

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.

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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

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