

Analyzing Language and Humor in Online Communication

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Chapter 14

Socio–Semiotics of Humour in Ebola Awareness Discourse on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Humour has often functioned as a tool for the relief of depression, anxiety and stress. People have continually turned to humour, in serious life threatening situations in order to find relief. Facebook users eagerly expressed their thoughts and opinions on the Ebola epidemic that raged across some parts of West Africa in 2014 through humorous graphics, texts and memes posted online. An awareness of the peculiar patterns and use of such humour creating strategies is crucial to the understanding and interpretation of socio-semiotic realities of such online interactions. This study identifies and analyses specific semiotic patterns in Ebola-related graphic posts in Nigerian online social discourse, particularly on Facebook, and argues, that such posts are not merely a bunch of humour. Instead, they are informal awareness campaigns that are even more apt than explicit verbal or written messages. The study applies Kress and Leeuwen's approach to multimodal discourse analysis.

The views and content expressed in this chapter are those of the author but not necessarily of the publisher and may contain some explicit ideas and concepts.

INTRODUCTION

The digital world is a vibrant society with various discursive practices and discourse on the Internet is usually reflective of the human society; however, because of the anonymity that the Internet offers, it has become a platform for unrestricted self-expression. The speed at which the Internet transmits messages

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has also made it a very viable platform for different types of communication. For instance, internet memes among others have become a regular feature of the cyberworld. Memes refer to jokes, images, videos, etc. that are dispersed from person-to-person via the Internet (Shifman, 2014). Ding (2015) notes that Internet users consciously look out for internet memes daily, for varying doses of humour. He argues that these memes, however, sometimes frame individuals or groups of people as discursive practices that are capable of reflecting socio-cultural realities. The present study argues that Internet memes are not merely a bunch of humour; rather they integrate, through a range of semiotic signs, some underlying discursive messages that serve as publicity or awareness campaigns. This study is an investigation of the socio-semiotics of humour in the discourse of Ebola awareness among Nigerians online.

BACKGROUND TO STUDY: THE EBOLA EPIDEMIC

Ebola is a chronic and highly infectious disease caused by Ebola virus, spread through direct contact with body fluids like blood, saliva, urine, sperm, or sweat of an infected person and by contact with contaminated objects, equipment or clothing. It is highly fatal with a death rate of up to 90%. However, the Ebola virus may be easily eliminated with heat, alcohol-based products, and sodium hypochlorite (bleach) or calcium hypochlorite (bleaching powder) at appropriate concentrations (Akharumere, 2014).

Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) was first discovered in 1976 in Sudan and in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Subsequent multiple outbreaks have occurred in Central Africa, mainly near tropical rainforests, especially in remote villages. However, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, South Sudan and Gabon have consistently been the worst hit regions since the first outbreak in 1976. About 2,200 cases of EVD outbreaks have been reported with well over 1,500 deaths since 1976 (Kaye, 2014).

The Ebolavirus, which is responsible for EVD is transmitted by members of the filoviruses family which comprises five distinct species: Bundibugyo Ebolavirus, Tai Forest Ebolavirus, Reston Ebolavirus, Sudan Ebolavirus and Zaire Ebolavirus. All except Reston are restricted to Africa and found in primates. The Zaire species is most lethal, with a fatality rate of up to 90%, and it was found to be the cause of the February, 2014 Guinea outbreak (Akharumere, 2014; Kaye, 2014).

In August 2014, 'Doctors without Borders' reported an Ebola virus outbreak in Monrovia, Liberia's capital. A number of quarantined patients escaped which resulted in further spread of the disease to other regions including Sierra Leone, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and Nigeria. While Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone are the three most affected countries with many deaths, only seven people died in Nigeria (Oketola, 2014). It was reported that EVD was introduced to Nigeria on July 20, 2014 by Patrick Sawyer, a Liberian-born American diplomat who travelled from Lome, in transit to a conference in Calabar the Cross River State capital (Denkey, 2015).

The former Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan, declared a state of emergency on the 8th of August, 2014, on the outbreak of EVD in Nigeria. Interestingly, as the Nigerian government searched for ways to curtail the spread of the deadly EVD, many social media users utilised *Facebook* to make jokes about the disease, humorously suggesting ways to treat and avoid the virus. Comical conversations and pictures of "the Ebola hug," "the Ebola kiss," "the Ebola handshake," the use of protective gloves and clothing appeared on *Facebook* walls of many Nigerian users.

Oketola (2014) asserts that the social media helped Nigerians to contain EVD. This suggests that humorous *Facebook* posts, and or memes may be perceived beyond mere jokes. Hence this work seeks

to identify the different strategies employed by Nigerians to create Internet memes; to highlight the embedded messages in each of the selected posts and to measure the extent to which sampled memes fulfilled intentional and unintentional messages.

SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN NIGERIA

Social media are offshoot of global advancement in technology, modernisation and globalisation. They include the various online technological tools that enable people to communicate easily and to share information through the Internet (Greendhow, 2009). People employ them to express and publish their thoughts online; while socialising, they share information and pictures that may generate threads of contributions and participations from friends and online community members.

Facebook is one of the most popular and subscribed variant of the social media; most attractive to both the young and elderly Nigerian. *CPAAfrica.com* in their May 2015 report submits that Nigerians have overtaken South Africa as the largest users of *Facebook* in Sub Saharan Africa with over 11 million users (www.cp-africa.com). In their characteristic innovative nature, Nigerians have bent the *Facebook* platform to enable them express virtually every form of communicable thought, action, information, resource, picture and image.

One of such uses to which Nigerians have employed *Facebook* is in posting and sharing of textually and graphically constructed humour. Practically every socio-cultural and political event generates Internet memes in Nigeria; one of which includes the Ebola virus epidemic in the nation in the middle of 2014. This resulted in the hosting of a *Facebook* community referred to as 'Ebola Jokes', comprising one hundred and fifty-six (156) active members and 2,110 followers (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Ebola-jokes/>). This is one of many online communities that focussed on EVD jokes. However, the 'Ebola Jokes' community on *Facebook* is the community with quite a number of humorous graphic texts and memes on the EVD. Some of the humorous pictures constitute genres of intentionally absurd textual and graphic structures and patterns which are forms of completely liberated speech/text patterns that ignore all norms, even those of elementary logic (Thompson, 1982). While it may be possible that Nigerians used such jokes to diffuse the seriousness and fear that engulfed the nation at that time, there are possibilities that underlying messages were missed while appreciating the humour in the posts.

HUMOUR IN LANGUAGE USE

Humour is perceived as a product of a comic, well-meaning and tolerant mind. However, following the Anglo-American tradition, humour is seen as a broad term that encompasses everything that elicits laughter: wit, non-sense, sarcasm, satire, irony and comedy. The implication of this stance on humour is that humour is made to assume all positive and negative meanings; from aggressive humour to joke (Ermida, 2008).

The diversity of the language of humour makes the concept difficult to define. Norrick (1993; 2003) observes how extremely complex in both form and functions, humorous communication can be and submits that there is no one straight way of defining the language of humour. This is coupled with the

reality that humour spans diverse areas of inquiry such as linguistics, psychology, sociology, philosophy, etc. Evrard (1996) identifies the remarkable ‘semantic flexibility’ of humour and its ‘enigmatic character’ and states that ‘its range of degrees, procedures, themes, its subtle and diffused character make it a difficult phenomenon to spot or define’ (p.4).

Humour can be either verbal or non-verbal; it can be a subjective experience or serve communicative purposes; it can express everyday reality or consist of fiction and imagination; it can charm or attack, be created spontaneously or be used as a well-prepared technique of personal and professional interaction; it can be a simple joke told among friends or amount to the kind of sophistication found in literary texts (Ermida, 2008). Everything can be humour as long as it elicits an element of laughter. Humour can be intentional or unintentional. Intentional humour is deliberate and planned to the least detail, while unintentional humour may occur as a slip caused by lapses in communication which may lead to breaking the rules of linguistic clarity (Ross, 1998).

The language of humour tends to be ambiguous, having both surface and deep meanings that can be deduced from analysing the text to find out how the existing conventions of language have been utilised to express wider possibilities of meanings. Ross (1998) identifies the essence of humour as surprise, innovation and rule-breaking, what may be referred to as a deviation from the norm. However, humour varies according to contexts, cultures, individuals and medium of communication. What may elicit laughter in one context may not, in another. Cultures differ and world views and experiences are perceived from different perspectives. Each culture or social group defines what constitutes humour per time. Also, humour is dependent on the individual; the age, gender and social class of an individual will impact on the variety of humour at play per time. The medium of communication also plays an all important role in determining humour. For instance, with the Internet and its attendant social media, there appears to have evolved a new style of language use, in addition to the complexities in defining the term, ‘humour’.

HUMOUR IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

Humour has a seemingly high profile in the Nigerian society, with an array of stand-up comedians and comedy series available on TV and the social media; *Facebook* in particular, attests to Nigerians seeming penchant for jokes on social events and situations. Ross (1998) observes that social context is important in the creation and reception of humour. In addition to this, humour is not static, it changes constantly changing, a joke on Ebola today for example, may not be funny in the next twenty years.

Humour in the Nigerian context spans from socio-cultural and political satire to idle jokes that are told for phatic communication in order to establish relationship and friendship. With the social media, Nigerians have become more innovative in their patterns of communicating humour, ranging from a short conversation between characters in the joke, to absurd graphic pictures of participants and characters. However, it is observed that there are underlying discursive messages in certain humorous communication. Why would people really want to make a joke of a deadly disease as EVD and not cancer? What unintended messages can be derived from such seemingly drastic jokes? Are there identifiable patterns to such humorous communication? This work intends to find answers to these questions by analysing selected humorous posts on *Facebook* by Nigerians on the Ebola epidemic recorded in the country between April and August of 2014.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: KRESS AND VAN LEEUWEN'S SOCIAL SEMIOTICS

Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) "Social Semiotics" is an approach to multimodal analysis influenced by the works of Michael Halliday (1978). It perceives language as a system of options and meaning potentials. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) shift emphasis from written language to multimodality (visual) and explore texts in relation to a socially created network of options that have meaning potential realised in the context of use and perform ideological functions. Thus, association of meanings that a text can connote is in a continuum, and adaptive to different social contexts. In other words, meaning making is seen as an ongoing process relative to specific context and experience; it is a social practice, and every aspect of the multimodal text—linguistic choices as well as visual modes which may include colour, perspective, modality, etc.—is a signifier.

This framework is found suitable for this work because the analysis and interpretation of language use is contextualised in conjunction with other semiotic resources which are simultaneously used for the construction of meaning (O'Halloran, 2004). Kress and van Leeuwen's approach emphasises that signs are not arbitrary, hence, meaning is derived through an integration of all semiotic elements present in a text as, even though these elements are not meanings by themselves, they are meaning potentials realisable in specific social contexts (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001).

Analysis takes into account the integrated use of two semiotic codes – written and visual in interpreting meaning. Drawing upon Halliday's ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) posit three metafunctions or types of meaning realised in semiotic signs or multimodal texts; the representational meaning; interactive meaning and the compositional meaning. Representational meaning is derived from two kinds of images, each of which involves certain processes. Narrative images involve action, reactional, speech and mental, and conversational processes, while conceptual images involve classificational, analytical and symbolic processes. However, these processes within representational meaning potential are streamlined into two processes, conceptual processes which "represent participants in terms of their generalised and more or less stable and timeless essence"; these involve attributive and suggestive meanings. The second set of processes is presentational processes which function as narratives, as they relate to actions and events (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996:56).

This study explores the ideational or representational meaning in sampled texts, noting that representation is a "scale running from maximum abstraction to maximum representation of pictorial detail, [and that] [a]n image may show every detail of the represented participants: the individual strands of hair, the pores in the skin, the creases in the clothes, ... or it may abstract from detail to a greater or lesser degree" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p.161). Consequently, in the context of a multimodal analysis as this, all modes, both written, graphic, colour and size are studied with the view to identify the underlying messages embedded in each text in relation to the reasons people make semiotic choices and the meaning potential in such choices. It also identifies elements of emphasis and 'de-emphasis' created by the presence or absence of certain features in the texts.

In relation to Halliday's *transitivity process*, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest that analysis of images in representational terms requires the identification of the represented participants, the process or the activity described, the qualities of the participants and the circumstances in which the action is being developed since "different logics govern the mode of written language and that of visual image: written text is governed by the logic of time or temporal sequence, whereas, visual image is governed

by the logic of spatiality, organised arrangements, and simultaneity” (Kress, 2003 cited in Liu, 2013: 1260). Both written language and visual image are therefore significant to meaning making, as they interconnect to create a unified communicative event.

METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature and it involves descriptive and discursive multimodal analysis of data. Data comprises fifty (50) Internet memes (comic photos, verbal and visual posts, etc.) purposively sampled from the ‘Ebola Jokes’ community on popular social networking site, *Facebook* during the 2014 Ebola epidemic in Nigeria. Because of similarity among some of these samples however, fifteen (15) are selected for analysis, these are numbered Figures 1 - 15. Analysis focuses on socio-semiotic interpretation of these memes, especially as they serve as meaning making strategies in the Nigerian socio-cultural context.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Sampled Ebola-themed memes generated by Nigerian users of *Facebook* are classified under six acts, namely: Narrative Acts, Conceptual Acts, Reactional Acts, Speech and Action Acts, Analytical Acts and Classification Acts. These are referred to as acts because it is perceived that the creators of the memes are performing certain acts with the memes. The table below presents the categorisation of sampled memes collected from *Facebook* on the Ebola epidemic in Nigeria.

Table 1 shows the frequency of acts performed by the memes. Narrative acts are the most frequently used, with 26% frequency. These are closely followed by the conceptual acts which occur at a frequency of 22%. The reactional, analytical and classification acts have a frequency of 14% respectively, while the least occurring are speech and action acts, which occurs at 10% frequency. This disparity in frequency could imply that over anything else, Nigerians are quick to relay stories of social threats within very short notice through social media platforms as evident in the narrative acts.

Table 1. Frequency of acts

Types	Frequency	Percentage
A: Narrative Acts	13	26%
B: Conceptual Acts	11	22%
C: Reactional Acts	7	14%
D: Speech and Action Acts	5	10%
E: Analytical Acts	7	14%
F: Classification Acts	7	14%
Total	50	100

A: Narrative Acts

During the outbreak of the EVD epidemic in Nigeria, several curative suggestions were proposed by novices in the field of virology, religious leaders and people who felt that the virus could be tackled using indigenous methods. One of the most circulated methods that even went viral, especially on *Facebook*, was the addition of cooking salt to bathwater as salt was rumoured to possess antiviral properties that were potent enough to destroy the Ebola virus. It was suggested that people should bathe with such salt water at least three times per day. Figure 1, 2 and 3 are deployed to humorously dramatise the salt-water concoction in different exaggerated perspectives. These memes or posts, though comical in nature, are strategically employed by Nigerian users of *Facebook* to sensitise other Nigerians about the absurdity of such unfounded claims. They attempt to mock the susceptibility of many Nigerians who quickly resorted to alternative measures to prevent themselves from being infected with EVD.

The participant in Figure 1 is a squatted man, the actor, with a blue towel wrapped around his waist, and a lighter shade of blue shower cap worn on his head. His head is bowed and supported with his left hand, this posture symbolically projects dilemma. Foregrounded by the young man are co-participants, transparent jars of salt and red ground pepper, which function as the goal in the narrative. The jar of pepper is placed on top of the jar of salt, perhaps to signify the relational process that exists between them, that is, in hierarchy of usage, the pepper is to be used before the salt. Closely situated by the jars are other participants, a transparent bottle of vegetable oil, and a blue bucket of water, just about two-third filled, with a small blue bowl that has a white tablet of soap, sailing on the water. The man's habit and the scene in general, are carriers of attributive meaning that suggest that he is about to take a bath, while the proximity of the jars and bottle to the bucket of water in relation to the visual texts, are suggestive of a process that involves applying the ingredients to the water. The author of Figure 1 deliberately made the jars and bottles transparent in order to foreground their content.

Figure 1.

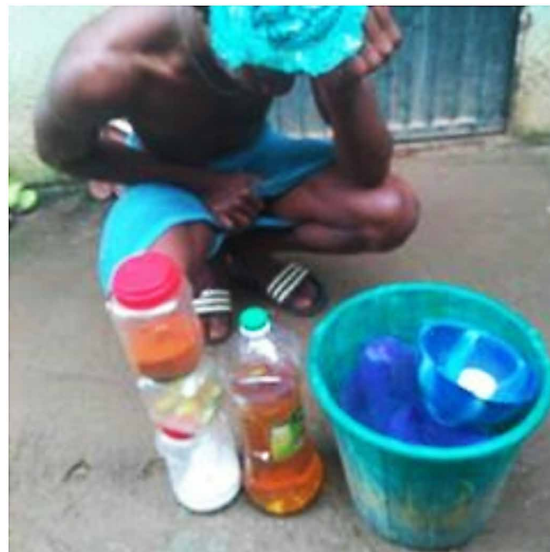


Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Within the context of the EVD, the narrative processes suggest that the man attempts to bathe with the concoction in order to prevent EVD. The colour blue, which is salient in this picture, connotes a cold and depressing mood (NAz and Epp, 2004). Hence, the scene is made to appear even more depressing than the Ebola virus. The integration of the elements in Figure 1 as well as its attendant contradiction of what a real bath scene is in the real world helps to portray the fallacy of the salt-water-bath approach to

preventing EVD. This contradiction makes the picture all the more humorous since table salt together with pepper (chilli), seasoning cubes and vegetable oil are popular condiments in many Nigerian kitchens, Figure 1 mocks Nigerians and suggests that in addition to salt, these too should be added to the already prepared bathwater in order to make the preventive procedure more effective. It may be assumed that Figure 1 is a central awareness campaign against superstitious anti-EVD claims as the frustration, and or dilemma reflected in the man's demeanour explains that such practices are acts of desperation and only frustrated attempts at seeking for a cure to EVD.

Figure 2 represents three prominent participants, a mean looking/ determined lady, the actor, whose focus of attention follows a vector within a phenomenon to the viewer, her left index finger points at a fully clothed astounded child seated in a stainless pot on a cooker, other prominent participants in the transactional process. In her right hand is an almost empty transparent sachet of salt. Her mean stare and pointed index finger is used to draw attention to the content of the pot. The baby in the pot appears to be a boy; he is dressed in a white over-all which is typically worn for babies in order to prevent cold. In the background are sets of cooking spoons and utensil, hanging on a tiled wall. These attributive processes are symbolic of a kitchen setting. The raised almost empty sachet of salt in the representation is a carrier that suggests that the woman has emptied most of its content in the goal, 'pot-of-baby'.

The presentational process in the visual images suggests that the woman is about to boil the baby in a pot of salt water in order to protect him from the deadly EVD. The extremity of the visual elements in Figure 2 is foregrounded and evokes surprise, which is one of the features of humour (Ross, 1998). The white colour of the baby's cloth is equally foregrounded to symbolise innocence, the baby stares at his mum in puzzlement and sits still in the pot of water in innocence (NAz and Epps, 2004). The vector in the woman's gaze at the viewer is an attention-drawing strategy. The totality of the presentation is deployed to mockingly suggest that in addition to adding salt to their bath water, Nigerians could possibly go further to boil themselves and their loved ones in the salt water solution for more effective results. The post questions the ludicrousness of such salt-water claims, and depicts through exaggerated humour, the fallaciousness of eradicating EVD through untested methods.

Figure 3 likewise ridicules the eagerness with which Nigerians had begun to experiment anti-EVD practices, even though these had not been institutionalised by health organisations or institutions in the country. The post has two salient images, two men who function together as actors in a transactional process; the two men are by a gas cooker, bent over a blue bucket of hot water. The man in a white shirt is seen turning a kettle of water into the bucket, the goal. It is suggested that this water is boiled as the kettle is in an attributive relationship with the gas cooker which lies at a close social distance with the gas cylinder, the kettle and the man. This proximity shows that the cooker had just been used. The white colour of the shirt worn by the man holding the kettle signifies the ignorance which informs the performance of the acts. The second man in the presentation is scantily clothed. He is holding yet another transparent sachet of salt in his right hand, and is bent over the blue bucket. This implies that he is about to empty or has emptied some of the salt into the bucket. His state of dressing shows that he is about to take a bath with the bucket of water. The conceptual process that informs Figure 4, like other posts is that the constructions are created to mock the salt-water-cure and prevention claim by many Nigerians during the EVD outbreak. Internet memes like this are discursive practices that suggest the ways in which information is quickly spread across the country. One man has heard of the anti-Ebola potency of salt, he swiftly informs another friend, brother, or neighbour who is also eager to 'protect' himself as well. Implicitly, the post may be said to question Nigerians' dispositions towards rumours as well as the speed with which rumours go round.

Figure 4.



Although these memes elicit laughter at the surface level, at a deeper level, viewers are made to ponder on the possibility of such drastic measures. The surprise and absurdity the pictures portray make the acts unrealistic, thus emphasise the deceitfulness of the claims that salt-water bath is a preventive measure for Ebola.

The visual image in Figure 4 is transactional, it features one actor, who is the focus of attention, an unidentifiable individual whose body is completely covered in a patterned lemon green wrapper, his legs are shielded by a pair of white stockings, and his head is also covered with a piece of towel, held firmly with a metal-like hat. The lemon green colour of the wrapper, which is a principal hue is used to express a kind of calmness, the colour promotes relaxation and helps to douse anxiety (NAz and Epps, 2004). Because only the individual's eyes are visible, and his hands are hidden under the wrapper, there is a relational process which carries a meaning potential of a state of calmness and satisfaction. The text written across the post reads, 'best way 2 save urself from ebola'. The use of short forms; '2' and 'urself', in the inscription shows that there no elaborate measures are needed for the prevention of EVD, the best and easiest way has been depicted by the individual.

In addition, the salience with which the text is written in a slant is a relational process that is directly linked to the foregrounded participant, the individual. It implies within the presentational process, that the person in the picture characterises what the inscription says. The picture is an exaggerated conceptual process that portrays the need for people to wear protective clothing to avoid direct body contact with infected persons. Inasmuch as the intended message is clear, the extremity in the portrayal of the message is more likely an effective attention-getter, and like an advert, it likely serves to increase awareness on the EVD.

B: Conceptual Acts

Nigerians are known to be characteristically courteous and friendly. Greeting is an identifiable element of the Nigerian culture; thus, failure to extend friendly greetings and compliments to one's neighbour is largely perceived as a deficiency in home training and manners (Nwoke, 2013). When relationships with neighbours or acquaintances are closely knit, greetings in Nigeria are usually accompanied by an embrace, a hug, a pat on the back or even a kiss. Consequently, the EVD posed some limitations to the expression of these greetings. These seemingly motivated *Facebook* users to humorously suggest innovative but bizarre ways of getting around the situation.

Figure 5 to Figure 8 each shows two actors exchanging pleasantries while equally taking precautions against EVD. Figure 5 shows one foregrounded participant, a young man in a white vest, who shakes another foregrounded participant (another man) hand, the handshake represents the goal. The first participant has taken great care to shield his feet, hands and face with several layers of nylon sheets. The nylon sheets in this instance are relational attributive processes establishing a relation with the other shielded body parts, hence, a conceptual process is developed to portray an underlying message of the need to take precautions while “doing the needful” (greeting) without necessarily risking one's health. The use of the nylon suggests the ingenuity of Nigerians and their ability to improvise in the midst of needs as Nigeria is a developing nation and most of her citizens would rather buy food and shelter than spend their income on synthetic gloves and other forms of protective measures (Okoroafor and Nwaeze, 2013). The social distance represented in the interactive process between the two men in Figure 5 is unusual in the Nigerian setting. The expectation would have been for the men to be closer than they are.

Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 6 relatedly is presentational process that foregrounds two participants, a lady in black top and a man in white shirt also exchanging pleasantries, with a bold inscription across the picture which reads, 'Ebola greeting...'. One recurring theme in the presentational processes within Figure 5 to Figure 8 is the foregrounded neutral colours; 'black' and 'white', which are carriers of representational meaning, as they are symbolic processes in themselves. The colour black relates to the hidden, the secretive and the unknown which creates an air of mystery and fear, while on the other hand, white represents a new beginning, wholeness, innocence and perfection (NAz and Epp, 2004). There is the saying that what black covers, white uncovers. Thus, Figure 5 to Figure 6 are symbolic processes. It may therefore be inferred that while the characters in black conceal their fear of being infected with EVD, those in white suggest that they are able to relate with the situation and thus, share the same fear. However, the foregrounded participants in the posts still succeed in sustaining a jovial exchange as indicated by their smiling faces. The unusual bow by the characters in Figure 6 is a face saving device, it has interactive meaning potential, as it is deployed to cushion the inner embarrassment of both participants. The social distance between the visual images in the narrative is an element of salience interrelates with other participants to express deliberate avoidance of direct body contact. The ellipsis on the inscription on Figure 6 also suggests that there is more to say but the picture gives all the necessary clues. Such clues may include that Nigerians are innovative, jovial, and health conscious.

Figure 7 is a shift from Figure 5 and Figure 6; the narrative introduces a completely new form of greeting, at the analytical level, it appears to be a deliberate exaggeration of innovative greeting methods, though seemingly unreal, a conceptual process is established to assert that body contact may still be maintained while exchanging pleasantries, even if this means through unusual methods as the two men in Figure 7 humorously hit their buttocks together in place of a hug. This attributive process signi-

Figure 7.



Figure 8.



fies that even if the Ebola virus escapes through protective gloves, it is not likely to pass through thick items of clothing.

The presentational process in Figure 8 is a complete break from the Nigerian politeness norm; the second man bluntly refuses to extend his unprotected hands for a handshake and goes on to inquire if the 'salutee' has not heard of Ebola: 'Hmm! My guy Hang am! You never hear about Ebola?' (Figure 8). The use of Nigerian Pidgin in the conversational process is foregrounded to express the sociocul-

tural identity of the participants in the narrative. While the memes elicit laughter, they provide clues to Nigerians' abilities to retain their socio-cultural practices and still observe EVD preventive measures.

C: Reactional Acts

As a developing nation, Nigerians are known to be very innovative and creative especially in dire situations where they perceive an opportunity to take advantage of a desperate situation in order to make money (Nnadozie, 2002). It is therefore no wonder to find jokes on commercialised Ebola preventive items on *Facebook* as a reaction to the need for prevention.

Figure 9 portrays one foregrounded participant, a sachet of 'Blessed Anti-Ebola Salt: Chineke Punish Ebola', with an inscription on the top right corner, 'Buy 2 Get 1 Free!' in red flash frame. ANTI-EBOLA is written in red upper-case letters, a salient type-face to make it conspicuous and catchy. Also, BLESSED and SALT are written in upper case letters and large typeface to appeal to the religious sensibilities of the viewer, as these texts lie in a frontal vector in relation to the viewer. The representations in this post offer some insights into the Nigerian socio-cultural context. First, the use of the term, "Blessed" presupposes some spiritual sense relations in the brand-name. It tends to suggest that Nigerians have an affinity to religion, and would therefore be more willing to patronise a blessed "Anti-Ebola salt". This is a form of double preventive measure against EVD, the spiritual measure on the one hand, and the use of table-salt on the other hand (as already indicated in the section on 'Narrative Acts'. 'Chineke' is the Igbo term for 'God'; its use on the salt sachet is an attributive process that relates to the Igbo identity of the merchant. Nigerians, especially Igbos who belong to the south-eastern and south-central regions of the country, are known to be perhaps the most enterprising ethnic group in the country; hence, they see business potentials in almost every circumstance (Nnadozie, 2002). The use of the term, 'Chineke' also coheres with the name, 'Blessed Anti-Ebola Salt', as it is a conceptual process of representation which

Figure 9.



suggests a spiritual variable in the packaging of the product. The message flashed in the red frame on the upper left corner reads, BUY 2 AND GET 1 FREE offers additional value to other texts in the image, and this is equally done to draw attention to the commercialisation intent of the producers of such products during that time.

The conceptual meaning deducible by the reader of this representation appears to be a sensitisation to Nigerians on the need to be wary of dubious motives by some individuals who may take undue advantage of the Ebola epidemic in Nigeria. The inscription, 'buy 2 and get 1 free', further suggests a purely commercial intent, as it appears to be another aim at persuasion. Thus, the meme with all of its semiotic features, such as the typeface, the colour, the letter case which appear to be commercial strategies, is deliberately created to discredit the efficacy of any seemingly convincing anti-Ebola measures. All other features in the background such as the small fonts used for the expiry date and trademark are deliberately so done in order to raise attention to such aspects of the product. It is done to conceal the producers and legality of the products. This is the trend with many fake products in Nigeria, the author of Figure 9 by so doing, establish a conceptual meaning that the 'blessed salt' is a fake product.

Figure 10 in like manner shows a black bottle of perfume with the inscription, 'Ebola Perfume Spray'. The undefined of the bottle is significant, as it suggests that its contents are unusual. The choice of black as the colour of the bottle makes it opaque, preventing the content of the bottle from being visible; this has a relational attributive process as it establishes the psychological implication of black as a secretive colour. This again functions as a narrative that suggests that the product and many like it in the Nigerian market are flukes; as a mental process, the mere thought of the possibility of a perfume spray that dispels Ebola is comparable to the possibility of a spray that can make one invisible – which is only seen in magic and myths. Though Figure 9 and Figure 10 reveal Nigerian socio-cultural realities, they also serve as sources of humour in the digital world, that is, the online community.

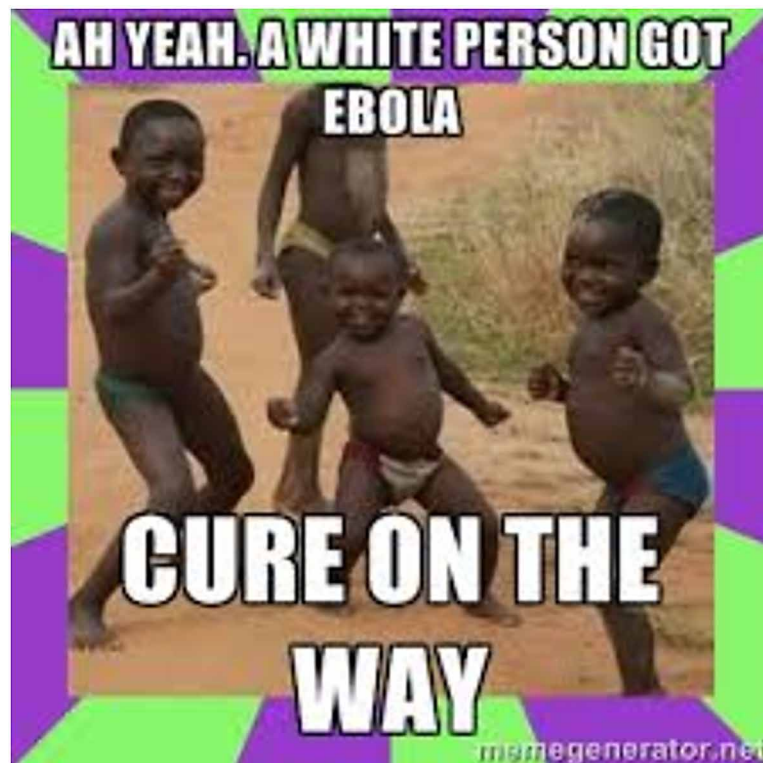
Figure 10.



D: Speech and Action Acts

In this section, the visual and verbal modes are almost equally integrated to express salient messages. The participants in Figure 11 are four black scantily dressed children smiling excitedly and dancing at the news that “A White Person Got Ebola”, consequently, “Cure is on the Way”. The underpants of the children are ‘backgrounded’ to emphasise poverty, backwardness, depravity and primitivism that may be associated with the black race. The literal framing of Figure 11 is actually the figurative framing of the black race as a poverty stricken people. In establishing interactive meaning the text, “A White Person Get Ebola”, boldly presented in white font, an asymmetry is observed in the contrast between the participants’ complexion and the reference to “a white person”. The dance style and smile of the children is infectious and humorous, but an underlying message is implicitly passed across through the meme; it implies that developed countries would be more proactive towards seeking a cure for EVD since one of their own (a white) has been infected. For example, the United States of America, a world power, has remained complacent towards fighting a cure for EVD in African nations, as the country’s position on the epidemic in Africa may have seemed controversial (Ogundipe, et al., 2014) Figure 11 appears ideological, as it accuses developed nations of complacency in the face of a disease that has resulted in a high fatality rate among Africans. The background of Figure 11 also foregrounds dryness; as the brown sand and dry grass cohere with the representation of the children to depict lack, austerity, depravity, crude, under-development.

Figure 11.



The foregrounded participant in Figure 12 is a monkey in big goggles, comfortably seated on a blue stool as he plays a guitar on a stage. The meme has an inscription that reads, 'i wanna sing a little song about an EBOLA i gave'. In the two instances where the pronoun 'I' occurs in the post, it is written in lower case, in contravention of the writing convention that the personal pronoun, 'I' should be capitalised. This appears to be a deliberate de-personalisation strategy which tends to suggest that the humans generally consider the monkey as an insignificant creature. However, the monkey engages in a reactional process as it resists the belittling attempt by humans. The monkey proudly claims that it is responsible for EVD, the post places emphasis on the magnifying impact of EVD, through the use of upper case letters and bigger fonts—'EBOLA' (Figure 12). The crossed left leg of the monkey and his big goggle combine to project a *laissez-faire* attitude towards every accusation.

Even though the meme is a comical post, it is a presentational process which functions as an awareness strategy. It sends the message that EVD is contaminable through monkeys, and therefore, it is the duty of humans to keep away from monkeys if they must avoid EVD.

E: Analytical Acts

Figure 13 is a presentational process that features two hands, the trademark of Nokia, a technology company, whose products are popular in Nigeria. It likewise has other textual language within its narrative. When a Nokia phone is powered on, two hands briefly engage in a handshake before the phone lights up its home-screen, however, Figure 13 jokingly notes that 'I turned on my Nokia phone for the past one hour but these hands won't hold themselves, that's the fear of Ebola'. This text is presented in black font to connote fear, as the joke on the one hand suggests the hands are held back from each other in fear of the EVD. Though this is likely a conjecture, the meme, on the other hand, is a conceptual process which re-emphasises the awareness campaign against EVD, notifying viewers/readers against unguarded body contact. The message here is similar to that of Figure 5, 6, 7 and 8.

Figure 12.

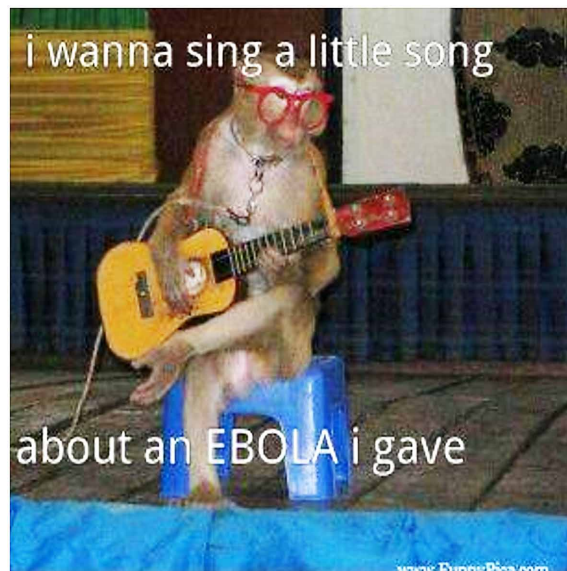


Figure 13.



The freedom of self-expression that *Facebook* users enjoy allows them to impersonate and defame important political personalities and names at will. In Figure 14, President Barack Obama of the United States of America is caricatured as a turbaned Muslim with two Islamic flags hoisted behind him. The meme reads, 'Let me make this perfectly clear...i am not a Muslim i am the ayatolla of Ebola'. While it is rumoured that Obama belongs to the Islamic religious sect (Weeks & Southwell, 2010; Hollander, 2010), Figure 14 presents an antithesis, by dismissing the claim that Obama is a Muslim, but conferring a high

Figure 14.



order Islamic title on him; an ‘ayatollah’ is a powerful religious leader of Shiite Muslims. Though the meme presents comical visual images through caricature, its verbal text does not create compositional meaning as its information value appears to be in contradiction with the images portrayed. This implies that Nigerian creators of memes may lack visual and media literacy which should underlie the creation of such memes.

F: Classification Acts

Crises are not unusual in human societies. Figure 15 employs the logic of time to reflect of crises bedevilling the Nigerian society. In 2014, there was the popular hashtag, ‘#Bring Back Our Girls’ that raised global awareness on over two hundred school girls kidnapped by terrorist organisation, Boko Haram in Nigeria. The Boko Haram insurgency has continued to attract attention to the country, and is a major concern in the country. The EVD appears to be an addition to Nigeria’s already existing problems, hence, the meme has two participants (cartoon characters) performing two goals. One of them carries the placard, #Bring Back Our Girls, and appears to be bewildered (as depicted by the ‘?’ and ‘!’ above his head) with the presence of another, ‘#Send Back Their Ebola’ placard, the goal of the second participant. There is a suggestive conceptual process in the narrative that the latter’s hashtag performs a blame game. Though they may be classified as humour, since the verbal and or visual semiotic modes produce both meaning and humour in cartoons (Tsakona, 2009), the images suggest that rather than seeking solution to Nigerian problems, Nigerians are trading blames, as signalled by the determiner, “their” in the expression ‘their Ebola’. The question is “whose Ebola?” An ‘us’-‘them’ ideological categorisation is equally brought to the fore by the representational process embedded in the use of ‘their Ebola’ and ‘... our girls’.

Figure 15.



FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This chapter analysed different humorous online posts on the 2014 EVD epidemic by Nigerian *Facebook* users by noting that these posts (memes), perform different semeiotic acts of representational meaning. The findings reveal that despite the ability of the posts to elicit laughter, the posts combine interrelated meaning-making processes which have significant underlying meanings embedded in the messages. The selected posts all have the features of ambiguity, surprise and deviation; which are qualities that enhance the humour in them. In addition, the semiotic patterns of the humorous posts include excessive exaggeration, salutation, innovation, jubilation, impersonation and blame game, as they reflect the Nigerian society, their usage largely reveal the deceit in some of the unorthodox practices recommended to quell the spread of the virus. The posts further warn Nigerians from falling victim of products designed to take advantage of consumers in desperate situations, such as the EVD. In addition to these, the study notes that Nigerians are able to maintain and sustain their positive socio-cultural practices even in the midst of a threat. Salient in some of the memes is the foregrounding of Nigerians' expectations from developed countries and world leaders; and the memes further reveal the need to evaluate the cause of any form of crises and address it from the right perspective.

However, the conceptual process that spreads across the posts is that they raise the level of awareness on EVD. They were indeed resourceful in combating and winning the fight against EVD in Nigeria. This study establishes that messages are embedded within humour; hence, beyond their abilities to elicit laughter, humorous posts are messages that may be resourceful in tackling social problems. It is however recommended that readers of *Facebook* posts should be more analytic and systematic in their perception of such memes, in order to get the intended message. This calls for improved media and visual literacy among meme producers because literacy has come to refer to the ability to access, interpret, analyse, access and communicate messages in various forms (Hobbs, 1997; Chauvin, 2003).

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