Article

Humour as discursive practice in Nigeria's 2015 presidential election online campaign discourse

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Abstract

One of the most popular forms of humour on the Internet is memes. Given the identity construction motif that is associated with memes, agents of memes select targets outside the in-group and criticise the targets' behaviour for ideological purposes. This study examines the patterns of humour evidenced in the deployment of Internet memes (both verbal and visual) in the online campaign discourse of the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. Data for the study consist of Internet memes produced and disseminated during the presidential election campaign between December 2014 and March 2015. Considering Archakis and Tsakona's view that humour can be a very efficient means of identity construction, the study applies Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model with particular reference to the theoretical concept of the 'ideological square', which encapsulates the twin strategies of positive 'in-group' description and negative 'out-group' description. This theoretical approach is complemented with Neuendorf et al.'s taxonomy of theoretical perspectives on humour. The study reveals that the memes deployed in the presidential election online campaign discourse largely serve subversive purposes to detract greatly from the electoral value of the targets. In terms of the reinforcing function of humour, however, serious socio-political issues were raised to express the public's worries and desires in a bottom-up communication flow.

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Introduction

Political humour pertains to political issues, and it is produced either by politicians or by cartoonists, journalists, media practitioners and citizens (Tsakona and Popa, 2013). Nilsen (1990) notes that political humour has two major social functions. First, it serves politicians in defining political concepts and to disarm critics and relieve tension. Second, it serves political critics in expressing their criticism. Writing on the critical nature of humour, Kayam et al. (2014) argue that '[e]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' (p. 7). Archakis and Tsakona (2005) emphasise that an interesting distinction has been put forward by Holmes and Marra (2002) between 'reinforcing' and 'subversive' humour based on a critical discourse analytic approach. The former reinforces existing power or solidarity relationships, whereas the latter challenges existing power relationships.

Sørensen (2014) explains that political humour is approached as a certain type of genre like satire, parodies or cartoons and presented in a certain medium such as TV or the Internet. Shifman (2007) notes that the Internet has become a major actor in the production and distribution of humour, as countless websites are devoted to humour and an enormous traffic of emails containing humorous messages daily congest PC terminals all over the world. Corner (2012) argues that media systems work not only to circulate political humour, but also that they are a major site for its production, the mainstream routes now being joined by an increasingly wide range of online traffic. One of the new genres in political humour is memetic communication which, according to Silvestri (2014), is the creative use of digital content to spread ideas, establish community, and participate in culture. For Silvestri (2014), memes are cultural composites – ideas, symbols and practices – that spread in multiple forms through imitation and appropriation. Tsakona and Popa (2013) argue that contrary to more traditional and institutionalised forms of political humour, Internet memes and political stunts could be classified as unconventional political humour since it appears that citizens are the main creators and participants in such genres, while state or media control is relatively more limited or less conspicuous.

According to Norrick (2009), any complete theory of humour must include its exploitation in and effects on interaction, taking into account matters such as gender, power, solidarity, politeness and identity. Such an interactional theory of humour goes beyond a purely pragmatic description of jokes and joking. Du Preez and Lombard (2014) argue that all memes carry connotations, values and judgements. Shifman et al. (2007) argue that the increasing popularity of new forms of Internet-based humour has raised questions about the significance of humour in campaigning and whether online humour can be used as means of stimulating political engagement. Kotthoff (2006) posits that boundaries between members of in-groups and out-groups raise the status of the joke-teller and can be used to influence the conversational partner. Archakis and Tsakona (2005) opine that it has been suggested that humour does not occur accidentally in discourse aiming solely at the participants' amusement, but that it can be a very efficient means of the expression of identity construction. Archakis and Tsakona (2005) state that linguistic and conversational humorous choices can be seen as acts of identity, that is, as discursive strategies by means of which people can construct their situated sense of social identity.

Thus, this study seeks to explore how Internet memes are appropriated by netizens to express their positions and anxieties concerning certain political issues and to convey their criticism of the two main aspirants in Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. The significance of the study lies in the fact that it draws fresh data from a political event in an African setting contrary to the now-familiar terrain among scholars concerning how humour works in election campaign discourse in the Western world. For instance, Shifman et al. (2007) and Tsakona and Popa (2011, 2013) have studied the growth of online humour genres and their prominent role in US presidential election campaigns from the late 1990s, the 2004 US Presidential elections which saw the widespread use of online humour both by satirists and by the parties themselves, and proliferation of viral emails and satirical websites in the 2005 UK elections. Besides, the study is significant in that it attempts to respond to the challenge posed by Ruiz-Madrid and Fortanet-Gómez (2015) that humour researchers when analysing discourse need to highlight the importance of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), hence the analysis of both verbal and visual Internet memes in this study.

The next section of the study reviews literature on Internet memes as well as their nature and appropriation for political engagements. Thereafter, we provide information on the data for the study, after which we espouse the theoretical orientation. This section is followed by the analysis and discussion, which leads us to the concluding remarks.

Internet memes as artefacts of political communication

The word meme derives from the Greek *mimema*, signifying 'something which is imitated'. Thus, *memetics* is understood as 'the theoretical and empirical science that studies the replication, spread and evolution of memes' (Shifman, 2013: 363). First conceived and coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) in his book *The Selfish Gene*, the meme was Dawkins' response to the gene-centric focus of evolution. Specifically, Dawkins, according to Wiggins and Bowers (2014), envisioned the meme as a cultural unit (or idea) that sought replication for the purposes of its own survival. Ideas (or memes), for Dawkins, are inherently selfish and virulent, competing to infect individual minds and use those minds as vehicles for replication. However, it is only memes suited to their socio-cultural environment that will spread successfully; the others will become extinct. According to Shifman (2013), examples of memes in Dawkin's pioneering text include specific signifiers such as melodies, catchphrases, and clothing fashions, as well as abstract beliefs (e.g. the concept of God).

Although memes were conceptualised long before the digital era, the unique features of the Internet turned the spread of memes into a highly visible process taking place on a global scale. Wiggins and Bowers (2014) note that Internet memes have become a focus of scholarship because of their import as both an activity and a genre in social networks as numerous scholars study memes in order to understand digital culture. Thus, Shifman (2013) writes,

> In the vernacular discourse of netizens, the phrase 'Internet meme' is commonly applied to describe the propagation of content items such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet. According to this popular notion, an Internet meme may spread in its original form, but it often also spawns user-created derivatives. (p. 362)

Du Preez and Lombard (2014) observe that any Internet user can create a meme on a meme-generating site. Memes created on such a site are usually altered slightly, but are still traceable to the meme family. Segev et al. (2015: 2) define Internet memes as groups of digital textual units created and distributed by many participants and bound together by two forces: (a) a shared quiddity which is specific to each family, constituting its singular essence, and (b) more general qualities of form, content and stance that draw on the conventions of the 'meme culture'. A general notion emerging from the existing literature is that in theory, quiddities can be categorised into types: visual and verbal quiddities. While visual quiddities tend to be more immutable and concrete, textual quiddities tend to be changeable.

Shifman (2011) stresses that human agency should be an integral part of our conceptualisation of memes, describing memes as 'dynamic entities that spread in response to technological, cultural, and social choices made by people' (p. 189). Contesting Blackmore's (1999) claim that people are 'meme machines' operated by the numerous memes they host and constantly spread, Shifman (2013) cites Conte's (2000) suggestion to treat people not as *vectors* of cultural transmission, but as *actors* behind this process:

> The dissemination of memes […] is based on intentional agents with decision-making powers: Social norms, perceptions, and preferences are crucial in memetic selection processes. This conceptualisation of people as active agents is highly appropriate for understanding how memes travel on the digital highway, particularly when examining cases in which the initial meaning of a meme is dramatically altered in the course of its diffusion. (p. 366)

To Wiggins and Bowers (2014), 'memes are remixed, iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of continuing a conversation' (p. 1).

Du Preez and Lombard (2014) emphasise social media effect on the proliferation of memes in the Internet age, stating that social media sites – such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – have changed the way in which memes are transmitted or spread. It is argued that social media have provided the most fertile environment for the replication of memes to date. Thus, the mass exposure to memes on social media considerably increases the fecundity of memes. Shifman (2014) considers the Internet meme as the most useful concept for understanding current cultural trends because it epitomises the essence of Web 2.0 interactivity. Wiggins and Bowers (2014) conceive of Internet memes as artefacts of participatory digital culture. Their definition of participatory digital culture retains much of Jenkins' (2009) concept, although they have added *digital*. According to Jenkins (2009), a participatory culture is one with 'relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices' (p. 3).

For Wiggins and Bowers (2014), viewing memes as artefacts is helpful for three reasons. First, memes as artefacts possess *virtual physicality*, meaning that memes as artefacts exist in the human mind as well as in the digital environment. Second, memes as artefacts highlight their social and cultural role on the new media landscape. In this regard, Shifman (2014) emphasises that tracing the evolution of Internet memes grants

us access to 'deep social and cultural structures' (p. 15). Wiggins and Bowers (2014) explain that whereas a cultural artefact offers information about the culture that creates and uses it, a social artefact informs us about the social behaviour of those individuals or groups which produce it. Third, seeing memes as artefacts underlines the purposeful production and consumption among members of participatory digital culture.

With regard to the purposeful production and consumption reason of memes as artefacts, Wiggins and Bowers (2014: 7) argue that Internet memes are messages transmitted by consumers/producers for discursive purposes. Specifically, the term 'discursive' asserts repetition of subject or thematic matter from within an established meme. Thus, a successful Internet meme implies a modified narrative. In this sense, memes make a semiotic contribution to the environment in which they are located. As to the appropriation of memes as artefacts of political communication, Silvestri (2014) argues that perhaps the most significant takeaway from Shifman's (2014) treatise on memes is that they can serve as a Trojan horse for political communication and can potentially even be the playing field for political actors. Seeing memes as a form of political participation, Shifman (2014) argues that with the help of new media, 'the perception of what constitutes political participation has been broadened to include mundane practices, such as commenting on political blogs and posting jokes about politicians' (p. 120). In this regard, Silvestri (2014) surmises that 'Internet memes represent yet another way for ordinary citizens to claim public space by riding the coattails of popular culture' (p. 199). Digital culture, in Shifman's (2014) conception, becomes an 'arena of bottom-up expression' that blends 'pop culture, politics, and participation in unexpected ways' (p. 4).

To conclude, we will emphasise Shifman's (2011) and Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) view that humour is a key feature and a central component of online memes. Nakamura (2014) also notes that memes are often defined by their humour in addition to their whimsical nature. Shifman (2011) finds that three important concepts in defining humour are also found in the majority of humorous memes. These concepts include playfulness ('inviting' viewers to participate in a game), incongruity (an unexpected cognitive encounter between two incongruent elements) and superiority (the viewer perceives himself or herself as superior to the other). In this sense, one ideological issue for which Internet memes have been appropriated in online political communication is the construction of identity either consciously or subconsciously. Therefore, we find the appropriation of Internet memes as artefacts of humour in representing presidential aspirants in Nigeria's 2015 online presidential campaign discourse an engaging study to explore.

Data for the study

Data for the study are composed of memes produced, disseminated and consumed by netizens via Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. The data, made up of both verbal and visual memes, were purposively sampled in the heat of the presidential election campaign between December 2014 and March 2015. Of the 14 political parties which participated in the 2015 presidential election, the data were delimited to the campaign discourse revolving around the candidates of the two dominant parties – Dr Goodluck Jonathan of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and General Muhammadu Buhari of the opposition All Progressives Congress (APC). Although there were varied issues that

dominated the social media during the presidential election campaign, the researchers purposively sampled data that revolve around the following issues: (a) the perceived misrule of the PDP for 16 years (1999–2015) and the poise of the emergent coalition opposition party the APC to dislodge it; (b) the alleged ineptitude of the incumbent Dr Goodluck Jonathan to fix some of Nigeria's nagging problems such as corruption, insecurity, energy and unemployment during his first term in office; (c) labelling General Muhammadu Buhari, the standard bearer of the opposition party, as a religious bigot and harping on his alleged certificate scandal; and (d) the 'change' mantra that dominated the campaign of the opposition party and was widely chorused by many Nigerians as well.

Theoretical framework

Van Dijk's Socio-cognitive Discourse Analysis approach is characterised by the interaction among cognition, discourse and society. Van Dijk (2009) believes critical discourse analysis (CDA) needs a model of context such as Moscovici's (2000) social representation theory: one individual's cognition is informed by dynamic constructs known as *social representations*, that is, the concepts, values, norms and images shared in a social group, and activated and maintained in discourse, hence the emphasis on ideologies. For Van Dijk (1995), ideologies are understood as mental structures, which state the social cognitions and attitudes of social groups and institutions.

Ideologies are (re)produced and distributed through discourses to mentally represent the basic social characteristics or properties of a specific group, for example, identity, activities, goals, norms and values, group relations and resources. Van Dijk (1998) postulates the theoretical concept of the 'ideological square', stressing that many group ideologies involve the representation of *Self* and *Others*. The 'ideological square' functions to polarise in- and out-groups in order to present the 'We' group in a favourable light and the 'They' group unfavourably. Interestingly, this ideological polarisation encapsulates both verbal and visual strategies. Kress (1993) argues that 'all signs are […] equally subject to critical reading', given the fact that 'no sign is innocent' (p. 174).

With respect to the theoretical perspectives on humour, Neuendorf et al. (2014) note that the interdisciplinary literature on humour to date has identified four broad mechanisms of humour apprehension: superiority/disparagement, arousal/dark humour, incongruity and social currency. Raskin (1985) argues that many researchers who have followed the approach to humour based on hostility, malice, aggression, derision or disparagement consider themselves followers of Thomas Hobbes. For Hobbes, the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others or with our own formerly. Superiority/disparagement is an aggression-based theory whereby people use laughter to vent their hatred or emotional stress as well as express power over others. It is interesting that humans have some sense of relief and feel a fleeting superiority when they laugh and make a jest of people.

Arousal/dark humour is anchored on the works of two philosophers and writers, Immanuel Kant and Herbert Spencer. They assert that arousal/dark humour is concerned with using humorous response as a simple way of releasing pent-up psychological strain or tension. Krikmann (2006) notes that arousal humour focuses mainly on the psychological

effects humour allegedly brings about in the recipient. Incongruity humour is essentially cognitive, that is, based on some objective characteristics of a humorous text or an act. It is assumed that every such act involves two different planes of content which are mutually incompatible but also include a certain common part which makes the shift from one to another possible (Krikmann, 2006). Neuendorf et al. (2014) explain that incongruity humour is experienced when two disparate perspectives are simultaneously experienced, stressing that the joy of humour derives from the 'solving' of the incongruous puzzle. Levonian (2011) stresses that the humorous effect of a joke is generated mainly by its punchline, which frequently presents a seemingly irrelevant idea, opens up an entirely new trend of thought or makes an unexpectedly rational statement. Social currency, according to Neuendorf et al. (2014), is concerned with building and maintaining relationships such that humour can enhance the establishment of functional social construction or hierarchy, the achievement of a sense of group belonging or understanding.

On the kind of relations that obtain between these theoretical approaches to humour, Raskin (1985) emphasises that although the history of humour research has been marked by a great deal of claims and counter-claims, examples and counter-examples, the theories are not at all incompatible. They actually characterise the complex phenomenon of humour from very different angles and do not at all contradict each other. Neuendorf et al. (2014) remark that while most scholars take the view that one particular humour mechanism is paramount (usually to the exclusion of the other mechanisms), 'multiple mechanisms are likely, and […] these may come into play simultaneously when a receiver encounters a potentially humorous stimulus' (p. 67). Thus, Raskin (1985) submits that the incongruity-based theories make a statement about the stimulus, the superiority theories characterise the relations or attitudes between the speaker and the hearer, and the release/relief theories comment on the feelings and psychology of the hearer.

Analysis and discussion

The discursive practice of naming is used by the memes' producers to negatively represent the presidential aspirants. Generally, the names are used as parodies of existing names. In speech or writing, parody is a literary device which intentionally copies or imitates another work, making features or qualities of the original noticeable in a way that is humorous. According to Yin and Yun (2012), parody is an amusing imitation of classic or popular expressions. Thus, we find names of the two presidential aspirants parodied to achieve some political goals. Such names are particularly configured as nonce-formations. According to Ahmad (2000), a nonce-word is 'a linguistic form which a speaker consciously invents or accidentally does on a single occasion' (p. 711).

Considering the alleged disenchantment of some Nigerians with President Jonathan's performance during his first term in office, and their impression that he would not be able to bail Nigeria out of her predicaments if given a second-term mandate, the opponents use humorous memes which are coinages from his surname 'Jonathan', giving such nonce-words as 'Jonadaft', 'Jonadumb', 'Jonascam' and 'Jonothing'. In each of these nonce-words, an English word which has the propensity to whip up negative sentiments in the electorate is grafted into the original name of the bearer, with the deletion of the final syllable 'than' in 'Jonathan' and its replacement with the words 'daft', 'dumb' and

'scam' in the first three names. In the fourth, only the first syllable 'Jo' is retained, while the word 'nothing' is grafted to fill the second and third syllables.

In doing so, the picture presented of the person of the president, his capability, his intelligence quotient, his eloquence/articulation, his morals and his score-card are all portrayed negatively, as suggested by the words 'daft', 'dumb', 'scam' and 'nothing'. Certainly, no right-thinking human being would want to entrust any venture in the hands of somebody described as being 'daft' and 'dumb'. The same thing applies to the import of 'scam'. The president could have been given this scammer image probably for his alleged failure to fulfil his campaign promises during his first term. For instance, he used folk appeal to seek the electorate's votes in 2011, claiming that 'he had no shoes' as a young Nigerian (evidence that he too had tasted poverty) and that if elected, he would banish poverty from the land and put food on the tables of the ordinary people. However, after almost 4 years in office, the opposition party and some Nigerians still accused him of not having fulfilled this promise.

Thus, the name 'Jonothing' gives the impression that the president has offered nothing in his first term and therefore should not be re-elected. While seeing nothing good in the Other, the discourse producers must have exaggerated here because the President must have done some things, and if asked to present his score-card, the nonce-formations he and his supporters may derive could sound like 'Jo-something', 'Jo-somanythings', 'Jo-alot' or even 'Jo-plenty'. Thus, in line with Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, we find in this context how semiotic resources can be appropriated in a given political context to serve the interests of discourse producers along ideological lines, showing how ideologies influence cognition of group members.

For his first name Goodluck, there is a nonce-word rendered as 'Gridlock', suggesting that the country has been brought to a standstill with the incumbent's style of governance. Little wonder then that decorum is sometimes thrown to the winds, as the president's regime is disparagingly tagged 'badluck' to Nigeria by corrupting his original surname 'Goodluck' as 'badluck'. In an attempt to cast grave doubt on the competence and performance of the President while in office, his doctoral degree (PhD) – Doctor of Philosophy – is humorously reconfigured as Port Harcourt Diploma (PhD), a travesty of his bagging a doctoral degree from the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The element of surprise in this humour is the attempt to equate a diploma certificate with a PhD degree. While the incongruity in the humour would really stimulate laughter in the reader and thereby release some psychological tension, the playfulness in its use disparages the person of the president and his competence to defend his PhD certificate.

In fact, some netizens against his re-election bid suggest humorously that instead of aspiring to be a president, he had better apply as 'ward councillor' (the least elective political office at the local government level), 'neighbourhood watch', 'fisherman' (having come from a part of Nigeria Bayelsa (where fishing is the dominant occupation), 'headmaster of elementary school' or better still a 'zoo keeper' (for having a doctoral degree in zoology). Worse still, some even suggest that keeping a zoo would be a dangerous offer for the President because he would be eaten up by the lion (being a weakling and an unintelligent fellow). These diminutive images of the stature of the president bear upon different aspects of the theories of humour cumulatively appropriated to emphasise the punchlines in the humorous memes, express the producers' sense of superiority at

laughing over all the president's perceived weaknesses, and release some tension in the readers – probably from some national economic and political problems. In terms of Van Dijk's view about the ideological polarisation of discourses, it is noteworthy that for political advantage, the negative attributes of the incumbent are intensified, while positive attributes that could earn him any electoral value are mitigated or even completely effaced.

For the candidate of the opposition party, General Muhammadu Buhari, his person is maligned on religious grounds, and in doing so, his surname 'Buhari' is recontextualised following the process of grafting of syllables as seen in the case of 'Goodluck Jonathan'. In a bid to distance the presidential aspirant from Nigerians, there is an attempt to link him with the dreaded terrorist group Boko Haram that has killed thousands of people and kidnapped thousands as well, among whom are the Chibok girls (see later). While the presidential aspirant may have his candidature boosted by his track record as an incorruptible political office holder, as a result of which some call him 'Mr Integrity', whipping up primordial sentiments against his person in a religiously volatile setting like Nigeria could distance him from the Christian community from every peace-loving Nigerian who is tired of the insecurity in the land, partly escalated by the Boko Haram insurgency. Hence, the nonce-formations 'Buharam' and 'Bokohari' deserve attention.

In 'Buharam', the second word in the name of the terrorist group (Haram) is grafted to join the first syllable in the original name 'Buhari' to derive 'Bu+haram'. In 'Bokohari', the first word in the name of the terrorist group 'Boko' is used as a stem, while the second and third syllables in the original name of the aspirant 'hari' are grafted as a suffix to derive 'Boko+hari'. As humorous as these coinages may sound in terms of the producers' playfulness with language, the implications for the ambition of the aspirant could be counterproductive. In fact, in what could suggest an outright banishment of the aspirant from the Nigerian political space, the addition of the word 'haram' – meaning 'forbidden' – to the new name tag given to him renders him unworthy of the office of the president.

Apart from the religious issue, the allegation that Buhari did not possess the minimum requirement of the West African School Certificate (WASC) to contest for the office of president was a major campaign issue. While Buhari claimed to have submitted his certificate to the military board and thought it was in its custody, the military board publicly declared that it was not in possession of the certificate. In the ensuing confusion, the ruling party asked that he be disqualified and charged for perjury. As suits were instituted against him by some individuals and political groups, the campaign discourse took a humorous dimension. One such humorous stroke is that Buhari possessed an ACRC (Almajiri Cattle Rearing Certificate), suggesting that he never went to school and that as an 'almajiri' (urchin) all he mastered was rearing cattle, an occupation common in the Northern part of Nigeria where Buhari hails from. This humorous stroke disparages not only the educational qualifications and personality of the target, but also the values, traditions and culture of the northern people just as President Jonathan and his Niger Delta culture and tradition pertaining to fishing were ridiculed earlier. The punchline in the humour is the incongruous collocation of the word 'certificate' with 'cattle rearing'. Bringing to bear Van Dijk's notion of ideological square on the construction of identity for Buhari thus far, we can see that the memes analysed function to polarise in- and out-groups such that negativity is woven around otherness.

It is interesting that humorous jibes are sometimes contested such that supporters of the ridiculed target fight back, as is the case with the Buhari certificate saga where his supporters reply with the meme below:

IF THE PDP GOVERNMENT LED BY JONATHAN HAD SEARCHED FOR THE MISSING GIRLS THE WAY THEY ARE SEARCHING FOR BUHARI'S CERTIFICATE, THE GIRLS WOULD HAVE BEEN FOUND 3 HOURS LATER.

- CONCERNED NIGERIAN

The punchline of this humorous meme is the collocation of the verb 'to search' with the objects 'missing girls' and 'certificate'. Searching for humans ordinarily should have attracted a higher level of commitment than searching for a certificate. But the impression is given that the government of Jonathan searched (metaphorically speaking) more frantically for Buhari's certificate than searching for the over 200 missing Chibok girls kidnapped from their school on 14 April 2014 by the dreaded Boko Haram terrorist group. The missing girls' distraught parents and concerned people around the world still await their release. The impression is thus given of PDP as a party that has lost focus of serious national issues and was desperately pursuing a trivial one. Thus, the humour disparages the target, using ironic sarcasm for rhetorical effect.

The name of the ruling party, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), cuts the figure of humorous memes such as People Deception Party (PDP), Poverty Development Party (PDP), besides the acronym PDP rendered as 'PDPigs' in the campaign discourse. The injection of the word 'deception' in the first example criticises the party's governance style in the 16 years of its reign purportedly for not delivering its electoral promises to the people. In fact, the strange collocation of the words 'deception' and 'party' could distance the political party from the electorate, as people would wish to vote for a party with integrity. Another punchline in the humour is the incongruity of the collocate 'poverty' and 'development'. Parties or governments are known for 'eradicating' poverty, not 'developing' it. Thus, in an attempt to criticise the ruling party and thereby distance it from the electorate, these linguistic incongruities are foregrounded in the memes. The grafting of 'pigs' as an animal image to the identity of the party is one that portrays it as having allegedly messed up the country with dirty (corrupt) deals. Trusting the party and voting for it again are metaphorically configured in the visual meme following:

The image of hopelessness and futility in the meme is underlined with the punchline of the cognitive representation of trying to fetch water with a perforated waste bin. The inscription of PDP on the waste bin and the posture of the man pouring water into it, squatting and resting his chin on his fist, seem to deliver an electoral message: 'Don't vote for this party with unconvincing agenda; vote for the opposition party for a change of story.' While the meme producers are hostile to the PDP with the use of certain incongruous cognitive elements, the goal of the discourse is that of social currency whereby there is an establishment of functional social construction towards denouncing a particular political party and embracing another one.

One such issue which appears to portray the ruling party as one metaphorically fetching water with a perforated waste bin is that of the problem of the energy sector in Nigeria. In this regard, the following visual meme becomes instructive:

Again, this text criticises the PDP as a party that has supposedly failed to fulfil one of its electoral promises. The punchline in the humour is anchored on both verbal and visual signifiers. The question of 'transformation' is raised because the president's/ party's blueprint for national development was tagged 'Transformation Agenda', with the promise to fix the problem of power generation in the country, among other national problems. Ironic sarcasm is suggested in the rhetorical question 'Is this transformation?' when considered against the backdrop of the assertive 'Darkness. Everywhere'. In the midst of the visually captured darkness comes a lantern providing a dim light which cannot dispel the darkness. In a bid to now mobilise the people to seek an alternative, the logo of the opposition party produced in bright colours such as red, white, green and sky blue and the visual appeal of a thumbprint with the directive 'Vote for Buhari' give an impression of the metaphorical light that the people would supposedly experience by parting with the hypothetical dark world of the ruling party. Once again, Van Dijk's concept of 'ideological square', which encapsulates the twin strategies of positive 'in-group' description and negative 'out-group' description, is exploited here.

Hilariously, the incumbent in a hypothetical campaign for re-election is caricatured in the meme below in respect of his handling of the energy situation in the country:

If the president has as one of his campaign promises the committal 'I will stabilise electricity' and he is now captured in the above image using a generator-powered microphone to speak with his subjects, the reader is then able to understand the punchline in the humour on which the criticism of the target is based. The reality of the Nigerian situation is that almost every home struggles to have one generator, even the smallest which is proudly labelled 'I pass my neighbour', meaning 'I am better than my neighbour (who is in darkness!)'. Hence, to satirise the president and his party for purportedly having failed to fulfil their promise on power generation, he is captured in this visual meme using the same 'I pass my neighbour' generator releasing thick smoke to further pollute the environment in addition to its noise.

It is noteworthy that it is not only in terms of power generation that netizens criticise the ruling party and its standard bearer. The incumbent and his party are also assessed in some other sectors of national life, showing a score-card which is abysmally poor:

What Jonathan promised us 4 YEARS ago and the score:
We will fight for JUSTICE! – F9
We will fight for all Nigerians to have access to POWER! – F9

We will fight for qualitative and competitive EDUCATION! – F9
We will fight for HEALTH CARE REFORMS! – F9
We will fight to create jobs, for all Nigerians! – F9
We will fight corruption! – F10
We will fight to protect all Citizens! – F10
We will fight for your rights! – F9
He doesn't have what it takes to move this country forward and for the reason we want a change. VOTE WISELY! VOTE BUHARI

In this text, almost all the vital sectors of national life have been highlighted and the president has been scored poorly. We need to point out here that the humour in this text derives its punchline from intertextual reference to the scoring pattern of the West African Examination Council (WASC), which conducts exams for secondary school leavers. The principle of intertextuality, according to Porter (1986), is explained thus: '[…] texts refer to other texts and in fact rely on them for their meaning. All texts are interdependent: We understand a text only insofar as we understand its precursors' (p. 34). Porter (1986) explains further that this is the principle that all writing and speech – indeed, all signs – arise from a single network that Vygotsky calls 'the web of meaning'. Therefore, examining texts intertextually means looking for 'traces', the bits and pieces of text which writers or speakers borrow and sew together to create new discourse.

In the WASC grading pattern, the best grade 'Excellent' is rated as A1 and the least grade 'Failed' is F9. While it would not be out of place for a candidate to fail one or two subjects from a total of nine in WASC examination, it is the height of shame and the abyss of failure when a candidate scores F9 in all subjects, a performance that is humorously tagged 'F9 parallel' among young Nigerian secondary school leavers. In the aforementioned text, the president has been scored F9 in all the sectors depicted, but there is a humorous dimension in which he is scored F10 in 'corruption' and 'we will fight to protect all citizens', a bizarre grade that does not even exist in the grading system of any Nigeria's educational system. Such a hyperbolic representation is an attempt to project the president to the electorate as an abysmally poor performer who is unworthy of being given a second chance in office.

The intertextual reference to the grading pattern in the education system does not end at the point of scoring. The remark of either fail or pass which determines whether the candidate proceeds to the next level or repeats the class for a better performance is humorously recontextualised in a political context thus:

The producer's sense of superiority over the target is expressed in the latter's humorous supposed acknowledgement of his failure and his attendant plea that he be given the chance to repeat. The punchline in the humour is hinged on the incongruity between the applicability of the antonyms 'fail' and 'pass' in an academic setting and that of a political arena. While a candidate that fails in the former is graciously given a second chance to repeat, a candidate that fails in the latter does not have the indulgence of doing the same. Therefore, in the political arena, the assessment scheme is 'I have passed and so let me repeat' and not 'I have failed and so let me repeat' as the president is humorously portrayed to have pleaded here. Given the kind of tension that normally characterises the heat of election campaigns, this kind of meme would greatly serve to release tension and psychic energy in the reader.

To draw the battle line between the two main political parties and their standard bearers in the presidential election, there is an intertextual reference to a wrestling bout. The element of surprise in the meme following is the portraiture of the contestants across diverse weight categories: while one is heavyweight, the other is portrayed as lightweight or featherweight (a minor). Such a strange pairing is geared towards producing some psychological effects (relief) on the recipients of the meme.

The ruling party is negatively represented by a diminutive figure that reminds one of the Lilliputians in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The figure that bears the inscription of the opposition party conjures the image of Superman in popular discourses. The dwarfed figure's attempt to give the gargantuan figure a push is a cognitive representation of the perceived inability of the ruling party to overcome the now-strengthened opposition party in the electoral contest. Interestingly, however, depending on who the meme producer is supporting, the party labels on the contestants could be easily swapped to give a contrary representation. Nonetheless, the incongruity in the humour underlines how humans generally tend to use humour to 'compete' with other persons, making them the target of their humorous comments. It is also interesting how the positive self-representation and negative-other representation in the meme underline Van Dijk's concept of the 'ideological square'.

In what appears to be a final showdown with the incumbent and his party, supporters of the opposition party boastfully declare, 'If Jonathan and PDP stand against FEBUHARI, Nigerian masses would MARCH for BUHARI' as seen in the meme below.
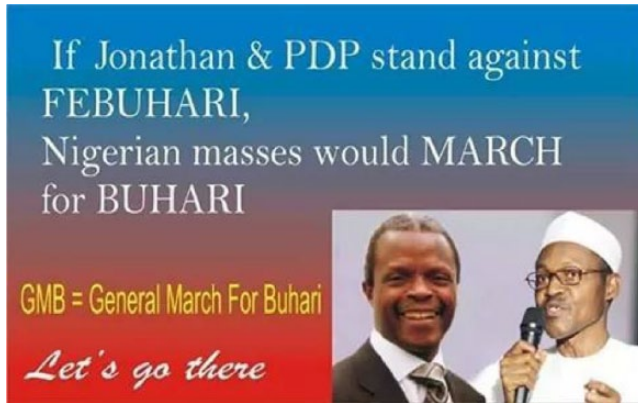
It should be noted that the presidential election was first scheduled for 14 February 2015 before it was postponed to 28 March 2015. As soon as the campaign started in December 2014, creative supporters of the APC changed the 14 February date to a campaign slogan by coming up with the nonce-formation 'Febuhari'. The import of this coinage is that the first syllable 'Fe' in the name of the month 'February' is recontextualised in a Yoruba sense ('*fe*' as a verb form), meaning 'to love'. Then, the remaining syllables 'bruary' are substituted with 'Buhari' based on phonoaesthetic similarities to derive the campaign slogan 'Febuhari' (a coinage for the election month), meaning 'Love Buhari'. The rhetorical import of this coinage is to disparage the incumbent and then mobilise support for Buhari, using the social currency humour mechanism with the establishment of functional social construction or hierarchy.

It is noteworthy that such an affective campaign slogan was contested by supporters of the PDP who, instead of asking the people to 'love Buhari', asserted that his mission would fail, using the verb 'fail' in 'Failbuhari'. Interestingly, when the government shifted the election date to 28 March, supporters of the APC still devised further humorous memorable and apt campaign slogans from the new month March, asking the electorate to 'March for Buhari'. They also creatively changed the identity tag GMB=General Muhammadu Buhari to GMB=General March for Buhari as seen in the above meme. To provide a further visual complement for the directive, the meme below is instructive:

The directive that serves as the title of the text 'Forward MARCH BUHARI', which shares the same pragmatic content with the hash-tagged utterance #March4Buhari, resonates with the kind of order that would be given by a brigade commander in the army when his or her troop is on parade. We thus have an intertextual reference here to military parade parlance which could release some tension in the recipients in addition to building and maintaining relationships among members of the in-group for a common cause. Such a rhetorical goal is further enhanced with the visual appeal of the silhouettes that appear to be on a line, with their leader raising the APC flag in a bid to effect the 'change' that the party and its supporters were yearning for.

It must be noted that the 'change' revolution that the APC was canvassing during the campaign is symbolised with the image of the broom in the logo of the party:

At campaign grounds, party leaders and their supporters would brandish the broom as the weapon with which they hoped to sweep away the ruling party PDP and the misrule that it had allegedly perpetrated for 16 years. In a humorous appeal that disparages the incumbent and his party and tends to boost the solidarity in the camp of the opposition, the impression is created that the international community backed the supposed redemptive/cleansing mission of the opposition party as portrayed in the meme below:

President Obama is seen holding a broom as a purported apologist of the APC. This meme, apart from serving social currency purposes in humour to boost support for the in-group, tends to release some psychological tension in the recipients, given the incongruity of capturing the acclaimed most powerful president in the world going unimaginably partisan to enthrone democracy in an African country. Furthermore, the meme, playing on the American factor and supposed support for the opposition party, underlines Van Dijk's position about positive self-representation as an ideological bent in contradistinction to negative-other representation.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the appropriation of Internet memes in representing the two main aspirants in Nigeria's 2015 presidential election online campaign discourse. We have focused on verbal and visual memes and tried to describe the specific characteristics of the memetic representations with respect to the discursive practices deployed to enhance their effectiveness. Such discursive practices include nonce-formations, pun, parody, ironic sarcasm, hyperbole, imagery and metaphor. Our analysis demonstrates that the memetic practices invoke the dichotomy in the literature between the reinforcing and subversive humour. Largely, considering the satiric thrust of the discursive practices, one could argue that humour in the discourse largely serves subversive purposes, as it is targeted at detracting from the electoral value of both candidates. However, there is an implicit staging of the reinforcing function of humour in that while the targets are being satirised, there is the conscious attempt to reinforce in-group solidarity, thereby boosting the electoral value of the preferred candidate and his political party.

This study, like earlier studies such as that by Shifman et al. (2007), raises the question of the instrumental or playful nature of memes in political discourse. In Shifman et al.'s (2007) study of online humour during the 2005 UK election campaign, humour was considered more than a counter-cultural sideshow, as the study reflected particular uses of humour as a means of political critique and contestation. In this study, we find out that the humorous memes are largely deployed as tools of political engagement by the discourse producers to persuade people to identify with a certain candidate in the election while ridiculing the foibles in the other. Of course, we have to quickly point out – as emphasised in the literature – that online political humour can be conceived in the context of game-playing in that scholars have considered the political critique of the genre 'harmless' or 'playful' and, therefore, not capable of generating any change (Tsakona and Popa, 2011, 2013). This position does not, however, foreclose further studies, particularly in an African setting, from providing empirical evidence suggesting that political humour could lead to political change(s).

Our analysis demonstrates the practicability of combining theories of humour with theories of discourse analysis. It is interesting that the synergy of Van Dijk's concept of 'ideological square' and Neuendorf et al.'s (2014) theories of humour provides a solid theoretical underpinning for characterising memes as artefacts of political communication, particularly in the discourse of election campaign. Van Dijk's concept of the 'ideological square' underlines how representations of the targets by the memes' producers reflect ideological polarisation between in-group and out-group members

with respect to promoting and devaluing the electoral value of the presidential aspirants. The theories of humour underline the discursive practices of expressing the ideological polarisation of the opposing group members with respect to unpacking the characteristics and rhetorical effects of the memes as artefacts of political communication. The fact that the study equally combines both verbal and visual memes in the analysis underlines the trend in contemporary CDA studies to go multimodal.

Funding

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