

Every corona is not a virus: a semiotic analysis of Coronavirus memetic humour

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Abstract

This study is a visual semiotic analysis of Coronavirus memetic humour, aimed at ascertaining the implied meanings of selected Covid-19-related Facebook memes that stimulated virtual discourse among Nigerian netizens during the pandemic. The study adopts Visual Semiotics Theory and Encryption Theory of Humour to account for meanings derived from the presuppositional assumptions and shared sociocultural knowledge which serve as the decrypting 'key' to meaning. The 'key' activates the appropriate disambiguation and interpretation of the significations in the semiotic resources conveyed in the humorous memes. Nineteen Facebook Covid-19-related memes were selected as a representative sample for a descriptive and qualitative analysis. The analysis is coded into 11 discourse domains based on the related semiotic contents of the memes which include: preventive protocol, media reportage, religious beliefs, health sector, sociopolitical domain, socioeconomic domain, security, science, transportation, relationship and lifestyle to account for the differentials in perceptions by Nigerian netizens. Findings show that Nigerians created Coronavirus memetic humour to stimulate laughter in the rather consequential circumstances generated by the pandemic derived from the humorous contents of the image macros. In the Nigerian social context, the Coronavirus memes humorously instantiate the apprehension and helplessness of a people, and thrive to express protest, insecurity, corruption, religiosity, economic hardship and a poor health system. These, altogether, combine as a myriad of the challenges faced by the people who consolably devised coping strategies to trivialise the pandemic, while yearning for an inclusive government that prioritises the welfare of its citizens.

Key words: visual semiotics, semiotic analysis, Coronavirus memes, memetic humour, Covid-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

The ravaging Coronavirus pandemic created fear in the global space. The apprehension was generated by the high fatality rate and unavailability of effective therapeutic vaccines to attend to the rising infected cases and fatalities. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) have educated the citizens during the scourge on the need to adhere to the preventive advisory in their media campaigns. Covid-19-prompted

crises across countries with attendant consequences depending on each nation's level of preparedness to combat the global emergency. Amid the crisis, humour in verbal and nonverbal forms was devised as coping devices to stimulate laughter in the rather unfortunate situation. Humour in this circumstance became the common approach devised to reduce tension and cope with the crisis (Akinola 2018; Sobowale 2020). The humorousness of such creations is interpretable within the appropriate social context by Nigerians in the virtual space.

In Nigeria, the media sensitisation and rhetorical strategies on Covid-19 rather stirred fear in the citizens (Stewart 2020). This, combined with the forceful stay-at-home order evidently reactivated the activities of Nigerian netizens and the production of disaster humour to create laughter (Sobowale 2020). Disaster humour is "specifically meant to offer relief from tension, helps to deal with difficult and challenging situations and softens the impact of difficulties experienced" (Akinlola 2018: 14). Nigerians are known to make themselves happy in similar or even worse situations. Helliwell, Layard and Sachs (2017) authenticated this position in the report that presented Nigerians as the fifth happiest people in Africa and 95th in the world. Nigerians express their humorous linguistic behaviours in various forms, and have extended same to social media. This includes Facebook, where netizens actively engage in virtual discourse on memes and other contents. In Nigeria, Facebook is believed to accommodate the most active users who are either producers, observers, modifiers, distributors, critics or consumers of memes conveying different visual semiotic resources (Murphy 2013; Umar & Idris 2018). The lockdown provided renewed active participation in the social media where netizens' social distances were narrowed, collective experiences expressed and the common Nigerian identity reconstructed (Uwen & Ukam 2020). This synergy created virtual and discursive responsibilities of the participants.

Memes are embedded in semiotic resources. Semiotics investigates multiple kinds of images that perform representational functions, and sometimes conveyed via varied channels (Larson 1994; Prior 2014). The representations could be in different modes of communication that people develop and use to communicate the understanding of the world (Bezemer & Jewith 2009). It could be in the form of visual resources; artifacts such as texts, scripts, and images, among others, are aspects of visual representations. Visual semiotics interprets semiotic resources beyond the primary senses (Barthes 1968). This category of interpretation, in this instance, is facilitated by the situated sociocultural environment that provides the link between the humorousness, the forms and content of memes and the implied messages they convey.

Studies have described internet memes in terms of their content, forms, interpretations and interactions with other genres. For instance, Shifman (2013: 367) describes memes as "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by internet users, creating a shared cultural experience". Laineste and Voolaid (2016: 27) view memes as "relatively complex multi-layered, and intertextual combination of (moving) images and text disseminated by active agency of internet users" which usually evoke laughter across cultures. Another author sees a meme as an "idea, style, or action that spreads via internet in the form of mimicry, which may be variously expressed" (Dyner 2016: 662). Memes could be an image macro that captures the thoughts and views of a specific audience in social engagements. Memes typically convey different messages, which are particularly humorous in content and meant to evoke laughter among the interpreters (Mindless 1971; Buchel 2012; Kim & Park 2017; Akinlola 2017; Oluremi, 2019). Memes are operationally used in this study to mean images (with or without inscribed text), or cartoons shared virtually by Nigerian netizens to express their common experience during the pandemic. Some memes are characteristically created in image-text form. Sontag (1961) describes such creations as iconographic (graphic and iconic) messages that are complementary. Different text-picture combinations bear situated

relevance and have cognitive effects on the underlying assumptions and interpretations of the image macro materials (Yus 2011; 2016). Images with complementary texts “make meanings out of the series of activities that advance the survival of man in the society” (Uwen & Ebam 2019: 163). The complementation communicates significant elements in images as equivalents to words combined in the creations to offer comprehensive meaning (Barthes 1977; Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; 2006). Text-image representations in this form are produced with deepened meaning and understanding within the social context of the creators and consumers. All categories of memes are visual-verbal jokes which are placed in the virtual or on-site space as (intertextual) creations that stimulate laughter across borders (Dynel 2016; Laineste & Voolaid 2016). They may differ across nations to account for the peculiarities in their experiences.

In Nigeria, Ambrose and Idegbekwe’s (2020) study on Covid-19-related memes dwelled on the pragmatic relevance of the image macros in the Nigerian social media space. Filani, Akinrinlola and Ajayi’s (2020) study utilised the messages expressed in the memes to capture different attitudes of Nigerians towards the pandemic. Also, Ajayi and Akinrinlola’s (2021) multimodal analytic approach explored the diverse pragmatic functions of the Covid-19-related memes and the implications they have in medical discourse. Another study adopted a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach in the examination and categorisation of memes into the functions they perform, particularly in the political domain (Unuabonah & Oyeboode 2021). The central conception is that the creations convey restricted contextual meanings to the Nigerian interactants during the period of the pandemic (Uwen & Ellah 2022). The studies are expository; however, they do not engage in an (in depth) investigation of the humorous content of the memes where the implied meanings are embedded. It is these second-order-meaning representations that capture the presuppositional assumptions of the producers and consumers of the visual resources. Drawing from the missing gap, it is believed that the explication of the internet memes within the conceptions of visual semiotics would provide pointers to the situated perceptions and shared experiences of Nigerians during the pandemic.

2. Theoretical framework

The study adopts the Visual Semiotics Theory (VST) and Encryption Theory of Humour (ETH). Barthes’ (1968) VST says that visual images (with or without inscribed texts) and what they stand for are significations describable at the connotative and denotative levels for the expression of a situated worldview of a people. Barthes’ denotative, basic or first-order meaning is the meaning of the inscribed and complementing text in the image, while the image itself has the connotative or second-order meaning which describes the interpretation(s) drawn from the sociocultural context of the authors and users. It is also viewed as the broadened meaning beyond the primary sense which has specific association with the experiences of the producers and users. Flamson and Barret’s (2008) ETH, and the modification by Flamson and Bryant (2013), propose that humour is encrypted with underlying signals that the speaker (creator or author) and the hearer (reader or audience) decrypt through implied information they share. Meaning in this sense is “dependent on access to implicit information on the part of both the speaker [creator or author] and the audience” (Flamson & Bryant 2013: 54). The iconographic elements, in this context, are related to the denotative and connotative scripts, while the iconological significance of the image depends on what it depicts according to the users, and the pace and (abstract) things that shape the social context (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; 2006). It is the social context that strengthens the shared knowledge which forms the decrypting ‘key’ in the decryption process. The meaning appropriation process selects, includes

and excludes certain audience based on shared inferences and cognitive knowledge. The referred sociocultural knowledge is what stimulates laughter, reduces tension and releases psychic inhibitions believed to maintain good health (Freud 1991; Meyer 2000; Kecskes 2010). VST and ETH are significant to the study because the common sociocultural background and shared experience of the active virtual population of Nigerians become the decrypting 'key' for the appropriate meaning explications of the semiotic resources.

3. Materials and methods

The data were generated through the extraction of one social media meme from 100 personal Facebook pages of Nigerians (based on the biodata in their profiles) during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly from March to December 2020. The data were from the Facebook profiles that were set as a public page in order not to violate ethical concerns. The selected pages were profiles of the Nigerian producers, consumers, distributors, critics and discussants of memes that communicated the Nigerian worldview during the pandemic. The information on the profiles of the representative sample consists of employed and unemployed male and female Nigerians from diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds, aged between 18 and 45 with a minimum of Secondary School Education. Although Nigerians use other social media platforms for the dissemination of memetic messages, the choice of Facebook is because "Nigerians have mostly utilized Facebook in posting and sharing of textually and graphically constructed humour" (Chimuanya & Ajiboye 2016: 255). Upon the collation of the memes, the researcher discovered that some of the Facebook users produced and circulated the same or similar memes that conveyed same messages. It is on this basis that 19 memes that were not evidently overlapping were selected as the representative sample. The limitation of the corpus to 19 memes is to avoid unnecessary overlap and unwieldiness in the qualitative description. The selected memes labelled Figures 1-19 were selected because of their situational representations of the Nigerian social context in the period of the pandemic. The Facebook sources from which the memes were extracted are provided below each meme. The data are then coded into 11 discourse domains for a visual semiotic analysis. The analysis accounts for different perceptions of the Covid-19-related realities among Nigerian netizens. The users' comments under the memes aided the researcher in the appraisal and assessment of the humorous contents, underlying meanings and encrypted messages they communicated in the Nigerian worldview.

4. Results and discussion

The findings and discussion are based on the selected Facebook memes with polysemous interpretations using semiotic and qualitative analysis approach. The memes are coded and discussed under these discourse domains: preventive protocol, media, religious, health, sociopolitical, socioeconomic, security, transport, science, relationship and lifestyle. There is some level of overlapping of the domains in the corpus and the domain is limited to a maximum of three memes.

4.1. Preventive protocol

Nigerian netizens created different Facebook memes to communicate the preventive advisory for the survival of the people. Images in this category define perceptions, and communication

in this form is vital to human relations and existence (Worugji 2010; 2015). The memes that performed preventive advisory functions are presented in Figures 1 and 2 below.



Figure 1. Source: Facebook page¹, March 30, 2020.

Figure 1 shows an aged woman with a humorously devised facemask made from corn's leaf. It is loosely but confidently worn round her head, crossing the ears and nose regions while the mouth is visibly exposed. This type of 'facemask' is a sign of distorted awareness of the media campaigns on the type and proper use of facemask as a preventive measure against the spread of the virus. The meme falls within Davies' (2015) categorisation of stupidity jokes instantiated in the nonverbal medium. The humorousness of the picture is captured in the woman's 'confidence' that the loosely worn leaf could prevent her from contracting the virus. Implicitly, the meme communicates the presuppositional knowledge between the initiator and the recipients (consumers of the embedded messages). It recreates the rural-urban divides in terms of the dissemination, comprehension and utilisation of Coronavirus preventive protocols. The meme also indexes the economic gap between the rural dwellers and city residents in the context of the availability, affordability and proper use of medically recommended facemask.

¹ The specific links to the Facebook pages are available from the author.



Figure 2. Source: Facebook page, September 24, 2020.

The meme represented in Figure 2 above has the complementary text “COVID-19 Special Medicine STAY HOME. Please take frequently! No going out stay indoor”. Here, there is the combination of image, colour and appropriate lexical choices to disseminate the lives-saving message(s) needed in the period of the pandemic. Image, colour and text are combined to perform the iconological and iconographic functions in meaning orientations (Kress & Leeuwen 2006). The texts: “COVID-19” and “STAY HOME” provide the decrypting link to the shared experience, and connotatively foreground relevance, focus, caution and emphasis on the life-saving alternative to the unavailable vaccine. As explained in the comments that follow the meme, red, in this context, connotes danger, discomfort and death, while white represents safety, hope and life as represented in the colours of “COVID19” and “Stay indoor”, which symbolically depicts the “special medicine” to be taken frequently. The text-image combination construes the shared presuppositional knowledge of the consumers and suggests that, in the absence of effective therapeutic vaccine, STAY HOME and the observation of the preventative protocol, as Obinna (2021) proposes, become the only “special medicine” available. The humour lies in the mimicry of the unreliable container which has no efficacious therapeutic content, which is also linked to the unsubstantiated claims of discoveries that could flatten the curve of Covid-19 infections at the peak of the pandemic.

4.2. Media reportage

The media is critical to the dissemination of information during crisis. It does not matter if the dimension of the crisis is social, economic, political, religious or health-related. Media reports during crises usually create a positive or negative impact on the citizens. The meme below shows an aspect of the media representation of Coronavirus in Nigeria.



Figure 3. Source: Facebook page, July 21, 2020.

Figure 3 shows a patient sitting feverishly in a consulting room awaiting report of his medical check. The doctor is seen standing closely with the patient's folder. The symptoms read "fever, tension [and] shivering" and the result of the diagnosis confirms that "it's not corona, it's due to overdose of corona news". The implied meaning interpretation in this context reconstructs the correlation between the image-text relation and the complementary roles to introduce the appropriate meaning based on shared experience. The fever, as symbolised in the patient's looks, situationally captures the social experience and the collective apprehension of Nigerians. This is worsened by the media hyper-panicky reportage during the pandemic. The situated experience attracted cautionary advisory on the media to avoid fear-induced reportage that could frustrate the collective efforts to curb the spread of the virus (Nwakpu, Ezema & Ogbodo 2020; Apuke & Omar 2020). In the social context of the meme creator and its Nigerian audience, the media implicitly embodies an agent of fear among Nigerians rather than a source of hope and direction. The social link between the situational context of the meme and the Nigerian netizens rather advances the mapping for appropriate meaning interpretation in the context. The symptoms that were observed in the patient as induced by fear rather than Coronavirus implicitly introduce the jocular dimension of the text-picture resources.

4.3. Religious beliefs

The context of Christian religion is also captured in some of the Facebook memes. Nigerians are said to be very religious people. In support of this assertion, Aremu (2013) states that Pentecostal Christians in Nigeria often recontextualise some facts in religious narratives to address prevailing (un)pleasant situations. The health crisis provided another circumstance that stimulated the expedient evocation of religious beliefs to address the anxiety the pandemic has introduced. The humorous meme that captures the Christians' belief system is represented in Figure 4 below.



Figure 4. Source: Facebook page, April 29, 2020.

Figure 4 shows the religious ridiculing of Covid-19 as the Biblical Jesus is seen with a flaming whip thrashing the demonic-looking Coronavirus. The semiotic resources in the meme connotatively portray the pandemic as evil in the Nigerian religious circles. The sparkling whip on “Corona” demonstrates the predictable triumph as captured in the warning “No place for you in Nigeria”. The text is a complementary signification for hope, as it portrays Nigeria as a no-ravaging scene for the virus. The decryption of the humorous message is premised on the doctrines of the Nigerian Pentecostal Christians who share same religious knowledge and background on the supernatural power of Jesus. The meme is a revocation of the prediction of divine intervention in the prevailing calamity based on shared past experiences. The meme rehearses Nigerians’ religious consciousness and the orientation that God has power over any predicament. This is captured by Kperogi’s (2019) position that Nigerians in the Christian faith are acculturated in religious doctrines that assure them of safety in tragic situations. The belief is derived from the *Bible*, and as recorded in Ephesians 2: 8-9: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest say men should boast”. These corroborate Sebba-Elran’s (2021) position that the pandemic evidently evoked old beliefs and introduced new ones. The meme is humorous because the belief system could not prevent Nigerians (Christians) from contracting the virus and cannot be scientifically proven either.

4.4. The health sector

Some of the Facebook memes that satirise the pandemic are situated in the health sector. The Nigerian healthcare system is reported to be replete with obsolete and dysfunctional facilities (Omeleke & Taleat 2017). Such obsolete facilities are amusingly captured in Figures 5 below.



Figure 5. Source: Facebook page, October 13, 2020.

Figure 5, as explained in the accompanying comments on Facebook, is a funny and memetic comparison of Covid-19 patients in two Isolation Centres: one on the left believed to be in the United Kingdom while the other on the right in Nigeria. The photographs symbiotically depict the paradoxical approaches the two nations adopted to combat the pandemic. One patient is seen in a sophisticated medical facility, and the other sitting on a bed in a makeshift Isolation Centre. He is seen eating with one hand in a very relaxed position while holding bottled water with his other hand. The Nigerian section exposes the rot in the health system, as Ephraim-Emmanuel (2018: 2879) decries the problems to include: “declining government expenditure on health despite increasing health care needs, non-availability, non-functional or insufficient basic medical equipment, inadequate health facilities and lack of basic drug”. Aside from the exposure of the makeshift medical facility, the visual image implicitly presents the patient in the United Kingdom’s Isolation Centre as a ‘real’ infected patient. The humour is evident in the healthy temperament of the ‘Covid-19 patient’ in the Nigerian facility who is eating cheerfully and unaided. The ‘patient’ is believed, as the comments suggested, to be ‘arranged’ to ‘act’ as an infected person for ulterior motives. The presuppositional assumption here is reiterated by the activities of the other ‘patients’ in the background seen in playful dispositions, untypical of those really infected with the dreadful virus. The satire evoked by the meme is based on the clearly juxtaposed health sectors of the two countries the Nigerians have the shared knowledge of. The technologically-driven health facilities and the perennial neglect of the local health facilities, according to the comments, are the attractive resonances that encourage medical tourism to developed countries.

4.5. Sociopolitical domain

Nigerians also created and disseminated social media memes to protest against the political establishment. Tella (2018) avers that memes in this category are deployed as digital resources for political reasons. The visual semiotic resources that connote the situated sociopolitical experience of Nigerians are captured in Figures 6 and 7.

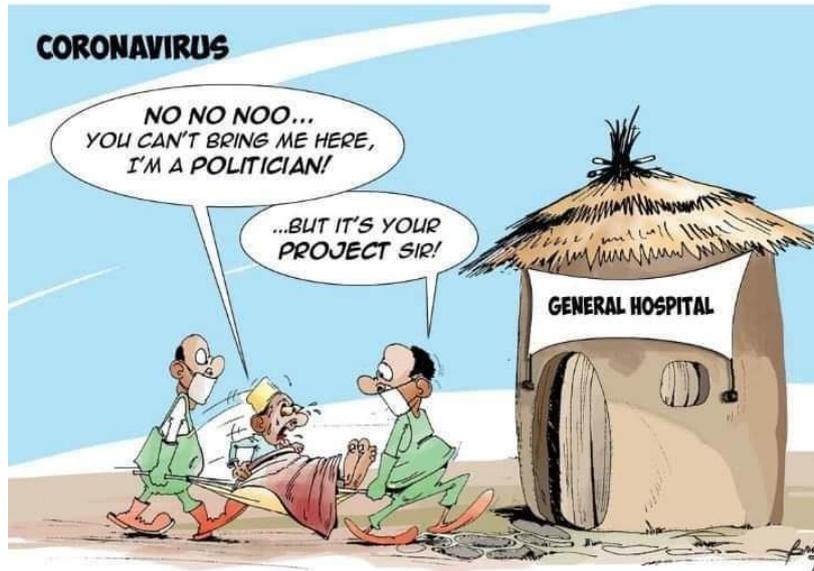


Figure 6. Source: Facebook page, September 6, 2020.

The visual semiotic content in Figure 6 shows two paramedics taking a politician on an improvised stretcher to a muddled medical facility labelled “GENERAL HOSPITAL”. The politician’s resistance and the paramedics’ mimicry are shown in the scripted interaction. The visual image combined with the exchanges re-enact the shared sociocultural knowledge that establishes the social divide; the divide between the few privileged politicians who have access to sophisticated hospitals in and outside of Nigeria, and the helpless and poor masses, whose impoverished status restrains them to the poor health system in the country. On this, BBC (2020) has reported that rich Nigerians frequently travel to the UK, Germany or the US at the slightest headache because Nigerian hospitals are poorly funded. The green attire of the two paramedics connotes their professional marker. The visual semiotic devices in the meme are combined to present Coronavirus as a common enemy and leveller of human beings irrespective of social status. Figure 6 is reflective of the practices among the political class who misappropriate funds meant for the execution of constituency projects that could be of benefit to the masses.



Figure 7. Source: Facebook page, December 2, 2020.

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The next meme in Figure 7 shows a “GOVERNOR” patiently glued to the top of a warehouse where “COVID-19 PALLIATIVES” are hoarded. Palliatives in the Nigerian parlance is used to describe Covid-19 donations and consumables believed to be hoarded by government officials (Uwen & Ellah 2022). The description is corroborated by the action of the “GOVERNOR” holding on to the consumables while deceptively warning the hungry citizens: “STOP! STOP!! THEY ARE POISONED. THEY CAN KILL”. The hungry and angry Nigerians responded in appreciation and contempt “THANK YOU. HUNGER CAN KILL TOO!” The humour is centred on the response of the people to the governor, who lacks nothing in the Nigerian socioeconomic context, but holds on to foodstuffs meant for the citizens. In the sociocultural context of Nigeria during the pandemic, many governors, as depicted in the picture, rather hoarded the consumables until the items were discovered and forcefully looted. The semiotic components also reveal the overpowering resilience of the enraged and hungry population to claim what belongs to them.



Figure 8. Source: Facebook page, July 22, 2020.

The meme in Figure 8 is allegedly created to satirise Kano State’s governor’s excitement over the president’s pledge to assist Kano State combat the pandemic, which prompted his demand for 15 billion naira. The governor’s enquiry “ARE YOU GIVING IN NAIRA OR DOLLARS?” equivalent of “15BN” (15 billion naira) inscribed on the *babaringa* (the loose large traditional attire) exposed the apparent intention to misappropriate the money. The president’s disappointing response “WE’LL SUPPLY ALL REQUIRED MATERIALS AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NEEDED” while walking away provides sociopragmatic clues to his aversion of the vice of corruption. The second-order meaning further introduces the need to devise alternative strategies to curb the menace, which, in this instance, is the promised logistic supplies in place of cash that may be looted. The meme clearly indicts the governor’s inflation of the cost of combating the surge in his State. Adewale and Abu (2020) corroborated the scenario: “Kano State’s demand of N15 billion from the Federal Government to manage the rising cases of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) may not materialise after all, because of her inability to justify the demand”. The social actors here, and past events which the participants have implied knowledge of, formed the basis for the satire that mocks the corrupt

leader(s). The humour is constructed in the makeshift bank represented by the expansive *babaringa* and the dashed hope indicated in the president's response

4.6. Socioeconomic domain

The memes in this category specifically expose the economic realities arising from the temporary suspension of economic activities due to the government stay-at-home orders as shown in Figures 9 and 10 below.

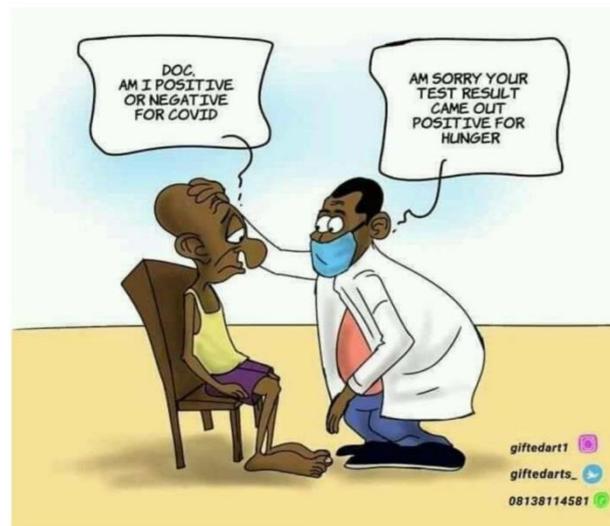


Figure 9. Source: Facebook page, August 21, 2020.

Figure 9 shows a health-conscious man who visited a medical facility for medical examination having observed the ‘symptoms’ of Coronavirus. In the cartoon-like meme, while the doctor is still examining him, the patient had courteously enquired in apprehension “DOC, AM I POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE FOR COVID”? In response, the patient got a rather shocking medical result, as the safety-conscious doctor quipped apologetically “AM SORRY YOUR TEST RESULT CAME OUT POSITIVE FOR HUNGER.” The shared knowledge here is hinged on the large number of Nigerians experiencing poverty capable of inducing Coronavirus-like symptoms. Barthes’ (1968) second-order meaning is reconstructed in this context, as the shared experience provided the clues to the impoverished citizens whose apprehensive symptoms were diagnosed to be hunger-induced. Corroborating the fact that Nigeria has a poverty-stricken population, Akpomovie (2010: 41) decries that “it is a startling paradox that two-thirds of the Nigerian people are poor, despite living in a country with vast potential wealth.” This human-inflicted condition has multiple causes which ranged from personal, physical, economic, social and cultural to political deprivation perpetrated by the privileged class. The comic linguistic choices in the enquiry-response structure of the communication partners construes a humorous depiction of the common realities among Nigerians at the peak of the pandemic.



Figure 10. Source: Facebook page, July 31, 2020.

The comical meme in Figure 10 shows a nuclear family: the man, his wife and a child. The family in the meme, as it reflects the social condition of many other Nigerians at the time, is caught in between two very difficult choices: to go out in search of food and possibly contract the virus or stay at home and face the horror of hunger. The two opposing options: “OUTSIDE” and “INSIDE” are described using two monstrous figures that appear noxious and destructive. The humour, as demonstrated in the family’s fear of going “OUTSIDE”, and possibly settling to remain “INSIDE”, as the semiotic resources suggest, has its consequential implications embedded in disaster jokes of this nature. The shared knowledge connects the decrypting link between the meme and the communicative functions it performs by portraying a common dilemma during the pandemic. This is reinforced in Agbo’s (2021) satiric opinion that Coronavirus is rather conceived as a farce in Nigeria because what the people are actually suffering from is the hunger virus. The majority of Nigerians, particularly among the poor subpopulation, expected the government to rather fight hunger, as the semiotic resources suggest, which, to them, is more raging and endemic than the virus.

4.7. The security sector

Some of the Facebook memes are also produced to present Nigeria’s security challenges. It is believed that the rising insecurity in Nigeria is connected with unemployment of the teeming youth and ethnoreligious disagreements, particularly the Muslims and Christians, and Fulani herdsmen clashes with Igbo and Yoruba farmers. Other reasons include unequal and unfair distribution of state resources, lack of trust and confidence in the government and incapability of the existing security agencies to curb crime. In spite of this, there is a need to check and control criminality. This prompts Cheng and Long (2018) to caution that the society needs one or more forms of social control mechanisms in order to promote peace and maintain orderliness. This responsibility is within the statutory duties of the Nigerian police. However, Musar (2019) complains that the police have failed and attributes this to the reason the military is deployed to control the civil populace. The critical and prominent nature of security and the need to address the lapses apparently prompted the creation of Covid-19 memetic humour. This category of memes is marked in Figures 11 - 12 below.



Figure 11. Source: Facebook page, August 2, 2020.

The text-image meme above shows an armed soldier is in a hot chase of a man who violates the stay-at-home order. The embedded humour in the photograph lies in the trained soldier's inability to catch up with, and arrest, the 'flying bloody civilian' in a race with two contrasting motives: enforcement of government order versus survival against brutality. The corresponding inscription "USA releases \$2 trillion to fight COVID-19 ... NIGERIA stay at home and wash your hands" has social implications. Aside from being humorous, it exposes the implied meaning ordering in the meme, and implicitly resurfaces the crude and uncivilised methods of enforcing orders. The accompanying text overtly juxtaposes the cushioning palliatives released to citizens in developed countries against a forceful stay-at-home order in Nigeria without the supply of basic needs. The humorousness of the text is a mimicker and portrayal of government's mere orders without the accompanying provision of basic necessities. This condition prompted the hungry citizens to defy the orders in search of food, being conscious of the consequences including arrest and humiliation. The image macro content represents Nigerians' resilience and resistance to the crude security system. On this, studies have emphasised the unprofessional and coercive approaches by Nigerian security forces, characterised by human rights abuses, intimidation, assault, unlawful arrest and detention (Musar 2019; Akinwotu 2020; Arisukwu, et al 2021). This prior knowledge informed the action of the 'sprinter' in Figure 11 above as a resistance strategy by Nigerians in similar circumstances.

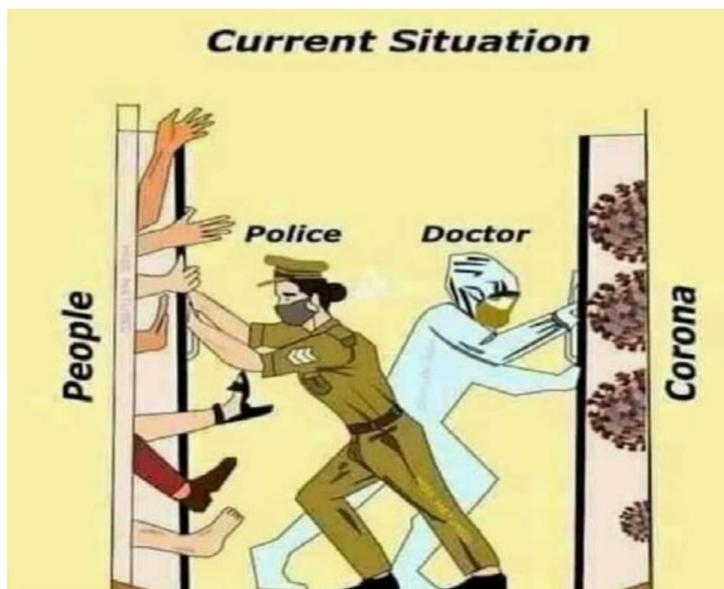


Figure 12. Source: Facebook page, July 26, 2020.

Figure 12 is a ridicule of the Nigerian security and health sectors. The meme shows the “People” overpowering the “Police” in contravention of the stay-at-home order, just as “Corona” is seen to be out of the control of the “doctor”, which instantiated the reality of the “current situation”. Going by the Nigerian experience, the meme shows the obvious incapacities of the “Police” and “Doctor” symbolically representing the security and medical sectors. Studies have attributed the abysmal performance to their operation with outdated facilities that cannot yield positive result in the contemporary Nigeria (Ephraim-Emmanuel 2018; Musar 2019; Arisuku et al 2021). Figures 11 and 12 re-enact the common social realities where some health practitioners, and the security personnel have shown shabby efforts to contain challenges. The humour lies in the use of bare hands and physical efforts to fight Coronavirus against world’s best practices.

4.8. The transport sector

The transport sector is also captured among the domains of discourse that these Facebook memes represent. The transportation of (infected) people helped the spread of the virus during the pandemic. This led to the subsequent restriction of inter and intranational travels, as Figures 13 and 14 humorously capture.



Figure 13. Source: Facebook page, August 3, 2020.

The laughter-inducing meme above captures the symbolic representation of Kaduna State governor who supervised the restriction of human and vehicular movement from Kano to Kaduna. The comments on the image macro content concluded that the person in the meme is the governor based on his dress, stature and the leading role he played in the enforcement of restriction of vehicular movement into Kaduna. The satiric meme reconnects the citizens with genuine efforts of some government officials in deploying available resources and mapped strategies to curb the pandemic. The complementary texts are explicational scripts that participants in the social context could decrypt. Such context-induced communicative strategies often help in the appropriate interpretation of the discourse of this nature (Ellah & Uwen 2020). It is humorous because it is impractical and dangerous to think of ordering a speeding vehicle to “GO BACK” while standing in a very unsafe position on the road.



Figure 14. Source: Facebook page, September 11, 2020.

The semiotic content in the meme above shows an overloaded luxurious bus with the inscription “CORONA EXPRESS” on “WORLD TOUR”, “BYE, BYE FOREVER CORONAVIRUS, NIGERIA DOESN’T NEED YOU” and “In Nigeria people are using me to make money”. The combined elements, humorous as they may appear, are the corresponding features that recollect the transnational and intranational spread of the virus through the transport system. The text-image meme resituates the outbreak of the pandemic in the Nigerian social context as an avenue for the managers of the health emergency to allegedly enrich themselves. This belief is a presupposed knowledge, strengthened by past experiences which provided the explicatory cues to the implied meaning of the image-text figure. The socio-cognitive attachment of the participants to the communicative impulse of the meme, the shared sociocultural inferences and contextual affordances bear the force for meaning orientation in this context (Uwen & Ushie 2022). The humour is adequately communicated in the wishful transfer of the virus from Nigeria to elsewhere, where it could be properly contained and managed. This hilarious deportation of the virus is also captured in the text: “bye bye [from] Nigeria”.

4.9. Science sector

The science sector is also included in the encoding of the discourse domains in the social media discourse on Covid-19 in Nigeria. The development of science and technology in Nigeria is cobwebbed with complex challenges without the political will to revamp the educational sector to match with the competitive space in the global community. Seeing this, Odia and Omofonmwan (2007) have lamented that the Nigerian educational system, which is pivotal to scientific innovations, is bisected with myriads of plagues and crystallised challenges. The meme in Figure 15 is produced to lampoon the nation’s educational system that is not funded to produce scientific innovations.



Figure 15. Source: Facebook page, November 2, 2020.

The meme in Figure 15 implicitly shows a group of Nigerians hurrying away from a shark-like creature (which symbolises the virus) to hide behind and eulogise a scientist. The scientist is seen to be busy conducting research, connected with the invention of the Covid-19 antidote.

By the dress codes of the obviously apprehensive crowd, it is a mixed ethnocultural congregation of Nigerian leaders whose desperation for hope and life is chorused in unison: “Please... Hurry up...”. The chorused encouragement of the scientist illuminates the apprehension towards hope and expectation of the production of the much-expected therapeutic vaccine. The meaning of the meme is implicitly fixed and situationally transcribed in the prevailing condition of the educational sector in Nigeria, which the consumers of the semiotic components of memetic humour are conversant with. Created to evoke satire and irony, the humour is presented in the expectation of the same political class who had perennially underfunded education to look up to the same system for solutions at the critical moment.

4.10. Relationship

Nigerian sociocultural practises encourage and value relationships within and outside the family circles. Thomas, Liu and Umberson (2017) emphasise that relationship ties stimulate the consequential happiness and wellbeing of the persons involved irrespective of the circumstance they find themselves in. Also, Onuoha (2020) confirms that there exists a nexus between health and wellbeing which produces happiness as the outcome. It is this intra- and interpersonal happiness that sustains the amorous bond between lovers even in crisis situations. Figures 16 and 17 are the humorous memes that represent romantic relationships during the pandemic.



Figure 16. Source: Facebook page, August 17, 2020.

The meme above shows the funny and improvised manner of kissing by a newly wedded couple wearing facemasks. Although kissing is an obligatory nuptial assignment meant to create haptic sensation and tactile interaction, it tends to differ in this context because of the couple’s consciousness of the Covid-19 preventive protocol. As seen, the nuptial activity is merely staged to fulfil this aspect of the matrimonial rituals. The decrypted meaning underscores the traditional relevance of family life and relationship to the people. The quest for balanced happiness and family life is exemplified by the couple’s compliance with the law

that bans social gathering to contract the holy solemnisation of their matrimony in the strange moment. The use of facemasks by the couple to kiss each other is a strange practice and a humorous one. This is because, as the image portrays, the action of kissing is merely ‘formalised’ but not actualised in this context. The scenario depicts the sociocultural values and situated meanings which, in this instance, align with the social context of marriage given the choice of attires and uniformity of the facemasks (Kandinsky 1977; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress 2010). The underlying meaning of the meme is fixed in the citizens’ resolve to go for what could make them happy irrespective of the prevailing circumstance.

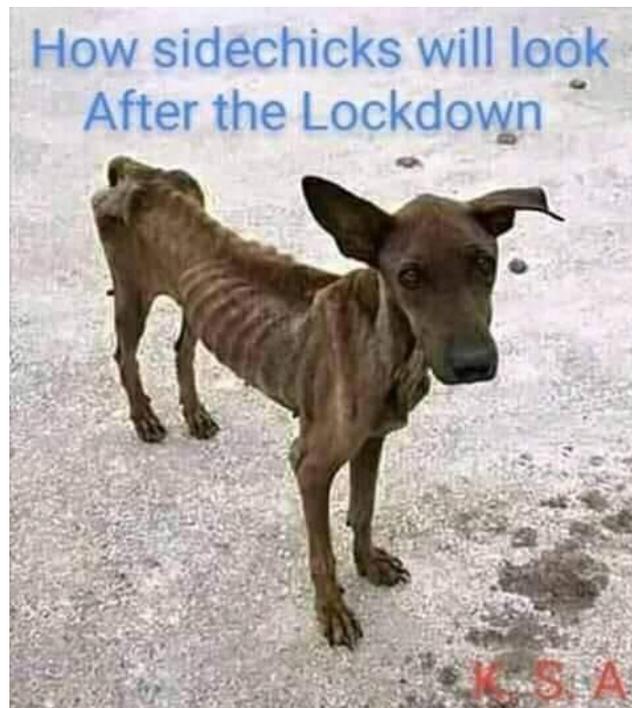


Figure 17. Source: Facebook page, May 15, 2020.

Figure 17 is another Facebook meme showing a famished and malnourished dog with the inscription “How sidechicks will look after the lockdown”. The attached text supports the semiotic resources that situate the connotative meaning of sidechick in the Nigerian social context. The sidechicks are the category of females (youth) who engage in transactional sex with married men for various rewards, which may be in kind or monetary terms. The image macro, according to Sontag (1961) and Barthes (1968; 1977; 1986), plays a vital role in meaning orientation. This is because the relevance of the in-built text in the image helps in the disambiguation of the semiotic resources and facilitates the generation of appropriate contextual meaning intention of the creator (Halliday & Hasan 1976; Rose 2001; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). The associative meaning of the dog is attributive, it connotes promiscuity and dependence on its owner for survival and sustenance of life. The meme symbolically reconnects participants with the situated meaning of sidechicks in the Nigerian sociocultural context. The long abandonment of the sidechicks by their lovers has had its impact on them, as shown by the famished and emaciated looks of the dog. The presupposed knowledge provided the cues for meaning appropriation. Studies have corroborated the Nigerian conceptualisation of the sidechick as a decrypting key in this context. For instance, Okonkwo (2018) reveals that the sidechick is connected with a set of female youth who struggle for survival by using what they

have (sexual resources) to get what they want (money). Ewherido (2021) also maintains that it is an old practice among young women, stressing that every sidechick knows wives of the men she contracts sex with. The sociocultural orientation arises from the opportunities that men have, which prompts some female youth to depend on them in order to survive, access power and get protection. This belief established Nigeria's celebration of patriarchal values and is immersed in the sociocultural environment of a superior male status and a subordinate female one (Uwen & Ekpe 2018). The man, in this belief, becomes the sustaining agent to the female due to the multiple advantages he wields over the woman. These practices are connected with the crystallised cultural orientations, which evidently manifest in the sociocultural, economic, political, and religious fields, and the access to opportunities, social power and security. Worugji (2011) describes this as injurious to the social esteem of womanhood. The meme is a sign of the superiority of man as a 'life-sustainer' to the parasitic sidechicks. The 'forceful' separation from their male lovers who involuntarily stay with their wives at home has negative effects on the sidechicks. The humour is rooted in the looks of the dog and its metaphoric representation of the sidechick.

4.11. Lifestyle

The final discourse domain to be discussed is lifestyle. The lockdown accumulated boredom and idleness, amid therapeutic rumours which activated unhealthy practices. It was rumoured that excessive consumption of alcohol and smoking could prevent or cure the disease. Warigon and Otto (2020) also confirmed the rumour that the virus is caused by 5G wireless technology and that drinking of alcohol or lemon tea could be an effective preventive measure. Another version has it that any substance that could heat up the body is capable of curing Coronavirus. These rumours were spread alongside other superstitious beliefs. On this, Olorundara (1998) has noted that most Nigerians are known to be tenaciously glued to superstition. These beliefs consequently affect their conceptualisation of scientific knowledge and innovation. Two jokes marked Figures 18 and 19 are related to this discourse domain.



Figure 18. Source: Facebook page, May 19, 2020.

Figure 18 is an almost nude and sexually attractive lady flaunting her two breasts. She is comfortably relaxed while drinking alcohol labelled "Corona Extra". The semiotic resources and the text "Every corona isn't a virus" are combined to stimulate humour by unveiling a non-virus and non-contagious strand of Covid-19 in the intoxicating liquid. The text, in the context of the shared knowledge of the consumers, demeaned the virus and encouraged the

consumption of alcohol to ‘cure’ boredom and Covid-19, as rumoured in the period. The lexical choices in the text align with the social context of the discourse (Uwen 2020). The disposition of the lady impliedly calls for sexual appeal, which instantiated with redoubled sexual activities during the lockdown.



Figure 19. Source: Facebook page, June 1, 2020.

The final meme for discussion in this study shows a man who created a hole through the facemask to enable him to smoke. It is humorous because an adult smoker should rather smoke before wearing or after the removal of facemask. Although the facemask here is iconographically and conceptually similar to Figure 1, it situates the image in the context of lifestyle. The pandemic, as shown in the picture, and as erroneously believed, rather activated the practice of harmful lifestyle, such as smoking, drinking and unsafe sexual behaviour. As the photograph implicitly shows, some Nigerians are often engaged in the trivialisation of life-threatening crisis, propagation of unfounded rumour, superstitious practices, and risky social lifestyle. These are combined to resonate the choice of consuming alcohol and smoking as alternative medication to the cure for Coronavirus.

5. Conclusion

The paper presented a visual semiotic analysis on Coronavirus memetic humour among Nigerian Facebook users, using insights from Barthes’ visual semiotics and Flamson and Bryant’s encryption theory of humour. The virtual discourse on memes is an aspect of polyvocal digital humour, which is a symbolic feature of the participatory dialogue culture of Nigerian netizens expressed at the peak of the spread of the dreadful Covid-19 pandemic across the globe. The study is a significant lead to the contemplation that the virtual space could be utilised to disseminate information that described the situational context of the society during the pandemic. Drawing from Barthes’ (1968; 1977) meaning interpretation based on the

situated sociocultural context, the semiotic elements in the Coronavirus memetic configurations represented the reflections of the common realities and experience of Nigerians. These realities are captured in the mind-eyes of the creators, distributors, and consumers, and expressed in the virtual participatory discourse in memes.

The categorisation of the implied messages in the humorous memes into multiple domains of discourse showed the multisectoral effects of the pandemic. Ranging from the advisory protocol, media, religion, health, politics, economy, security, science, and transportation to social behaviour, the discourse depicts the homogeneity of the plethora of challenges faced by Nigerians. The myriad of Coronavirus-induced forms of apprehension, as the interpretative contexts demonstrated, enveloped the nation's social class, religious, ethnic and other affiliations of human endeavours into a common fate. The stay-at-home orders which confined citizens also reactivated active virtual presence and participatory conversations on participants' common experience using Facebook as the convergence outlet. The conceptions of Flamson and Brant's (2013) were utilised to explicate the underlying significations of the memes based on the complex social contexts which provided the appropriate presuppositional assumptions and decrypting tools for meaning appropriation.

Amid the consequential realities of the pandemic, Nigerians on Facebook exploited the situation, using the memes as humorous coping devices to assert, inform, compel, enlighten, educate, instruct, condole, encourage, and refresh hope. They also devised the creations, beyond their denotative conceptions, to condemn, rebuke, criticise, confront, mock, attack, satirise, and express discontentment with the political establishment. The semiotic resources, such as humorous coping strategies, formed secondary significations for the resilience of Nigerians to survive crisis. The discourse permeated through humour to construct the collective yearning for an inclusive wellfarist government that could apprehend challenges and focus on delivering the expectations of the citizens. The study generally provides insights into the field of humour studies in the perspective of visual semiotics.

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