

Nigeria's Memes as Anecdote of Youthful Participation in 2019-2020 Nigeria's Critical Events

Adeyoola Mercy Ojemola & IfeKristi T. Ayo-Obiremi

Bowen University, Iwo, Nigeria

Department of Mass Communication

adeyoolamercy@gmail.com; +2348163051046

ifeyoobi14@gmail.com; +2348134433425

Abstract

Hinged on the stimulus-response theory of the mass media and the theory of public sphere, the researchers sought to identify internet memes and youth participation in Nigeria's critical events between 2019 and 2020 as well as highlight the humorous uses of these memes by youth during the critical events. As a qualitative discourse content analysis, twelve memes purposively and conveniently sampled reveals youth's active participation in Nigeria's events as well as the concealed realities in humorous texts and images. The researcher among others recommended that the Nigerian government pay attention to youth's messages concealed in memes.

Keywords: Meme, Youth Participation, Coronavirus/COVID-19, End SARS, Elections

Introduction

The concept of memes as it relates to jokes, images and trends on the internet is huge deviance from the original concept of memes coined in 1976. Biologist Richard Dawkins in his book "*The Selfish Gene*," recommended the term *meme* as a Darwinian gene-centred academic concept to cultural evolution. As a Darwinian concept, memes were gene-like cultural units including songs, habits, inventions and skills (Blackmore, 2000) which through imitation, were propagated from one person to another and they were also replicators that were used as means of imitation. As a form of internet communication, a meme (usually humorous) is any unit of information in the form of an image, phrase or video created based on an experience or imagination and sweeps through the internet via email, chat, forum or social networks triggering people to replicate it (Castaño, 2013). One of the earliest internet memes was an emoticon which was a combination of text, humour and symbol used by Carnegie Mellon University's online bulletin board to flag humour in 1982 (Davidson, 2012 in Beskow, Kumar & Carley, 2020). Other recurring images and videos which encouraged creative involvement in participatory platforms sprang up in the first decade of the 21st century.

As the world clamours for participatory media culture, technology had fostered citizens' involvement in cultural, political and social issues. The use of memes is a very good tool for active participation as individuals and as members of a community. Different social classes and groups in the society want to be involved in the dealings of society and the youth who are regarded as the backbone of any society that determines the society's future are not left out. Youths want to be involved in the development, decision-making process, growth and protection of the environment (Shoaib, 2015). In a

bid to be recognised and participate in trending events, youths across the world and peculiar to this study, Nigeria, embark on meme creation and actively participate in different serious and semi-serious events in the country. Thus, the researchers examined a few internet memes created by the Nigerian youth that reflected their refined yet strong involvement in Nigeria critical events between 2019 and 2020.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify and describe how the Nigerian youth has utilised internet memes creation and participated in the national events in 2019 and 2020.
2. Explore and highlight the humorous uses of these memes by the Nigerian youth during critical situations in the country.
3. Examine the concealed truths behind seemingly jokey memes concerning Nigeria's critical events.

Theoretical Framework

Stimulus-Response Theory

The stimulus-response theory propounded in 1957 by B. F Skinner portrays the mass media audience as passive members of the communication process who receive and process information the way the media intend as there is a direct contact between the mass media and these individuals. Media messages are received by individual members of the society who interpret the messages and respond immediately in the same or similar manner (Anaeto, Onabajo & Osifeso, 2008). With the internet and digital media, individuals disseminate media messages without any interference from media gatekeepers hereby making everyone the media themselves, who create content that drives social discussions. Since the mass media are recognised as an active agent for fulfilling the functions of social institutions, youth in the creation of memes influence people's perspectives and drive discussions that produce immediate similar reactions (Anaeto *et al* 2008). As youth subtly yet actively participate in society's activities through the creation and dissemination of memes, youths create these memes based on their ideologies, experiences, imaginations and opinions. These memes are dispersed on the internet, disseminated among social groups, presented in public spheres and discussions are opened leading people towards the same line of thought.

A conceptualisation of Internet Memes

Memes, as a form of internet communication, can be emotional or contextual written or visual texts, trending phrases, pictures, images superimposed with text, videos or animations that gain grounds by dispersion on the internet (Saike *et al*, cited in Reime, 2012). Memes can spread through the internet in their created form (memes for view which are memes disseminated in their original form) or can be edited in its movement (memes for use which are edited and replicated to suit other purposes) as many memes are more often than not, created to turn against its original motive and spread at an accelerating speed (Davidson, 2012, cited in Sanchez, 2020).

The main purpose and function of a meme which is decided by the creator/originator and/or users have become an effective way to communicate a message for a particular target audience as they are more often than not, used to evoke certain emotions and make people react in certain ways. Beyond generating humour and other emotions, memes can fill deeper needs than a simple laugh (Miltner, 2011, cited in Huntington, 2017). Memes are not news but they can serve as important sources of information, persuasion and entertainment to citizens as memes are often created around trending events and issues in society. Issues of national importance, political affiliation or movements that might seem uninteresting to youths can be made participatory with the use of memes and thus, develop participation in national and international issues. Communities, groups and individuals that do not have a voice in the society can be given a voice as traces of the creators of memes are removed and the origin cannot be traced to a specific individual. This advantage of anonymity gives a voice to the voiceless, enables freedom and creates a platform for grassroots involvement without reprisal from authorities (Huntington, 2017; Beskow *et al* 2020). In political and societal issues, youth can use memes to participate in leading conversations and/or criticise the ills of the society or those in government without being punished for hate speech. On the flip side, memes if not properly handled can generate uproar in the society, lead to usurping authorises or they are sometimes used to water down the seriousness of an issue thus causing youth to ignore or joke with issues that are of importance (Reime, 2012).

Elections in Nigeria and Memes

While writing on the evolution of political memes, Beskow *et al* (2020), refer to internet memes as an ever-present and inherent part of the digital age, subsisting through words, gifs, videos, emoticons and usually combined with texts to convey a message. They also agree that these memes are capable of conveying political messages capable of wielding power to appeal and influence cultures and political actors. Depicting creative involvement in the Nigerian political arena as previously marginalised political players, Yeku (2018) studied the use of memes and social media hashtags by the Nigerian youth. He expressed that the Nigerian youths use various social media platforms to disengage themselves from the orthodox political belief systems of how politics in Nigeria should be run and by extension, the government. To this effect, funny memes are created and hashtags that end up going viral on the internet emerged as a medium for participating in public debates. He concludes his study with highlighting that the use of internet memes are key factors for the Nigerian citizen to be involved in political conversations.

One of the steadily evolving entertainment that has emerged on and through the internet is the use of memes which according to Vasiliki (2014), are generated primarily for entertainment purposes. Just like Yeku (2018), Vasiliki has identified that as entertaining as memes are when they bear political themes, they are easily disregarded and considered irrelevant to political participation. These two studies have justified the existence of political participation in shared memes on the internet. Both studies with four years gap, which have captured memes and the political sector in the United States of America (Vasiliki) and Nigeria (Yeku), have surmised that the circulation of these

memes cannot be taken for granted as they directly or indirectly shape the political and cultural sectors of a given society hereby qualifying as political participation. The Nigerian political sector is influenced by the 'intersocial, interethnic and intercultural tensions within the country' (Adewale, 2011) and Dike (2018) categorised the sector as consisting of politicians whose political works are based on projecting 'their selfish ideologies' to the public as the model for the Nigerian social systems and structures. There are narratives inclusive in these models which are '...subtly pushed into campaign promises and electioneering strategies' (p. 493). Dike attributed the use of memes for socio-political participation on the internet to its ability to replicate, mimic and criticise, spurring a platform for discourses. According to Feezell (2016), the more exposed an individual is to politics, the more political participation is encouraged especially on online platforms where the various media of exposure stand to impact social movements. In other words, memes with political contents can be seen as a medium for political engagements. Rintel (2013) explained this by saying that when important events occur in a society, it becomes normal for 'humorous posts' like memes in various forms to 'spread concurrently with serious professional reportage' (p. 254). It is also projected by Rintel (2013) as a '...process of movement' (pp. 255). Also, it is strongly noted that memes do not hold their value in their contents rather in their ability to conjure up meaning that translates to public voice beyond what traditional media has to offer.

Sule *et al* (2020) described the Nigerian 2019 general elections as one possessing so much 'tension and challenges' and a major contributing factor to this is the 'undesirable obstacle of election postponement' (p.103). Sule *et al* (2020) opined that the 2019 general election was supposed to happen with a better outcome than that of 2015; however, the outcome was a reflection and replication of past occurrences. Along this line, they noted that the 2019 election bore with it '...an interesting phenomenon in the country owing to the fears, anxieties, speculations, uncertainties...' (p. 100) in the nation. In the midst of these, Nigerian youths circulated and utilised funny and viral memes which can be considered as indirect strategies for participating in the 2019 general electoral process. The viral memes sent via various social platforms on the internet though considered humorous can be satirical, further expressing that '...Nigeria digital actors supplement social media's positioning as a space for coordinating social activism with a practice, expressed through comical images that perform and narrate the voice of marginal and excluded groups such as youths' (Yeku, 2018, p. 225). Dike (2018, p. 496) noted that memes are useful in merging socio-political negotiations from the internet sphere and the physical world becoming 'natural alternatives for engaging and depicting human and societal systems.'

Covid-19 in Nigeria and Memes

Nigeria recorded her first case of the coronavirus on the 27th of February, 2020 when an Italian man came visiting Nigeria for work purposes. Within a month, the Federal Government had placed restrictions on movements for people within Lagos State, Ogun State and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja of which many other states in the country followed suit. Restrictions were also placed on inter-state travelling as well as public

gatherings. These restrictions which were popularly referred to as ‘lockdown’ were gradually eased out in May though by then, 7,839 coronavirus cases have been confirmed with 226 deaths related to coronavirus (ACAP, 2020; Oyeranti & Sokeye, 2020). Aregbesola & Folayan (2021) duly noted that due to the poor funding of and investments in the Nigerian health sector, the state of the health care facilities in Nigeria poses a major challenge to the proper handling of and response to Covid-19. The average Nigerian who has meagre access to health insurance is left in a vulnerable state to infectious disease and other arising medical problems during the period.

Within the few months of lockdown in Nigeria, there were numerous concerns raised about the economic implications the decision will have on the average Nigerian. Kalu (2020) expressly noted that Nigeria, possessing a large population who live on their daily earnings with no backup savings hereby leading to hunger. The federal government promised that there will be palliatives in form of funds and food items for those who are most affected by the lockdown restriction though available, it was poorly distributed. Citizens who defaulted in the bid to earn some money for upkeep were apprehended by the police. Omaka-Amari *et al* (2020) identified some major challenges that have impeded the efficient tackling of Covid-19 to the poor compliance of the citizens to the restrictions; the influx of various myths and misconceptions about the pandemic by citizens; the interference of the social media through the dissemination of unverifiable news and information; the high rate of poverty among citizens who find it difficult to comply with the government directives. Key to note, as mentioned by Omaka-Amari *et al* (2020) is the distrust of the citizens towards the Nigerian government which has been built up over the years which somehow negatively impacted the spread of the pandemic.

The use of internet memes as a forum for the discussion of covid-19 matters cannot be overlooked. As highlighted by Cannizzaro (2016, p. 563), ‘internet memes raise increasingly legitimate cases’ that spread rapidly via the internet thus bringing to light cogent matters that usually should not be overlooked. As explained by Reime (2012), memes can be vague and vast by nature, however, individual memes cannot be discounted because it bears specific and emotional states of mind beyond humour. Hence, memes bear distinctive meanings and can serve predetermined functions by those who use them.

#EndSARS in Nigeria

The #EndSARS protest was a call for the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police Force based on brutality, notoriety and violations of the human and civil rights of the Nigerian citizens. The public anger at the police erupted as a result of the shooting of a boy in Delta State by the SARS on October 3, 2020. Though the allegations were denied by the police force, the anger of the public could not be quelled as many other previous victims took turns to speak on the cruelty they had experienced in the hands of the squad. Thereafter, many youths took to the streets of various States in the country in peaceful protests against the corrupt police force, calling for an end to police brutality and the disbandment of the SARS unit. Various social media platforms were taken too as part of the peaceful protest where many celebrities and influential figures both international and local showed their supports (Husted, 2020; Uwazuruike, 2020).

According to ACLED (2021), this incidence has further widened the issue of distrust between the Nigerian government and the citizens, especially when the peaceful protest resulted in the killing of some peaceful demonstrators due to members of the military force in Nigeria firing live ammunition at them. This action allegedly led to the killing of at least 15 persons on the 20th of October. During the almost-month-long protest, the members of the police force were also involved in further harassments of the citizens they are supposed to protect. The highlights of the protests according to Dambo *et al* (2020) were the abuse of human rights, injustice, a fight against corruption and the need for activism among Nigerian citizens to have one voice against bad governance. It is to be noted that during this period various memes that contain humorous undertoning were actively disseminated on various social media platforms. However, due to the seriousness, national and international implications the #EndSARS event had, these memes were active contributors to the demonstrator's efforts. This was especially so for the online demonstrators who bombarded the various international social media platforms to share their grief and desire for change to the international world.

Methodology

The researchers adopted qualitative discourse content analysis through careful selection of top tending popular memes on google focusing on the 2019 Election, Covid-19 and the #EndSARS crisis in Nigeria. The purposive and convenience sampling techniques were adopted for this study to satisfy the objectives of the study by incorporating a total of twelve memes, with four memes used in discussing each of the three critical events this study focuses on.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

2019 General Election- Oriented Memes as Youth Participation

Images (1-4)- 2019 General Elections Memes



As seen in image 1, the lettering may not glaringly capture the intentions of the meme originator as against the image attached. However, depending on whom the meme audience is and the political position he stands with during the election period, the meaning attached to Image 1 displays the need to have a voter's card and vote for a choice candidate. Image 1 could be deemed bias towards the electoral candidate Buhari or otherwise. This meme actively aligns with the public sphere theory suggesting that the meme's audience is saddled with a responsibility of determining the perspective the meme originator has and align himself to it leading to reactions that drive discussions (Anaeto *et al* 2008).

In image 2, the highlight of the lettering was to emphasise the postponement of the general election from the earlier scheduled date which was 14th February to a week later. Worldwide, 14th February is a day to celebrate love, especially between couples in a relationship. Due to the election date on such a day, the usually elaborate preparation to celebrate such a day was halted. However, the move in the date has made it further mandatory to celebrate the day instead of the earlier scheduled voting exercise. As funny as the intention behind the meme sounds, especially coupled with the image of the ex-president of the country, Goodluck Jonathan, it can be seen as a medium to point out the inadequacies and maybe incompetency of the nation's electoral body, INEC.

Images 3 and 4 depict an antagonism to the ages of the two leading presidential electoral candidates in the two main political parties in Nigeria, the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and All Progressive Congress (APC). For APC and PDP, Muhammadu Buhari and Abubakar Atiku respectively, are portrayed in these two memes as people who are too old to rule. Image 3 speaks of how youths have previously been claiming to run for political offices where they can serve as better leaders for the country whereas, during the election period when the need for action has risen, they have pitched their tents with the old men. Funny as it seems, it highlights that youths were merely offering lip service for rulership and have no drive to pursue their desire to rule Nigeria. In Image 4, the antagonism towards the age of these presidential candidates was more obvious as their ages were stated and indirectly referred to as people who should be getting pensions and not lead a country like Nigeria. In addition, the emphasis placed on the word 'Nigerian' seems to call further attention to the position that there is an issue with Nigeria and those who stand to hold the helm of affairs in the country when it comes to age.

Coronavirus-Oriented Memes as Youth Participation

Images (5-8)- Nigerian Coronavirus Memes

The gods opened a **warehouse** for covid19
palliative.

Eyin Irunmole thank you o.



If you're staying safe at home with money
you're in ISOLATION, if you're staying at home,
broke, you're in QUARANTINE, but if you're
staying at home, broke and with a quarrelsome
wife, you're in TOTAL LOCKDOWN 😊 😊 😊



Mental health first



In Image 5, the meme originator is thanking the gods for opening warehouses of palliatives for the hungry masses' consumption, emphasising on warehouse and palliatives. During the Covid-19 lockdown in the country, the government promised palliatives for the citizens. Nevertheless, the impact of the shared palliatives was not felt where they were most needed until some youths in Lagos State found some warehouses stocked with Covid-19 branded foodstuff like bags of rice, garri, beans, salt, sugar and cartons of noodles and spaghetti, donated by top companies in and out of the country for relief. These foodstuffs were looted by these youths' way after the lockdown period was eased. The angry youths who have little or no trust in the federal and state governments accused them of depriving them of what was due them. Sarcastically, the 'gods' were branded the providers of the previously locked warehouses and the palliatives stocked in them, which is ominously projected by the public to have been locked up by the government with no intentions of giving it to the public for consumption (Dabang & Ukomadu, 2020).

Image 6 meme highlights the importance of money in the lockdown period. The high rate of poverty in Nigeria cannot be undermined as well as those who live by what they earn daily. The memes image captures a serious atmosphere by the looks of the child in the image which quantifies that money issues cannot be underrated. The lettering captures and emphasises three keywords- isolation, quarantine and total lockdown. It may be deduced that the Covid-19 period was a tough one where finances became a stringent issue. However, the meme originator expressed that whoever had money to spend during the lockdown period was merely living in isolation- a state of being away from other people. Those who did not have money (the broke) during the period were on quarantine- a state of sanitary measure to prevent the spread of a contagious disease. Those who did not have money and had to stay at home with a quarrelsome wife were on total lockdown- a state of complete restrictions which is equivalent to having no freedom. These, though humorous, is a reflection of the various financial state of people during the Covid-19 lockdown and the kind of adverse effect having no money for daily upkeep can have on them.

Image 7 has an image of a well-dressed man who has his nose mask on but covering his head instead of his nose as should be the function of the nose mask. This may be a representation of the psychological effects the lockdown period had on Nigerian citizens. This is inferred from the lettering attached to the meme's image which captions the three words 'mental health first.' During the Covid-19 period, as identified by Olaseni *et al* (2020) the prevalent psychological distresses amongst Nigerians during the lockdown were insomnia, depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms thereby creating the need for psychological health services within the country. According to the

meme, it may be inferred that having a healthy mentality pays off than contracting the dreadful coronavirus.

Image 8 meme has a focus on the Nigerian education sector. The caption on the meme emphasises the three words ‘will you graduate? The humour behind the meme stresses social distancing, which is one of the preventive measures from contracting the coronavirus, as an obstacle to doing well in examinations. The meme suggests that the introduction of social distancing as a culture in the coronavirus era impedes an increase in the success rate of students. In other words, if social distancing is employed in the examination hall, the hope of passing becomes questioned. Another under toning to this is the understanding that the Nigerian education sector has not grown enough to be able to cater to the restrictions the Covid-19 pandemic has brought on education such as adequate provisions for continuous studying through online platforms. Thus, education is put on hold until some certain level of normalcy is restored to the country.

#EndSars-Oriented Memes as Youth Participation

Images (9-12)- #EndSars Memes

Nigerians keep tweeting and saying #EndSARS, yet many of us do not know the full meaning of SARS ??? Ask the person next to you (you would see that the ting would go skrrrahh ah Pap, pap, ka-ka-ka and end with me don't know)



SARS just carry Emeka (my guy)...
When Dem open e gallery na
#ENDSARS screenshots full am.



Though #Endsars was one of the most trending issues throughout the month of October and was considered one of the most popular protests all over the world, Image 9 suggests that there is a very high likelihood that some of the youths at the fore of the protest have no understanding of the meaning of SARS. Nigerian youths took the lead to express their grief towards the Nigerian police force particularly SARS, however, the lettering of the meme surmises that some are fighting the course without guiding understanding. As a result of this, some members of the police force who have no attachment to the SARS unit ended up with attacks from the Nigerian youths; thereby resulting in innocent policemen bearing the brunt of some of the retaliation attacks.

The content of image 10 humorously tells the tale and woe of how the SARS unit of the police force unabashedly infiltrated the basic human right to privacy. The meme jokingly tells of how the meme originator’s friend, Emeka was arrested by some members of the SARS unit and his phones pictures were checked, only to find images supporting the trending protest #EndSARS. The image attached to the lettering of the meme captures the result of Emeka, which was trouble with the SARS. This meme

buttresses what Uwazuruike (2020, p. 5) explained about the birth of #EndSARS: ‘#EndSARS was birthed by gross human rights violations and sheer disregard for human life.’

Image 11 was a satirical move to explain that there is no meaning to the change the police force affected when SARS was asked by the protesters to be disbanded. The solution the police force came up with was to change the unit from SARS to SWAT-Special Weapon and Tactics unit. The meme originator was satirically saying that only the name changed, the persons involved in the old unit are still the ones to operate the new unit. The meme’s image shows the images of two ‘women’ and as common knowledge among Nigerian youths are the same person, Okuneye Idris Olanrewaju popularly known as ‘Bobrisky,’ a transgender.

Image 12 depicts a funny spiritual atmosphere where an assumed Nigerian youth prays to God asking for forgiveness of sins for beating up a Nigerian senator and the response, he got from God was that a good deed has been done and needs not to be counted as sin. This can be inclined with how some Nigerian politicians like the governor of Osun State was attacked by the angry protesters during the #EndSARS. Also, some private properties and businesses belonging to renowned and influential politicians were attacked (BBC news, 2020). The meme invariably suggests that those attacks cannot be counted as sin before God, rather, it is a good deed that can attract blessings. This shows the level of frustration the Nigerian youths have been pushed to.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has revealed that memes are an inextricable aspect of the new media and participatory culture based on their ability to reflect various emotions, opinions, and a lifestyle that can facilitate public discourse. It is noteworthy that major users of the new media particularly meme creation are youth who have their lives practically revolving around internet use. Therefore, the researchers emphasise the observations of subtle participation by youths in the guise of humour around cogent matters and events within the country; hence, it is imperative to encourage further studies on memes, their origin, content, rapid spread and functions. The researcher concluded that Nigerian youths are active participants, though seeming passive by use of humour, in the various discourses of proceedings within the country. This means that Nigerian youths have a voice through meme creations and should not be silenced. Thus, the following recommendations are hereby given:

1. The Nigerian government should pay attention to hidden meanings in the various memes created by the Nigerian youth on critical issues in the country as a means of knowing the public’s opinion of them.
2. The Nigerian government is encouraged to work on improving the trust level the Nigerian citizens, especially the youth, have towards them.
3. More scholarly studies on memes should be encouraged to understand better the thought patterns of the Nigerian youth.

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