Virtual Activism: Internet Memes and Political Discourse in Nigeria.
by
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Abstract

This paper examines internet memes as a unique form of narratives about political discourse in Nigeria. Through the use of social media platforms as a vehicle of political communication, internet memes about politics explore issues that contain visual metaphors aimed at provoking discourse and stimulate political participation. By employing semiotic theory, this paper examines 200 pictorial internet memes on Nigerian politics between 2015 and 2018. I argue that internet memes about politics are related to political cartoons in form and context. But unlike cartoons, memes require less artistic prowess and figurative expression in rendition but could achieve the same desire in viewers. Owing to their composition of easily digestible visual elements, they appeal to more audience who in turn could easily lend their voices to a popular meme by adding more textual or visual enhancement to create more layers of meaning.

Keywords: internet memes; art and politics; social media in Nigeria; democracy; virtual activism

Introduction

The social media, since the Arab Spring, has become one of the most viable platforms through which the public participate, challenge, provoke and resist governmental policies in postcolonial Africa. As a medium of the popular culture, its acceptance as safe-haven of the voiceless has resulted in increased activism across the continent. The impact of social media in political discourse is so significant in Nigeria that the national assembly, in 2015 proposed to prosecute, through the infamous "social media bill", anybody found guilty of challenging or mocking governmental policies or the policymakers on social media and if found guilty shall be liable to an imprisonment for two years or a fine of N2, 000,000.00 or both (Opusunju, 2018). The increase in citizens' participation on these platforms is attributed to the upsurge in the numbers of smartphones ownership and access to the internet in the country. In a survey conducted by *Statist,* an online global survey website, about 23.3 million Nigerians own smartphones, and 75% of these people have internet access and are on one social media platform or the other (Statista, 2018). Social media activism found expression in different forms which range from "biting" textual criticism to satirical photo manipulations in provoking political discourse. Among the means of political communication on social media platform is the internet meme which is the focus of this article. The masses comment on political news by creating or sharing memes garnished with political narratives. With the exponential increase in multimodal contents on social media

platforms, the transmission of internet memes on these channels has become a significant way of reproducing and reinforcing, ideas and meanings (Dobson and Knezevic. 2017).
 Though there have been considerable numbers of researches on social media and political discourse, little has focused on the use of internet memes. However, scholars have acknowledged that investigation of memes can improve our knowledge of the public's perception, interrogation and decision on different forms of socio-political issues (Shifman, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Milner, 2013). It has also been observed that memes can help increase participation in political discourse (Jenkins, 2006).
Internet memes as further discussion shows in this paper, comprises all forms of social media contents which may be textual, visual, the combination of the two or video, that is geared towards expression of ideas with humour as the main ingredient of attraction, transmitted through the internet medium.

In this paper, I have focused on memes that combine textual and visual elements in one composition published on social media platforms between 2015 and 2018. The study is qualitative and descriptive; it relies on primary data which compromises pictorial internet memes downloaded from *Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter*, and *Instagram* as these are the major social media platforms in Nigeria. Two hundred (200) memes are purposively selected for the analysis based on their thematic concerns and compositional elements. These comprise memes with textual and visual elements making up a whole theme of discourse, and memes with only images engaged in symbolic ways.
By employing semiotic theories of triadic sign significations which focuses on content analysis of signs and texts in selected memes on Nigerian political discourse, I argue that internet memes are similar to political cartoons in forms and context. They are one of the viable means through which socio-political happenings are circulated, interrogated and reconstructed. Their messages are easily digestible owing to its compositional elements and affinity with the popular culture. The speed at which they also spread on the social media platform contributes to its success as means through which the masses get information about socio-political happenings.

What is Internet Memes?

 The word "meme" is the short form of "mimeme" coined by British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book "Selfish Gene" in 1976. It was used to describe a concept which encapsulates analogously, a cultural phenomenon of how rumours, catch-phrases, melodies, or fashion trends sustain and replicate through a population (Bauckhage, 2011: 46). Dawkins describes this as a "natural human, spreading, replication and modification of ideas and culture" (qtd in Marcin, 2014:244). Memes are likened to genes or virus owing to these features.

From the perspective of memes as forms of internet communication, memes are the unit of cultural transmission that is created through the process of digital replication and is capable of innovations (Marcin, 2014). They can spread quickly among internet users (Dike, 2017). Patrick Davidson, succinctly puts it that "internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission (Davison, 1983). As internet memes are transmitted, they become organic, taking another form within the original theme

to arrive at new layers of comments or meanings. For instance, this particular picture (Fig 1) of President Muhammadu Buhari became generic on social media for a different aspect of his administrations as perceived by the Nigerian internet users. It started as an official picture posted on the President's social media handle and later became an object of political discourse through transmission and replication with users redirecting its thematic concerns by adding texts elements.

As popular as pictorial internet memes are, Internet meme did not start as a form of digital photographs or pictures manipulation, its history could be traced to the beginning of the 1980s with the popularity of emoticons (Husted, 2012). *Smiles* in various forms became the first memes with minimalistic features (Marcin, 2014). With time they became more sophisticated and visually appealing. The late 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed digitally manipulated photograph with computer applications software such as Photoshop (ibid). Digitally manipulated pictures with humorous textual elements become the most popular in the present times. Now internet memes are created on smartphones with simple application software such as *GATM Neme generator, Mematic, Memedroid, Tumbr* etc. that require no graphic design or photo editing knowledge. There are even numerous websites where these memes could be created and publish for free; these websites include www.memegenartor.net, www.memedad.com, and www.quickmeme.com. The means of creating memes are available to the majority of internet users, hence their broad participation in meme creation and replication.

In terms of imageries and satirical textual elements, internet memes are similar to socio-political cartoons. Like cartoons, the audience needs to be familiar with the context of the message and symbolic elements employed. However, out of allusions available in "cartoonists armoury" (Gombrich, 1985:127) as weapons of socio-political criticism, popular cultural element is the most engaged by meme creators. This is understandably so because memes require less intellectual exercise to decode – they are meant to be easily digestible while passing messages quoted in humour. Meme creators rely on familiar or popular imageries, themes, personalities, scenarios, narratives etc. to interrogate socio-political situations. Though internet memes can address all aspect of society, this paper focuses on the use of internet memes in political discourse in Nigeria.

Internet Memes Scholarship.

The study of internet memes in political discourse is gradually gaining scholarly attention the world over. Scholars have investigated the relationships of organic nature of memes with biotic viral replication from a scientific perspective (Bauckhage, 2011), internet memes have been explored as, cultural data to study the representation of poverty (Dobson and Knezevic, 2017); forms of humour on social media platforms (Taecharungroji and Nueangjamnong, 2014); means of communication (Buchel, 2012); medium through which salient societal issues could be transmitted to the mass (Ajiboye and Chimuanya, 2016) and as a form of rhetorical discourse (Ding, 2015). The phenomenology of how internet memes rapidly gain popularity is the concern of Bauckhage's study (2011). As he observes, an internet meme is commonly assumed to spread virally, but scientific exploration to the assumption has not gained currency. By investigating 150 popular internet memes

published on *Google Insights, Delicious, Digg, and StumbleUpon*, the study revealed that popular internet memes spread through homogeneous communities' and social networks rather than the internet at large (ibid). Some studies have explored the use of memes in an election campaign. Marcin's study (2014) titled *Internet Memes as an example of Political dissatisfaction of Poles on the internet*" investigates meme as an expression of the political activity of Polish citizens on the internet. He proposes a typology of memes in polish politics based on the subject and context of mockery. Adegoke and Oyebode's study examines the patterns of humour in Internet memes in the 2015 online presidential election campaign discourse in Nigeria (Adegoke and Oyebode, 2015). It focuses on the use of internet memes as tools of criticism against certain socio-political issues at that time. My study of internet memes takes a visual semiotic theoretical approach in locating visual cues through which memes interrogate political discourse within a socio-semiotic context.

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

In carrying out the content analysis of the selected memes, some patterns are identified based on the formal and contextual composition of the memes. In most cases, internet memes creators hide behind "anonymous masks" to create biting images as counter-narratives of governmental policies, very few signs their works with their social media handles, to create the impression of self-assigned defender of socio-political injustice. In political discourse interrogation, political memes creators employ similar tools by editorial cartoonists in their compositions. Little wonder Huntington argues that memes "resembles a hastily form of cartoon with block texts and edited or combined images." (Huntington, 2017: 2). The use of dialogue boxes also known as *fumetti* (fig. 4), picture manipulation to create a caricature-like impression of the subject (fig. 8), Captions and character labelling (fig.12) and symbolic appropriation of images (fig.10,13 & 14) are all part of *cartoonist' armoury.*

In this study, I have specifically looked at the period between 2015 and 2018 under the present President Muhamadu Buhari because, being the first era of opposition party taking power from the incumbent in Nigeria, the expectations are so high. Some of the campaign promises have not been fulfilled, and some of his policies reverted to the same thing he spoke against while campaigning. Though considerable success has been recorded in the fight against Boko- Haram terrorism with the reclamation lots of local governments annexed by the terrorist gang in Borno State under the previous administration, and the release of some of the kidnapped Chibok Schoolgirls, the recent rise of serial killings by Fulani herdsmen across the northern and middle-belt part of the country is putting his administration's security scorecard in red. All these elicited expressions from the masses through the creation and circulation of internet memes. For instance fig.4 – a photograph showing the president and his vice in office perusing documents was turned into an object of satire in contesting his unfulfilled promises.

Figure 1. President Buhari's official Picture in office circulated through his *Twitter* handle

Figure 2. Textual elements added to the original picture to mock ex-first lady's humorous speeches while in office.

Figure 3. Different Text added to the same picture to convey another idea

The photograph has been embellished with cartoon elements – the speech bubble or *fumetti*, to spark a conversation couched in humour. The vice-president has brought a list to the president comprises empty campaign promises, and the president responds by saying that it was not his handwriting. As simple and straight forward as this conversation seems, it elicits lots of discourse concerning how the opposition came to power. It should be noted, Muhammadu Buhari has contested for the same post three times; 2003, 2007 and 2011 with no success. The massive amalgamation of major opposition parties ACN, ANPP and CPC formed a formidable force - All Progressive Congress (APC), against the then ruling party People's Democratic Party (PDP) (Jimoh, 2018) that brought him to power in 2014. The merger, however, included "dissidents" from the ruling party and the goal was to win power by all means. Some politically conscious Nigerians highly criticised these desperate moves as it would result in empty promises. In the meme, by replying "This is not my handwriting", the expression is figuratively reawakening the audience's consciousness that

most of his campaign speeches were doctored by political gladiators to favour their agenda and not intended to be fulfilled. Part of what the opposition party rallied the masses in protest against is the removal of fuel subsidy by the Goodluck Jonathan administration in 2012 (Ebhomele, 2017). Just a year into his administration, president Buhari removed the same subsidy he campaigned against making fuel pump price going as high N141 (One hundred and forty-one naira) from N87 (eighty-seven naira) and later to N145 (One hundred and forty-five naira) (Jones, 2017). That is the theme meme in fig. 5. The creator has brought different images of the president with his "double talks" captured in word balloons of the ruling party's brand colour Red and Green. During the election campaign, he was seen as a messiah with his *change* mantra. His administration embarked on continuous blame game on the past regime as the cause present predicaments (Jannah, 2018) (Fig 6). A view that seems uncomfortable for most Nigerians who believed they voted him in based on his credibility and to discontinue the gross misconduct of the past administration.

Photo manipulation with photo editing software like *Photoshop* is also prevalent in memes about politics in Nigeria. Most times images are superimposed on a different unrelated background to create a metaphor with layers of meanings. This is akin to a political cartoon's use of metaphoric allusions (Jimoh, 2016). The following memes : (Fig. 7 to 9) employed photo manipulation technique in visual satirisation. In fig.7, a street Billboard of possibility a different advert is converted into a sign advertising the ruling party. However, the party's name - All Progressive Union- has been reconstructed as an object of ridicule as "All Promises Cancelled" in contesting its failure to actualise promises of the campaign which include creation of employment for the youth, steady power supply, infrastructural development, adequate security among others. Failure to fulfil some of these promises within three years of ascension to power resonates ambivalence of the masses' optimism of a better life.

Picture manipulation is also a major part of some "trendy" internet memes. Photographs are re-appropriated for another use in metaphoric expressions. For instance, fig.8 portrays some of President Muhammadu Buhari's top cabinet members serving punishment in school uniform, in a manner typical of mode of punishment in Nigerian public schools setting. The subjects, from left; APC party chairman Adam Oshiomole, minister of transport Rotimi Amaechi, minister of information Lai Muhamed and minister of power and housing Babatunde Fashola, have their heads cropped and placed on other bodies (fig. 9), denoting that the meme creator coveted them being punished and treated like unruly secondary school boys for their incompetence in their various capacities as statesmen. The meme engaged *illusory construct* in provoking discourse on leadership failure on the part of the ruling party and its mechanisms. In most African societies, it is unnatural for adults to be punished like children. Depicting them in this position stripped them of their adulthood, hence their authority and support from the masses – it is a state of a complete vote of no confidence against them on social media.

Sometimes picture manipulations, character labelling and other visual narrative devices may not be strong enough to express the theme of counter-narratives passably; hence meme creators resort to staging actions that could vividly capture their intended message (figs. 14 & 15). In fig. 15, a lady is pictured kneeling by a car, with fuel tank opened, raising the Bible

in prayer for water to be converted to petrol, citing examples of water being transformed to wine by Christ in the holy book. This could be ascribed to wishes of some Nigerians during fuel scarcity that has become perennial in the country. Despite being one of the largest producer of oil in the world, Nigeria does not refine her crude and relies on import of refined product for her local consumption. This has resulted in the government subsidising the high cost that always accompanies refined fuel imports. Disagreements between government and oil marketers often cause a rift and inevitable shortfalls in local supplies which in turn lead to scarcity.
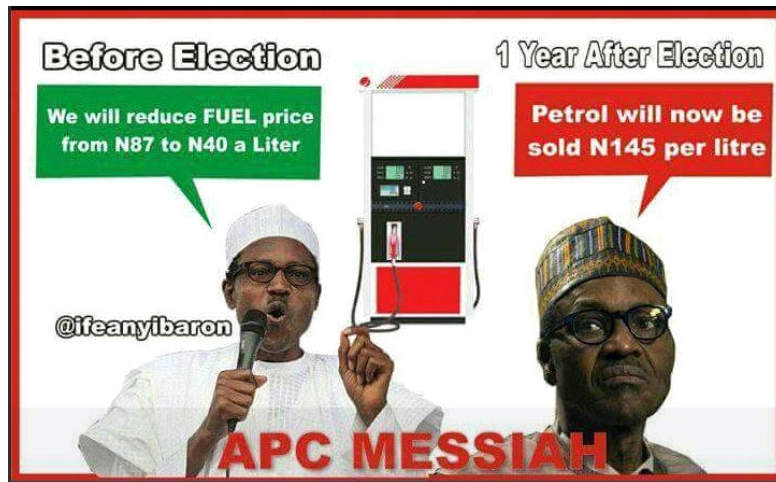

Figure 5. Juxtaposition of different images and comic elements to express the Presidents failure to fulfil his promise.

Figure 6. Meme with caption commenting on blame game.

Figure 7. Ruling party All Progressive Congress is here satirized as All Promises Cancelled

Figure 8. Memes about political gladiators serving punishment.
They are, from left; Governor of Edo state Adam Oshiomole,
Minister of Transport, Rotimi Amechi,
Minister of Information Lai Muhamed and
Minister of Power and Housing Babatunde Fashola

Figure 9. The original picture. Source;
www.madailygist.ng

Figure 10. Meme titled;
Who do you still prefer,
Jonathan or Buhari?

Figure 11. Superimposition of empty coconut as former and incumbent Presidents' skulls.
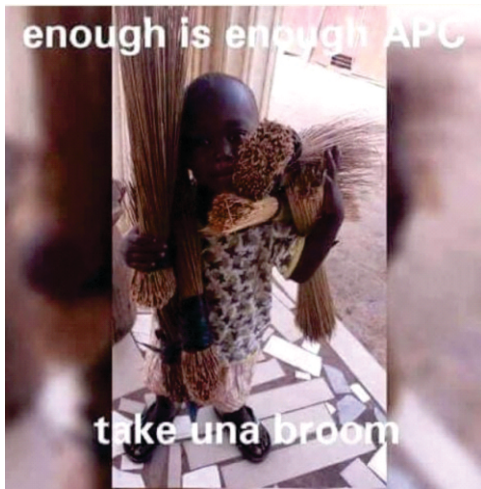
Figure 14. . Staged actions memes
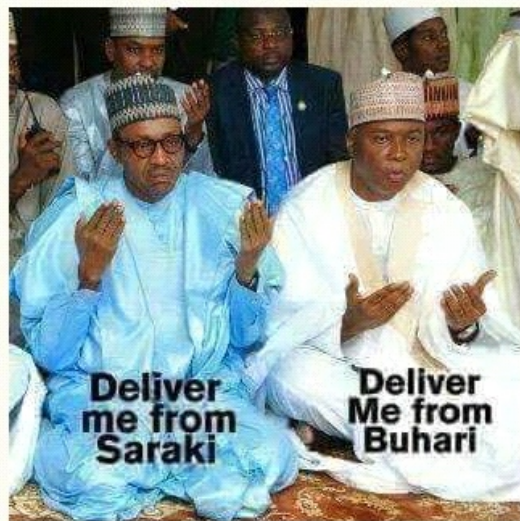

Figure 15. Staged action

Figure 12. The President and Senate President at a religious function

Figure 13. Metaphoric representation of Nigerians with dogs' attitude

Findings and Conclusion

This paper has explored internet memes as a means of expression which can serve counter-narrative purpose in political power contestation. From the analysis of internet memes in Nigeria, it is discovered that pictorial internet memes employ formal and contextual visual narrative devices similar to political cartoon in constructing aspect of socio-political realities to interrogate and provoke discourse. Meme creators are anonymous and have the liberty to recreate or embellish already popular memes with more narrative elements to create different layers of meanings concerning the message being circulated. This opportunity of inconspicuousness in creating a conspicuous emblem of revolt –political memes- increases popular participation, interrogation and transmission and account for why they get circulated rapidly and widely on social media platforms.

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