

# Communicating via imagery: Speaking through online memes

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## Abstract

Online memes have become a participatory culture used by members of the society to express ideas, feelings, and emotions as well as respond to trending topical issues. The speed and often time, anonymity associated with the social media have made it easy to deploy memes that often makes the source challenging to track. These memes use several frames combined with multimedia elements to disseminate the intended message. Memes have gained prominence not just in Nigeria but globally and are fast becoming social artifacts. In Nigeria, it has mainly become a popular tool used for self-expression about specific issues, including the activities of the police force in the polity. Hence, this study undertook a content, and semiotic analysis of purposively selected memes and conversations on Twitter and Instagram linked to the hashtag #9japolice. The study specifically examined the themes, frames, and contextual meanings embedded in the memes to assess the dominant discourse embedded in the visuals and surround conversations on the hashtag. The study found that predominant themes embedded in the memes found on Instagram and Twitter included bribery, extortion, absconding from duty, irrelevancies, fitness/appearance, among others. Also, humour, sarcasm, cowardice, laziness, power distance, misplaced priorities, greed, etc. were used to frame the memes.

**Key Words:** Online Memes, Language, Visual Communication, Nigerian Police Force, Participation

## Introduction

Social media serve as online locations where people express themselves and are able to participate in discourse not bound by time and space. There is evidence that social media platforms have increased youth participation in civic and political spheres of discourse (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2016). This increase in youth participation is driven by the desire of young people to express their opinions, participate in campaigns and organise protests especially in countries where there is an impingement on the freedom of expression and the media is censored. These online locations thus serve as the new public sphere for discourse on all issues. People find individuals with like-minded perspectives and forge collaborative partnerships, particularly at an ideation level.

Papacharissi (2015) explains that this type of publics are networked and connected or disconnected through the conversations that

exude sentiments. This is particularly important because as Banaji and Buckingham (2013) explain it, digital media which encompass social media are an integral part of people's lives today. The Commonwealth Secretariat (2016) corroborates this view when they state that young people can't imagine a world without the internet. Social media has changed communication processes and patterns. In what was regarded as the twitter revolution, social media was used to mobilise people for the Arab spring, which led to changes in several societies but not necessarily in the direction the agitators had expected. However, it allowed young people to voice their issues with the state of governance.

Vromen, Xenos and Loader (2014) claim that changes in political participation of young people are slowly but surely redefined by socio-economic forces which in the Nigerian enviro-

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nment would include the high unemployment rate among young people, the declining economic purchasing power amongst other issues. They believe that the change in participation platforms is more of an integration which does not necessarily mean the complete erosion of traditional participation fora. As the Commonwealth Secretariat (2016) explains, the BringBackOurGirls campaign which went viral did not secure the release of the girls. Labelled as "clicktivism," some researchers suggest that online activism is often short-lived as people get easily distracted.

In places like Kenya, youths expressed their "disillusion, alienation and marginalisation" with mainstream politics by discovering alternative venting platforms on social media. It was the information source for young people and others when authorities banned live media broadcasts during the 2007/2008 post-election crisis in Kenya (Management Association, 2018, p183). These young networked citizens have unique traits that have been shaped by educational and employment exposure, socio-cultural factors such as social class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and residential location. In Nigeria, the youth unemployment rate increased to 33.10 percent in the third quarter of 2017, from 29.50 percent in the second quarter of 2017 (Trading Economics/NBS, 2018). As of 2012, Nigeria's population stood at 167 million people and the highest for youths between the age brackets of 15 and 34 years of age (Vanguard, 2017, June 6). This has been a significant driver of online youth activism with regards to issues that affect them directly.

As Nelson, Ojebuyi, and Salawu (2017, p106) discuss in their book, Nigerians have constituted "a virile community of civil activists in social media" with Twitter as the focal hub of civic mobilisation in the country. Nigerians, mainly youths, use Twitter and other social media platforms to contest and negotiate actions and decisions that impact on the citizens, especially governance. They explain that social media has come to fill the gap opened up by an embattled media caged by the Prohibition of Frivolous Petitions and Other Related Matters Bill. This online civic participation and mobilisations are now known as the Twitter and Facebook Revolution, respectively.

- Widespread popularity amongst young people, especially Nigerian youths (facts and data if available – Pew centre, etc.).

- Impact/Effect of Memes as an avenue for expression –examples of situations where it has been used.
- Reason for focus on the Nigerian Police force. (Brief on performance so far, what sparked the #9japolice hashtag on twitter etc.).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Shifman (2014:8) defines internet memes as "socially constructed public discourses in which different memetic variants represent diverse voices and perspectives." Memes have been used to create new layers of meaning regarding issues in society (Huntington, 2016). As a result, memes have become tools used mainly by young people to engage in debates and viral activism online. Vromen, Xenos and Loader (2014) explain that activism is experienced in every generation, particularly amongst young adults, and this usually hovers between apathy and violent protests. Itodo and O'Regan (2017:2) explain, that although Nigeria has had a long history of activism, a surge in the level of citizens' activism occurred mainly between 2013 and 2017, and much of this surge coincided with the period when the #Bringbackourgirls and #OccupyNigeria campaign was most active. These campaigns have given Nigerians particularly the youths the ability to voice their displeasure with situations that infringe on their freedom in any form on social media platforms Facebook, YouTube and Instagram which have become platforms for social mobilization and protest and Twitter emerging as a "site of resistance" (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015 as cited in Ofori-Parku and Moscato, 2018:2480; Herman, 2014; Madden, Janoske, and Briones, 2016).

While there have been studies on the impact of social media usage on young people and their communication patterns in Nigeria (Ashiekpe, 2017; Kayode-Adededeji, 2018; Olasinde, 2014; Ajike et al., 2016), studies are lacking on how young people in Nigeria engage social media tools to express their civic and political views. Also, the negative reputation of the Nigeria Police Force particularly for being unprofessional and corrupt and often mishandling citizens (Human Rights Watch, 2010) has given rise to online activism against these corrupt practices as demonstrated by the deployment of hashtags such as the #9japolice that went viral in April 2017 (TimePostNG, 2017). In light of the above, this study, therefore,

sought to understand how memes have been deployed on Twitter and Instagram under the hashtag #9japolice to address issues of indiscipline associated with the Nigerian police force.

### Research Questions

- (a) What are the predominant themes running through the memes?
- (b) What framing tools were used to present the memes?
- (c) What are the contextual meanings inherent in the images used in the memes?

### Social Media, Activism and Participation

The revised European Charter on youth participation explains it as "more than voting or standing for election. It defines it as the right, the means, space, and the opportunity and where necessary the support participate in and influence decisions and engages in actions and activities to contribute to building a better society". They explain that participation can come in different forms. According to the United Nations General Assembly, youth participation includes • economic cooperation – which relates to employment and economic development, poverty elimination, building a stable financial situation in a society, for a country or for young people as a group • political participation – which relates to authorities and governments, public policies, exercising power, the influence on the distribution of resources at different levels • social engagement – which includes involvement in a local community in order to address local problems and challenges. Nigerian youths have used social media to drive participation at all levels whether it is a protest against the name change of UNILAG or to bring back the kidnapped Chibok girls or state their desire for change in administration.

For Mutsvairo (2016), mobile communication is at the heart of this increasing mobilisation of social and political participation across the world, and this is true for Nigeria as well. This is due to the lack of geographical boundaries online. The result is that a lot of social initiatives have evolved over the years, with many of them crisscrossing into the physical public arena. This Uzuegbunam (2015) explains based on a digital evolution which allows youths to continually communicate and

adapt to changes through new and creative ways peculiar to them. Nwonwu (2011, cited in Uzuegbunam) expounds on this when he states that African youths see social media as an invaluable tool for advancing the quest for "freedom, justice, and a better, well-administered society." Perhaps this might be because those concepts are severely lacking in practice.

Social media platforms have become particularly useful in activism because they bypass the mass media gatekeepers and censors from affected political elites or institutions who are often at the receiving end of the protests or actions. Besides the advantage mentioned earlier, Mutsvairo points out that social media are enablers in that they allow activists to connect quickly, sympathetic followers can join in, and citizens can watch and participate in real-life online activities. Despite these advantages, he points out that the platforms can only facilitate the protests but do not guarantee the outcome the activists want as discussed with regards to the BringBackOurGirls campaign. Bozoglan (2018) explains that social networking sites have allowed Nigerian youths to use it for more than research purposes and now get involved in various forms of political and social activism. Examples of those instances include the protest by the University of Lagos students against the name change of the school from the University of Lagos to Moshood Abiola University (Balarabe, 2015 cited in Bozoglan and Bahadir). This confirms what Ugor and Mawuko-Yevugah (2015) said about new media technologies driving youth empowerment, social action, and political engagement in various ways. From a 19-year long European survey, it was discovered that those who regularly use the internet were more likely to participate in product boycotts, sign petitions pro or against specific issues or social causes. Nigerian youth presence on social media is the main reason why they are increasingly able to voice their opinions.

Cammaerts (2015) cites eight reasons for the use of social media by activists (see Jordan and Taylor, 2004; Cammaerts, 2005; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). These are: to organise recruit and network like-minded individuals; to coordinate direct action where necessary; to disseminate plans; to discuss/debate/deliberate/decide; to attack ideological enemies; to survey the surveiller and to preserve protest artifacts

(Cammaerts, 2015). Despite the advantages of social media use, face-to-face communication is still essential for building trust and keeping information safe from unwanted eyes.

### **Memes as Participation Tool on Social Media**

Wolff and Pfeiffer (2004) describe memes as signs or more accurately sign vehicles which are tangible things, events, or processes. Shifman (2014, cited in Foster, 2014) argues that the word "meme" could be used to describe a variety of contemporary behaviours. Also, Knobel and Lankshear (2006, also cited in Foster, 2014) define memes as "widely propagated ideas or phenomena" online (p. 217). Memes now describe internet memes or image macros, gifs, videos, and email chains online. Given these definitions, Spencer (2017, p 6) traces the origin of memes to the work of an evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. In her view memes describe songs, fads, catchphrases, and or images, and are "nominal cultural information units conveyed by individuals, and groups, through communication processes" (Dawkins 2006 cited in Spencer, 2017).

These memes have now become a universally accepted tool by internet users for the spread and duplication and acceptance of digital content. Images (Memes) are generally most effective when they go viral. The viral nature of memes helps users convey opinions and ideologies, which would otherwise die out if they are not spread (Rushkoff, 2010, cited in Spencer, 2017). These memes have proven capable of generating feedback from viewers, whether through comments, responses, redevelopment of new concepts, or a mixture of the above. Kulkarni (2017) explains that images capture a part of a culture that spreads by the process of imitation or copying. Images particularly memes have become the form by which citizens air their views in society (Shifman, 2014 and Nowak, 2013 cited in Kulkarni, 2017). Internet memes have become intertwined with social life and become opinion shapers. Particularly noteworthy is that memes convey information from the creator of the message to an extensive network of people. Kulkarni (2017) explains that digital natives are driven to browse the news sites for detailed information based on the content of memes made on the issues. Shifman (2014) in his book- 'Memes in Digital Culture,' explains that memes are more of user-generated content than standardised information generated by

established media houses or elites. These user-generated memes look professional as they include videos and photos produced by professional artists. A lot of research goes into making some of this content to ensure it achieves the set objectives.

Marwick and Lewis (2017) explain that images are intended to be transmitted by individuals on social media because propaganda spread through interpersonal connections irrespective of the validity is more successful than that generated by the message designer itself. As such, this feature lends memes to be used by media manipulators who are bent on pushing propaganda in all forms and places like Nigeria – often negative and possibly lies. They use this social media tool to promote ideologies to achieve a specific end. The danger is that these media manipulators are not exactly interested in whether or not the media becomes a part of their machinery as they are confident in the distance the coded information would travel via interpersonal connections on social media especially by individuals who have no time to confirm the veracity of the claims on the meme.

### **The Nigerian Police and the #9japolice**

Several studies have identified gaps in the effectiveness of police organisations (Alemika, 2013; Hills, 2008). The Nigerian police, in particular, has been accused of power abuse that dates back to when the British colonialists used the police force to maintain order and repress anti-colonial protests (Alemika and Chukwuma, 2004). Till date, the Nigerian Police Force, perceived as the most corrupt public institution (Wambua, 2015) is still being accused of dishonesty, abuse of power, corruption, use of force to detain, fraud among others (Odekunle, 2004). On the one hand, the Nigerian Police Force came up with initiatives that deployed digital technologies to address these accusations to improve police-citizen relations (Odeyemi and Obiyan, 2018). One of such efforts was the creation of the Public Complaints Rapid Response Unit (PCRRU), which uses digital media platforms such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, etc. (Odeyemi and Obiyan, 2018).

On the other hand, the public has created and deployed several hashtags and associated memes to champion campaigns that speak against these acts of indiscipline and police brutality against citizens. One of the hashtags used by Nigerians to talk about the indiscipline in the Nigerian Police Force is the #9japolice

that went viral and trended on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2017 (TimePostNG, 2017). The hashtag was used by Nigerian citizens to deploy memes that spoke about bribery, corruption, abuse of power and other forms of indiscipline in the Nigerian Police Force. This study, therefore, sought to examine the memes associated with #9japolice force to identify the predominant themes running through the memes, the framing tools used to present the memes and understand the contextual meanings inherent in the images used in the memes.

### **Framing**

Robert Entman developed the framing theory. Nelson, Ojebuyi, and Salawu (2017:109) define the theory as the “selection of some aspects of perceived reality” and highlighting or emphasizing them in an informative text in such a way as to emphasize a particular problem and interpret. Framing is related to the agenda-setting theory and often referred to as a subset of the latter. Bernard L. Shaw in 1983 coined the former. Boydston, Gross, Resnik, and Smith (2013) explain that framing portrays issues from one perspective to the necessary exclusion of other viewpoints. To Spencer (2017), it is the process which selects and highlights some aspects of reality, thus giving them greater emphasis or importance. The theory is about providing an interpretation using specific words to drive meaning and shift the focus of the reader to help aid understanding of the issue in discourse (McCombs, 2006 cited in Spencer, 2017). Focusing on the frames contained in memes would be necessary for giving the reader a perspective on what is at stake or essential to the designer of the message.

In another study, framing is described as “a schema of interpretation, collection of anecdotes, and stereotypes that individuals rely on to understand and respond to events” (Cissel 2012 cited in Spencer, 2017:68). Based on the above definition, it can be inferred that framing also extends to social media as it is a collection of individual and group-driven content disseminated to influence views. Social media framing can manifest as memes, individual posts, and sometimes within groups all for convincing others. Therefore, framing presupposes an element of bias exists from the author of the message regardless of the form it comes in. Because social media shapes opinions and pushes ideologies far beyond geographical and cultural boundaries, it is essential to

consider framing with regards to how it can sometimes cause polarisation and affect relationships via that platform. The originator of the message engages his opinions to frame the message and thus give a new output or ideology that he or she wants the readers to buy into (Canning, 2010 also cited in Spencer). As Nelson et al. therefore indicate, in the framing process – the framer who is the encoder has the power to drive the angle from which he wants his readers to decode his message. It is in the process of examining social media content that it becomes natural, especially for young people to discover compatible interests and views on the issue.

Every tweet or Insta-message contains specific messages which can provide “understanding” to those it encounters along the way. This is best explained by the fact that framing reveals what issues, developments, and events currently dominate public agendas (Lamerichs, Nguyen, Melguizo, Radojevic and Lange-Bohmer, 2018). Although hitherto framing has mainly been used to examine content from the angle of the transmission model, which is top to bottom, it would be instructive to investigate framing of content from a horizontal perspective especially with regards to the dissemination of memes on the *#9japolice perspective* which are user-generated content.

### **Semiotic Theory**

Danesi (2007) explain semiotics as the science of produced meaning. Its goal is to unravel the meanings built into all kinds of artefact – words, symbols, narratives, paintings, etc. In evaluating the V sign done with the human fingers, it can stand for different things depending on the society in which it is used. It was first associated with Victory by the British Politician Winston Churchill after the World War II victory. Following the use of the same symbol in the Star Trek movie, it became associated with peace; yet that same symbol can mean the alphabet V or even the number 2 all depending on the context. Thus semiotics is about investigating, deciphering, and explaining the what, how, and why of signs or symbols.

Balci and Ozden (2017) state that semiotic markers are handy for image analysis. They explain that images have a Signifiers and the Signified plays off on the Denotation and Connotation. The signifier denotes the exact description of all the signs/symbols/item that is

seen in the image while the signified connotes all possible interpretations that the items in the image represent beyond the surface meaning especially when backed up by text which generally points out the direction of interpretation. The signifiers are the visible descriptions, while the signified are the inferred and suggested meanings based on the elements of the meme in focus.

An excellent example of how this works is what is done in *Sherlock Holmes Mystery*; the clues that Sherlock sees in every crime scene which could be the smudge of mud outside a window or the chipped edges of the door handle are the Signifiers. What those signifiers connote or mean which is subject to Sherlock's interpretation and which could include a trespasser outside the window peeping in, someone broke in the door, etc. The combination of the two aspects of semiotic analysis helps to give a robust explanation for the images, which in this instance represents several memes randomly used to display the feelings of youths about the #9ja police.

Despite the advantages or strengths of semiotics, Wolff and Pfeiffer (2004) criticise the theory stating that it gives the impression that images can be analysed without consideration to the context in which they were designed. Moreover, depending on the aspect of analysis, the signs mean different things to different people; this could then be taken as a subjective interpretation.

### Method of Study

A mixed-method was employed for this study. First, the #9japolice was used to search out relevant memes on Instagram and Twitter. The search resulted in 52 and 96 posts for Instagram and Twitter, respectively. Hence, the population of the study constitutes 148 Instagram and Twitter posts summarily. Using a purposive sampling technique, 31 memes were purposively selected as the sample size for this study. From the 52 memes obtained from Instagram, 11 memes were purposively selected and assessed for relevance to the #9japolice. The 11 items were picked based on the number of likes and comments which ranged from thousands to more than ten likes and comments. For Twitter, 20 items were selected from a population of 96 items identified using the #9japolice. The 20 items were purposively selected based on significance to the subject

matter and the number of likes that ranged from 220 to a minimum of 6.

First, a semiotic analysis of 31 purposively selected memes on the #9japolice with the most responses and an analysis of the responses to the memes posted on the issue was carried out. The selected memes were also content analysed in terms of the images and the significance of the text used in the memes to frame the creator's perception in terms of the message it conveyed. The hashtag also enables users to track the issue in discourse as it unfolds. The frames are independent variables as used by the original designer, and the responses to the memes are the dependent variable.

The choice of twitter and Instagram was informed by the following:

- Twitter is popularly used in Nigeria and other parts of the world for public discussions, while Instagram is used for challenges that are visual driven (Ofori-Parku & Moscato, 2018; NaijaTechGuide Team, 2019).
- Activist campaigns usually start on Twitter – #BringBackOurGirls, #OccupyNigeria, and so on (Herman, 2014).
- The platforms are prevalent among Nigerian youths what with the many "challenges" that take place on the platforms (Statista, 2019).
- Instagram is famous for its use of images (both still and moving) (Statista, 2019).

### Content Categories

- (a) Pre-dominant themes in the memes: This identified the Police behavioural points of focus in the memes.
- (b) Frames used in the memes: This explained the words used to capture the reference in selected memes and conversations under the hashtag.
- (c) Context of the images used in the memes: This decoded and explained the images used in the memes and what they represented.

### Data Presentation

As shown in Table 1, the predominant themes were victimisation (n=6, 20%), followed by bribery (n=5, 16.67%), favouritism (n=4, 13.33%) and extortion/hounds (n=4, 13.33%).

**Table One: Predominant Themes in Memes on Twitter**

| Predominant themes             | Freq. (n) | Percent (%) |
|--------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Bribery                        | 5         | 16.7%       |
| Favouritism                    | 4         | 13.3%       |
| Duty                           | 1         | 3.33%       |
| Victimisation                  | 6         | 20%         |
| Fitness/Appearance             | 1         | 3.3%        |
| Irrelevancies                  | 3         | 10%         |
| Good officer                   | 1         | 3.3%        |
| Laziness/ Absconding from Duty | 3         | 10%         |
| Extortion/Hounds               | 4         | 13.3%       |
| Misinterpretation              | 2         | 6.7%        |
| <b>Total</b>                   | <b>30</b> | <b>100%</b> |

Table 2 revealed the predominant themes inherent in the memes analysed on Instagram. The data showed that bribery (n=3, 27.3%), laziness/absconding from duty (n=3, 27.3%) and extortion (n=3, 27.3%) were predominant themes inherent in the memes analysed on Instagram followed by the victimisation theme (n=2, 18.2%).

**Table Two: Predominant Themes in Memes on Instagram**

| Predominant themes             | Freq. (n) | Percent (%) |
|--------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Bribery                        | 3         | 27.3%       |
| Victimisation                  | 2         | 18.2%       |
| Laziness/ Absconding from Duty | 3         | 27.3%       |
| Extortion/Hounds               | 3         | 27.3%       |
| <b>Total</b>                   | <b>11</b> | <b>100%</b> |

#### **Framing Tools used to present the Memes**

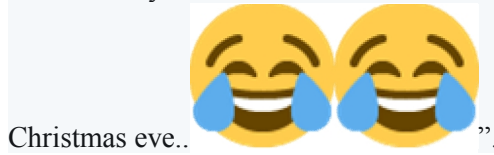
The framing tools identified in the memes alongside examples are given below:

*Humour, Sarcasm and/or Laziness*

1. "Are you alone in the car? No sir: who is with you? : The lord and a host of angels: oga, park well **you carry overload**[#9JAPOLICE](#)".

This particular conversation was framed using *humour and sarcasm* as it was evident the person in question was alone. Moreover, underlying the use of sarcasm and humour also hints at the ridiculousness of a policeman accusing the driver of an empty car of carrying "overload."

2. “I once used the bread and Akara in my bag to bail myself from [#9JAPOLICE](#) on



This second item is framed using humour as well but underpinned by the absurdity that he escaped police detention for no reason using the food he had with him. The hint of corruption and bribery underpins it.

3. When you get into the Nigerian police force VS When You Retire [#9JAPOLICE](#)



Humour and laziness are two frames that define the text for this meme. The first image shows a fit and ready for work officer, while the other shows an overweight officer who would be unlikely to run or pursue a criminal in the case of such a likelihood.

#### **Power Distance**

1. “I remember being arrested by [#9JAPOLICE](#) for refusing to give them bribe. Our offense being "we have no respect for elders."

In this instance, the message originator hints at the Power distance in the country. The policemen, in this instance, misused their power simply because they were older than the citizen in question or as a result of their uniform.

#### **Cowardice**

1. “It's only in Nigeria you'll call [#9JAPOLICE](#) that there's a robbery going on and they'll say there's no fuel in their car so they can't come”.

The frame used here speaks to the **cowardice** of the force. Given the Nigerian environment where policemen's families do not get any

serious benefits in the course of their death, it appears that this is the motivation for their more often than not avoiding tense situations.

#### **Extortion**

1. “[#HUSBANDMATERIAL](#) @FridayTrendsN G 7 Apr 2017

More

How [#9JAPOLICE](#) be looking at you when you don't have your complete papers, but still decide to keep speaking big big grammar”.

In this instance, the description is framed by two things – focus on what they want, which is the money and secondly extortion of an unsuspecting citizen.

#### **Misplaced Priorities, Greed, and Anger**

1. “Tellem you're been robbed, no time, no fuel, they're busy, etc. Oya tellem boys are here 9japolic gbera gbera gbera aja2 [#9JAPOLICE](#).”
2. “When you have all your car papers and license on check, [#9JAPOLICE](#) be like Oniranu...bad market”. This conversation is framed by **greed and anger** that they are unable to extort the target.

In this instance, the frames used are that of misplaced priorities, greed, and anger. In the first example, the policemen are more willing to go after the yahoo boys because of what they would get compared to them doing the right thing. In the second example, police officers are annoyed whenever a citizen has all car papers complete because it does not allow them to extort money from citizens.

#### **Abuse of Power**

1. “It's only [#9JAPOLICE](#) that'll expect you to walk around with the receipt to your fone.”.
2. [NSIKAN](#) @\_Kiimosabe 13 Aug 2013 More [#9JAPOLICE](#) be like: "why 'u wearing black on black?? Oh, u want to impersonate us abi?? PARK dis car!! I said PARK dis car!!!"

The examples above are framed by abuse of power. The first instance indicates that the Nigerian police force often abuses power by intimidating citizens based on flimsy offenses

such as not walking around with a phone receipt or wearing black which is also the colour of the Nigerian police uniform.

**Contextual Meanings inherent in the Images used in the Memes**

Five memes were selected for analysis in this instance. Communication in the Nigerian environment is high-context, and as such, a lot of the conversations are driven by the meta-communication. The originators of the memes have asides from a few exceptions like Drake's image used visuals of people the Nigerian citizen can identify with.

In this first image below, the signifiers include Drake, a famous musician stretching out his hands like he is asking a question. He also has a surprising look of disbelief on his face. He is wearing a face cap that is turned backward and is seated, showing some form of relaxation. The Signified implication of the visual in combination with the text is that Drake, in this instance, represents a 9ja policeman. In other words, he is the stand-in referent for the policeman who cannot believe that the citizen would talk back at him. His hand stretched out is indicative of the perception he has towards the average citizen which is that he thinks that the citizen is a nobody which is echoed in the text "what's this one saying?" His words "c'mon get in the van" is also indicative of an officer who believes his uniform gives him the right and authority over a regular citizen.



In the second meme, we see a man smiling sheepishly sideways as he looks at someone or something in front of him. The background is not so visible –except for artwork. From the

text, however, the background seems to play little or no role in the meaning of the meme. The man in the visual represents police officers who have found themselves in the same situation as described by the text accompanying the meme.

The smile on the man's face depicts a policeman who is happy or ecstatic at a citizen who knows the right thing to do. In other words, the policeman or the signifier in this meme smiles as if to say "good citizen." Of course, this is a sarcastic insult which accuses the Nigerian police force as only ever being happy when they are being bribed or when they demand a bribe and receive it.



The third meme has a lady fully kitted in the 9ja police uniform. The background is green, and she has a smirk on her face like she knows a secret others are not privy to. The green in this instance could be taken to mean Nigeria as the colour is the country's national brand. Also signified in this instance is the expression on her face which is indicative of when a hunter catches its prey, which is instructive of how the policewoman feels now that she has the citizen at her mercy. The text further explains why she is excited as the citizen has committed an infraction which would mean that she discovered she has the upper hand over the

citizen and is expectant that she would get some financial gain or benefit from it.

When 9ja police finds you with an expired license



@tina.obiora

In the fourth meme, there is a dark and medium height man looking sideways with an expression of disbelief or suspicion on his face. The background is not evident and as such, has no role to play in this discourse. The expression on the man's face reveals that he is in disbelief at what is before him or what he is looking at. When combined with the text, it gives off the impression that the policeman is suspicious of the citizen he is looking at. Of course, this is reflective of a socio-cultural context which permeates every aspect of the Nigerian environment. Nigeria has battled with the images of young men engaging in fraudulent actions and using the proceeds to ride new and bigger cars, amongst other things.

As such, the 9ja police force is always on the lookout for such individuals. This would explain why the officer looked suspiciously when he noticed the citizen had a car and serious money to spend. In part, due to the reign of fraudsters popularly known as the yahoo boys and the havoc, they have wrecked across continents and mainly because of their lavish style, there is always an aura of suspicion by the Nigerian police force to successful young men in particular.

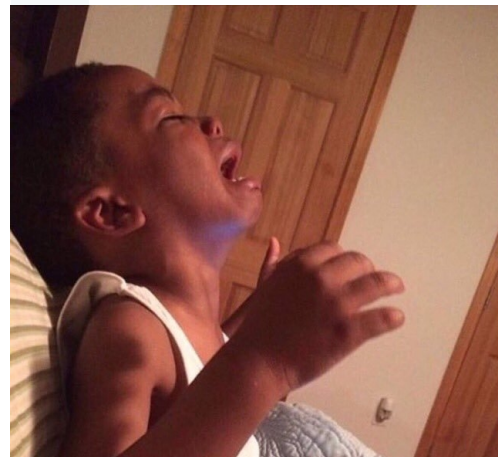
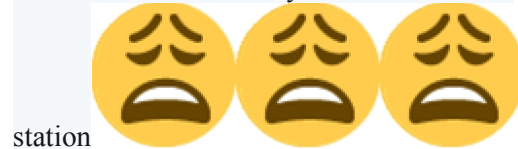


Reply to Iseunife The First

In the fifth and final image, we have a young child crying with its face turned up, and hands are thrown up. The child is also laying on a bed. For this image, the child signifies the citizen. The wailing lends itself to the impression that the child believes all hope is lost.

When taken into consideration alongside the text, the citizen believes there is going to be serious issues and that it would affect him/her. The tears, therefore, represent the fear and devastation of a citizen required to follow the police to the station. It means the citizen believes there is something negative awaiting him or her at the station. This is understandable given the security contexts where 9ja police officers have been known to fabricate evidence against innocent citizens either before the station or at the station. This is further backed up with a sad smiley to show the gravity of the request by the #9JAPOLICE.

When #9JAPOLICE says follow me to the



### Discussion

The study set out to examine the memes associated with #9japolice force to identify the predominant themes running through the memes, the framing tools used to present the memes and understand the contextual meanings inherent in the images used in the memes. Below are the findings of the study in relation to the research questions for the study.

**RQ1: What are the predominant themes running through the memes?**

The study found that Instagram and Twitter users were able to effectively communicate their feelings about the 9japolicemen and their performance on the job. Of the ten themes that were deduced from the twitter memes, seven of the ten themes were negative. In other words, the view of the Nigerian police deployed via memes, and the conversation around it indicates that the Nigerian police force needs to work on its image via its actions. The themes and the images used depicted the negative actions of the 9ja police force. While citizens could have been dealt with if they physically communicated any of those ideas to the Nigerian police force, the twitter users who deployed the selected memes and conversations were able to communicate to the police force the issues they had with force's operations. On Instagram, all five themes identified were negative. As explained by Shiftman (2013) and Nowak (2013) as cited in Kulkarni (2017) images particularly memes have become the mouthpiece by which citizens air their views in society especially when to do so physically would have consequences. Moreover, the anonymity of images, once they begin to circulate, allows citizens to fully express their feelings about the Nigerian police force without reservation.

**RQ2: What framing tools were used to present the memes?**

The conversations and images used in the memes were framed using humour and sarcasm. Humour possibly to deflect the sad state of the issues citizens have experienced with the police force that should be their friend and a security watch. It also gives citizens the perspective of the source of the memes. In recent times, Nigerians have been described as happy people despite the many challenges that come with the terrain, and the attitude of the Nigerian police force is one of them. The use of humour to deflect serious issues has been one significant approach to addressing the depressing issues. The two form a perfect blend – sarcasm to highlight the source's disgust, disillusion, and disappointment with the issues and humour to drive the direction the issue is viewed from. The fits the discourse by Spencer (2017), who explained that frames select and highlight the aspects of the reality a communicator or message source has chosen, thus giving them greater emphasis or importance. In this

instance, the author has chosen to highlight the gravity and seriousness of the 9japolice issues but without the intention to depress people but rather to entertain. Using images, the message source has managed to portray the 9ja police incompetency using the themes harnessed in the first question, such as abuse of power, extortion, etc. The sources of the memes have, therefore given their interpretation of the issues surrounding the 9ja police to emphasise the weight of the issues and drive people's attention to all the wrong things.

**RQ3: What are the contextual meanings inherent in the images used in the memes?**

From the semiotic analysis, it is evident that each of the memes carries their meaning, which makes better sense when viewed in line with the accompanying text. The text of these memes helps to frame them in a way the message source wants the readers to see the information. As such, the images tally to some extent with some of the themes already sieved from the memes and the surrounding conversations whether its abuse of power or fear at the use of power by the 9ja police force.

The images had literal meanings but produced a much more emphatic frame when combined with the text messages. None of the memes was isolated or devoid of meaning. Each meme had a denotative and connotative meaning, and it was the combination of both text and visual elements that helped to make the meme's message clearer and better. The sources of the message embedded their meaning in the memes and used the visuals to drive perspectives on the issue at play in the memes. As Danesi (2007) explains it semiotics deals with the production of meaning. The message sources have managed to produce meaning using memes on different platforms. They had done this using as many elements of multimedia as they possibly can to produce the specific meaning on their mind when they deployed the memes.

**Conclusion**

While the analyses of memes are not so conventional and have not been the subject of focus in Nigeria, there has been semiotic and textual analysis conducted on other media artefacts. And some of them did set the tone for this study. This study set out to do a content and textual analysis of memes on the 9japolice. It was able to establish that memes are not idle

tools deployed for deployment sake. Depending on the issue in discourse or at play, every meme carries a message and represents the citizens' views about the theme or concept they choose to focus on at any point in time. Further studies can be conducted to ascertain how citizens, especially young people, view the use of memes and why they use memes to portray their views on social media.

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