

## **Beyond Joking: A Pragmatic (De)construction of “Nigerian Realities” in Selected Humour-Evoking Facebook Memes**

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### **Abstract**

Studies on memes are relatively few in the Nigerian scholarly space, with most of these studies focusing more on humour and humour strategies in memes. However, little or no attention is paid to how humorous memes, beyond their joking contents, reveal the socio-ideological realities that define the Nigerian society. This study, therefore, investigates how the shared linguistic, cultural, situational, experiential and national presuppositions among Nigerians help in teasing out some of the existential phenomena that characterise the country, as projected through humour-evoking memes on Facebook. Data comprise fifteen purposively sampled humour-evoking memes from Senior Pikin, Warehouse of Laughter, and Rant HQ; three popular pages dedicated to jokes and reflections on social issues in Nigeria on Facebook. Data were subjected to interpretive and pragmatic analyses, within the purview of Common Ground theory, with conceptual terminologies borrowed from Odebunmi’s (2006) Mutual Contextual Beliefs theory. Findings reveal display of materialism and elevated status, gender and stereotyping, marital infidelity, electricity and (un)employment problems, religiosity and spiritualisation of issues, and exorbitant spending on festivities/ceremonies are some of the social realities found within the Nigerian space as evident in the memes. The study, therefore, concludes humorous memes do more than instantiating jokes in the Nigerian context.

**Keywords:** Humorous memes, Facebook, Nigerian realities, Common Ground/Contextual Beliefs

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## **1. Introduction**

*There are elements of truth and reality in every joke*

A popular Nigerian saying

The quote above drives the thematic focus of this study. In the Nigerian context, one of the strategic ways of reflecting on the social, religious, cultural and political realities that define the experience of the people is joking. Thus, just as it is believed there are elements of truth in every rumour, so it is with jokes. For instance, Filani and Ajayi (2019) have emphasised how (professional) stand-up comedians have deployed comedy and jokes in depicting the Nigerian social life; a phenomenon that has been described as a way of ‘strategically coping with the socio-cultural realities in the country’ (Obadare, 2016; Yeku, 2016). Interestingly, with the introduction of the social media into the Nigerian space, it appears many Nigerians, who are not professional comedians, have been given the platform to demonstrate their comedic tendencies while critically portraying the various ideological cum social realities of the country. In other words, beyond manifesting their ability to crack jokes on the social media, many Nigerians have deployed the platform to express their personal feelings, realities and beliefs which are quite instructive of certain socio-ideological issues of common interest to Nigerians. In this study, the linguistic constructions in some selected humour-evoking Facebook memes are subjected to pragmatic analysis, with a view to establishing the fact that, the texts of the memes, beyond being jokes, perform certain pragmatic functions, particularly in the Nigerian context.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Computer-mediated discourse and Facebook**

Although there had been series of scholarly works that met the definitional criteria of the computer-mediated discourse (CMD) prior to 1995 (e.g Murray, 1985, 1988; SeverinsonEklundh, 1986), Herring (2001) claims the term computer-mediated discourse was first introduced to scholarship in 1995 at a pre-session of the Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics she organised in March that year. As such, Herring (2001: 612) defines the CMD as ‘the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages

via networked computers.’ According to this scholar, the CMD is an aspect of the broader field of study known as computer-mediated communication (CMC) whose preoccupation is language and language use in computer networked environments. In her submission, the CMD employs methodological approaches used in language-related fields like linguistics, communication, and rhetoric in the analysis of the CMC. As noted by Warschauer *et al.* (1996), the CMC has promoted the motivation to participate in online communication among individuals. As explained by Herring (2001), the CMD involves messages composed and typed on a computer keyboard and read as text on a computer screen, typically by a person or persons at a different location from the message sender. Such messages could be through e-mail, virtual discussion groups and reality role-playing games, or real-time chat. The linguistic properties of the messages vary according to the form of messaging system deployed, as well as the sociocultural context of use. Indeed, the Facebook is one of such social media platforms that facilitate the CMC or CMD.

As observed by Delise (2012), the Facebook is a social network that was developed by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004. Since its advent, the Facebook, like its other Internet-based social networks such as Twitter, 2Go, WhatsApp, Instagram, has facilitated globalisation, ensuring easy virtual interaction among friends, relatives and acquaintances. Commenting on the popularity of Facebook, Smith (2018) reports that, as at 2017, the platform has 2 billion monthly users, and over a billion daily active users (Lamidi, 2018). As part of the series of activities that take place on Facebook, there are social and daily activities such as information sharing, discussion of trending stories and happenings, education of the populace (Facebookzens), advertising and reconciliation of estranged relationships and instantiation of jokes, among others. In Facebook interactions, comments often come in form of texts, pictures, and emoticons. This attests to the multimodal nature of the platform.

## **2.2.(Internet) Meme in computer-mediated discourse**

The Internet meme is one of the tools for engaging in computer-mediated discourse. The concept of meme was coined by Richard Dawkins, a pioneer in the study of memetics, in his book *The Selfish Gene* published in 1976 (Kulkarni, 2017). As claimed by Dawkins (1989), the term meme has its origin in the Greek word ‘mimeme’ which means ‘to imitate’, and it later became a part of the popular culture. However, with the emergence of Internet and digital technologies, the term ‘Internet Meme’ evolved and gained popularity (Shifman, 2013; Kulkarni, 2017). Memes are often

conceived of as ‘organic ideas’, given their characteristic nature of undergoing a process of variation, competition, selection and retention; as a matter of fact, they compete with other memes for people’s engagement and attention (Shifman, 2013; Heylighen, 1995). They often metamorphose from single events to commonly shared social phenomena through the transformative processes of mimicking, copying, imitation, repackaging and remixing (Taecharungroj, & Nueangjamnong, 2015).

Buchel (2012) opines Internet meme is ‘a piece of culture, typically a joke which gains influence through online transmission’ (cf. Kulkarni, 2017: 13). Shifman (2013: 41) describes an internet meme as follows: “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users”. It has overtime been referred to as channel through which ideas get to wider audience within a short period of time. This notion is reinforced in the submission of Liisi-Lainesk (2016) who argues that Internet meme plays a very important role, particularly in the area of conveyance of information. According to him, the Internet meme acts as a primary source of information for digital natives, who often times are attracted to news items by the memes on them. Similarly, Internet meme has been reported to be a powerful political tool, mainly used for campaign and persuasion during electioneering period (Kulkarni, 2017). Internet meme has equally been deployed for the promotion of cultural and religious ideologies (Pech, 2003). In the Nigerian context, the Internet meme has been deployed for economic, educational, and humorous purposes. In the latter sense in particular, Yeku (2016) and Tella (2018) are notable.

### **3. Statement of the problem**

Studies in the use of social media for private and public interactions and discourses, particularly in the Nigerian context, including Ajayi and Ajayi (2014), Ajayi (2018; 2019), Ajayi and Bamgbose (2019), Yeku (2016), Tella (2018), Filani (2018), Lamidi (2018), and Lamidi (2018), among others, have examined different linguistic and pragmatic strategies in online interaction and discourse. For instance, Ajayi and Ajayi (2014) examine face and ideologies in the comments of participants on Nairaland.com on issues revolving round the alleged marriage between Ahmed Yerima (a Nigerian senator) and a 13-year old Egyptian girl. These scholars report that, while Ahmed Yerima made recourse to cultural ideologies in defence of his alleged action, a lot of

Nigerians found his action condemnable on moral grounds, hence deployed different kinds of linguistic strategies in threatening his face. Ajayi (2018) investigates impoliteness strategies in the Facebook posts of Nigerian electorate in their opinions on the two major contestants in the 2019 presidential election. Ajayi and Bamgbose (2019) engage how the Facebook is deployed among Nigerians to engage in ethno-religious conflict. Yeku (2016) focuses on different joking and humour strategies in social media humour-related posts, with particular reference to Akpos' jokes on Facebook. Tella (2018) explores the deployment of humour generation and framing in the 2015 election campaign memes in Nigeria. Filani (2018) investigates humour strategies in humorous Facebook posts of Akpos, a popular Nigerian comedian, and respondents' comments. Similarly, Lamidi (2018) deals with identity construction in Nairaland interactions, while Lamidi (2018) looks at the deployment of pragmatic strategies in Facebook-sponsored advertisements. While these studies have examined different linguistic phenomena in relation to the social media, they have largely glossed over language use in Internet memes. Even Tella (2018) that has given attention to humour-related Internet memes has only focused on political memes within the purview of humour and framing theories. Thus, it suffices to say little attention has been paid to the linguistic cum pragmatic dimension of Internet memes in general, and the application of common ground in humour-evoking Internet memes in the Nigerian space in particular.

Therefore, this study is a pragmatic approach to linguistic scholarship on Internet memes, particularly within the purview of Common Ground theory. In particular, the study aims to argue, humour-evoking Internet memes, beyond serving as a joking tool, perform some pragmatic functions, especially as they reveal and reflect certain socio-cultural realities/practices that define the Nigerian space.

#### **4. Theoretical framework: Common ground and Mutual Contextual beliefs**

The concept of Common Ground, like many other linguistic phenomena, has been viewed differently by different scholars, hence its various and varying definitions. For instance, Stalnaker (1973: 48) submits common ground refers to the background knowledge or beliefs shared by the speaker with his audience. This shared knowledge or beliefs constitute the context of their linguistic interaction. Allan (1986) describes it as 'context'. Based on a presupposition of awareness, Clark (1996) describes Common Ground with this analogy: X is aware of the world around him/her and is aware of being aware of it, i.e. X is not asleep, in a coma, stoned out of

his/her mind, or the like. X is also aware that an interlocutor Y is aware in a similar way to X; likewise for Y in respect of X. Duranti (1997: 27) opines it includes sensitivity to cultural and procedural knowledge as aspects of 'contextualisation' (Gumperz, 1982: 131). Lee (2001) notes that common ground has been described with a plethora of terms such as mutual knowledge, common knowledge, presupposition, shared beliefs, among others, depending on the interest of individual scholars. As such, it is a vital ingredient required for meaningful and successful interactive communication (Kecskes & Zhang, 2009)

As a follow up to the claim earlier made in 1973, Stalnaker (2002:74) describes common ground as follows:

The common beliefs of the parties to a conversation are the beliefs they share, and that they recognize that they share: a proposition  $\phi$  is common belief of a group of believers if and only if all in the group believe that  $\phi$ , all believe that all believe it, all believe that all believe that all believe it, etc. (Stalnaker 2002: 704)

A critical appraisal of these definitions reveals the concept of common ground relies heavily on context. Perhaps this was what informed Odebunmi's (2006) mutual contextual beliefs theory situated within common ground scholarship. According to Odebunmi (2006), participants in interactions rely on (assumed) shared experiences, situations, cultures, and sociopolitical realities, among others to (de)construct meaning in discursive interactions. Thus, no utterance operates in isolation; meanings of utterances are context-bound and essentially as jointly constructed by the participants. Odebunmi (2006) identifies two types of context: linguistic and social contexts. While the former has to do with the linguistic structure or environment of an utterance (which explains why the meaning of a word in an utterance is essentially dependent or constrained by the preceding or the succeeding item), the latter (social context) refers to the role of sociocultural, situational, religious and historical factors in meaning (de)construction in communicative interactions. At best, one can then describe Odebunmi's mutual contextual beliefs theory as a nomenclatural expansion of common ground as conceived by earlier scholars.

Thus, while we choose to adopt the term ‘common ground’ as the theoretical framework in this study, certain conceptual terminologies, given their relevance, are borrowed from Odebunmi’s (2006) mutual contextual beliefs in our data analysis and discussion.

### **5. Methodology**

The data for this study comprised fifteen purposively selected humour-evoking memes from three purposively sampled humour pages on Facebook: Senior Pikin, Warehouse of Laughter, and Rant HQ. The selection of these three humour pages was predicated on their popularity among Nigerians, as the three most consistent posters of humorous contents that address various issues of common interest in the country. Data were texts contained in memes captured between November and December, 2019. Some of these memes, as a way of adding to and reinforcing their ‘humorous’ contents, carry the images of some popular comedians and actors in the Nigerian movie industry. The interpretive design was adopted. Data were subjected to interpretive and pragmatic analyses, particularly within the purview of Common Ground theory, with inputs from Contextual Beliefs.

### **6. Data presentation and analysis**

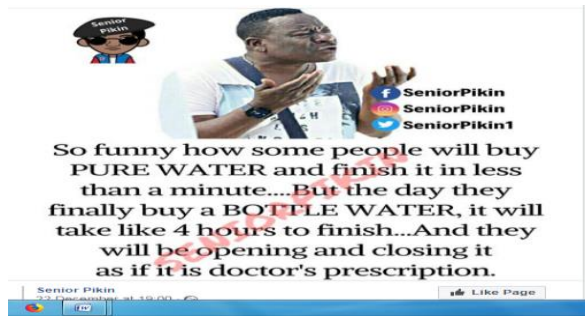
This section is devoted to the analysis of the data gathered for the study. The data are thematically grouped based on their presuppositions. Our discussions draw heavily from the submission of Filani (2018) that joking in online spheres in Nigeria benefits immensely from the linguistic, cultural, sociological (elements well captured in Odebunmi’s (2006) mutual contextual belief, and national presuppositions shared by the citizens of the country.

#### **6.1. Display of materialism and elevated status**

##### **Example 1**



## Example 2



The memes presented as examples 1 and 2, whose pragmatic import can best be realised by making recourse to Odeunmi's (2006) social component of contextual beliefs, graphically project the lifestyle of an average Nigerian youth characterised by showing off, wearing of expensive clothes (often tagged designers), and living an expensive lifestyle just to project themselves as individuals who 'have made it' (or arrived as expressed in the Nigerian context). These youths, especially those who have chosen their models among the many Nigerian hip hop artistes who often display their riches in a competitive manner through their materialistic and expensive lifestyle (Ajayi and Bamgbose, 2019), would go to any length, including getting involved in criminal acts to sustain their expensive cum materialistic lifestyle and elevated status. In Meme 1, three of the most influential individuals in the world, Dangote, Zuckerberg and Bill Gates are instructively mentioned as examples of fellow Nigerian youths should emulate. These fellows are projected as individuals who live a moderate lifestyle, wear simple and less-expensive dresses in spite of their riches. The presupposition here is, if Dangote, the richest man in Nigeria and Africa, Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook and one of the richest young men in the world, and Bill Gate, reputed to be among the first three richest fellows in the world, would not display a life of materialism and mundanity, it would be a mark of lack of wisdom to assume living a showy life characterised by unchecked taste for materialism is what projects one as a successful fellow.

In example 2, the typical practice among some fellows in Nigeria to create an identity of an above-average individual is depicted. In the Nigerian context, some of the very many ways to show a sense of elitism, enlightenment, or living far above average is to adopt a lifestyle considered to be identified with the elite in the society. In this meme, two items that distinguish between perceived the low-class and high-class Nigerians are foregrounded: pure water (sachet water) and bottled water. While the former goes for 10 naira, hence is mostly affordable for most low-class



Nigerians, the latter, on the average, sold for 50 naira, is believed to be affordable mainly for high-class Nigerians. Thus, as a way of projecting themselves as fellows belonging to the latter class, many Nigerians, especially youths who want to carry themselves as affluent are fond of displaying bottled water in public places. As a way of further projecting this above-the-average life identity, some of them give the false impression that, bottled water, believed to be more hygienic relative to pure water, has been recommended for them by their physician(s).

This notion is particularly instructive, because, given the socio-economic situations in Nigeria, it is not a common practice among the low-class Nigerians to visit physicians (except on critical cases that have defied self-medication). Most times, it is the high-class ones, who ‘can afford the services of physicians’, that visit the hospital for medical check-up, as well as follow a lifestyle (including taking bottled water) recommended by medical practitioners. As said earlier, it requires an exposure to the social behaviour of Nigerians to see these memes beyond such that project jocular contents and messages; pragmatically, they are an indirect way of lampooning the unnecessary showy lifestyle some Nigerians live to impress others.

## **6.2. Gender and stereotyping**

Filani and Ajayi (2019) have examined how gender and stereotyping is done in joking contexts, especially in stand-up comedy in Nigeria. Making reference to Yus (2004), these scholars note that, in joking contexts in Nigeria, comics project two types of beliefs: collective cultural beliefs and the comedian’s personal belief. As shall be pointed out in this section of the paper, humorous memes are deliberately created by the comics to project the sociocultural beliefs (arising from certain shared situational realities among Nigerians) of Nigerians about gender and stereotyping. We argue that both the sender and the receivers of the humorous memes are guided by their shared Nigerian sociocultural experience in their (de)construction of meanings beyond the humorous effects of the memes.

### **Example 3**



In meme 3, the man, representing the masculine gender, is projected as one that faces all manner of societal pressure in form of shame and disrespect if he is jobless and broke. The message on the meme is one-sided, creating the impression that it is only men who experience societal shame and pressure for being jobless and broke. However, the reality in the message can be fully appreciated when the linguistic content of the meme is situated within the highly patriarchal Nigerian society. The Nigerian sociocultural context is such that places much responsibility on the male folks (Makama, 2013): being heads of families, bread winners and ‘lords and masters’ in many culture-defined institutions and settings in the country. As such, men are often prayed for, even by the female folks, that they would be ‘men indeed’. One of the factors believed to emasculate a man and subject him to disrespect and shame in the Nigerian society is not being able to meet the financial needs of his nuclear (and extended) family. This has played out in many instances in Nigeria as reported in the news. A recent experience readily comes to mind. A woman was reported to have denied her husband sexual intercourse for a number of months on account of his ‘inability to meet the needs’ of the family. The man had to resort to begging the wife as he was sex-starved. Such a man vividly falls into the category of men that could be described as facing shame and disrespect from his wife, who culturally, should be ‘worshipping’ him if he (the husband) was man indeed. The reality from this meme therefore, is that, the male gender is stereotyped as the ‘shoulder’ upon which the society rests (even when there are evidence to show that women perform all the roles traditionally believed to be men’s in the society).

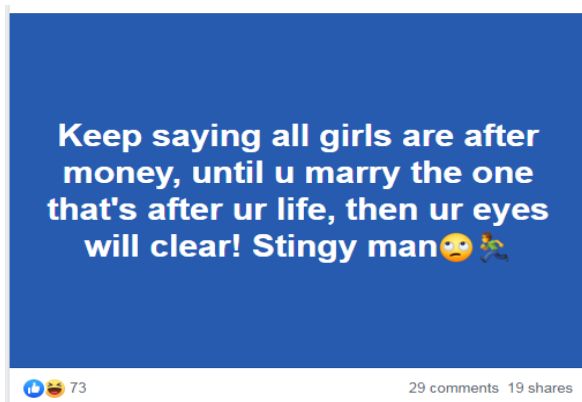
#### Example 4



Meme 4 depicts the stereotype, particularly among the female folk in the Nigerian society, that when a man is ‘unusually’ nice, caring and kind to a woman, the man must have been seeking amorous affairs with the woman. This stereotyped notion held by many women in the Nigerian

society could be as a result of the very many reported cases of some men allegedly taking undue advantage of ‘helpless’ ladies and women in the name of trying to help them tackle whatever challenges they are facing. This untoward trend or development is often being projected in many Nollywood<sup>1</sup> movies, hence men are constructed as individuals that cannot offer help to women without seeking ‘something in return’. This explains why many ladies are characteristically reluctant to receive assistance or help from men who offer one to them, particularly in difficult situations. However, this is not always the case as there have been many instances, as narrated by some women, of men who have been of immense help to them without necessarily seeking to go intimate with them. For instance, as reported by Tijani-Adenle (2019), a female journalist recently recounted her experience as an undergraduate student in an interaction between her and a male professor in a first-generation Nigerian university. Contrary to the notion she had had that every form of assistance coming from men should be seen as a ‘Greek gift’, the man offered to be her role model and mentor, and to her surprise, the man indeed lived up to his words: mentoring her to graduate with a good grade from the university; encouraging her to pursue her master’s and doctor of philosophy degrees without asking her hand in an intimate relationship.

### Example 5



In meme 5, the stereotypical perception of women by quite majority within the male folk as being lovers of money and material things is projected. In this regard, the feminine gender is constructed as comprising women who do not love genuinely or as those who fall in love with men, mainly because of material things such as money. Following this ideological notion, some men would sarcastically say ‘all a woman appreciates in her entire life is money’. It is no gainsaying that, to a

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<sup>1</sup>The brand name for the Nigerian movie industry.

great extent, this submission is a reflection of the many realities that characterise the Nigerian society, especially as it relates to spousal relationships between men and women, as there are hundreds of cases where wives have been reported to have dumped their husbands, and ladies abandoning their 'poor' boyfriends for rich ones. A young man opened up to me recently on his frustration arising from his experience with his girlfriend who did not mince words telling him she could not continue with the relationship with him because he was still a *hustler*<sup>2</sup>, who could not meet her needs. The young lady purportedly claimed she had found a yahoo boy (a cyber scammer) who had got the money to make her happy. Similarly, there was another case of a woman who reportedly left her husband 'who was not rich' for his friend, who was a regular visitor to their home whenever he visited the country, because he was considered rich. This notion is further articulated through the meme below where women are metaphorically, albeit through a simile, projected as wi-fi which connects to the 'strongest' device around. In a plain language, women naturally gravitate towards the richest or the most successful of every man that shows advances towards them:

**Example 6**



This phenomenon has been reported in a number of studies such as Tolorunleke (2014) and Adeniran (2015), for instance. This shared societal experience among Nigerians provides the presupposition that guides the (de)construction of meaning in the meme. However, this does not

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<sup>2</sup> A hustler in the Nigerian context is a fellow that is still struggling to experience a major financial breakthrough.

necessarily rule out the fact that there are many women in the Nigerian society that truly love their men, irrespective of their financial status.

### 6.3. Electricity and (un)employment issues

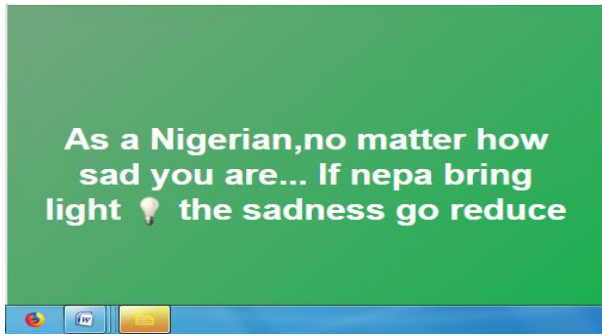
There are several indices that point to the underdevelopment or the developing status of Nigeria (Ojo, *et al.*, 2014). Prominent among these indices is lack of social amenities, chief among is electricity which is either not available in many parts or erratic in most other parts of Nigeria (Ohajianya *et al.*, 2014), and (un)employment problems. These two are reflected upon in the memes discussed in this section.

#### Example 7



Example 7 above paints a graphic picture of the electricity situation in Nigeria. Part of the untoward social experience shared among Nigerians is electricity problem. In many parts of the country, supply of power is considered golden, given its unavailability most times. In places where it is relatively available, it is unstable and erratic; hence it suffices to conclude that darkness, especially at night is a second nature in most parts of the country. This untoward experience is what is jocularly projected in the meme. As indicated in the meme, one way Nigerians ensure a particular case of power outage is not peculiar to them (as is the case most times when certain residential buildings would experience power outage due to one technical fault or the other peculiar to their residences), is to check if there is electricity or not in the residences within their neighbourhood. To them, having a collective power outage experience is better than a personal one, as the latter could portend a long time of blackout, while the former is a sign of hope power could be restored soon. This notion is further reinforced in the meme below presented in Nigerian Pidgin:

**Example 8**



In the two memes, 7 and 8, reference to NEPA, National Electric Power Authority, is instructive. This is the name of the institution saddled with the responsibility of handling the power sector of the country between 1972 (Ohajianya *et al.*, 2014) and 1999 when it was privatised (Duruji and Okachikwu, 2017). However, years after the privatisation of the power sector and the name of the organisation has been changed, first to PHCN, Power Holding of Nigeria, and now to NERC, Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission, the term NEPA has remained synonymous with electricity in the country. This explains why Nigerians still shout ‘Up NEPA’ whenever power is restored in their various homes; a practice that has been found even among new generations of Nigerians, including those little children born years after the nonexistence of NEPA. The Nigerian Pidgin, in which the idea foregrounded in the meme is expressed, can be regarded as the ‘unofficial lingua franca’ of the country, and its use here by the poster who shares it with other Nigerians, reinforces Odebunmi’s (2006) position that shared linguistic code is an essential aspect of common ground.

**Example 9**



Meme 9 depicts the ‘hard’ conditions many organisations often give as requirements for securing employment with them by job seekers in the country. This condition, as the meme presupposes, arises from the high level of unemployment in the country (Longe, 2017), a fact Nigerians are well aware of. As a matter of fact, there are lots of graduates in the country that have been out of school for as long as ten years or more but with no jobs. Some of them have had to take up jobs whose pay is far below their qualifications out of desperation and lack of better alternatives. Worst still, organizations, establishments and companies that can only pay ‘as low as thirty thousand naira (less than 100 dollars) monthly, an amount of money considered relatively and ridiculously low, given the economic condition of the country, would still insist on many years of cognate experience as condition for employment. Although reference is made to the whole of Africa in the first line of the meme, making mention of N30k in the latter part reveals the situation described is in relation to Nigeria. The ‘N’ in the quoted figure represents the Nigerian Naira, while the ‘K’ is a slangy expression for ‘thousand’ among Nigerians, especially the youths. This unfortunate situation is what many youths claim have made them resort to cyber scam and other forms of fraudulent activities (Ajayi, under review<sup>3</sup>). In fact, many educated youths in Nigeria now see education or schooling as waste of time, and in their parlance ‘as a scam’.

#### **6.4. Religiosity and spiritualisation of issues**

Another socio-ideological phenomenon cum reality that defines the Nigerian society, as depicted in the humorous memes, is high sense of religiosity and spiritualisation of issues. An average Nigerian tends to see things through the religious lens; hence, they bring religiosity and spirituality into every aspect of their lives and activities. One is sick, it must be the devil’s attack; hence, one must pray and be prayed for to become healthy. One is poor; it must be some spiritual or ancestral forces at work, and as such; one must pray hard to fight poverty. In fact, the president of the country, Muhammadu Buhari, was recently reported urging Nigerians to pray to be able to overcome the security challenges of the country, especially as the citizens of the country were under regular attacks from Boko Haram (a religious terrorist group in the country who claims to be advancing the cause of Islam) and Fulani armed bandits ([www.pulse.ng](http://www.pulse.ng)). Against this

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<sup>3</sup> Findings from my postdoctoral research carried out at the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa.

backdrop, some studies, including Çancı and Odukoya (2016) have reinforced the high level of religiosity and spiritualisation of issues or problems in the country. This socio-ideological perception is foregrounded in the following memes.

### Example 10



In this meme, the common religious practice among Nigerians to pray on virtually everything, including poverty is reinforced. The fellow here projects him/herself as a prayerful fellow who can pray to attract money into his/her bank account and would encourage anyone interested to key in to the practice. As has been witnessed in many religious gatherings, particularly in churches and ‘Christian’ settings, including mountain tops, special programmes or services are often organised, sometimes in the morning on week days, where it is common to pray against the spirit of poverty. Some church leaders and pastors even go as far as leading ‘prayers of riches and wealth’ in which members participate vigorously and passionately, even with ‘oceans’ of sweat on their bodies. Similarly, it is not uncommon in the Nigerian religious space to see church and religious leaders preach on how one can experience financial breakthrough through prayers. In some funny instances, as has been circulated on the social media, some religious leaders would ask their followers to pray to receive miraculous credit alerts on their phones. Unfortunately, this practice has made many remain in poor and consequently wallowing in abject poverty in the country. This development has attracted a lot of criticisms from very many well-informed minds in the country, including public analysts and social critics as well as several university dons, who have argued that such practice prevents productive thinking among Nigerians.



### Example 11



The extent to which Nigerians go to manifest a high sense of religiosity and spiritualisation of things is demonstrated in the meme above. In the meme, the poster projects his/her mother as a fan of Cristiano Ronaldo, one of the world’s famous footballers who has won the FIFA best player of the year five times. In the particular instance presented here, the mother purportedly ‘decreed’ as is the practice among some Christian sects in the country that Ronaldo would score a goal in particular match. This scenario is a depiction of how much Nigerians believe God, a divine and spiritual Being, can be evoked to influence outcomes of any kind of game or sporting activity in general, and football in particular. This often plays out in the request often made by Nigerian indigenous coaches that their teams need the prayers of Nigerians whenever they are involved in competitive tournaments. In their (Nigerians) belief, the act of winning a match or a competition is ultimately determined by a supreme being (God) whose intervention should be carefully and prayerfully sought. Meanwhile, to the average realist in the country, prayer cannot be substituted for adequate preparation, and that is why, to them, a better team would emerge victorious in a football match, irrespective of whether the team prays or not. To these individuals, prayer without work is dead (their own version of the biblical injunction ‘Faith without work is dead’, James 2: 14-26).

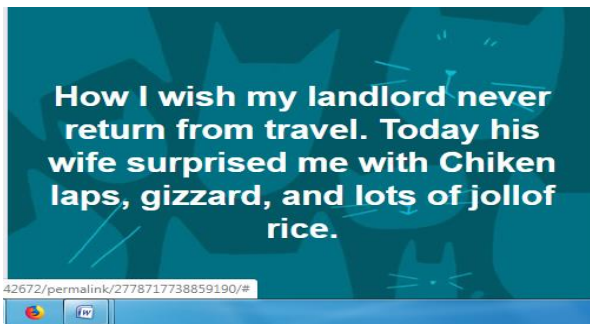
### 6.5. Marital infidelity

Manoocheh *ret al.* (2019: 1) argue that ‘marital infidelity is perhaps the most complex problem encountered by couple and family counselors and psychologists’. In the opinion of Hertlein *et al.* (2005), (marital) infidelity manifests in form of “engagement in sexual relations with a person other than one’s partner,” including cybersex, looking at pornography, physical intimacy, or emotional intimacy with someone other than one’s spouse. They further explain marital infidelity

is characterised by change in work habit, receiving phone calls late in the night and secretly, receiving a lot of doubtful messages, among others. Fife *et al.* (2008:316) note that marital infidelity involves emotional or sexual intimacy with someone other than one's partner without the partner's consent. It comes with giving extra care and unusual attention to the 'illegitimate' partner.

Amadi and Amadi (2014) observe marital infidelity is one of the fundamental issues confronting families in Nigeria. This thus points to the phenomenon as part of the realities that define the Nigerian social space. This is what is foregrounded in the memes below.

### Example 12



Making recourse to some shared indicators of marital infidelity among Nigerians, it is difficult not to conclude the wife of the landlord described in the meme above is not involved in an extramarital affair with the creator of the meme who is understood here to be a male tenant of the landlord and his wife. This interpretation comes atop among the various possible interpretations that can be read to the post, if it is critically appraised in the context of the many known cases of marital infidelity experience witnessed in the country. For instance, the sudden display of unusual niceties that manifest in the landlady serving 'him' a sumptuous meal, comprising 'lots of jollof rice, chicken laps and gizzard', raises suspicion. Similarly, the wish that the landlord would not return from his trip, as expressed by the beneficiary of the benevolence of the suddenly 'kind, generous and caring' landlady is pragmatically instructive. The absence of the landlord could have made it possible for his wife to make advances towards the beneficiary, who, in return, might have consented and subsequently satisfied her sexually, hence the need to compensate him with a sumptuous meal as described in the meme. This interpretation is aided by the so many reported cases of tenants sleeping with co-tenants' spouses, tenants having affairs with children of landlords, and landlords/landladies having amorous affairs with tenants and neighbours on the radio, television

and social media across the country. The use of lexical item ‘surprise’ in the meme is deliberately used to give the impression the new act of the landlady is not attached to any act of favour, including ‘warming her bed’ in the absence of her husband. Given all the indices of the shared experiential knowledge among Nigerians regarding the indicators of marital infidelity as explained earlier, the commenters on the post, as evident in their various reactions/responses to it, were able to interpret it as such.

### **Example 13**



The message in the meme above is clearly unambiguous, given the commonness of the social issue focused therein in the social space within which he/she (the sender) and the receiver(s) operate. The creator is apparently reacting to the issue of marital infidelity in the society. In this particular instance, the creator of the meme is advocating the cause of women whose spouses engage in extramarital affairs. It is not uncommon in the society, as has been widely reported in various conventional and social media, to witness instances of married men, abandoning their wives sometimes for reasons such as claims they (their wives) have lost their youthful figure; they are no longer attractive or they are not just attracted to them anymore. Such women are often being treated with scorn, seen as ‘touch not’, and are often maltreated by their husbands. Men who indulge in this kind of practice are seen scouting for young ladies for whom they go the extra mile, including spending their last savings, to impress. The creator of the meme berates this kind of practice and warns such should stop in 2020.

### **6.6.Exorbitant spending on festivities/ceremonies**

Nigerians are heavy spenders, especially during festive periods like Christmas and New Year celebrations. They also celebrate all kinds of social events like child christening, wedding, burial,

house warming, among others, during which they spend huge amount of money. The extent to which Nigerians go, including borrowing, to spend heavily on ceremonies and festivities is reported by Ogbechie and Anetor (2015). This shared background knowledge provides the context for the (de)construction of meaning in memes 14 and 15 presented below, both for the creators and the receivers.

#### **Example 14**



Example 14 above reflects how many Nigerians get carried away in their spending during the December festive period, usually between 20th and 31st for Christmas and New Year celebrations. Some see this period as a time to give themselves and their loved ones unusual treats, and in the course incur a lot of debt which effect is usually felt in the January of the new year. Many parents, especially those who are salary earners, can easily relate to this situation, as most times, they would have spent so much during the festive period that, paying their children's school fees in the beginning of the year (which often marks the commencement of second term in most schools in Nigeria), becomes extremely difficult. Some of the things on which money is spent during this season include new clothes, vacation tourism and visitations, food, house painting, charity, among others. For those who travel to their home towns during the period, it means much more spending as they are expected to reach out, money and gift-wise, to their parents, relatives, friends and neighbours. As projected in the meme, the creator has suddenly realised s/he has almost nothing in his/her bank account, having spent so much on the celebration of the festive season. The meme can therefore be construed as such that presuppositionally warns Nigerians against overspending during the festive season. This message is reinforced in example 15 presented below:

### Example 15



In the meme above, the common practice among Nigerians to get involved in ‘spending competition’, particularly during the festive period is projected and warned against. This is against the backdrop of the shared knowledge of the people on the consequences of such practice. The meme presupposes individuals should put into consideration their financial strength during festive periods, so as to avoid unnecessary spending competition or spending to impress that could have adverse effects on them.

### 7. Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to further expand the scope of memes studies in the Nigerian scholarly space. While most studies on memes in Nigeria have focused on humour and humour strategies, this study has focused on the pragmatic presuppositions in humorous memes, with particular emphasis on the notion that, beyond their joking contents, humour-evoking memes by Nigerians are capable of revealing the social realities that characterise the Nigerian society. Drawing inputs from Common Ground and Contextual beliefs, the study demonstrates how recourse to the shared linguistic, cultural, ideological, situational and experiential presuppositions among Nigerians become helpful in meaning (de)construction in humour-evoking memes. Findings show that socio-ideological phenomena such as display of materialism and elevated status, gender and stereotyping, marital infidelity, electricity and (un)employment problems, religiosity and spiritualisation of issues, and exorbitant spending on festivities are some of the social realities identified the Nigerian space. Therefore, it suffices to posit that humorous memes do more than instantiating joke in the Nigerian context.

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