submitted:

> [sic] Ordinarily, Yes, and based on the explanation I gave to the earlier question, that submission is quite in order. Mind you, President Mohammadu Buhari is the live Patron of MACBAN (Myetti Allah Cattle Association of Nigeria). So, naturally, his sentiment is expected to be with them. But it has been further accentuated by his unpresidential silence regarding the murderous incursion of the killer herders. I won't say Fulani herders, killer

Fulani herders, because most herders are Fulanis. Some of them are killers, so killer Fulani herders.

Another politician who could be said to be neutral in the answer given, unlike the former who gave an outright answer, said:

[sic] Well, everybody is actually entitled to his or her personal opinion. To the same set of people, an action can mean different things to so many people. So, his silence to some people might mean he is in support. His silence to some might mean he is the mastermind. His silence to some people can mean a lot of things, but as I said, we don't know anything. We are actually kept in the dark, so that will lead anyone to think about anything and own it up to him or herself.

These responses to the interview items posed to answer research question one revealed that all the public members interviewed had similar reactions in agreement with the question. They revealed that silence played a significant role in how Nigerians perceived and assigned meaning to the President's position regarding the killer Fulani herders in the country. Opinions showed that he supported the herders' nefarious acts as a Fulani man and because he is the Patron of the herders association—MACBAN. To further establish this finding, another respondent stressed that:

[sic] Yes, of course, you know the fact that he is a Fulani man…. Now there is also that angle of him being the Patron of the Fulani herders. I am more aware that all these came up because of that silence. So, there are different notions about his personality because of where he is coming from, and the people involved are from his area. He creates a disposition of him being on their side by not going all out against them. You look at; for example, when it comes to the issue of IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra—a group from the Eastern region clamoring for secession) [insertion, mine], he was a bit more vocal on how he is going to deal with the leader of IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu. He has not been too vocal about dealing with Fulani herders.

To conclude, answering research question one, this study will reiterate that silence, especially from leaders in the situation investigated in this study, harms people and society. It shows that communication encounter purpose—effective information dissemination and accurate feedback can be compromised through silence. When this happens, it could lead to sociopolitical and other crises in the polity.

Therefore, this study submits that President Buhari's silence affected how Nigerians interpreted and assigned meaning to his position about the Fulani herders' crisis in the country. His silence is associated with negativity, passiveness, impotence, and absence (Ephratt, 2008, pp. 1910). It shows that

his action portrays negativity and distrust of leadership in the polity. Over the period of his position as the Commander in Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces of the country, there were various contentious reports about his actions. In Orjinmo's (2023, para. 1) report, the reporter submitted, "When he steps down next week, President Muhammadu Buhari will be leaving Nigerians less secure, poorer, and more in debt than when he came to office in 2015." However, Buhari and members of his political camp are convinced that he performed well. An AFP report stated, "Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari defended his political record on Sunday, the day before he steps down, saying he leaves the country in a better state than when he took power in 2015 (Ekpei, 2023). The report showed various areas where Buhari believed he improved during his time as the President.

However, public opinion pointed to the fact that Buhari did not live up to what was expected of him as an elected leader in a democratic setting. He did not create an atmosphere to improve Nigerians' trust, confidence, positive psychological capacities, positive ethical climate, and relational transparency to foster positive self-development in line with Guenter, Schreurs, and van Emmerik's (2017) argument.

Research question two was set to establish how President Buhari's silence helped spread conspiracy theories in the country. On Buharis' part, it revealed he was acting in line with the plan to Islamitize the country, among other plans—a reason why silence is harmful to people and society, especially in a crisis. Conspiracy theories are speculative in that they posit actions that are hidden from public scrutiny, complex in that they postulate the coordination of multiple actors, and resistant to falsification in that they hypothesize that conspirators use stealth and disinformation to cover up their actions—implying that people who try to debunk conspiracy theories may, themselves, be part of the conspiracy (Lewandowsky, Cook, Oberauer, Brophy, Lloyd, & Marriott (2015). However, on the part of the citizens, it could be said that they were not being vocal and acting based on their perception and the meaning they could assign to Buhari's silence when the country was facing a substantial security crisis under his watch.

It is evident that silence gives room to all sorts of interpretations and deductions the listener would assign to the speaker's action when they kept quiet instead of addressing the receiver's need for information. Therefore, respondents' responses to the interview question were analyzed and interpreted to give substantive answers to research question two.

First, the politician who was neutral in response to interview questions to research question one did not provide a specific answer to the interview question. He neither agreed nor disagreed. Further probe revealed that he was a member of the ruling party. In his words, he said,

[sic] "Well, I won't go for any of the options… you just have to balance it. There is nothing like conspiracy anywhere."

Conversely, the second politician has a different opinion. He asserted that the President's silence helped spread conspiracy theories about his position on the Fulani herders crisis in the country. The responder noted that the extent of Buharis' silence when Nigerians expected him to condemn the Fulani herders, was to a "Very Great Extent." One of the academics also agrees that President Buhari's silence helped spread conspiracy theories about his position on the Fulani herdsmen crisis in the country to a "Very Great Extent." On the other hand, another academic member interviewed thinks the President's silence affects the spread of conspiracy theories. In his opinion, it is to a "Little Extent."

Interestingly, the Journalists' responses were balanced based on the scales set — "5" representing the highest and "1" as the lowest. Two of the four Journalists interviewed believed Buharis' silence effect was to a "Very Great Extent," while the other two said it was to a "Great Extent." The two scales chosen fell on the high side of the scale set in this study, that is, "Very Great Extent" (the highest scale) and "Great Extent" (the second highest scale). According to the responses from those selected to represent the public voices, two of the three people interviewed submitted that President Buhari's silence helped spread conspiracy theories to a "Very Great Extent." However, one respondent submitted that it is to a "Great Extent." Also, both sets of respondents fall on the high side of the scale — scales "5" and "4."

Although this researcher did not develop explicit research expectations regarding how silence could influence listeners during a communication encounter, it was expected to find evidence of influence because whatever is not uttered cannot be heard. Such action tends to create room for listeners' choices to interpret and assign meaning as they wish. So, based on the responses gathered from all the selected respondents, this study submits that President Mohammadu Buhari's silence significantly affected how Nigerians perceived, interpreted, and assigned meanings to his position about the Fulani herders crisis in the country. This submission is consistent with the established conclusion that being a Fulani, Buhari supported the herders as they unleashed mayhem on anyone who dared to stop them from grazing their cattle on people's farms. This thought also pointed to the discussions on unchecked the spread of the situation from the Northern region to other regions.

In conclusion, it will be submitted that President Mohammadu Buharis' silence aided most Nigerians in believing there was a conspiracy due to Buhari's actions, which allowed the spread of assumptions and speculations of his actions toward the Fulani herders crisis in the country. The majority of the selected respondents' responses that represented

Nigerians' opinions within the context and scope of this study attested that if President Mohammadu Buhari had addressed the situation, the problem would have been nipped in the bud. The country would have focused and harnessed its energy and resources toward building an impressive economy to compete in the global socioeconomic space. It shows the importance of effective verbal communication to silence. Silence should instead be used to complement other forms of communication. However, one should not overlook the importance of silence in the communication encounter. Everyone, especially leaders, must adopt silence carefully and effectively to complement other forms. If not harnessed adequately with other forms of communication, silence can create unprecedented room for misconception, misinterpretation, misinformation, disinformation, and misperception.

Recommendations, Suggestions for Further Studies, and Limitations

This study recommends that leaders at all levels should take cognizance of the essence of their position and be mindful of the importance of communication with people, institutions, or organizations. They should pay critical attention to how they communicate and relate with others. If leaders would adopt the principles of effective communication, it would consistently minimize conspiracy theories of any form, distrust, and noncooperation. It will create a more peaceful environment for leadership operations and societal development.

This study exclusively adopted the in-depth interview method using one instrument—the interview guide, which included open-ended questions for data collection. This approach would have limited the data generated to give a more expansive interpretation, discussion, and answers to the research questions posed. However, it will be submitted that the method served the purpose of this study. The data gathered helped to answer the research questions significantly within the study's purpose and scope. However, it is suggested that further studies should adopt more than one method or instrument. Research has shown that using mixed methods help researchers generate more data from diverse sources and elements and can help each method supplement the other and improve a study's validity and results dependability (Zohrabi, 2013). This study is believed to provoke more academic conversation on this subject.

References:
1. Ajibefun, M. B. (2018). Social and economic effects of the menace of Fulani herdsmen crises in Nigeria. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, *8*(2), 133-139.
2. Akinyetun, T. (2016). Staff to gun: Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, *4*(8), 38 – 44.

3. Aupers, S. (2020). Decoding mass media/encoding conspiracy theory. Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories. First Edition. Routledge.

4. Bello, A. S. (2013). Herdsmen and farmers conflicts in North-Eastern Nigeria: Causes, repercussions, and resolutions. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, *2*(5), 29–139.

5. Benoit, W. L. (2013). Image repair theory and corporate reputation. In *The Handbook of Communication and Corporate Reputation.* First Edition. Carroll, C. E. (Editor). John Wiley & Sons Inc.

6. Chiaburu, D. S., Lorinkova, N. M., & Van Dyne, L. (2013). Employees' social context and change-oriented citizenship: A meta-analysis of leader, coworker, and organizational influences. *Group & Organization Management*, *38*, 291–333.

7. Cikotić, S. (2021). Leadership in complex situations. In: Erçetin, Ş. Ş., Açıkalın, Ş. N., Vajzović, E. (Editors), Chaos, complexity and leadership. *Springer Proceedings in Complexity. Springer, Cham.* https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-74057-3_2

8. Comfort, L. K., Kapucu, N., Ko, K., Menoni, S., & Siciliano, M. (2020). Crisis decision-making on a global scale: Transition from cognition to collective action under threat of COVID −19. *Public Administration Review*, *80*(4), 616–622. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13252

9. Coombs, W. T. (2019). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing and responding*. Fifth Edition. Sage Publications, Inc.

10. Craig, T. C., & Muller, H. L. (2007). Theorizing communication. Readings across traditions. Sage Publication, Inc.

11. Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. Fifth Edition. Sage Publications Inc.

12. Duke, O. O., & Agbaji, D. D. (2020). Fulani herdsmen crisis and the socioeconomic development of Benue state, Nigeria. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, *10*(8), 343-357.

13. Dutta, M. J. (2021). Communication as praxis. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *49*(1), 1-2. DOI: 10.1080/00909882.2021.1890962

14. Ekpei, P. U. (May 28, 2023). "Nigeria's departing President Buhari defends legacy." Retrieved on May 30, 2023, from, https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230528-nigeria-s-departing-president-buhari-defends-legacy

15. Ephratt, M. (2008). The functions of silence. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *40*, 1909–1938.

16. Gardezi, F., Lingard, L., Espin, S. L., Whyte, S., Orser, B., & Baker, G. R. (2009). Silence, power and communication in the operating room. *Journal of Advanced Nursing 65*(7), 1390–1399. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2648.2009.04994.x

17. Garfin, D. R., Silver, R. C., & Holman, E. A. (2020). The novel coronavirus (COVID-2019) outbreak: Amplification of public health consequences by media exposure. *American Psychological Association, 39*(5), 355-357. Retrieved on June 6, 2021, from *http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/hea0000875*

18. Goertzel, T., (1994). Belief in conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*. *15*(4), 731–742. doi:10.2307/3791630. JSTOR 3791630

19. Gold, C. (2019) Communication. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, *28*(3), 171–173. DOI:10.1080/08098131.2019.1589106

20. Guenter, H., Schreurs, B., & IJ. Hetty van Emmerik (2017). What does it take to break the silence in teams: Authentic leadership and/or proactive followership? *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, *66* (1), 49–77.

21. Grice, H. P. (1989). Studies in the way of words. Harvard University Press.

22. Hardy, T. L. D., Boliek, C. A., Aalto, D., Lewicke, J., Wells, K., & RiegeraJ. M. (2020). Contributions of voice and nonverbal communication to perceived masculinity–Femininity for cisgender and transgender communicators. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, *63*, 931–947.

23. Isenhart, M. W. (2009). Interpersonal communication in high-tech culture: Eastern or Western? *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. *15*(1-2), 35-52. https://doi-org.ezproxy.regent.edu/10.1080/00909888709365258

24. Joo, J., Bucy, E. P., & Seidel, C. (2019). Licensed under the creative commons automated coding of televised leader displays: Detecting nonverbal political behavior with computer vision and deep learning. *International Journal of Communication*, *13*, 4044-4066.

25. Kidwell, B., & Hasford, J. (2014). Emotional ability and nonverbal communication. *Journal of Psychology and Marketing*, *31*(7), 526–538.

26. Kreps, G. L., Frey, L. R., & O'Hair, D. (2009). Applied communication research: Scholarship that can make a difference. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *19* (1-2), 71-87. https://doi-org.ezproxy.regent.edu/10.1080/00909889109365293.

27. Lewandowsky S., Cook J., Oberauer K., Brophy S., Lloyd E. A., & Marriott M. (2015). Recurrent fury: Conspiratorial discourse in the blogosphere triggered by research on the role of conspiracist ideation

in climate denial. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 3*, 142–178.

28. LisaM, T. (2009). Speaking into silences: Autoethnography, communication, and applied research. *Journal of Applied Communication Research. 37*(1), 94-97.

29. Marsen, S. (2020). Navigating crisis: The role of communication in organizational crisis. *International Journal of Business Communication, 57*(2), 163–175. https://doi.org/10.1177/2329488419882981

30. Ndubuisi, C. I. (2018). A critical analysis of conflicts between herdsmen and farmers in Nigeria: Causes and socioreligious and political effects on national development. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies, 74*(1), 1-6. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.5065

31. Ojo, E. O. (2018). Nigeria's democracy: The trilemma of herdsmenism, terrorism, and vampirism. *Journal of Pan African Studies, 11*(3), 144-158.

32. Okereke, D. (2012). The remote immediate cause of crimes, insecurity, terrorism and instability in Nigeria and solution. Retrieved on June 16, 2021, from *https://www.scribd.com/document/123307847/The-Remote-and-Immediate-Cause-of-Insecurity-Instability-and-Terrorism-in-Nigeria-and-Solutions/*

33. Okibe, H. B. (2022). Herder-Farmer conflicts in South East Nigeria: Assessing the dangers. *Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding Scholar, 34,* 1-7.

34. Orjinmo, N. (May 21, 2023). "Nigeria's Muhammadu Buhari leaves a legacy of kidnapping, inflation, and debt." Retrieved on May 22, 2023, from https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65637553

35. Patton, M. Q. (2015). Qualitative research and evaluation methods. Integrating theory and practice. Fourth Edition. Sage Publications, Inc.

36. Peters, J. D. (2008). Communication: History of the idea. Retrieved on May 5, 2021, from https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405186407.wbiecc075.

37. Rosenthal, U. & Kouzmin, A. (1997). Crises and crisis management: Toward comprehensive government decision making, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 7*, (2), 277–304. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a024349

38. Ruqayyah, B. (2019). Farmers-Herders conflict in Nigeria: A review of relevant literature (2019). Retrieved on April 24, 2020, from https://ssrn.com/abstract=3912973

39. Seeger, M. W. (2006). Best practices in crisis communication: An expert panel process. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *34*(3), 232–244. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00909880600769944

40. Slovic, P. (199). Trust, emotion, sex, politics, and science: Surveying the risk-assessment battlefield. In Gesser-Edelsburg, A. & Hijazi, R. (Editors), When politics meets pandemic: How Prime Minister Netanyahu and a small team communicated health and risk information to the Israeli public during the early stages of COVID-19. *Risk Management and Healthcare Policy*, *13*, 2985–3002.

41. van der Linden, S. (2015). The conspiracy effect: Exposure to conspiracy theories (about Global warming) Decreases pro-social behavior and science acceptance. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *87*, 171–173.

42. Valaitis, R. K., O'Mara, L., Wong, S. T., MacDonald, M., Murray, N., Martin-Misener, R., & Meagher-Stewart, D. (2018). Strengthening primary health care through primary care and public health collaboration: The influence of intrapersonal and interpersonal factors. *Primary Health Care Resource Development*. *19*(4), 378–391. doi:10.1017/S1463423617000895PMCID: PMC6452942

43. Virani, F. (2013). The power of silence in effective communication. Retrieved on May 5, 2021, from https://www.freepressjournal.in/education/the-power-of-silence-in-effective-communication

44. Watkins, D. V. & Clevenger, A. D. (2021). US political leadership and crisis communication during COVID-19. *Cogent Social Sciences*, *7*, 1-33. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1901365

45. Wasike, B. (2018). Gender, parasocial interaction, and nonverbal communication: Testing the visual effect of sports magazine cover models. *International Journal of Communication*, *12*, 173–199.

46. Weigmann, K. (2018). The genesis of a conspiracy theory. Why do people believe in scientific conspiracy theories and how do they spread? *Science and Society*, *EMBO report 19*: e45935, 1-4. DOI 10.15252/embr.201845935

47. World Population Review. Accessed on June 14, 2021, from, https://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/cities/africa

48. Walumbwa, F. O., Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Wernsing, T. S., & Peterson, S. J. (2008). Authentic leadership: Development and validation of a theory-based measure. *Journal of Management*, *34*, 89–126.