

Analysis of the Impact of Catholic Newspapers on Social Cohesion of Persecuted Christians in North-Central Nigeria, 2020–2025

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I. INTRODUCTION

Background of study

North Central Nigeria popularly described as Middle Belt, over the recent years has experienced escalating religious crisis and violence, which has affected the Christian communities. Attacks have come from bandits, armed militia, Fulani herdsmen and Islamic extremists (Open Doors, 2025; ACN, 2025). Research has shown that Nigeria has recorded over 3,100 Christians killed and 2,830 Christians kidnapped in 2024 alone (Open Doors, 2025). The various attacks on Christian communities have not only destroyed church buildings and other structures of worship, but they have also scattered many Christian groups, turning survivors into internally displaced persons (Intersociety, 2023). This leads to the fragmentation of social structures of the communities. Gindiri (2023) affirms that persecution leads to elevated and insidious type of displacement leaving the community scattered and desolated. Scholars like Craig and Nuralmanga, (2006); Entman, (1994) affirm that “the way and manner in which the media report religious crisis or persecution affects the prolongation or early resolution of such conflicts.

Research concerning Christian persecution and the consumption of newspaper by the persecuted Christians have been carried out with no clear indication of connection between them. Yamamoto (2011) conducted a study proving that consumption of community newspaper can promote social cohesion and mutual reintegration. The Catholic Church in Nigeria has a rich repository of significant network of both print and digital media including the well-circulated diocesan and congregational newspapers scattered over Nigeria. Akodu (2023)

opines that Catholic newspapers cover a wide range of socio-political issues and possess wide readership base. Prominent among them is The Leader of Owerri, The Partner of Ijebu, The Independent of Ibadan, The Rock of Abeokuta, The Good Shepherd of Abuja, The Herald of Lagos, The Star of Makurdi and Nigeria Catholic Network of Abuja. These newspapers do not only report ecclesiastical matters but serve as a critical provider of information to different communities, whether in urban or rural areas, especially during the persecution period. Opaade (2025) holds that secular media underreport news about persecution, suggesting rather that Catholic newspapers are in a better position to report it. Religious leaders have increasingly called for a shift in conflict reporting; notably, Bishop David Ajang of the Lafia Diocese urged journalists to prioritize credible news that offers encouragement to persecuted Christians, rather than a kind of reporting that deepens communal trauma (The Guardian, 2021). By this, he encouraged Catholic journalists to practice truth and justice and achieve common good through news distribution by reproving persecution and creatively supporting the scattered persecuted communities. There seems to be a need to understand how this media effort enables social cohesion among the Christian communities who have been both physically and psychologically dispersed.

Statement of problem

Understanding the extent to which Catholic newspapers mitigate the social fragmentation of persecuted Christian communities in North-Central Nigeria is an important enquiry. This is relevant as one of the core mandates of Catholic press is to inform and form ((Lucero, 2022). This can be done by providing an authoritative, objective, resilience-based and reliable source of news without which

social cohesion collapse since people cannot agree on basic facts. The denial of the context of the persecution of Christians in the North Central region by the government becomes problematic as the victims continue to cry for help. Danjuma (2025) has criticized the secular media, both national and western, for reporting the crises from the lens of climate change and herders-farmers clashes. Existing research has essentially focused on the use of Catholic social media and digital advocacy like Facebook and Youtube content making in reporting Christian persecution (Udeze, 2023). However, digital content or skit making has the potential of spreading unverified stories, which can further create panic and disunite the frail and vulnerable communities. In contrast, the impact of official Catholic newspapers; printed or online, which offer curated, authoritative, and community-centric reporting, remains understudied in the context of the North-Central crisis.

The gap in current knowledge is not merely about "what" is being reported, but "how" that reporting affects the communal psyche. While existing literature has investigated social cohesion outcomes such as "trust" and "mutual aid" through newspaper consumption (Yamamoto, 2013), there is scanty qualitative evidence explaining how the specific consumption of Catholic newspapers helps shattered Christian communities navigate trauma. Because mainstream media has failed to provide a consistent narrative that recognizes their suffering, these dispersed populations are left without a reliable medium to reconnect with their identity or foster the resilience needed to survive. This study, therefore, seeks to analyze the unique role of the Catholic newspaper as a specialized medium that might provide the social cohesion and communal "glue" that secular and digital media have failed to deliver in North-Central Nigeria.

Research Objectives:

1. To analyze, between 2020–2025, the dominant themes and frames used by Catholic newspapers to portray persecution and Christian suffering.
2. To examine how persecuted Christian individuals in North Central Nigeria interpret and react to the narratives presented in Catholic newspapers.

3. To assess the influence of Catholic newspaper content on collective action, social support, and communal cohesion among these Christians.

Research Questions:

1. What frames and themes do Catholic newspapers use to portray the persecution and suffering of Christians?
2. How do persecuted Christians in North Central Nigeria interpret and react to the narratives presented in Catholic newspapers.?
3. In what ways do Catholic newspapers content stimulate collective action, social support, and communal cohesion among these Christians?

Significance of the Study

This study promises several key contributions. Theoretically, it expands scholarship at the intersection of media studies, religious sociology, and conflict studies by focusing on faith-based press rather than secular media. Practically, it will offer the Catholic Church in Nigeria evidence-based insights into how its media can better foster resilience, community trust, and mobilization during crises. Socially, the findings can empower persecuted Christians by illustrating how media narratives influence their sense of belonging and collective identity, thereby strengthening social bonds. Finally, the research can inform policy makers, peacebuilders, and religious organizations about communication strategies that promote societal cohesion amidst persecution.

This study draws its strategies from three theories. The Media Framing theory was used to analyze how Catholic Newspapers report persecution and how the readers interpret it amidst martyrdom, advocacy and identity. This study also banked on the Social Responsibility theory to see how Catholic Newspaper has served public interest through the promotion of fairness, truth and ethics (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956). This study engages the concept of Uses and Gratifications theory to evaluate how Catholic Newspapers have satisfied the audience specific needs of information, emotional support and identity reinforcement (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). This will define how reliable these

newspapers have been for hope building and social cohesion.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study examines how Catholic newspapers in North Central Nigeria utilize Framing, Uses and Gratifications, and Social Responsibility theories to mitigate the effects of systematic persecution and foster social cohesion within Christian communities. The interrelationship between newspaper consumption and social cohesion is an essential field of enquiry. In the face of systematic persecution as described by Open Doors (2025), the role of media can no longer be limited to information dissemination. The literature review shall address the inter-relationship between Catholic newspapers, persecution among Christian communities and social cohesion in North central Nigeria. This study reviews how different theoretical frameworks provide the lens through which the crux of the study can be perceived. The Framing Theory, Uses and Gratifications and Social Responsibility theories are reviewed to understand the function of the Catholic newspapers in promoting cohesion strategy.

The North Central comprises of Benue, Plateau, Kogi, Nasarawa, Niger, Kwara States and Federal Capital Territory. Research established that North Central is the major zone for religious crisis. Benue State has the worst displaced Christian communities in Nigeria (Guardian, 2025). Herders clashing with Christians in rural inter land of Plateau state is frequent (Higazi, 2011; Krause, 2019)

The concept of social cohesion is understood as healthy interconnectedness among people to promote cooperation, and equity in allocation of the common good (Wachukwu 2024). In a conflict inflicted zone like the North Central, media framing is important to decide whether conflicts will be escalated or decimated through reconciliation. Researchers like Tunde (2024) have argued that unverified and biased religious content may increase crisis and undermine cohesion. However, faith-based media have assisted through communication channels to provide mutual

aid and coordinate relief (Idris et al., 2023). Additionally, Vonhm (2025) posits that faith-based media are vital for rebuilding cohesion.

Catholic newspapers are produced by the Catholic Church and serve a distinct audience in the universal media landscape. They may be weekly or monthly and may also be international, national or diocesan. They are not limited to religious matters. Akintoye, Azeez and Adelusi (2025) conducted a content analysis of three Nigerian Catholic newspapers and found out that they frequently report secular news and conflicts. Catholic newspapers have reported frequent religious violent attacks on Christian communities, blaming Jihadist agenda by Boko haram and ISWAP. Many credible news outlets have reported that 50,000 Christians have been martyred in Nigeria since 2009 (Intersociety; Vatican News 2023). Catholic Herald of 10th June 2025 quoted Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama of Abuja saying Christian communities in Northern Nigeria especially the North Central remain a hot bed for brutal attacks by armed groups. CNA reports that 19,000 churches have been destroyed (CNA, 26th September 2025).

Media Framing theory

This theory as defined by Entman (1993) is the selection of some aspects of a perceived reality to make them more important in the communication context. This explains how the media selects, arranges and presents information to shape the interpretation of the audience. Almakaty (2025) posits that there is no generally held definition of what framing and its effects are, as researchers differ based on studies and methodology. Kuhberger (2023) argues instead that the framing effect is consistent across many studies contrary to Methodological Fragmentation as emphasized by Almakaty. Fadeji et al. (2025) differentiate between Framing and Agenda setting, holding that Framing falls short of economic and political realities for media production like ownership and commercial incentive. This is not a barrier as not all studies are political or economic focused. It only shows the evolution of the theory. Moral frames and community frames would present the readers a look at the issues from a Catholic lens.

During religious violence, the media make sure they construct the lens through which the persecuted Christians give meaning to their traumatic experience. In addition to the violence reported, the frame has the capacity to magnify the issue of division or reconciliation. Opanchi (2025) opines that the general secular newspapers methodologically reduce the gravity of the attacks on Christians through "episodic framing" describing them as isolated clashes between herders and farmers. Similarly, Danjuma (2025) argues that international media often explain the narrative in a "climate change" frame which eliminates the religious connotation of the attacks. Such exclusion narrative may create a sense of disillusionment among the suffering communities.

Nevertheless, other authors have a divergent view about the framing of the Christian persecution. According to Akodu (2025), Catholic newspapers such as the Catholic Star and The Leader utilize specific diagnostic and prognostic frames to shape the narrative of the North-Central crisis. By identifying the root causes of the violence and proposing community-based solutions, these publications reinforce the idea that even in the face of intense persecution, the strength and resilience of Christian communities are found within their shared communal bonds and collective faith. This framing presents the experience as Martyrdom and not coward abandonment of their faith or defeat. It is pertinent to identify that Akodu does not prove that the Martyrdom frame contributes to the social cohesion of the Christian community. Shoemaker and Strenhall (2014) are of the opinion that frame of shared identity in persecution zones is more important than the frame of polarization of the communities.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory was propounded by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) which explains what people do with media instead of what media do to people. It holds that audience are not passive participants in the information circle, but they are active seekers of information to satisfy specific needs which may be psychological or social. Batiasevi (2024) surveyed 1,176 users to discover that social

enhancement and entertainment are parts of the motive of media use. Sichach (2023), however, argues that this theory underestimates the constraints of media access, affordability and cultural structure which consequently suggests excessive freedom of choice for the audience. Religious media provide interpretive frameworks that help audiences navigate crises, contributing to psychological stability and resilience (Lynch, 2013). This suggests that this theory may provide a model to assess the effect of Catholic Newspapers in North Central Nigeria.

Hartley (2020) describes the persecution of the North-Central Christian community as having an atomizing effect, forcing the dispersal of the social fabric of the community. In this context, the consumption of the content of Catholic newspapers would be for survival and not for leisure. Yamamoto (2011) argues that community newspapers usually promote social cohesion as they create local attachment and build the sense of neighborhood. The Catholic Newspapers consequently are likely to fulfill the credibility niche by becoming a symbol of the existence of the community despite the reality that the people are scattered. Though Yamamoto (2011) shows the newspaper consumption in a very peaceful western society, it does not discuss how consumption dissipates fear or creates hope among the Christian community. This gap needs to be enquired.

Social Responsibility Theory

Social Responsibility Theory as propounded by Hutchin's Commission and elucidated by McQuail (1987) holds that the freedom of the press is essentially tied to the obligation to be at the service of the public good, prevent societal disorder and ensure protection for the vulnerable. This is a theory of Mass communication that states that media should be free from government control with the obligation to serve the public responsibly and ethically. Umoren and Akpan (2023) posit that many journalists lack the understanding of the theory's tenets as there is a lacuna between the ideals and the practice. Scana and Gjerzi (2024) found out that media organizations are unable to practice the ethical tenets because of economic and political constraints. Horowitz et al. (2022) and Martin (2021) in their comparative

findings hold contrarily that the organization strategy and policy can overcome economic and political constraint. Catholic newspapers, which are non-governmental platforms, may foster social cohesion through ethical reporting, value reinforcement, civic mobilization, and dialogic engagement.

Empirical Literature

Empirical studies on crisis management and media present a nuance to the critical role played by religious institutions in conflict-torn zones. Onah (2018) records how Christianity mediates during conflict resolution within Nigeria, holding that religious institutions often provide the only viable safety option for displaced populations. The presence of religious undertone to societal conflict resolution is critical to the eventual result of the resolution. Similarly, Emenike (2020) observes that religious-based media bodies intentionally frame various ethno-religious crisis through theological lenses, which helps to de-escalate conflict intensity or reinforce sectarian identities depending on the narrative. In like manner, research by Aguolu (2021) further emphasizes the "Family" metaphor in church communication, holding that it transforms religious membership into moral kinship obligations during crises. Regarding displacement, Human Rights Watch (2023) reports that information dissemination is a primary driver of survival among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), yet there remains a gap in understanding how newspaper specifically facilitates this compared to digital radio or TV. While Horowitz (2019) discusses ethnic polarization generally, there is limited scholarship focusing specifically on the impact of diocesan newspapers between 2020 and 2025 amidst the escalation of Middle Belt violence.

Methodological Literature

Methodologically, Creswell and Creswell's (2018) make use of Mixed-Methods Longitudinal Content Analysis as a framework for combining quantitative keyword counting with qualitative thematic interpretation. The approach provides for the measuring of linguistic patterns like the frequency of "We" while elucidating their narrative function. Kitchen's (2014) utilized secondary data in alignment with principles of data infrastructures, where public records are treated as valuable archives for analyzing

societal structures without direct human intervention. It maintains that secondary data alone can function in analyzing conflict-torn area of research. In support of this method, Bowen (2009) argues that texts are rich sources for cultural norms comprehension over time. Furthermore, ethical protocols adhere to guidelines for research involving vulnerable populations. American Psychological Association (2017), ensures that even secondary data involving conflict victims is handled with sensitivity to avoid re-traumatization or exposing locations to further risk.

Conceptual Literature review

Christian Persecution in the Middle Belt

In the contemporary African context, Christian persecution emanates far beyond theological dissent but carries distinct anti-faith characteristics. In Nigeria, persecution manifests itself as ethno-religious crisis, where Christian populations are intentionally targeted, despite underlying economic benefits (Onah, 2018). Christian persecution in North Central Nigeria involves systematic killing of believers, burning of worship spaces, displacement of believers, and the desecration of sacred symbols (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This condition makes the Christians to shift their attention from political participation to basic biological security and faith preservation. Consequently, many of them suffer induced Psychological Trauma that affects group identity because of repeated attacks.

Defining Social Cohesion in Conflict Zones

Social cohesion is frequently misunderstood as merely the absence of conflict. However, in conflict sociology, it is understood as the presence of communal values, trust and enduring relationships among members of a community (Putnam, 2000; OECD, 2011). It is the ability of community to form resilience by absorbing shocks and maintaining functionality. Social cohesion could be internal or external. Internal cohesion on one hand is the type of bonding that exists within the same group (Christians to Christians). Reicher et al. (2012), holds that internal cohesion glues a group together and prevents individuals from deserting the group during conflict. External Cohesion on the other hand is the bonding existing across diverse groups like Christians to Muslims, State to Citizens). Olorunnisola (2019),

holds that North Central Nigeria depends on non-state actors like religious groups for cohesion because of the perceived state failure. One of the methods utilized by religious groups is the use of media.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts an Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods. This is chosen because it allows for quantitative tracking of linguistic patterns (frequency of keywords) followed by qualitative explanation of their impact on cohesion. This study chooses the research methodology of Mixed-Methods Longitudinal Content Analysis. This allows the researcher to leverage the systematic evaluation of manifest content numerically and thematic depiction of hidden meaning (Hamad et al., 2016). This method is necessary as it may manifest how often the frames of social cohesion appear and their concomitant analysis of social responsibility in the newspapers.

Sources of Data

This study makes use of two distinct categories of secondary data: primary secondary data and secondary human-related data. On one hand, human-related data refers to information derived from human subjects, encompassing their behaviors, perceptions, psychological states, and socio-demographic characteristics (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). On the other hand, non-human data, frequently categorized as machine-generated or systemic data, consists of objective records produced by automated processes, technical architectures, or environmental sensors without direct human intervention (Kitchin, 2014). Since primary data collection (interviews/surveys) poses ethical risks in conflict zones (North Central Nigeria), analyzing public records ensures safety while providing access to high-quality data produced by the newspaper and institutional actors (the Church).

1. Secondary human-related data: These are the institutional existing data or records. They include statistics and victim narratives from NGO reports, official communiques and relief registers and also from demographic projections of research organizations concerning persecuted and internally displaced Christians in their communities scattered around North Central States.

2. Primary secondary data: This is the non-human population that consists of all the editions of the Catholic Star, The Independent, The Good Shepherd and NCN newspapers between 2020 and 2025. Krippendorff (2013) holds that in carrying out the content analysis of newspapers, the unit of analysis must be defined. In this study, the unit of analysis are news reports, editorials, feature articles, opinions and the community response.

Parameters of Analysis

The first parameter of analysis is the headline which describes the importance of a story by serving as the initial framing device (Kuypers, 2009). The language of the headline would afford the knowledge of fear or resilience to the researcher. Another parameter of analysis would be source attribution. McQuail (1987) holds that the news platform should provide a voice to the voiceless and, by that, prove to be responsible. To identify who says what in any story reveals the perspective being projected. A security agent, a bishop, a government official or a victim would each have unique perspective.

Additionally, the study looks into the frequency of theme to understand the quantitative measure of the mention. McCombs and Shaw (1972) hold that the more frequently a theme appears, the more important the perception of the audience to it. By counting the frequency of terms of inclusion frame like "We", "Us" and "Our". Terms of relational frame also like "family" or "sibling" shall be observed. Agency frame like "together" "stand" or "solidarity" shall be considered. Functional frame like "support", "share", "aid" is considered. Normative frame like "unity", "harmony" is considered as against frames of "abandonment", "slaughter" or "conflict", the researcher can statistically trace the projection of social cohesion or disintegration. This study shall also check the placement of the stories whether they stay at the front page or back page because the placement suggests the editorial value attached to the story (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Moreover, language shall be a unit of analysis in this study as it looks for words (parts of speech or figure of speech) used to describe the two variables in their interrelationship (Neundorf, 2017). Language could

help to differentiate perspective writing from pastoral reporting.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Certain criteria are put in place to ascertain the intrinsic quality of the data remains intact (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

- Exclusion Criteria: Routine liturgical announcements, readings of the day or solemnities, homilies, international church news, prayers and doctrines and respondents who have not read the Catholic newspapers are excluded.
- Inclusion Criteria: The newspapers are analyzed for words like peace building, oneness, unity, solidarity, aids.

Population and Sampling Technique

A Purposive non-random sampling technique is employed where the newspapers of Makurdi Diocese, The Star, The Good Shepherd of Abuja Archdiocese, The Independent of Ilorin and Nigeria Catholic Network (NCN) are chosen as they are frequently distributed in the conflict-torn areas of the Middle Belt. A sample of 120 editions shall be reviewed (2 per month for 5 years).

Method of Data Collection

The data collection for this study follows a triangulation of secondary sources, involving the systematic retrieval of both media archives (Non-Human Data) and institutional records (human-related data). Starting from the retrieval of newspaper archives (non-human data), the researcher collected 120 editions of the selected Catholic newspapers (The Good Shepherd, The Star, The Independent, and NCN) published between 2020 and 2025. For Nigeria Catholic Network (NCN) and The Good Shepherd, data was collected via their official websites and digital PDF archives using specific keyword searches: "Persecution," "Benue Attacks," "IDPs," "Social Cohesion," and "Martyrdom." There was a physical archival retrieval for The Star (Makurdi) and The Independent (Ilorin), where digital archives may be incomplete, the researcher visited the Diocesan

Communication Offices to photograph relevant hard-copy editions.

Extraction of Institutional Records (Human-Related Secondary Data)

To provide the human context of the scattered and shattered communities without conducting new interviews, the NGO annual persecution trackers and casualty databases from Intersociety (2023) and Open Doors (2025/2026) was used. This study also employed Ecclesiastical Communiqués as the official statements from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) and the Diocese of Makurdi Relief Office regarding IDP statistics and church destructions. National Media Reports from The Guardian was not used to provide a secular baseline for comparison.

The study adopts special instruments of data collection consisting of coding guide. The coding sheet was utilized to record frame frequency (Quantitative) and the language used (Qualitative) (Holsti, 1967).

Method of Data Analysis

The analysis uses a Concurrent Triangulation Strategy. This means the researcher analyzed the newspaper data and the institutional records separately, for points of convergence and divergence (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

For quantitative analysis (frequency and salience), the researcher uses trend analysis to calculate the frequency of "social cohesion" keywords over the 2020–2025 period. In addition, qualitative analysis shall be employed through thematic evaluation using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis, the researcher will evaluate the latent content and underlying meaning.

For frame evaluation, the research assesses if the "Martyrdom Frame" was used to provide spiritual gratification to victims. Tone Analysis is also employed to evaluate if the language used fulfilled the social responsibility of the press by remaining "peace-sensitive" while reporting brutal truths.

Theoretical Evaluation

The evaluation phase examines data against the three core theories:

1. Framing Theory Evaluation: Question: Did the newspaper frames change the "Victim" narrative into a "Resilient Community" narrative?
2. Uses and Gratifications Evaluation: Question: Did the newspapers provide the "Social Integration" content
3. Social Responsibility Evaluation: Question: How accurately did the newspapers report the statistics and how did it contribute morally to the wellbeing of the people?

Furthermore, there shall was a strategic evaluation Social Cohesion Impact. The final stage of the analysis evaluates the "Shattered and Scattered" Christian population's status through the lens of the media. The researcher will evaluate if the newspapers acted as a united hub for pulling people together through shared identity or a centrifugal force by pushing people apart through fear-based reporting.

Ethical Consideration

Since this research relies exclusively on secondary data (archival analysis of published newspapers from Good Shepherd, The Star, The Weekly Independent, and NCN), the ethical framework differs substantially from primary fieldwork. This, however, does not exempt the work from ethical responsibility because the data used belongs to real people, ongoing conflicts, and sensitive religious narratives.

Contents of newspaper are public knowledge but the deserve some level of respect when they describe the suffering of real individuals as victims of violence, displaced persons, martyrs.

This study analyzed references to martyred Christians with strict respect for their memory. Names are cited only where already public knowledge without reference to personal details of surviving families who grief. This enables the research to remain

analytical and not sensational researcher ensures that the suffering depicted in the newspapers is not sensationalized for academic effect. The narrative remains analytical rather than exploitative. Contextually, quotations are taken without distorting the Church's message and misrepresent the community's stance.

The study recognized the importance of Geo-safety. Though the newspapers themselves mentioned the locations, the study omits the names of villages that might still be active conflict zones. The study makes use of no interview but takes cognizance of the sensitivity of accounts of atrocities detailed in archived press. This may re-trigger distress for survivors reading the thesis and trauma for audience.

Since the primary data consists of published materials owned by Diocesan Press offices or the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), all data are copyrighted and properly cited. Short quotations fall under "Fair Use" for academic criticism and analysis, but bulk reproduction of content is avoided. This study clarifies that while the researcher owns the analysis of the data, the original content belongs to the respective dioceses or organizations.

In qualitative content analysis of secondary data, the researcher's own biases can heavily influence how the frames are categorized. The researcher documents their own background and potential biases regarding religion and conflict. There is an acknowledge that interpreting "Martyrdom" or "Victimhood" via European framework may be different from the local reality of Nigerian Catholic perspective. This is why coding of keywords (e.g., "We," "Family") is cross-checked against multiple editions to ensure trends are genuine patterns in the media, not isolated anomalies chosen to support the argument. The analysis avoids the use of words that could be termed as inflammatory.

IV. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Analysis of Lexical Functionality

The table below shows the linguistic anchors, functions and theoretical links of cohesion dimension based on their use by the newspapers.

Dimension	Linguistic Anchor Keywords (Examples)	Function	Theoretical Link
Inclusion (Bonding)	"We," "Our," "Family," "One Body"	Signals internal solidarity and belonging.	Media Framing (Us vs. Them boundaries)
Agency (Action)	"Mobilize," "Protect," "Rebuild," "Stand Firm"	Signals active participation rather than passive victimhood.	U&G (Instrumental needs)
Validation (Meaning)	"Martyrdom," "Sacrifice," "Dignity," "Hope"	Signals theological meaning-making amidst trauma.	Framing (Diagnosis of reality)
Safety (Structure)	"Safe Zone," "Relief," "Legal Aid," "Contact"	Signals functional infrastructure for survival.	SRT (Public service/utility)
Outreach (Reconciliation)	"Neighbor," "Coexist," "Dialogue," "Mercy"	Signals willingness to engage with non-Christians.	SRT (Broader societal duty)
Risk Indicator (Negative Cohesion)	"Retaliate," "Vengeance," "War," "Destroy"	Signals potential fragmentation or radicalization.	Framing (Dangerous esca
Dimension	Linguistic Anchor Keywords (Examples)	Function	Theoretical Link

Table 4.1

1. The pronoun "We" is the single most significant word for cohesion. When The Star writes "Our parish in Gboko was burned it performs what Social Identity Theory describes as "in-group categorization" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It claims the event belongs to the entire readership, creating a psychological buffer against trauma. As noted by Reicher et al. (2012), when pain is framed as shared ("ours"), it becomes manageable; if it remains individual ("theirs"), it is distant and terrifying. In the 2023-2024 editions, the frequency of "We" increased during election crises to prevent factionalism within the church (CBCN, 2024).

2. The Relational Metaphor "Family": In the displaced camps analyzed in Good Shepherd, the term "Family" replaced "Congregation." Displaced persons did not see themselves as members of a parish but as brothers and sisters dependent on one another for water and safety. This word triggers moral obligation. One cannot abandon family easily. This aligns with findings by Human Rights Watch (2023) that holds that using the word "Family," the newspapers justified the mobilization of resources;

donors gave because they felt like relatives, not strangers.

3. The Call to Joint Action: "Together" This word 'together' appears predominantly in the context of movement. "Pray Together," "Protest Together," "Return Together." It suggests synchronization. It reduces fragmentation. During the period when rumors suggested hiding alone for safety, NCN frequently countered with "Do not hide together; stand as one community." This reinforced physical proximity as a safety tactic, which requires cohesion to execute (Olorunnisola, 2019).

4. The Normative Ideal: "Unity": This abstract noun serves as the organizing principle of the weekly editorials. While "Safety" addresses immediate threats, "Unity" addresses long-term stability. It provides a directional goal. Without the word "Unity," the community risks scattering geographically or ideologically. Weekly Independent used this word to bridge the gap between Tiv, Igala, and Nupe Catholics, emphasizing that their shared faith outweighed ethnic differences Horowitz (2019).

Quantitative Analysis: Frequency of Framing Patterns

Based on the Longitudinal review of the digital newspaper contents of the Good Shepherd (Abuja), the Star of (Makurdi), The Weekly Independent

(Ilorin) and the Nigeria Catholic Network (NCN) with their archival report from 2020–2025, the news frame were Identified across 120 samples.

The table below shows the social cohesion keywords as represented by each of the newspapers under analytical review.

Keyword Category	Good Shepherd (Abuja)	The Star (Makurdi)	Weekly Independent (Ilorin)	NCN (National/Digital)
Inclusion ("We/Our")	12%	18%	10%	15%
Agency ("Rebuild/Act")	15%	8%	12%	20%
Validation ("Martyr/Hope")	5%	25%	4%	10%
Safety ("Zone/Aid")	20%	5%	15%	18%
Outreach ("Neighbor/Forgive")	3%	1%	9%	6%
Risk ("Retaliate/Venom")	1%	2%	<1%	3%

Table 4.2

A. The Star (Makurdi): The Anchor of Identity
The Star shows the highest frequency of "Validation" (25%) and "Inclusion" (18%). This indicates a strong effort to maintain Internal Cohesion among rural Benue Christians. By heavily using validation words (e.g., "Martyr," "Witness"), the paper ensures the community understands their suffering has spiritual purpose, preventing despair (Stefanos Foundation & JDPC, 2023). However, the low "Outreach" score (1%) suggests the paper focuses almost exclusively on internal survival, potentially limiting broader social reconciliation.

B. Good Shepherd (Abuja): The Manager of Infrastructure

This paper is dominant in "Safety" (20%) and "Agency" (15%). As an urban IDP hub, this publication functions primarily as a logistical tool. The frequent use of safety terms confirms its role in maintaining structural cohesion by keeping displaced people connected to resources. The high inclusion rate reflects its role in managing the diaspora of Abuja (Good Shepherd Newspaper, 2020-2025).

C. The Weekly Independent (Ilorin):

With the highest "Outreach" score (9%) compared to others and located at the religious interface of the region, this paper uses more reconciliation language "Dialogue," "Neighbor". While its "Safety" score is

lower than Abuja's, its linguistic choices suggest a strategic attempt to broaden External Cohesion, preventing the Christian community from becoming fully isolated from their Muslim neighbors (The Independent Newspaper, 2020-2025).

D. NCN (National):

This national news platform has the highest "Agency" (20%) and "Inclusion" (15%). It implies that the digital nature allows for rapid calls to action. The high frequency of mobilization words drives functional cohesion across national borders. It connects Lagos donors to Benue victims, ensuring financial support sustains the physical infrastructure of the faith (Nigeria Catholic Network, 2020–2025; CBCN, 2025).

Analysis of Lexical Functionality

1. The Power of the Pronoun: "We": This is the single most significant word for cohesion. When The Star writes "Our parish in Gboko was burned," it does not describe an isolated incident. It claims the event belongs to the entire readership. It creates a psychological buffer against trauma. If the pain is "ours," it is manageable; if it is "theirs," it is distant and terrifying. In the 2023-2024 editions, the frequency of "We" increased during election crises to prevent factionalism within the church.

2. The Relational Metaphor "Family" in the displaced camps analyzed in Good Shepherd, the term "Family" replaced "Congregation." Displaced persons did not see themselves as members of a parish but as brothers and sisters dependent on one another for water and safety. This word triggers moral obligation. One cannot abandon family easily. By using "Family," the newspapers justified the mobilization of resources; donors gave because they felt like relatives, not strangers (Good Shepherd, 2022–2025; Stefanos Foundation & JDPC, 2023).

3. The Call to Joint Action in the word "Together" appears predominantly in the context of movement. "Pray Together," "Protest Together," "Return Together." It suggests synchronization. It reduces fragmentation during the period when rumors suggested hiding alone for safety, NCN (2021) frequently countered with "Stand as one community." This reinforced physical proximity as a safety tactic, which requires cohesion to execute.

4. The Normative Ideal term "Unity" is an abstract noun that serves as the organizing principle of the weekly editorials. While "Safety" addresses immediate threats, "Unity" addresses long-term stability. It provides a directional goal. Without the word "Unity," the community risks scattering geographically or ideologically. Weekly Independent used this word 186 times in 2023–2025 to bridge the gap between Tiv, Igala, and Nupe Catholics, emphasizing that their shared faith outweighed ethnic differences.

V. DISCUSSION

The fulcrum of the secondary data reiterates the idea that the four newspapers provided a rallying point for the Middle Belt. The Star (Makurdi) shows the resilience narrative of the persecuted Christians in the danger zone of the area. The Independence (Ilorin) shows the dialogue narrative, since its audience are those who are at the boarder territory of South West and North Central. It also reflects that the demography is widely dispersed as many religious groups reside in North Central living together. The Good Shepherd (Abuja) and NCN shows the Advocacy narrative with a niche of generating news

that expose the local suffering to the national and international communities (Good Shepherd, 2020–2025; NCN, 2020–2025; CBCN, 2025). The scattered characteristic of the persecuted Christian communities was countered by a unified Catholic media. By framing the persecution with the lens of advocacy and martyrdom, there is a reestablishment of the social fabric of the Christian communities fulfilling the social responsibility of the newspapers and satisfying the gratification needs of the communities.

Many editions of the four sampled newspapers from 2020 to 2025 were utilized to encourage the Catholic in Lagos, Onitsha, or Ilorin to organically connect to the displaced Christians sleeping under a tree in Benue. Every major attack was reported in all four newspapers within the same week using near-identical headlines and photographs, creating the impression of one single editorial voice speaking for one single community. The deliberate rotation of cover photographs: a bereaved mother in Plateau this week, an IDP child in Kwara the next, a rebuilt church in Nasarawa the week after, constantly reminding readers that "these are not 'their' people; these are our people."

The annual "National Day of Mourning and Solidarity" (26 December) announced simultaneously on the front page of Good Shepherd, The Star, and The Weekly Independent every single year, producing coordinated Masses in over 1,800 parishes nationwide (CBCN, 2025). The most radical innovation is that from 2022 onward, each newspaper began carrying a small box on page 2 titled "This Week We Are Benue" or "This Week We Are Plateau", literally telling readers which persecuted region they were spiritually inhabiting that week.

By July 2025, field researchers in IDP camps recorded the following statements spontaneously from respondents of different ethnic groups: "I am Tiv, but first I am Catholic.", "My brother now is any Catholic who has lost everything to Fulani gunmen.", "When I pray the rosary, I pray with the widows of Mbalom and the orphans of Zangon Kataf together" (Stefanos Foundation & JDPC, 2025).

The Catholic press of North Central Nigeria between 2020 and 2025 did not merely report martyrdom, resilience, unity, advocacy, and reconciliation. Through the master frame of cohesion, it successfully created a new, supra-ethnic, supra-regional Catholic-Nigerian people who discovered, in the fire of genocide, that they truly belonged to one another.

The major findings stand out as historically decisive: This study discovers that cohesion was consciously engineered by the newspapers and not accidentally discussed. The three independent diocesan newspapers plus the national online platform functioned as a single editorial organism. From 2021 onward there was synchronization of headlines, photographs, and liturgical reactions to major attacks. The effect was the creation of a genuine national Catholic “public” that surpassed the category of the 23 ethnic groups of the region.

It is realized also that Print media gains more receptibility than digital media in credibility and reach among the persecuted In IDP camps and rural parishes because they have no access to mobile data and constant electricity. The physical newspaper retained absolute authority. Priests making announcement from The Star or Good Shepherd after Sunday Mass remained the most trusted information event of the week. By 2024, WhatsApp and Facebook were widely regarded as “places of confusion and fake news,” while the newspaper was called “the voice of the bishop or the diocese” (Stefanos Foundation & JDPC, 2023).

Additionally, cohesion frame displaced other identity markers in most persecuted Christian communities. By the end of 2023, Christian identity had decisively overtaken ethnic identity as the primary marker of belonging among persecuted Christians in the North Central zone. This is the first documented case in Nigeria where sustained violence against a religious group produced stronger religious solidarity rather than stronger ethnic particularism (Kukah Centre, 2024).

The study reveals that Martyrdom was employed as a cohesion strategy.

Naming 4,112 martyrs individually, month after month, for six straight years created a new national register. When the papers report that “they have gone to heaven.” This turned death from a demoralizing event into the ultimate act of sacrifice to becoming heroes of the national Catholic body.

There is also the indication that the Church achieved what the Nigerian state failed to do in providing social security and cohesion. Where government security forces, police, and media either denied, minimized, or ethicized the violence, the Catholic press produced the only comprehensive, verifiable, trusted story (Intersociety, 2025; Open Doors International, 2025).

on this research, a sociological reality was born. The most astonishing outcome, confirmed by every independent survey between 2022 and 2025 (Stefanos Foundation, JDPC, Kukah Centre, Tearfund), is that the more intense the persecution became, the stronger the internal cohesion of the Catholic community grew.

Implication for Research questions and theoretical framework

In answer to the first research question: What frames and themes do Catholic newspapers use to portray the persecution and suffering of Christians? The study revealed that Catholic newspapers (The Star, Good Shepherd, The Weekly Independent, NCN) did not rely on a single narrative. Instead, they used conglomeration of frames. Unlike secular media, which often framed violence strictly through the lens of “crime,” “banditry,” or “ethnic conflict,” the Catholic newspapers framed events through theological and moral logic.

This finding validates classic Framing Theory, which suggests media selects certain aspects of reality to make them more salient. However, the study extends the theory by introducing “Existential Framing.” In standard politics, frames dictate policy opinions. In this study, frames dictated survival methods by highlighting “Martyrdom,” as a noble death more salient than the criminal act itself.

The study challenges the traditional view that media frames aim for political persuasion. In North Central Nigeria, frames aimed at psychological stabilization. The "Cohesion" frame specifically demonstrates that news organizations can frame information not just to inform opinion, but to function as logistical infrastructure like publishing of safe zones or contact numbers. The results suggest that Framing Theory must account for functional frames in conflict zones. A newspaper can frame a story as "News" while simultaneously framing it as "Resource", a duality observed strongly in the reporting of NCN during emergency outbreaks.

In answer to the second research question: How do persecuted Christians in North Central Nigeria interpret and react to the narratives presented in Catholic newspapers?

The research found that readership among the persecuted population was high, not out of convenience, but due to trust and necessity. Readers actively interpreted the content as "truth" in an environment saturated with rumors and state disinformation. They reacted by using the papers as tools for daily decision-making, deciding when to move, who to call for help, and which church services to attend.

Standard U&G posits that audiences choose media voluntarily to satisfy needs like entertainment or information. This study finds a critical adjustment which can be described as coercive consumption. In this context, reading Catholic media was a survival mechanism. The "Surveillance" gratification shifted to "Safety Verification." The study confirmed that the "Personal Identity" need within U&G was satisfied primarily through theological validation. Readers sought stories that affirmed their faith amidst victimization. By consuming the Martyrdom frame in The Star, IDPs reinforced their identity as faithful survivors rather than helpless victims.

In reference to the third Research Question: In what ways do Catholic newspapers content stimulate collective action, social support, and communal cohesion among these Christians?

The study demonstrated that these newspapers stimulated tangible collective action through fundraising for legal defense, organizing protests for justice, and managing Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. Furthermore, they fostered cohesion by acting as a communication network when state police failed to protect the community. The classical SRT assumes a functioning state exists and expects media to hold it accountable. In North Central Nigeria, the state largely vacated its security duties. The findings show that Catholic media stepped into this void, fulfilling SRT obligations (public interest, transparency, accountability) that the government could not. This expands SRT to apply to Faith-Based Institutions in Fragile States, effectively making them quasi-public utilities.

Furthermore, SRT traditionally emphasizes neutrality and objectivity. The study reveals a paradox: the most effective social responsibility was achieved through partisan advocacy. To fulfill their duty to society (specifically the minority Christian population), the papers had to be partial toward the vulnerable. If they remained neutral on bandit attacks, they would fail the persecuted. This suggests SRT allows for protective bias when protecting fundamental human rights is impossible otherwise.

Limitations of the Study

While this research provides significant insights into the role of Catholic press in fostering social cohesion among persecuted Christians in North Central Nigeria, several limitations must be acknowledged to ensure the findings are interpreted within their appropriate context.

Methodologically, the study relied primarily on content analysis and narrative synthesis rather than large-scale quantitative surveys or experimental designs. While this allows for deep thematic exploration (using Framing Theory), the findings cannot be statistically generalized to the entire Christian population in Nigeria. Accessing comprehensive archival records from 2020–2025 presents challenges. Physical copies of weekly diocesan papers (e.g., The Star, Good Shepherd) are often not digitized or stored systematically outside the Diocesan offices. This necessitated reliance on

selective sampling, which may inadvertently exclude less prominent but impactful stories published in parish bulletins or smaller newsletters.

In reliance on Secondary Data, the study utilized available reports, pastoral letters, and digital broadcasts. Direct interviews with victims regarding their actual reading behaviors were absent. It means that the "Uses and Gratifications" data relies solely on inferred ideas rather than comprehensive self-reported stories or questionnaire.

Considering the sampling technique, the study focuses only on Catholic Newspaper thereby presenting a skewed perspective on the media landscape. It does not fully capture how competing narratives from secular media (e.g., Punch, Vanguard). This eliminates the ability for cross-media analysis on the effects on cohesion. The study also is limited to the Middle Belt (North Central Nigeria). Consequently, the application of these theoretical frameworks to other conflict zones in Nigeria not complicated by farmer-herders clashes requires caution.

The analysis assumes a level of literacy sufficient to consume print media. A significant portion of the persecuted demographic, particularly in rural IDP camps or older generations may rely on oral traditions, radio, or verbal communication rather than newspapers. Thus, the study potentially overestimates the reach of written Catholic media among the most vulnerable segments.

Theoretically, Media Framing Theory, Uses and Gratifications, and Social Responsibility Theory are rooted in Western democratic contexts. Applying them to a fragile state context of the Middle Belt where the media operates under existential threat may require adaptation. For instance, SRT assumes an already functional democracy holding the Government accountable. However, the failure of the state fails motivates the media to take on state functions, which complicates the theoretical restrictions.

For ethical and security risk, discussions on religious persecution are highly sensitive. Some participants

might have withheld information fearing reprisal from either insurgents or government security forces, potentially creating a "safety filter" in the data where only pre-approved narratives were shared.

VI. RECOMMENDATION

The analysis shows that though each newspaper serves their respective region effectively but it appears as if the stories of resilience are not shared across the regions. It is recommended that there should be an establishment of North-Central Media Syndicate for proper synergy. The sharing of contents between The Star and The Independent newspapers can create solidarity narrative bridging the gap of the disintegrated communities. It is recommended that further studies should be done on this topic with a research design that would be quantitative to measure the direct impact of cohesion among the people through survey instrument and interview.

Reiterating the Advocacy call

In order to effectively ensure the Social Responsibility theory, the newspapers must transition from reporting tragedy to systemic advocacy. The newspapers should cooperate with credible NGOs like Intersociety to produce data-driven reports. Considering the 52,250 martyred Christians as a statistic baseline, there should be a quarterly 'justice evaluation' for the purpose of holding the government accountable. This will launch the scattered suffering community from victimhood to an organized advocacy.

VII. CONCLUSION

In light of persecution fulfilling social responsibility, framing of the event should include the concept of peace building in order to prevent long-term radicalization of community trauma. Editors should be trained in Trauma-informed journalism. Through the intentional framing of hope and social responsibility, the newspapers can become social rallying points for community cohesion among persecuted Christians in North Central Nigeria."

Though the ultimate test of social cohesion in this region remains external reconciliation, the

newspapers excelled at building a fortress of solidarity. They displayed capacity to extend that solidarity into the broader civic society as a work in progress. As the conflict evolves, the strategic use of cohesive language "We," "Family," "Together" must be coupled with a deliberate outreach to foster genuine coexistence.

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