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Humourising Covid-19 Pandemic Crisis in Nigeria: A Discourse Study of the Selected Online Memes and Posts

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Article Info	Abstract
Corresponding author: K. A. Adedeji kadedeji@unilag.edu.ng **Keywords:** Humour, Covid-19, Discourse, Memes, Social Media Platform	As the global community attempted to fight COVID-19 and cope with the new reality created by the global pandemic, online and mobile social networks played a key role in this new order. This study expands research in the use of these new media technologies for public health-based civic engagement in Nigeria. The primary aim is to explore the use of humour as a discourse strategy in online posts on the COVID-19 pandemic that were designed to create awareness, educate the public, and promote social and public morality. Using approaches in discourse analysis and humour in combination with Scollon's (1998) Discourse Mediated Theory (DMT), the study discusses how a combination of texts and images mediated through socio-technical affordances of the online platforms underpin the extrapolation of social meanings conveyed through humorous memes and posts. The data set was extracted from the repository of an ongoing project on the corpus of digital health humanities discourse at the Centre for Digital Humanities, University of Lagos. It consists of posts and messages on COVID-19 crisis circulated on WhatsApp platforms between February and March, 2020. Using qualitative interpretive paradigm, the study shows how serious and more profound themes on the pandemic are expressed through creative comical online posts and memes. A major observation is that humour appeal is generally sensitive to the culture of the audience as it draws its persuasive tenor from materials, artifacts and symbols that the audience can easily relate with. Equally, instances of Scott's (1990) notion of infrapolitics are found in some of the memes that satirise political situation and political actors in the country. Thus, weaponising the event-generating and event-driven memes for political ends heightens their functions within this situated socio-discursive milieu.

Introduction

As the country faced the unprecedented global public health emergency of COVID-19, citizens generally expected their governments and elected officials to proactively and aggressively confront the problem. The public was equally expected to comply with the guidelines that could help to contain the spread of the virus. Because these expectations were not always met, public reactions were ventilated through different outlets. The democratisation of the cyberspace and the socio-technical architecture of online technologies provided civic engagement platforms for information dissemination, public health education, advocacy, public criticisms, comments and reactions. Some of these reactions were channelled through memes and multimodal posts on the digital space. February 27, 2020 marked the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in Nigeria when the index case of COVID-19 was first confirmed. The digital space reacted sharply through an immediate upsurge in the number of posts and online messages on the Coronavirus global pandemic. Citizens used online platforms to express fears, anxieties and condemnation of government's handling of the pandemic. Posts, comments and messages couched in humour and satire were broadcast, rebroadcast and exchanged. The comicality in the messages notwithstanding, the posts encode more profound and serious messages addressing a range of social and public policy themes. New media platforms have thus escalated the rapidity and diversity of local and national reactions to the crisis.

Although public health communication has been gaining momentum in the country, the evolution of new media technologies as additional platforms to engage experts, patients and the general public has galvanised the

momentum. However, it is the humorous discursive components that made these online posts generate wider interest among scholars and researchers. Literature has shown that humour as an art has remained one of the most effective weapons advertisers rely on to get their messages across to the targeted audience. Discourse analysts share the sentiment when they consider the functional impact of language use in social settings. Schiffrin's (1994) submission on discourse provides the prism through which humour is considered as a piece of language use to accomplish a determined context-based action. Since humour occupies a central place in advertising discourse which forms a sub-component of public discourse, consumers of the messages are often deliberately influenced through language to act in a particular way. She points out that the activity most pertinent to our understanding of discourse is interactive activity; it is an activity that is directed to another person and has a potential for affecting that other person (Schiffrin 1994:415). A few of Schiffrin's views of discourse include the following: (i) discourse is about using language, not linguists' thinking about how people use language; (ii) linguistic forms and meanings work together with social and cultural meanings, and interpretive frameworks, to create discourse; (iii) what is said, meant, and done is sequentially situated, i.e. utterances are produced and interpreted in the local contexts of other utterances (p.416).

While a few studies on humour and memes in Nigeria (e.g. Adegoju and Oyebode, 2015; Ademilokun, 2016) have examined the use of humour in political-related advertisements, posters, and messages, the present study focuses on the use of humour in online-based public health discourse transmitted through WhatsApp social media platform. Our attention is particularly focused on multi-modal mediated user-generated content in the posts and memes for public consumption. Despite the danger of information overload, the COVID-19 health crisis generated a quantum of interesting data that provided human angle stories, illustrations and images that reconstructed meanings and relationships in the face of a frightening situation. Some socio-cognitive and socio-cultural components in the deployment of humorous contents in the posts are considered as socio-discursive strategies deployed to criticise public officials, condemn social ills and influence positive behaviour and attitude during and after the pandemic. This study thus intends to amplify the role of new media technologies for public advocacy that seeks for improved health care delivery and principles of good governance, as well as accountability in managing public wealth in a developing nation. It agrees that by leveraging on socio-technical affordances, social media technologies can dramatically transform public discourses and social networking mechanisms on health issues. These platforms can enable ordinary citizens to broadcast and transmit online messages and posts, and function as producers, promoters and consumers of public discourse contents. It is however the subtle repurposing of the memes originally created to address the coronavirus pandemic for social and political purposes that makes them uniquely connected to the social currency of democratic discourses in Nigeria.

Literature Review: Memes as Social and Discursive Event

Wilkins (2014:201) observes that memes were first described in 1976 by Richard Dawkins as 'units of cultural transmission that replicates and evolves in the face of selective forces'. The shaping and reshaping of memes, their propagation and evolution, is dependent upon 'the soup of human culture,' that is, the material social relationships of people (Dawkins, 1976, 192). He argues further, 'Internet memes are readily a participatory form of cultural expression'. And it may be argued that participants can engage with the images and ideas in the memes as a reflection of themselves, their cultures and their societies.

Meaning construction through online cartoons (memes) has become a popular means of eliciting emotional reactions to public policy issues. It is commonplace to find the use of some online advertising and public education materials containing non-linguistic codes, visual images, texts and dramatised images and admixture of colours and symbols. The multimodality of the textual contents of these online communication or advert materials is designed to achieve both visual and cognitive appeals to the audience. Online materials with humorous contents are becoming increasingly popular during political campaigns and public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the interconnectedness between public policies and social wellbeing of citizens, every public crisis is considered a spinoff of political decisions and must be interpreted in light of politics. Citizens often ascribe failure in public policy implementations, social challenges and difficulties to government policies and programmes. The government of the day therefore is assumed to accept the blame regardless of any well-intended but failed policy. In most developing and transition countries, it is difficult to separate public health management policy from actions and inactions of their political leaders. People generally assess the political decisions taken by government and its agencies to combat the pandemic. Some of their policies and actions may therefore become subjects of humour in some of the posts. On the other side of the pole appears to be the subsisting chronic and obvious shortcomings in public policies and governmental dysfunctionality in the provision of social infrastructure especially the neglected health sector to adequately handle emergence health situations. The Nigerian public was obviously worried and anxious about the capacity of their government to handle the pandemic given the abysmal performance of the political class and records of the embarrassing state of corruption in the country with its attendant consequences on public infrastructure.

Humour as Discourse

The use of humour in communication and literary works dates back to the early Greek civilisations. Since that time, writers, language and literary scholars, political communicators and more recently, advertisers have found this unique communicative device a potent tool to transmit their messages in a forceful and persuasive manner. Using this strategy in advertisements is designed to attract the attention of readers to the object of humour, sustain interest, and create desire or intention to acquire the material/ non-material product. In other public spaces, the strategy targets misdemeanors of public officials or individuals with the aim of seeking correctional attitude or social reforms.

Some earlier theories of humour are said to focus on the neutral or negative aspect of humour. However, Freud (1928) argued that humour can actually be used for positive goals. He sees it as the "representation of parental forgiveness that enables an individual to gain perspective and relief from the emotions attendant upon disappointments and failures" (Freud, 1928 as cited in Lefcourt, 2005, p. 621). The perspective on the use of humour as strategy to provide relief from emotional disappointment and disturbance has now been carried further in most contemporary theories of humour. Reece (2014:4) reviews other studies by showing that Vaillant (1977; 2000) found humour to be a mature coping mechanism in healthy older adults. When used to cope with the world at large and connect with others, humour is considered a virtue (Beermann & Ruch, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It is this later insights shared in the works of these scholars that are gradually becoming evident in the online memes and posts on COVID-19. While humour can be used to attack individuals, political figures, or criticise a mishandling of public policy, it may well serve a good purpose of helping people to cope with a dire situation, providing hope and comfort for the distressed and creating a laughing scenario to relieve pent-up emotions.

Akyuz (2015) outlines seven types of humour that are generally found in most literature. These are: "(1) Comparison - Putting two or more elements together to produce a humorous situation; (2) Personification – Attributes human characteristics to animals plants and objects; (3) Exaggeration - Overstating and magnifying something out of proportion; (4) Pun - Using elements of language to create new meanings, which result in humour; (5) Sarcasm - Category including blatant ironic responses or situations, (6) Silliness - lt ranges from making funny faces to ludicrous situations, (7) Surprise - includes all advertisements where humour arises from unexpected situations."

The insights shared in some studies on political memes provide useful theoretical basis for the investigation of humour during this COVID-19 crisis. For example: Chagas et al (2019) argue that the emergence of new kinds of humor, enabled by information and communication technologies, reinforces even more the importance of thinking about the use of humor in a political context. Having said that, what we propose is that political humor on the Internet contributes to the creation and consolidation of a web of shared meanings, which absorbs and re-frames content from popular culture. Thus, it acts as an exhaust valve for moments of tension, strengthens bonds of solidarity and makes learning much more fun, besides stimulating collective actions (Tay, 2012).

Most scholarship in humour agrees that humour originated from the desire to promote public morality by communicating more serious subjects or offensive subjects in a more pleasant way. Humour is often described as graphic satire; a creative way of attacking or painting a negative picture about an individual, a phenomenon in a jocular manner. It provides critical reflection about human society, becoming a tool for social constructs. Humour may reveal some of the critical realities of our day-to-day lives and engagements even if the contents may be sometimes distasteful. As memes, humour may be used to interrogate the nature and psyche of the Nigerian state probing beneath the garb of public image laundry of the government to unveil the dregs of corruption dragging the nation into backwardness. Some scholars observe that humour can be benign or caustic depending on the intention of the creator. Generally, creators of humour argue that the goal of projecting humourous characters and events is to promote the social good. While it may be offensive, it targets the general good advocating reforms and social morality. Weaver (2011:414) observes that humour can serve ideological functions for serious discourse.

Obadare (2009: 251) explores the use of humour to portray political situations in post-military dispensation in Nigeria. He observes that as a political discourse tool, humour can be used to articulate the dysfunctionality in democratic government and poor political leadership. He says "in political and social formations where authoritarian system may have closed conventional avenues for sociability and civic engagement, memes can become the agency to challenge, contest and negate official public policies." It conflates with Scott's (1990) notion of infrapolitics, where humour becomes a powerful tool in the hands of subordinate classes to challenge dominant power or call the leaders to account.

Obadare (2009: 245) identifies three theoretical bases for the study of humour-driven discourse in post-military democratic setting in Nigeria.

First, jokes, obviously, are serious things; they constitute a powerful metaphor for understanding the distribution of power and the nature and dynamics of social relationships within any given configuration. Second, historically, comical allegories, found these days in political cartoons have functioned as a means of rallying those at the margins of power, and are therefore worthy of investigation as a critical part of the politics of sub ordinate groups.

Third, as post-military 'democracy' across Africa encrusts the same shenanigans that were characteristic of military rule, ridicule has emerged as a means through which people attempt to deconstruct and construct meaning out of a reality that is decidedly surreal.

The emergence of online memes as a spinoff of the ongoing digital revolution has further democratised the platforms through which humourous materials and contents are created and transmitted. Lessig (2001) concurs by referring to the emergence of an entire generation of users empowered to create, remix, react and share culturally-situated innovative humorous materials using the infrastructure provided by the internet.

Julian (2019) asserts that internet-active users are constantly using the popularity and rapid spread of memes as vehicles to communicate subtle messages with covert interpretations. This creative practice is being used to reframe public discourse and express nuanced sociolinguistic meaning and cultural artifacts. Since most memes are contextually and socio-culturally-constructed, the inbuilt meanings and cultural shorthand encoded in most memes allow expressions that help to engage (with others from shared socio-cultural background) the topics of societal importance outside of conventional channels of communication and frames of meaning (p.6).

De La Rosa-Carrillo, (2015:22) refers to Stryker's (2011) description of memes as "a new visual way that people (use to) succinctly communicate opinions and emotions...Internet Memes as a message-delivering artifact that carries opinions and emotions. It is precisely this communicative aspect of internet meme language that gives me reason to believe that, just like any other language, it can in fact be employed to develop complex messages that may reach beyond immediate amusement…The Language of Internet Memes as visual, succinct and capable of inviting active engagement by users who encounter the digital content that exhibits said characteristics (p.22, 23).

Kaminska (2014) describes memes as the basic unit of cultural transmission which are formed by processes of identical replication and the capability of introducing innovations allowing for derogations.

Davidson (2014) considers Internet memes as pieces of culture, typically composed of jokes and funny characters which are shared and become influential through online transmission. He argues further that the current most popular form of an Internet meme seems to be – 'a digitally manipulated picture or photography, most frequently with a humorous phrase added on the top or bottom of it, or both' (p.127).

Online memes are part of online visual culture that are polyvocal in nature and open to multiple interpretations depending on the context and culture of their origin and use. Shifman (2014: 41) identifies three core elements that define Internet memes: they should be conceived of as (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.

Theoretical Framework

The advent of the internet and social media sites has transformed discursive practices across private and social spheres. The capacity to create and share messages and posts provides a quantum of opportunity for ordinary citizens to express their feelings and opinions on any trending public, national and global issues. Public communication has been particularly democratised with the technology-driven tools to challenge public authorities, hold government and elected officials accountable for their actions and decisions. The outbreak and spread of coronavirus as a global social discursive event feeds into the existing proliferation of new media technologies and computer-mediated communication practices yielding interesting public discourse data.

In Nigeria, social media platforms are playing a critical role in public health communication initiatives to create awareness about the disease and educate the general public on how to prevent it, and or treat the virus in the event of infection. The same web-based technologies are now being used by citizens to broadcast, transmit and exchange humorous posts and messages on COVID-19.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Scollon and Levine (2004:1) rightly anticipates the growing interpenetration of discourse and technology in contemporary times in their volume on multimodal discourse arguing that these two concepts now live in a symbolic relationship. They assert that "Now we are seeing the proliferation of communication technologies from palm-sized digital video recorders to cell phones and chat rooms on the Internet. Journals are going online, and theses are being submitted in multimedia formats. The term "multimodality" is coming to be used across many fields within which linguists work to encompass these many new technological changes."

The semiotic features in most communicative materials task audience to look beyond the text and lexico-grammatical features for communicative intentions and social meanings projected through familiar images, graphology, pictures, illustrations, colours, signs, symbols, logos and other cultural artifacts. Halliday (1976, 1984) has argued that language is an embodiment of semiotic properties that work together to encode meaning. Language users and discourse participants in a social and cultural context rely on these extra linguistic properties to appropriately engage with the meaning of the discourse. With the advent of web 2.0, social media platforms visual cultures are

increasingly becoming a critical component of online communications. Most online messages and memes contain not only text but also extra-linguistic codes and signs ranging from graphological features to images and emojis, as a composite meaning-making package.

Leeuwen (2004:14) for instance identifies the unique use of orthographical representations as part of the emerging visual cultures. "Typography is an increasingly important branch of visual communication. Formerly it saw itself for the most part as a transmitter of the written word, but today it is becoming a communicative mode in its own right — and itself multimodal".

Mediated Discourse Theory

Goddard's (2004) proposal on multimodal discourse suggested some principles that recognise some constraints and affordances of different communication systems, while also paying attention to the users in their situated contexts —"situated" not just in terms of their physical setting, but also socially and politically(p.37). Scollon's (2001) Mediated Discourse Theory (MDT) proposes a paradigm that combines the analysis of text and other modes of communication in social interactions.

Scollon sees MDT as "[t]he ways in which people in communication with each other mutually construct the situations they are in and their identities in those situations through discourse" (Scollon 1998:147). Focusing on language-as-action rather than language-as-text, MDT shares the approach of pragmatics-based theories to see language as a form of social behaviour, as mediated action. However, Scollon's concept of MDT ensures that texts remain seen as the actions of real communicators rather than as the embodiments of a priori classifications. The importance of this can be seen, for example, in his notion of sites of engagement, highlighting as it does the "windows" in space and time whereby texts are appropriated for use.

His concepts of 'nexus of practice' and 'mediated action' find relevance in the ways in which online memes become the context where participants rely on the available affordances for social interactions and meaning negotiation through the texts. The memes functioning as communicative actions draw on an array of discourse resources (text, images, illustrations) to achieve socio-discursive goals. The site is referred to as "The complex network of relations that exist for individuals as they appropriate different texts for action and therefore negotiate their participation in social events. His principle of 'texts as mediational means' establishes texts as the means by which sociocultural practice becomes instantiated in human action. Usually in event-based discursive practices, interactions are driven by a number of social and communicative factors that form the nexus of meaning creation within the discursive event. A combination of voices or communicative cues provides the key indicators of interactional thrust. His idea of polyvocality is thus suggested as a situation where "Communication . . . must make use of the language and the texts of others and because of that, those other voices provide both amplification and limitations of our own voices. A text which is appropriated for use in mediated action brings with it the conventionalization of the social practices of its history of use. We say not only what we want to say but also what the text must inevitably say for us. At the same time, our use of texts in mediated actions changes those texts and in turn alters the discursive practices (Scollon 1998:15).

It is interesting to notice the connection that Scollon's MDT made with the notion of language as action as encapsulated in pragmatics, especially Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and further developed in Jacob Mey's (1987) notion of communicative acts. These insights shed more light on how text and images as represented in multimodal discourse materials interoperate within the discourse space to signal social actions. For instance, the concepts of 'declaratives' and 'directives' (Searle, 1969) may be found as in the different ways language is used to represent the intentions of the creators. The lexicalization of some words and how this can be appropriately interpreted indicates how meaning conveyed through linguistic choices may be dynamic, flexible, context-based and dependent on negotiation among discourse participants. Directives as communicative acts usually have a variety of illocutionary force that may include, suggestion, plea, advice, recommendation, warning, and instructions because they often connect the utterance with the intention to achieve a purposeful action through overt or covert instruction to the hearer to carry out the intended or proposed action. As social behavior mediated through discourse, language is viewed as a process of accomplishing social actions.

Methodology

Using a selective focus method, the data collection period spans between March and April 2020 based on a systematic sorting of specific WhatsApp posts and messages containing text and images encoded with humourous messages and illustrations. The samples used in this study were extracted from a growing repository of self-collected corpus, an aspect of an ongoing project on Digital Health Humanities (DHH) at the Centre for Digital Humanities, University of Lagos (CEDHUL).

Through a process of close reading and content analysis driven largely by qualitative approach, the physico-technical architecture of some of these online posters reveals that they are specially created for a digital audience. The
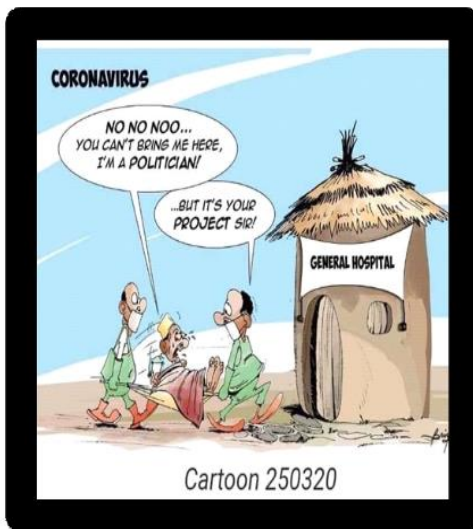
graphics and designs play a complimentary role in projecting the message and the humorous appeal. The analysis of the multimodal structure reveals how the creators of these messages and memes manipulate linguistic and non-linguistic elements to craft the messages towards achieving their intentions.

The copies of the data discussed below were posted broadcast on WhatsApp platforms as status page, messages and posts. Two major alumni group platforms (former High School and University) of the researchers provided the source of the data. They were posted and transmitted among members in the month of March, 2020 during the peak of the Coronavirus pandemic as the government declared partial and total lockdowns in Lagos, the Federal Capital Territory and a neighboring state to Lagos in the South west. It is observed that a number of the posts originated from Facebook and Twitter platforms before being transmitted and spread through WhatsApp. It was discovered that the COVID-19 pandemic crisis influenced the structural and semantic construction of the memes as social and cultural constructs. They basically reflect the reactions of people in Nigeria as an attempt to reconstruct the event to suit their peculiar socio-economic, cultural and political realities.
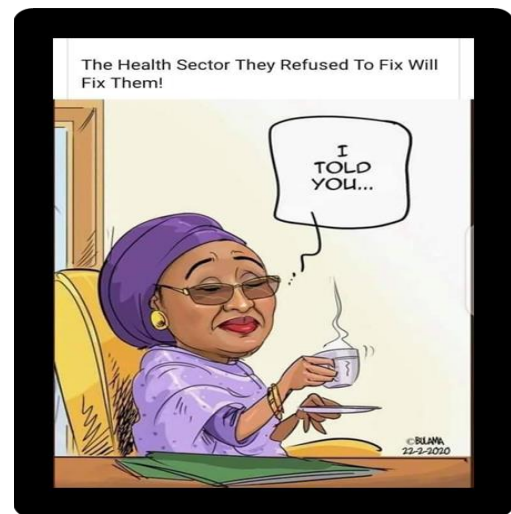
Data Analysis and Discussion

In the memes discussed below, a number focused on the public outrage against political leaders and public officials who have continued to foist on Nigerians decades of maladministration, leadership incompetence, corruption, and mismanagement of the collective resources of the citizens. The democratised online space and cyberspace affordances provided the sanctuary to attack these public officials. Other pressing social issues were equally humourised through the memes. Some of the messages attempt to highlight the impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown on economic activities, disruption of daily routines, and social relationships and peoples' way of life.

A number of the memes also carry strong political undertones with a deliberate attempt to criticise the collapse of public utilities and faulty public policy due to corruption and mismanagement of public resources by elected officials. The memes also show that the traumatic and disruptive experiences caused by the pandemic were being turned into objects of jokes, comedy, sarcasm and humour.
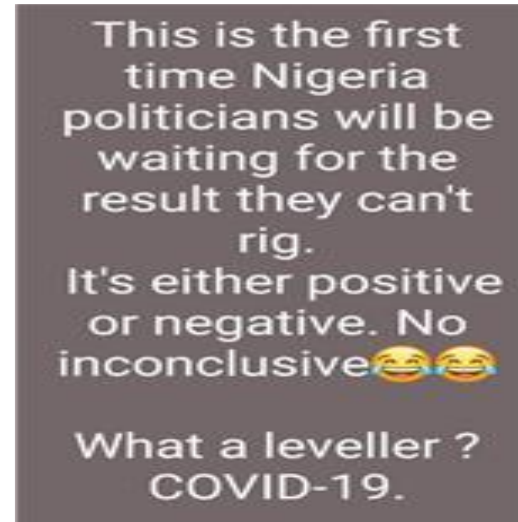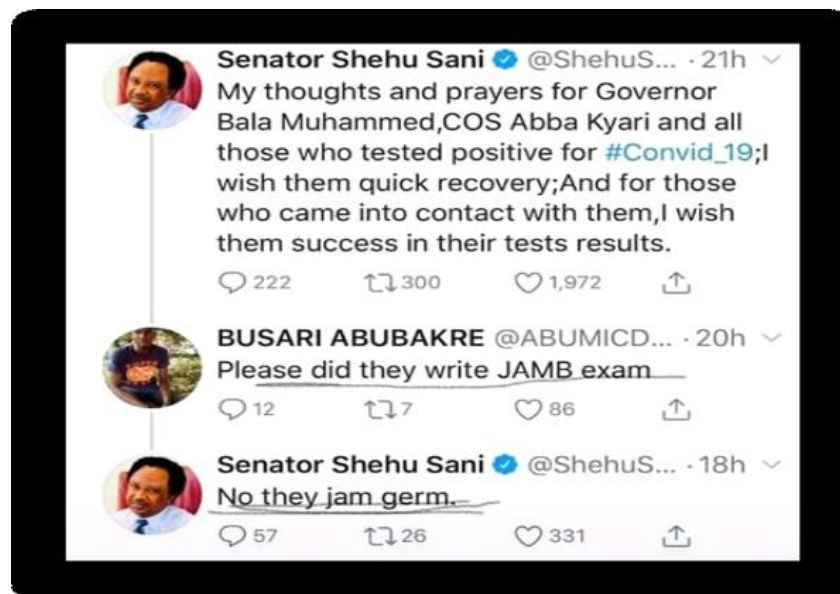

Copy 1

Copy 2

Corona Virus is very respectful.
The only disease that came into the country and went to greet the leaders first.😂😂😂😂

Copy 3

This is the first time Nigeria politicians will be waiting for the result they can't rig.
It's either positive or negative. No inconclusive😂😂

What a leveller ? COVID-19.

Copy 4

Senator Shehu Sani ✔ @ShehuS... ·21h ⌄
My thoughts and prayers for Governor Bala Muhammed,COS Abba Kyari and all those who tested positive for #Convid_19;I wish them quick recovery;And for those who came into contact with them,I wish them success in their tests results.
💬 222   🔁 300   ♡ 1,972   ⬆

BUSARI ABUBAKRE @ABUMICD... ·20h ⌄
Please did they write JAMB exam
💬 12   🔁 7   ♡ 86   ⬆

Senator Shehu Sani ✔ @ShehuS... ·18h ⌄
No they jam germ.
💬 57   🔁 26   ♡ 331   ⬆

Copy 5

Multimodal Discourse as Humour and Political Satire

Copies 1-5 above have different illustrations that make oblique reference to how political decisions, attitude of politicians and maladministration contributed to the COVID-19 crisis in Nigeria. The authors bury their harsh criticisms and caustic attack under the humour. It is noticed that some of the posts blamed politicians and public officials for the difficulty in flattening the curve. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) had attributed the surge in the number of infected persons in Nigeria to returnees who imported the virus into the country and community transmission. Many of the returnees were politicians and elected leaders that returned to the country after their trips abroad. Ordinary citizens found these online platforms the perfect channels to re-express their displeasure at the level of wastage of national resources and profligacy among the political class through unnecessary overseas trips. They convey their anger and frustration on the importation of the virus through these same leaders. The memes as political satire thus take on an additional social responsibility of seeking redress and remorse from the public officials through the subtle attack on them.

The first three memes (copies 1-3) fall into the category of political memes that Scott (1990) calls "infrapolitics", the use of symbolic action to make political statements while refusing to be identified with any political group. He stresses that subordinate groups use this form of humorous artifacts to continue to criticise and wage a

struggle against the oppressive political class without being overtly vocal about it. They are political memes that "…are about making a point — participating in a normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there" (Shifman, 2013, p. 120). The creators and distributors of the posts rely on the shared cultural and social meanings within the Nigerian political landscape to address prevailing political debates on corrupt political systems and corrupt political leaders. The subtle indictment on the political class becomes amplified through the comicality injected into the dialogue. Their mismanagement of the economy and national resources, needless and wasteful overseas travels are subtly cited as factors that predisposed the nation to the outbreak and spread of the virus.

Copy 1 captures the perspective discussed above. It shows two nurses carrying a sick politician infected with COVID-19 to a general hospital located in supposedly the constituency of the legislator. The meme shows the politician protesting profusely against being carried for treatment in the local general hospital. He screams– "NO, NO NO… YOU CAN'T BRING ME HERE. I'M A POLITICIAN! The graphological style (upper case letters ending with an exclamation) in which the expression is rendered conveys a strong sense of objection. He obviously realises and anticipates the consequence of poor healthcare facilities in public health delivery. The expression: "I'M A POLITICIAN" is deliberately chosen to project the artificial socio-economic gap created by Nigerian politicians between them and the constituents that they are supposed to be representing. It also demonstrates the arrogance and social detachment and social distance culture that the political class demonstrates in everyday social interaction in public spaces.

The nurses responded by reminding him that it was his own constituency project for which he collected huge budgetary allocation (constituency project allowance) to construct. "BUT IT'S YOUR PROJECT SIR!" The adversative conjunction, 'but', foregrounds the humour that encodes the subtle attack on the politician. It harps on the contrastive balance between personality and expectation. It condemns the false sense of importance, false sense of security, and detachment from social reality prevalent among the political class. The satire grows deeper and sharper through the image of the so-called public health facility depicted in the form of a locally constructed mud house (hut) situated in a lonely desert. The setting of the discourse and the discursive engagement further amplifies the gravity of public corruption in the country. It is also of interest to notice the quality of the inscription "GENERAL HOSPITAL", merely written on a tattered fabric-banner suspended on both sides with two small stones. It paints the picture of a hurriedly-arranged building for a window-dressing commissioning ceremony which is typical of most poorly constructed public facility projects in Nigeria. The so-called hospital, though described as 'general hospital', is located in a remote desert that is obviously inaccessible to the general public whom it was meant to serve. The combination of the text and images is intended to cast a shadow on political representation and a throwback on the lack of patriotism and accountability that usually characterises public resource management in Nigeria. The dialogue between the nurses and the sick politician bring up a number of pertinent political issues in Nigerian democratic space. One, it shows that the selfishness and cruelty of the political class ultimately impact availability of functional public infrastructure and the cascading effect on the citizens. Two, Nigerian politicians do not sincerely have the public good in their political programme. Three, public policies are interconnected with public life and public health management, and this triangulation is often grossly mismanaged in this socio-political space. Four, the satire is heightened by the visual images and the protest by the sick politician. It mocks the sub-standard nature of the so-called constituency projects for which millions of naira are often appropriated and accessed by the same lawmakers yearly. Five, COVID-19 is shown as a class leveller that is forces the politicians to patronise the same neglected health facilities as the populace since they could no longer enjoy overseas' medical tourism due international travel restrictions. The Chairman of the Presidential Taskforce on combating COVID-19 in Nigeria, Mr Boss Mustapha, confirmed this reality in a press report cited below:

According to Mustapha, COVID-19 pandemic has trapped everyone in their countries, with no one in Nigeria being able to travel abroad for medical treatment. He said it brought out the reality of the necessity to build a strong health system… (Punch Newspaper, 11th April, 2020- https://punchng.com/covid-19-fg-may-extend-lockdown-as-cases-rise-to-305/)

It may be argued therefore that the reconstruction of social identity and re-ordering of class structure through COVID-19 crisis may be sending a strong warning to all public officials to become more responsible and allow true participatory democracy to flourish in the country.

Copy 2: The second post as meme portrays the image of the First Lady, the wife of the President, Mrs. Aisha Buhari, apparently reacting to the ongoing pandemic health care crisis against the backdrop of her earlier warning in 2019 about lack of drugs and critical infrastructure at the Presidential Villa Clinic. Mrs. Aisha Buhari is portrayed sitting in her office seeping a cup of hot tea. Her mien shows someone mocking a situation with a subdued clownish smile.

The meme has the headline "The Health Sector They Refused To Fix Will Fix Them!" The body copy has the illustration of Mrs. Buhari apparently reacting to the headline with the statement, "I TOLD YOU…" written in

upper case to function as an attention getter. The reference to second person plural pronoun 'they' cohere with the second person singular pronoun 'you' to achieve specificity in the identity of those she is referring to. The inter-texuality that plays up connects her previous complaint with the current health crisis and the recent public statement credited to the Minister of Health in Nigeria that he never knew that public health facilities were in such a deplorable state in Nigeria.

The lexico-stylistic feature of the headline shows the application of pun on the word, 'fix' to illustrate the consequence of corruption and maladministration on public officials themselves. The punch line of this humorous meme is captured on the play on the word 'fix". Fixing is a popular political slogan in Nigeria that has a double interpretation: negative and positive. It is used here to suggest two possible interpretations. One, refusal to fix, that is, to repair or rehabilitate the health sector will eventually lead to the death of public officials when they fall sick and the sector cannot provide the necessary intervention to restore them to sound health again or to save them from ill health. The second interpretation is implicated in the public revelation of the level of corruption in the health sector against the backdrop of annual huge budgetary allocation. It is clear that years of national investments made into that sector have been grossly mismanaged. The possibility of pubic probe and prosecution seems to be waiting for all those responsible for the corruption and misappropriation of public funds in the sector. The metaphorical implication of the failure of "fixing" the officials is suggested. If found culpable, the indicted officials may be imprisoned; a move that will booster government's ongoing war against corruption through the feared anti-money laundering and financial crimes agency popularly called EFCC (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission).

The socio-semantic implication of her reaction, "I Told You', is rooted in her lamentation about the poor state of the clinic at the presidential villa when she sought to use the facility in 2019 and could not get the needed medical attention and drugs. The story was in the public domain at that time. The use of the pronominal 'I' and 'You' referential elements to recall extra textual information heightens the impact of the discourse. The headline which appears to emanate from her may also be the general comments from the media and the public on the neglect of public health facilities by the government. COVID-19 showed the poor state of the nation's health infrastructure. Years of neglect and underfunding have made the facilities inadequate to handle the pandemic. The illustration mocks the level of corruption that has no boundaries, where the very seat of power has become the victim of misappropriation of public resources.

In the post that carries subtle attack of the political class, we see the attempt of the people to express their displeasure about the mismanagement of national resources by the leaders. The collapse of public utilities portends great dangers for the ordinary citizens who cannot afford overseas medical treatment commonly referred to as medical tourism. These posts may be viewed as an aspect of infrapolitics, a brand of politics that uses symbolic action to make political statements while refusing to identify with any political group. Scott (1990), describes 'infrapolitics' as the ways in which subordinate groups can continue to wage a struggle against their subordination, but in a way obscured from the view of the dominant power. The use of humour is one clever way Nigerians have continued to express their anger and disillusionment on the misrule they have endured over the years.

As Kayam et. al. (2014:7) note, "[the] very expression of humour, whatever its content, has an element of criticism that says that the humorist or the one laughing in response to the humour is expressing a position about the object of the humour." Political humours are particularly created and deployed by citizens, media, non-state actors to criticise public officers or their political programmes and activities as shown in the memes above.

Humourising the situation through online posts therefore may be regarded as discursive intervention within the framework of public health management provoking actions in concrete meaning with the ultimate aim of seeking to elicit behavioral change in private and public spaces. Since none of them can travel abroad for any medical treatment they will be forced to devote more attention and resources to improve the health sector. The campaigns against corruption and for social reform thus find another outlet through the comicality embedded in the post that discusses serious subjects of public morality.

Copies 3-5 attack the political class directly. They lampoon members of the political class who were previously fond of travelling overseas for medical attention before the outbreak of Coronavirus and the consequent restrictions on international travels. In copy 3, the creator wonders how many of them are now 'suddenly healthy' and do not require 'overseas trip' for medical treatments. The fear of the ravaging effect of the virus in Europe and the USA has brought out the truth about the so-called medical checkup being used as conduits for corruption and money laundering. The punch line in copy 4 draws its reference from a local practice where important visitors often have to pay homage to rulers and kings in a town on entering the city/village for the first time. It is considered a sign of respect and giving honour to whom honour is due. Here, the virus imported into the country is described as an important visitor. Coincidentally, it has continued to infect and cause fatalities among the political class.

Localising the Global Experience as Humour

Copy 6

Copy 6 is a meme which originated from the international space but has now been localised and shared widely because it speaks poignantly to the ongoing industrial action embarked upon by university lecturers in Nigeria over poor funding and staff welfare. It is a reaction to years of debates and crises in the public space about how the education sector and funding for research and innovation has continually been neglected in the country. Although the post has an international dimension having originated from Spain, the local application provides the motif for sharing the post in Nigeria. The present crisis appears to throw a fresh light on the current parlous state of science and research and the paucity of funding to conduct research that can enhance innovation and national development. It is not surprising to find the post being circulated widely on three or four Group WhatsApp platforms for academics at a leading university in Nigeria.

In the post, a Spanish biological researcher is responding to a reporter's question on the role of researchers in coming up with solutions to the coronavirus pandemic.

"You give the footballer one million euros a month and a biological researcher 1,800 euros. You are looking for a treatment now. Go to Cristiano Ronaldo or Messi and they will find you a cure"

The locus of the humour is situated within the framework of lack of respect and proper attention to science and technology that remain the solution to man's numerous socio-economic and public health challenges. The misplaced priority of society on providing funding for sports, leisure and entertainment over and above crucial sectors such as education, health and research is subtly indicted. Equally the post covertly attacks sponsors of big-time sporting events and sports personalities that are not investing in science and technology and in academics who are the power behind the innovations that can improve society. At another level, governments' lack of investment in science and lecturers is suggested. The post is particularly relevant given the current face-off between the Nigerian government and the Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU) over government's inability to honour the agreement it willingly signed with the body.

The sharp contrast between 'one million euros and 1,800 euros' as differential remunerations between footballers and researchers respectively in Europe is expected to escalate the impact of the message. It was deliberately highlighted to increase public anger and disillusionment on government insensitivity to the critical sectors of the society and to elicit sympathy for researchers and academics who are being unfairly remunerated.

The message being communicated is that cutting edge research and innovation cannot be found on the fields of sports and entertainment. Failure to invest in education, scholarship, science and technology will often result in catastrophic reactions to social and global health challenges.

Copy 7

The post originated from Facebook but was thereafter transmitted through WhatsApp. Although it appears like an authentic advertorial, it was created as a meme to humorise the stereotyping notion in society that married women are contentious and the lockdown directive will worsen matrimonial squabbles.

GET RESCUED FROM YOUR WIFE AT 300K is a serious joke that equates a housewife's nagging with coronavirus. The post begins with some familiar icons that situate the source of the post as Facebook content. This inter-textual technical feature shows the widespread transmission of the post and its possibilities to reach a wider audience and achieve maximum impact. Again, it highlights the significance of social media networking sites for cross and inter-platform content generation, content-sharing and transmission. The choice of the lexical item, 'rescued' is aimed at amplifying the effect of the restrictions of movement and the stay-at-home order in major cities at that time. The author anticipates an increase in domestic violence wit husbands now at the receiving end. The offer at a cost of three hundred thousand naira suggests the willingness of some men to pay any price to escape from their spouses' anticipated nagging.

A close reading of the memes reveals the following among others:

(i)   The use of memes to create awareness about the reality of the outbreak and spread of the virus in the country against the backdrop of conspiracy theories being circulated online;

(ii)   To draw the attention of the general public to the deadly effect of the virus;

(iii)   Educate the public on preventive or containment measures that the public can take;

(iv)   Subtly attack failed public policies that overlooked appropriate investment on health facilities that could have prevented the outbreak; and

(v)   Ventilate pent-up opinions on some socio-cultural issues (e.g. marital infidelity, illegal abortion activities, electoral corruption and abuse of office by elected officials).

These and a number of other themes are portrayed through the memes. The selected data represents a general overview of humorous online posts that contribute towards public health communication during the period. Social media has become an enabler of public communication veiled with underlining ideological issues. Individuals can create content and contribute to public discourse by bypassing the gatekeeping role of the mainstream media.

Although the memes circulated in public domains, the two major sources of the data impact the types of COVID-19 related memes transmitted through the platforms. Many of the members are working class family men and women who are seriously impacted by the lockdown. It is not surprising therefore to find members expressing their anger, disappointment and frustration on the way political leaders at the federal level handled the serious public health crisis. A number of the posts thus reflected some of the general thoughts and opinions of the citizens. User-generated posts, rebroadcast/retransmitted humorous messages from other platforms shared on the platforms carry collective thoughts and aspirations of Nigerians. The other dimension shows that members' reactions indicate a sense of relief and bonding as they consider one another as fellow sufferers with shared experience. Sharing their experiences,

challenges, thoughts and aspirations through this medium appears to build a stronger sense of social relationship and camaraderie. Emoticons that indicate loud laughter, blushing, shame, among others are sometimes used to communicate their emotional reactions to the messages.

Conclusion

The study confirms the narrative that events across the globe have shown that COVID-19 as a global public health issue will, for a long time to come, continue to transform and reframe public discourses on public health care management during crises. In Nigeria, as shown from this study, new media technologies played critical roles in creating public awareness and public literacy about the virus. With increasing online posts on the pandemic being transmitted and exchanged daily virtually, producers of online contents are devising creative ways to communicate socio-political and cultural materials using the pandemic as object of discourse. The use of humour in a number of the posts has shown the capacity of these channels as tools for achieving a range of socio-discursive functions.

What makes them interesting objects of study is the capacity of the virtual-based texts to alter opinions, influence attitude and contribute to curtailing the spread while proving some comical features to relax the mind, momentarily distract attention from the seriousness of the situation, and douse tensions and anxieties associated with the event.

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