



## ANALYSING THE PICTORIALS OF VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA: A SEMIOTICS PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract:**

Violence attributed to the various agitating groups in the country has become a common occurrence across the Nigerian states. This paper explored a cross-comparative analysis of the pictorials of activities of two northern Nigerian agitating groups (the Boko Haram sect and the Fulani herdsmen) as semiotics signs of violence within the Nigeria socio-cultural space. A corpus of 14 pictorials of online newspaper reportage of the activities of the agitating groups across the Nigerian States downloaded from the Internet served as the primary data in this study. Using Peirce's triadic sign relations of icon, index and symbol, the study categorised the pictorials in the reportage and analysed them as semiotics sign carriage of violence showing that the communicative imports of the pictorials effectively explicate the magnitude of violence within the Nigerian socio-cultural space in their interpretations. The signs identified in the data include instrument of operation, ruins, body language, emotional display, etc., which are semiotics modals implicative of war, violence, destruction, agony, sorrow, agitation, etc., and symbolism of cruelty, ferocity, homicide and inhumanity generally. The paper concludes that pictorials are communicative signs carriage of concrete and implicative significations.

**Keywords:** Boko Haram, Fulani herdsmen, reportage, semiotics, terrorism

### **1. Introduction**

Violence within the Nigerian socio-cultural space poses a huge threat to the existence of her citizen. Nigerians live in perpetual fear as they are killed in their numbers, violently, daily. This has attracted different media campaigns: feature writings, reporting, media clips, and verbal communication. Sometimes the media campaigns are deployed as emotional inducement agents to provoke reactions which ultimately affect the manners of behaviours of the audience/viewers in a certain way. This is important as a means of disseminating information and reflecting captions, etc. Media campaigns are deployed to expose to the audience - what cannot be reported

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through direct societal realities, which are so crucial to the people. This work examines the pictorials used in the online newspaper reportage of the activities of the Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen sects as communicative signs deployed to create awareness, condemn and curtail the acts of violence within the Nigerian socio-cultural space.

Pictorials are semiotic sign elements in online newspaper reportage that bring into full force, the import of the event they capture. Bignell (1997, p. 81) asserts that "*news is not just facts, but representations produced in language and other signs like photographs*". In agreement with this, Barker (2005) notes that the media has the power to construct meaning about something through representation. Pictorial in media reporting is a powerful attention-catching device capable of sending signals to the brain at a glance, moulding the minds of viewers and aptly telling stories. Ferguson (2001) states that memories about images are easily recalled. This is true as visuals evoke very strong emotions, readily bring up the image of a scene, and recall memory easily. When images (pictures) co-occur with texts, they are capable of blocking the message of the linguistic element if taken at a glance. According to Gibson & Zillmann (2000), photographs are capable of shifting the readers' focus from the content of the text to that of the perspective of the picture. This assertion aligns with Wischmann's (1987, p. 70) position that pictures are "*capable of not only obscuring issues but [also] of overwhelming facts*"; and that pictorials could even supersede the message in the textual part of a news item. Pictorials explain more effectively, the thought expressed by a text, either alone or in combination with its linguistic component. Thus, Jewitt & Oyama (2001, p. 140) note that the mode of image, similar to the semiotic mode of language, "*represents the world (whether in abstract or concrete ways) ...*" The pictorial elements of the online newspaper reportage examined in this paper exemplify significations of violence in the Nigerian socio-cultural space, which give the content of the reportage interpretation and perspectives.

The application of semiotics covers such areas as the media, politics, culture, religion, architecture, painting, etc., studying varieties of signs deployed in everyday life for the purpose of communication in form of gesture, facial expression, pictorials, graphics, etc. Semiotics, as the study of signs, is concerned with the physical form of a sign and its interpretation. Saussure's (1959) perspective on signs elucidates the relationship between the signifier and the signified, elaborating on the dyadic relationship of sign - the summary of which is that *signifier + signified = sign* because the sign connects the signifier and the signified, and where it fails to do so, it is not a sign but a mere object. Peirce expands the notion of sign further through his triadic perspective on sign giving three types of significations as categories of sign: icon, index and symbol. The iconic sign has a physical resemblance to the signified, that is, the thing it represents - a photograph is a good example as it resembles whatever it depicts. An indexical sign shows evidence of what is being represented; a good example is using an image of smoke to indicate a fire. In a symbolic sign, there may be no resemblance between the signifier and the signified; the connection between them must be culturally learned.

This paper examines the effectiveness of pictorials in the online newspaper reportage of the activities of Boko Haram sect and the Fulani herdsmen as semiotics sign carriage of violence across the Nigerian States. It examines the pictorials used in the online newspaper reportage of the activities of the Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen sects as communicative signs deployed to create awareness, condemn and curtail the acts of violence within the Nigerian geographical space.

The following are the objectives of the study:

- 1) determine if the pictorials in the online newspaper reportage of the Boko Haram sect and Fulani Herdsmen activities can be placed within the Nigerian socio-cultural space;
- 2) examine the similarities in the operations of the Boko Haram sect and the Fulani Herdsmen within Nigerian; and
- 3) make categorization between the iconic, indexical and symbolic meaning of pictorial of the online newspaper reportage used as data in this work.

The study, therefore, raises pertinent questions that guide the analysis of its data presentation as follows:

- 1) Can the pictorials in the online newspaper reportage of the Boko Haram sect and Fulani Herdsmen be placed in the Nigerian socio-space?
- 2) Are there similarities in the operations of the Boko Haram sect and the Fulani Herdsmen within Nigerians?
- 3) Can the iconic, the indexical and symbolic meaning of the pictorial of the online newspaper reportage used as data in this work be categorized?

## **2. Significance of the Study**

The use of images as a component of reportage is a rich area for academic study. There are many scholarly works on reportage, exploring the effectiveness of the use of images in media reporting, making pictorial, as a component of reportage a rich area for academic study. Few previous studies examined the effects of newspaper images on reader's retention. Others centred on the effects of images on social protests prior to attitudes, and some x-rayed the effect of text and images on the retention of incidental vocabulary while reading articles online (Akpan, 2009; Bruder, 2007; Yoshii & Flaitz, 2002). However, not many studies have been done in the area of the examination of the pictorials as semiotics signs carriage with potent representational and interpretational imports in online newspaper reportage of events in the society. The preoccupation of this work, therefore, is to establish pictorials as communicative sign carriage of concrete and implicative signification. At the same time, the study seeks to establish pictorials as effective communicative elements in online newspaper reportage in communicating the enormity of violence in Nigeria. While the study will not be absolute in adjudging the effectiveness of pictorials in online newspaper reportage, it will give a guide on the effectiveness of its usage in event capturing and attention-grabbing.

## **3. Theoretical Frameworks**

This paper entails the qualitative analysis of the semiotics imports embedded in the pictorials of the online newspaper reportage of the activities of Boko Haram sect and the Fulani herdsmen as sign carriage of violence across the Nigerian States. The study is anchored on the semiotics approach explicating Peirce's iconic, indexical and symbolic signification of sign as a theoretical methodology in order to analyse effectively, the underlining significations of the pictorials that reports the activities of the group.

The concern of semiotics, as the study of diverse systems of signs, is the inherent representation of an object that gives signification to its interpretation. Saussure (1989) elucidates the concept of the sign as the dyadic relationship that exists between the signifier and the signified. According to him, the sign connects the signifier and the signified, and where it fails to do so, it is not a sign but a mere object. This study notes that a sign may have mixed and wide ranged signification, going beyond signifier/signified in its interpretation, depending on the situational context in which it occurs. Peirce's (1931) categorisation of sign representamen as an icon, index and symbol in his triadic relations gives credence to the diverse interpretative imports a sign such as the pictorials examined in this study are capable of having. Moriarty (1994) notes in his research on visual literacy that Peirce's tripartition offers a wider avenue for visual analysis. This is supported by Semetsky's (2007) assertion that signs are polysemic in character; noting that a sign may have diverse meanings depending on the culture. This work, therefore, considers Peirce's triadic categorisation as a veritable approach to the production of meaning in semiotics analysis, using it as an approach to the analysis of the representamen of the pictorials of the online newspaper reportage on the activities of the Boko Haram sect and the Fulani herdsmen in the Nigerian socio-cultural space.

#### 4. Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative method of analysis. The pictorials were downloaded from the websites of two Nigerian online newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Punch* newspapers. Eight of the 14 pictorials were from *The Guardian* and the remaining six from *The Punch*. The reportage captured the violent activities of the Boko Haram sect and the Fulani herdsmen. The choice of the two newspapers is informed by availability, their circulation and content coverage, which cuts across the six geo-political zones in Nigeria, making them prominent national newspapers in Nigeria. The pictorials were purposively selected and downloaded from the sites of the papers for analysis in this work because they exemplify the communicative and operational pattern of the violent acts within the Nigerian socio-cultural space.

#### 5. Data Presentation and Analysis

##### 5.1 Pictorials Representations of Violent Activities in Nigeria

The first question guiding this research seeks to know if the pictorial representation of violence in the online newspaper reportage can be placed within the Nigerian socio-cultural space. Before the claim of violence across the Nigerian border can be ascertained, there is the need to situate, properly, the activities of the perpetrators within the Nigerian socio-cultural space. The combination of pictorials and captions makes the pictorials effective as semiotic signs to place their signification, the violent acts of the two groups within the Nigeria socio-cultural space. Visuals and text combine effectively in online newspaper reportage to give effective interpretation to the overall content of a reportage. The following captions, "*Boko Haram operated in Adamawa community for six hours*"- *The Punch* newspaper; "*B' Haram destroys one million buildings in Borno*" – *The Guardian* newspaper; "*Fulani Herdsmen kill 32 in Kogi State attack*" – *The Guardian* in Figures 6, 9 and 10 and "*Boko Haram displaced victims at Dikwa*"- *The Guardian*; "*How*

*Fulani herdsmen invaded Benue community, killed, maimed in midnight attack*” – *The Punch* and *“Boko Haram will keep killing, and Nigeria’s leaders are powerless”* - *The Guardian* in figures 11, 12 and 14 further give force to the significations of the setting of the violence acts of the Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen. All the violence locations and setting such as Borno Community, a state in the North-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, Kogi, a state located in the North Central region of Nigeria and Dikwa, a Local Government Area of Borno State, Nigeria as captioned in the pictorials are all located within the Nigerian socio-cultural space which makes the message of the pictorials more effective and concrete. The above explanation is supported by the assertion of Yoshii & Flaitz, 2002 that both image and text have a great impact on the retention of vocabulary and give effectiveness to the communicative import of newspaper reportage. Also, in Figure 5, the Nigerian flag in the pictorial of the slain military personnel is a signification of the nation Nigeria, which further acknowledges the potency or effectiveness of the pictorials in the interpretation of the setting of the actions they report.

The pictorials and the captions in the online newspapers confirm that the setting of the operations of the Boko Haram and the Fulani herdsmen sects is predominantly Nigeria. In the picture showing where the 14 officers of the Nigerian army are being buried, we have the Nigerian flag which is the signification of the Nigerian entity as a nation. Finally, the captions in Figure 14 that read: *“Boko Haram will keep killing, and Nigeria’s leaders are powerless”* suggests strongly, that the setting of the violence represented by the pictorials is indeed Nigeria. All over the world, the name Boko Haram and its operation are identified with Nigeria. What’s more, the protagonist of this statement frustratingly expresses her disappointment in the government of Nigeria: *“and the Nigeria’s leaders are powerless”*

## **5.2 The Similarities of the Operations of the Boko Haram Sect and the Fulani Herdsmen in the Nigerian Sociocultural Space**

The second research question of the work seeks to know if there are similarities in the operations of the Boko Haram sect and the Fulani herdsmen within Nigeria. To answer this question effectively, the elements of pictorials on the report of the activities of the two groups would be examined to identify the pattern and instruments of operation to determine if they manifest commonality features in their various violent activities across the nation. The pattern of operation of the Boko Haram sects and the Fulani herdsmen as explicated in the selected pictures is violence typified. The two groups engaged in the use of dangerous instruments in their operations; chiefly among them are guns and explosives, which are sign signifiers of violence.

The pictorials of the online newspaper reportage in Figures 1 - 10 explicitly show that the Boko Haram sects and the Fulani herdsmen engage in the use of guns and explosives which are destructive instruments of violence and war. Figures 1 and 2 portray, significantly, the violent features of the two groups by the appearance of the Boko Haram sect in Figure 1 and that of the Fulani herder in Figure 2. Figure 1 shows masked Boko Haram men carrying guns while in Figure 2, the Fulani herder also carries a gun while pasturing! In Figures 1 and 2, the commonality of operation of the Boko Haram sect and that of the Fulani herder, as depicted in the pictorials is violence. The common referent element in the pictorials is a gun, which suggests that the gun, a weapon of violence, is a common operational instrument of both the Boko Haram sect and the Fulani herdsmen. It is, therefore, appropriate to identify the two groups as violence

agents with similarity of operations, that maim, destroy, kill, etc. Explosive is also another instrument common to the operations of the two groups. The magnitude of the ruins in the pictorials of the online newspaper reports in Figures 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 are probably caused by explosives. Figure 6 shows how the Boko Haram men raised down a building that looks like a church in Adamawa community in an operation that lasted for six hours as reported by *The Punch* newspaper (see caption). Also, the pictorials in Figures 7, 8 and 9 are all sign imports of ruins of great magnitude occasioned by the activities of Boko Haram and the Fulani herdsmen. As captioned in Figure 7, *The Guardian* newspaper reports that children were among the villagers burnt to death in the attack by the Boko Haram. In Figure 8, *the Punch* newspaper reports how the Boko Haram destroyed 1500 schools in the North East of Nigeria as shown in the caption. Also, *the Guardian* newspaper in Figures 9 and 10 shows the ruins of one million buildings in Borno occasioned by the Boko Haram violence (Figure 9), and that of the inferno occasioned by the Fulani herdsmen attack in Kogi State in Figure 10.

### **5.3 The Iconic, Indexical and Symbolic Import of Pictorials of the Activities of the Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen in the Online Newspaper Reportage**

Research question three seeks to know the iconic, indexical and symbolic import of the pictorial in the online newspaper reportage in this work. To answer this question, the pictorials will be identified and analytically discussed as any or all of Peirce's triadic categorisation of signs as iconic, indexical and symbolic sign carriages. This will be done using these categorisations to examine the pictorials as semiotics communicative signs implicative of violence in concrete, indicative and inferences terms in the Nigerian socio-space. A sign, in semiotics, refers to something that is capable of interpretation apart from itself; something that can stand for or signify something else. Saussure, in his theory of signs, describes signifier and signified as components of signs, describing the relationship between a signifier and a signified as signification. To him, the relationship between the material form and its mental concept is what defines a sign. The material form of sign is the signifier while the signified is the meaning, concept, etc. inferred from the signifier; that is, the meaning conveyed by the sign. In semiotics analysis, the above knowledge is key as a sign is not a sign, in the proper sense of it, but a mere object if it does not have signified concept(s) associated with it.

It should be noted that the relationship between the signifier and the signified can sometimes be arbitrary depending on the place, situation, culture and context in which the sign occurs. Hence, Peirce expatiates on sign relations in his triadic categorisation of iconic, indexical and symbolic. In iconic signs, there is a strong physical similitude between the signifier and the signified. For example, anytime we see the picture or image of a human being, barring the knowledge of the identification of personality representation, we can use the semantic component of the word meaning to categorise the interpretations of the image as +human, +or-adult, +or-male following Katz (1972) postulation. An indexical sign describes a situation where the sign as signifier relates with the signified in a way through indication. The popular indexical examples are smoke and fire, cloud and rain. In the case of a symbolic sign, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is culturally, socially and contextually connected or inferred as there is no inherent connection between the signifier and the signified. The above means that the sign signification, that is, the signifier and signified relationship of a sign object

may vary. A sign signification may have a direct, indicative or inferred relationship between its signifier and the signified. It, therefore, means that even though a picture may look like what it represents, inferences abound in its interpretations. The pictorials used in the online newspaper reportage examined in this work are semiotics signs that give signification to the online newspaper reportage, portraying inherently iconic componential elements that present symbolic and indexical inferences of violence as a true-life experience in the Nigerian socio-cultural space.

A pictorial that is an iconic sign can also be adequately analysed at the indexical level of representation by connecting the sense relation of the sign to what it indicates. A good example is the pictorial of a gun in Figures 1 and 2, which is the common instrument of operation of both the Boko Haram sect and the Fulani herdsmen. Iconically, a gun can be identified and mentally interpreted as *"a weapon from which bullets or other things are fired"*. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/gun>, and by implication, *"a ranged weapon which can engage targets beyond hand-to-hand distance, i.e. at distances greater than the physical reach of the user holding the weapon itself."* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ranged\\_weapon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ranged_weapon). Conversely, the knowledge of the meaning of a gun as a weapon can generate indexical signification for its object representation once identified - as a weapon indicative of violence, danger, war, death, etc. The summary of the above is that iconically, a gun is mentally and universally recognised as a weapon. Indexically, it is an instrument of war, killing object, death, etc. and has symbolically interpretative dimensions dictated by culture, experience, etc. inducing fear, agony, sorrow, etc. Recognising what the pictures of guns in Figures 1 and 2 stand for in their denotational sense is to see it as an iconic sign. However, beyond the similarity of identity in the representation of its picture is the inferences the picture is capable of making, in addition to the subconscious or spontaneous image that it produces in the minds of the viewers. Peirce (1931, p. 58) affirms this when he says that *"it would be difficult if not impossible to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality"*. The above shows that iconic, indexical and symbolic signs are interwoven in their analysis and may sometimes be difficult to set a boundary as they are not mutually exclusive; and a sign can be one and all of the categories depending on the interpretant.

#### **5.4 Iconic Representation of Pictorials of the Activities of the Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen in the Online Newspaper Reportage**

In the pictorials, there are iconic signs with direct imitation of the concept or object they represent, that is, they have physical similitude between the object as signifier and what they signified. Iconicity refers to a semiotics system that refers to signals whose physical form closely corresponds to characteristics of the situations to which they refer. Crystal (2008:234). Most of the pictorials are characteristically iconic in their presentation, capable of literal interpretations. The elements of the pictorials can be directly recognised as human beings, guns, cows, coffin, grave, corpse, flag, etc. because they are known photographs bearing a physical resemblance to what they represent. A human being can be a man, woman, young and old, As earlier mentioned, anytime we see a picture of human beings, the picture can be semantically classified with the features: +human, +or - male, +or-adult. A gun is a gun, whether in picture or physical form, as a shooting weapon. The pictorial of cows in Figure 2 is another iconic sign with universal interpretant as *"cattle that are commonly raised as livestock for meat, diary, hides, etc."*

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cattle>. The pictures of coffins, graves, and corpses in Figures 3, 4 and 5 are iconic sign representations that can be mentally recognised by viewers. Iconically, a coffin or casket has the signification of the box or case in which the body of a dead person is placed for burial <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/coffin>. A corpse, iconically is a signification of a dead body especially of a human being <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/corpse>, while a grave is an iconic signification of an excavation for the burial of a body – broadly: a burial place. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/grave>. All the elements above are sign imports of death, sorrow, loss, etc., making them indexical signs. It is, therefore, easy to describe the relationship existing between the signifier and the signified as noted above as iconic signification because the first thing that comes to the brain of their viewers is the mental pictures of interpretation of the signs in real life.

### **5.5 Indexical Representation of Pictorials of the Activities of the Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen in the Online Newspaper Reportage**

The pictorials in the online newspaper reportage are semiotic signs with indexical references to violence as a true-life experience. They showcase elements that are sign carriage with indexical signifiers. There may be no resemblance between an indexical sign and the object or concept it is used to represent but indicative deductive. Peirce (1935-1958: 143) describes an index as a sign that represents its object or concept by means of a temporary, spatial, or even causal connection with the object. The relationship between the signifier and the signified in the indexical sign carriage elements is easily understood and is universal, just like the popular semiotics example of smoke and fire and cloud and rain. Apart from the direct connections of the elements of the pictorials of human beings, guns and cows (Figures 1 and 2) with the mental and realistic images they represent as discussed above, there are meaning inferences outside their mental constructs. While the pictorial of the men in Figures 1 and 2 has the semantics feature of +human, +adult, +male in line with Katz' postulation, their dressing, facial expression and posture are suggestive, giving further interpretative clues to the viewers. Mentally or denotatively, they are human beings (men); indicatively, they could be sign representamen of warriors, killers (carrying guns), marauders, thieves (masking of faces), etc.; and the appearances connecting them with one or more emotions of fear, apprehension, etc. The interpretation of the signified of an indexical signifier is implicative, therefore, there has to be the presence of the signified as a sign for the signifier to exist. The interpretation of the pictorials of guns in Figures 1 and 2 can be taken beyond its iconic signification; what comes to mind at the sight of a gun is danger, war, death, etc. Human beings and guns are therefore indexes of war, fear, death, danger, violence, etc.

The indexical signs inherent in a pictorial may be common knowledge of viewers, in which case, the indication of the signs is known innately; or may be new, in which case it is learned and becomes part of the experience and future knowledge. The purpose of the use of pictorials in the online newspaper reportage examined in this work is to enhance the understanding of its reportage on the activities of the Boko Haram sect and the Fulani herdsmen. This is effectively done with the combination of pictorials with orthographic representation in message delivery. This brings another dimension into the interpretations that the various pictorials in the online newspaper reportage could have; i.e., the background information, as provided in the various captions in the pictorials, connect the pictorials to the theme of the



reportage, revealing the identification of the pictorials of human beings in Figures 1 and 2 as that of Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen.

The pictorials in Figures 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 have a clear indication of violence. Just like flame is indicative of fire, what we have in the pictures are ashes, burnt houses, flames, etc. which are all indications of consuming and destructive fire. Of course, the destructive views in the pictorials are aptly captured as *"Boko Haram operated in Adamawa community for six hours"* (Figure 6); *"Boko Haram: children among villagers burned to death in Nigeria attack"* (Figure 7); *"1500 schools destroyed by Boko Hara in North-East"* (Figure 8); *"B'Haram destroys one million building in Borno"* (Figure 9) and *"Fulani herdsmen kill 32 in Kogi State attack"* (Figure 10). These five captions effectively give further information on the massive destructions the pictorials unveiled by giving information on the location where the activities of Boko Haram and the Fulani herdsmen took place. They are indexical signs of sorrow, death, crying, emotional disturbances, etc. evoked by the pictorials of coffins, graves and corpses as shown in Figures 3, 4 and 5. These pictorials have grave connections: graves and coffins are indications of death. Without the physical presence of the viewers at the scene of the violent activities captured in the media report, the pictorials are semiotic imports, the signification of the deadly activities of both the Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen. Where there is a flame, there is fire. The fire symbolizes violence, destruction, war, etc. it elicits emotional, mental and abstract connectivity, giving viewers mottled perceptions and feeling about them, in relation to the product(s) they represent. For example, seeing the picture of the cow in the online newspaper reportage readily brings to mind common interpretation in the minds of Nigerians beyond its natural denotational meaning of the object of survival, meal, meat etc. to one of destruction as earlier discussed to mean a destructive animal known to destroy farms and land across the Nigerian nations and the Fulani herdsmen's killing.

### **5.6 Symbolic Representation of Pictorials of the Activities of the Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen in the Online Newspaper Reportage**

The pictorials in the online newspaper reportage are semiotic signs capable of symbolic interpretations induced by the knowledge of the viewers of the violent activities in the Nigerian socio-cultural space. Unlike the direct interpretation possible in the analysis of the iconic representation of the elements of the pictorials, the symbolic representation of the signs is completely arbitrary with inferences and connotative interpretations drawn from past experience, situational context and the sociocultural nuances surrounding the sign usage. According to Peirce (1935-1958: 169-170), a symbolic sign has no obvious link or similarity with the object it describes. There is, in most cases, no logical connection between the pictorial and their symbolic representations.

It is noted that most of the pictorials used in this paper have symbolic implications and inferences. The meaning of the pictorials in the online newspaper reportage, as shown above, does not entirely reside in the object of the sign carriage but in the associative contexts in which they are used, and other components of the pictorials such as gestures, body language, facial expressions, etc. This means that perception, based on emotion, experience, and social and cultural beliefs all play subjective roles in the interpretation of signs, thereby capable of giving a sign construct varied interpretations, as noted by Mahmud (2019), depending on the context and socio-cultural lenses in which it is looked.

The interpretation of the sign construct of the pictorials used in this reportage goes beyond the direct interpretative relation of the signifier and the signified as it is in the case of iconic signs. Significantly, many of the signs are capable of inferences beyond the direct correlate. They have perceived mental and induced inferences. The pictorial of the activities of the Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen as depicted in the newspaper pictorials elicit emotions; therefore, inducing abstract connection of life experiences. For example, the pictures of the gun in Figure 1 and 2 elicit fear from the viewers as an instrument of death, which has been internalized in the sub-consciousness of Nigerians in relation to herdsmen and cattle rearing. What would readily come to the mind of any Nigerian at the sight of a gun as shown in Figure 1 and 2, therefore, is the mental interpretation of the pictorials as objects of violence, killing, maiming, etc. occasioned by the Boko Haram sect and the Fulani herders. The feeling the pictorials generate is that of pity, sorrow, fear, etc. because, according to Nelson, (2020, p. 8), the gun, as a symbol, has depth and meaning beyond its objective form and function, noting that a gun has the power to take life like no other object. The viewers will be quick to connect the pictorial with the mental interpretation of the previous knowledge gathered on the violent groups giving them a vivid description and stronger impression of their operations being reported in the media pictorials. The pictures are capable of giving viewers a strong indication that the convergence underlining the motive of the Boko Haram sects and the Fulani herdsmen is terrorism based on the similarities of their activities which they are quick to connect with the information already gathered about their operations and the spate at which they happen.

At the symbolic level of semiotic analysis of pictorials, therefore, the interpretative elements are full of inferences and conclusions based on the context of usage. Cooking by women is a household and public common occurrence but it becomes, in the context of the pictorial in Figure 9, an object signifying displacement, suffering, desolation, etc. as it is occasioned not by celebration, which is the usual denotation of public cooking but this time around, a live-saving, pitiable exercise to care for the displaced victims of the Boko Haram sect. The caption of the pictorial in Figure 11 that "*Boko Haram displaced victims at Dikwa...*" effectively gives justification to the feelings that this picture may infuse from the viewers. This is also applicable to Figure 12 and 13 where the human elements in the pictorial are interpreted beyond their iconic representations to signify pain, sorrow, etc. This is clearly shown in the posture and facial appearance of the helpless wounded victims of the Boko Haram in Figure 12 and that of the woman described as Benue female farmer that her hand was cut off by the Fulani herdsmen during one of the attacks on Benue. While some of the victims are either displaced (Figure 12) or admitted as patients in the hospital (figs. 12 and 13), many are not alive to tell the stories. Figures 3, 4 and 5 show the fatality of the operations of the Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen violent activities where scores of coffins of people killed by the Fulani herdsmen are conveyed in a possession (Figure 3). In Figure 5, the bodies of the military men, victims of the Boko Haram sect are seen being laid to rest. *The Guardian* captions Figure 6 as "*the land flowing with milk and blood*", with the pictorial showing different corpses of victims of violence prepared for burial. The identified semiotic visual modes in the activities of the Boko Haram and the Fulani herdsmen as shown above have similar features. They are all significations of fear, terror, pain, torture, killing, trauma, displacement, etc. The pictorial used by *The Guardian* newspaper in its reportage of violence in Nigeria as captured in Figure 14 is that of a woman lamenting the helplessness of the

Nigerian leaders. Her facial expression suggests sadness, frustration, and her posture that of a troubled and emotionally disturbed victim: her hands are placed on her head and chest as a sign of frustration, bleeding emotion, frustration, worry, etc. These nonverbal elements further give force to the sign import of this picture as it expresses the thought, opinion, frustration and lamentation of the woman that *“Boko Haram will keep killing, and Nigeria’s leaders are powerless”!* This picture is symbolic of the effect of the activities of violent activities on the Nigerian people. The woman is thus, a voice, symbolic of the feelings, thoughts, opinions and frustration of the Nigerian populace on the activities of the two groups. The pictorials of the coffin and grave in Figure 4 are a symbolic indication of death. Death is a source of sorrow, not only to the family but to the Nigerian populace. The pictorial, therefore, evokes such emotions as fear, pity, anger, sorrow, etc., in the minds of the viewers which is aptly portrayed by the woman in Figure 14, while lamenting the dastardly activities of the Boko Haram sect. In Figure 5, the Nigerian flag is an iconic representation of the country and inherently has indexical and symbolic representations of the country, Nigeria. In the picture above, the flag is not hoisted, it is draped in the corpses of the service men who fell in the hands of the Boko Haram. This is a symbolic representation of Nigeria as a land of violence, death, and sorrow where military men fall in the hands of “non-state actors”. This assertion is supported in Figure 4 with the caption describing Nigeria as *“a land flowing with milk and blood”*.

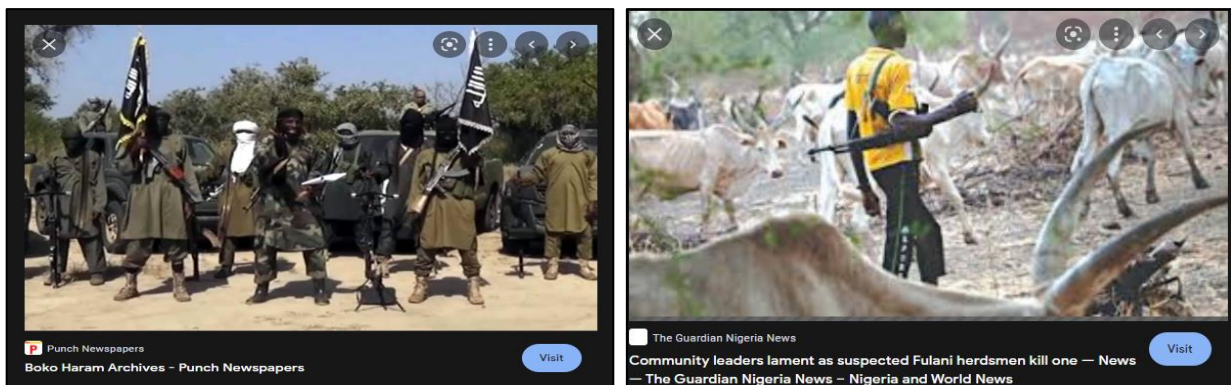


Figure 1 & 2: Pictorials of the Boko Haram Sect and the Fulani Herdsmen, the Perpetrators of Violence in Nigeria

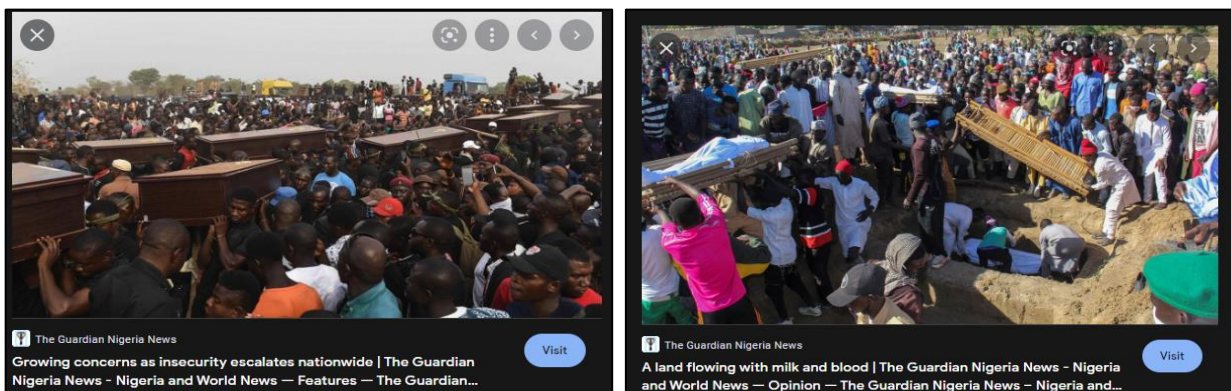
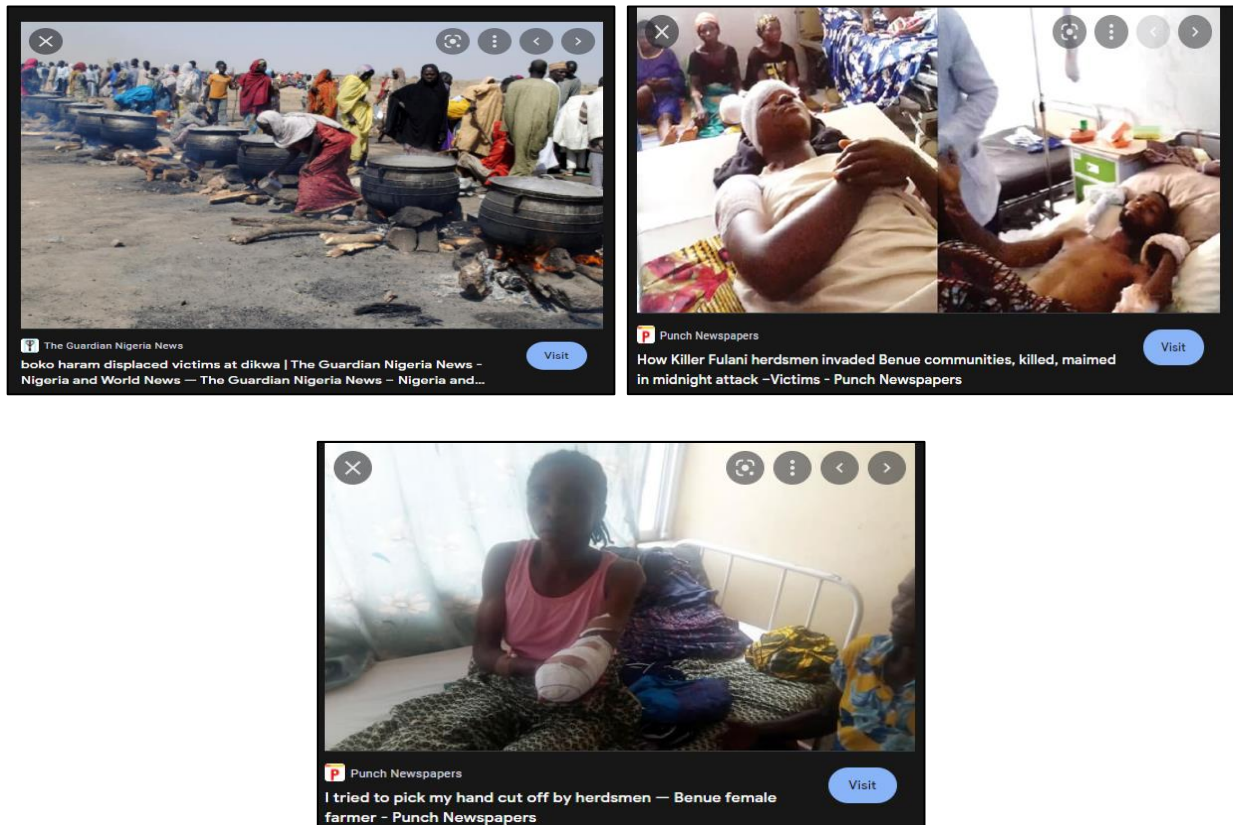




Figure 3, 4 and 5: Pictorials Showing Casualties of the Violent Activities of the Boko Haram Sect and the Fulani Herdsmen in Nigeria



Figures 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10: Pictorials Showing the Destructive Outcomes of the Activities of the Boko Haram Sect and the Fulani Herdsmen in Nigeria



**Figure 11, 12 and 13:** Pictorials Showing the Victims of the Violent Activities of the Boko Haram Sect and the Fulani Herdsmen in Nigeria



**Figure 14:** Pictorials showing the body language of a woman lamenting over the violent activities in Nigeria

## 7. Conclusion

Visuals as semiotics signs are capable of connecting meaning to social, religions and cultural contexts through the inherent components of its content. This explains the importance of pictorials in bringing into the fore, the physical, inherent, unsaid linguistic and symbolic

variables in the communicative text in which it is deployed. The effectiveness of a pictorial in an online newspaper reportage lies in its interpretant. It is discovered that the sense and meaning-making features of a pictorial do not necessarily lie in the components of the object, that is, the pictures, but in the possible inferences therein. The examples in the pictorials as shown above explain the non-affinity of the sign interpretant. The pictorials are all, apart from the iconic representation, capable of diverse interpretations as an element of socio-cultural sentiment could be brought to bear in their interpretation. This is so as cultural and social constructs are ingredients of symbolic significations where implied meaning is given.

This paper concludes that the signification of the pictorials in the online newspaper reportage examined in this work can be properly placed within the interrelationship of its sign construct, that is, the actions performed by the contents of the pictorial (interpretation) in relation to their forms, which are the signified, and the object to envision the core meaning of the content, the signifier.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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