

# **A Critical Pragmatic Analysis of Humour in COVID-19 Related Social Media Posts by Nigerians**

Qasim Adeyemi Aliu & Celestina Predia Kekai  
Department of General Studies, Nigeria Maritime University, Okerenkoko

## **Abstract**

Although the COVID-19 pandemic caused panic and disrupted several human activities globally, many Nigerian social media users constructed humorous posts, which revealed their socio-cultural, economic and political backgrounds. This paper examines COVID-19 related humorous Facebook posts by Nigerians and analyses their communicative functions with a view to foregrounding netizens' ideologies and attitudes towards the pandemic and the fight against it. A total of 21 purposively selected humorous Facebook posts on various themes of spirituality, corruption, social responsibility, conspiracy theory and morality are analysed. Choice of the themes is dictated by the textual components as they inadvertently reveal the foundation of various acts of indiscipline in Nigeria. Using critical pragmatics, the descriptive analysis of the data showed a preponderance of assertives and declarations, followed by expressives and directives. The speech acts were employed, respectively, to summarily describe COVID-19 as a conduit for corruption, domination and oppression; condemn Nigerians' religiosity and corrupt tendencies of political and spiritual leaders; express the masses' frustration, dissatisfaction and dejection during the lockdown; and finally, to advise readers on germane moral issues. Also, the study discovered issues of domination, power abuse and identity polarisation, especially between the elite (political, economic and spiritual leaders) and the masses. This study concludes that the social media serve as virile platforms for the expression of socio-political and cultural realities such as the netizens' vehement denial of COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria and their resistance to state domination and power abuse.

## **Introduction**

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic caused panic and disrupted most human activities globally, many Nigerian social media users exploited different individual and governmental activities during the pandemic in the construction of humorous posts, which revealed their attitudes and ideologies in an ultimate attempt to change the society. The outbreak of the virus, which first started in China in 2019, became a pandemic and its first Nigerian case was recorded on 28th February, 2020. More so, public perception about the health crisis appeared to be influenced by the domination of scaremongering about its fatality in thousands, spread rate and conspiracy theory in its local and global media framings (Ogbodo et al, 2020; Onwe et al, 2020). This supports Kamalu's (2016, p. 146) assertion that citizens' online reactions to Ebola virus disease (EVD) are products of the "discourse of fear" received from both the traditional and new media.

In fact, the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and international organisations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF),

sponsored vigorous sensitisations on various precautions and vaccinations against the pandemic in different media. Among other precautionary measures, the Nigerian Government declared a nationwide lockdown that affected schools, civil service, businesses and religious activities, among others. This, expectedly, worsened Nigeria's socio-economic instability. For example, Onwe et al, (2020, p. 224) assert that the partial and total lockdowns across the country further exposed the masses to serious hunger, or what they describe as "HungerVid -20", and the palliatives provided by the government were neither sufficient nor equitably distributed.

Notwithstanding national and international publications of COVID-19 situation reports and sensitisation against its further spread, many citizens challenged its existence in Nigeria and they perceived governments' efforts as a deliberate attempt to impoverish the masses and corner state resources. Therefore, they resorted to humour as a vigorous protest strategy to inculcate their different ideologies in the social media. As the social media provide wider access to freedom of speech and a great room for anonymity with limited government control on their contents, Nigerians adopt these platforms as a means of expressing their attitudes, grievances and ideologies while trivialising the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects through different linguistic and nonlinguistic resources. Humour, as something that provokes laughter or smiles, however, is not used only for its sake; but also to perform certain pragmatic functions. That is, it is employed to condemn or show disapproval of some acts and to correct societal ills.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is relatively new, many studies have examined the public health crisis from different perspectives, such as its media framings (Ogbodo et al, 2020; Onwe et al, 2020), morphological impacts (Katherine, 2020), crisis management discourse (Moinani & Barasa, 2021; Wodak, 2021) and multimodal pragmatics (Ajayi and Akinrinola, 2021). However, COVID-19 related humour, especially in the Nigerian socio-political, economic and religious contexts, remains neglected. Investigating Nigerian COVID-19 related humorous Facebook posts reveals various linguistic resources used by Nigerians to construct attitudes, ideologies and the strategic functions that they seek to perform with the posts. Thus this study examines COVID-19 related humorous Facebook posts by Nigerians, with a view to understanding communicative functions of linguistic structures and strategies in the texts and ideologies embedded in them.

### **Humour and Social Media Discourse**

Humour is a "comical or amusing text or performance" (Verschueren, 2017, p. 313). It is the ability to amuse people by stating the unexpected; taboos or the unspeakable; or by attacking a target (Ross, 1998). Humour is related to other forms such as jokes, comedy and jest. Even though the essential function of humour is to entertain, it can condemn, ridicule or demean some people or subjects. It often dwells on ambiguity and incongruity which can only be determined or settled by "a playful, non-serious and para-logical" (Attardo, 2017, p. 2). Attardo (2017) observes that humour flouts the cooperative principles as it often involves irony and sarcasm. Humour is culture and context-specific and it reveals people's attitudes about its subject (Ross, 1998; Raheem, 2018). Attardo (2017) claims that, according to the setting,

humour performs various social functions, most obvious of which is to form in-group solidarity among the participants against the outgroup exclusion and denigration. This is perfectly reflected in Adegoju and Oyebode's (2015) study of various memes used in Nigeria's 2015 presidential election online campaign discourse. Adegoju and Oyebode (2015) report that the memes reveal the subversive and reinforcing functions of humour in that they disparage and ridicule their targets, while they reinforce the need to support the preferred candidate and his political party.

Recently, social media discourse has received tremendous attention because of the relatively loose freedom of information processing and circulation offered by the new media. Many social media platforms have been adopted for propagation of different ideologies including ethno-religious and political hate speeches and secessionist agitations in Nigeria (Chiluwa, 2012; Auwal, 2018; Kamalu & Atoma, 2019). Working on the Biafra online secessionist agitation discourse, Chiluwa (2012) demonstrates that social media networks are employed to muster local and global support and active participation in revolutionist agenda against dominance and power abuse in order to achieve socio-political reforms. Similarly, Auwal (2018) notes that social media platforms have helped the Nigerian masses to express their opinions on governance processes and policies and organise sociopolitical protests, such as fuel subsidy removal protest and Bring Back our Girls protests. Also, Kamalu and Atoma (2019) examine Nigerians' online reactions to the arrest, detention and trial of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) leader, Nnamdi Kanu, by the Nigerian government. Their study reveals discourse patterns of otherness, political identities and ethno-religious sentiments of the social media commenters towards the Nigerian government.

Interestingly, humour is used to construct peaceful and polite resistance to authority and with the ubiquity of social media, its production and dissemination become easier and spontaneous. Hart (2007) contends that humour usually captures and foregrounds protesters' interests; and most times, it serves as the only potent communication tool and weapon in the hands of the weak. Similarly, Raheem (2018) observes that, apart from the ability of humour to effect relief from tension, it serves as a subtle protest by raising citizens' socio-political consciousness. In his study of selected performances of *'Nite of a Thousand Laughs'*, a stand-up comedy performance in Nigeria, he establishes that beyond the linguistic and discourse structures and strategies that form the comedy texts, different socio-economic and political protests and agitations are embedded in them. He also reports that different strategies, such as the use of Pidgin as a protest language, code mixing, exaggeration, irony and sarcasm, are used in the texts to air masses' opinions about different governance and policy issues.

### **COVID-19 and Public Health Crisis Discourse**

Public health crisis discourse encompasses information produced by medical experts and health organisations and agencies, governments' and citizens' reactions to the crisis and media representation of the crisis situation. These forms of communication are necessary for leaders and medical experts to explain regulations and guidelines to citizens in order to confront the

emergency situation and reduce casualties. In fact, Katherine (2020) observes that the necessity of expressing the situations related to COVID-19 has led to the development of many new English words, such as ‘social distancing’ and ‘contact tracing’, while meanings of some existing others expanded. Globally, both physically and online, public officials address their respective nations to update citizens about the COVID-19 pandemic and reveal the next line of actions. Wodak (2021) examines governmental crisis communication strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in some European countries. She reports that, according to different socio-political and historical contexts of each country, discursive strategies are encoded in four broad frames to reduce fears of death. That is, efforts against COVID-19 are constructed as necessary perseverance for eventual victory over death, mutual understanding, self-responsibility and a battle to save lives.

Similarly, Moinani and Barasa (2021) examine COVID-19 press briefings of Kenyan government officials and citizens’ reactions to the pandemic guidelines in the country. They reveal that the government use lexical choices that portray the fight against COVID-19 as a war, while the public is framed as an enemy, blamed for further spread of the virus and threatened with penalties, due to its outright display of dissatisfaction with the COVID-19 lockdown. Also, Radibratovic (2021) explores institutional discourse about the safety and effectiveness of AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine. His study reveals implicit discursive struggle and negotiations of meanings between the medical experts and the public as national and international health organisations continue to shift their earlier positions about possible risks linked to the vaccines in order to promote vaccination and control virus spread, preserve medical experts’ competency and naturalise institutional power and dominance over the public.

The media also take the responsibility of presenting new developments about the crisis. Beach (2020) studies the media construction of the pandemic as war and imprisonment. He contends that due to the threat associated with the pandemic, war registers and metaphors are used to frame the disease in order to stimulate strong emotion in the audience and accordingly influence public perception about the health crisis. Therefore, the virus is represented as evil against ‘us’, the good; and thus, it represents a common enemy that we must all strive to combat and win. Also, he reports that government’s order of lockdown and quarantine, in cases of infected people or suspected ones, is constructed as a form of imprisonment.

Citizens, however, are at liberty to discuss the health crisis situation among themselves or at any other platforms such as the social media. Kamalu (2016) discusses individual and groups’ ideological reactions to the Ebola virus disease (EVD) outbreak in the West Africa and he reports that, even though the discourse is based on public health, it is dominated by socio-political motivations, such as appeal to God as the only saviour, political, ethnic and racial sentiments and the construction of index case and his people as evil. Olafenwa (2021) analyses some episodes of *Jenifa on Lockdown*, a satirical performance about COVID-19. She contends that utterances of various actors in the play expose and indirectly criticise corrupt practices of Nigerian politicians and health workers. In addition, Ajayi and Akinrinola (2021) attempt a

multimodal pragmatic analysis of COVID-19 sensitisation memes. They contend that authors of those memes employ contextual variables such as inference, shared situation and religious forms of knowledge and conversational acts to construct meanings with different modes. They further report that the memes were used to perform different pragmatic acts such as warning, mocking, commending, labelling and accusing, condemning, sermonizing.

### **Methodology**

Data for this study comprise a total of 21 humorous Facebook posts purposively selected out of 54 earlier gathered. The posts are accordingly labelled P1 to P21, while P represents post. Pseudonyms generated from their authors' names (especially those using their real names) are used to preserve their anonymity. The choice of Facebook is informed by its popularity among Nigerians. The analysis is subdivided into five thematic analytical categories: spirituality, corruption, social responsibility, conspiracy theory and morality. Choice of the themes is dictated by the textual components as they inadvertently foreground the foundation of various acts of indiscipline in Nigeria. The speech acts of the selected posts are analysed with particular interest in the socio-cultural, historical, economic and political contexts of the utterances, while identity, power relations and their ideological features are discussed. The selected data were analysed qualitatively through critical pragmatics.

### **Critical Pragmatics**

Critical pragmatics is simply the combination of mainly Austin's (1962) speech act theory and other pragmatic features (such as presupposition, im/politeness and implicature) with the principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA). This theory, propounded by Mey (2001), intends to analyse linguistic functions of utterances; and simultaneously, reveal inherent features of ideology, power and identity in discourse. Wodak (2007) demonstrates the need for an eclectic theory of pragmatics and CDA in an attempt to fully interpret multi-layered meanings of implicit and explicit structures of dominance and inequality in complex veiled texts. Critical pragmatics interrogates discursive strategies used to indicate power struggle and legitimate dominance and inequality. In addition to stating the communicative functions of the utterances, the theory interprets hidden ideological meanings in the text. In other words, the theory explains how certain linguistic choices or speech acts used by text producers are influenced by their social contexts, identities and ideological backgrounds (Melefa & Chukwumezie, 2014; Al-Hindawi & Mohammed (2018).

In all, while Austin's (1962) speech act theory tries to explain actions or contextual functions that utterances perform, critical pragmatics interprets how utterances are used to perform actions in a way to exert power and promote dominance and inequality. This study adopts Searle's (1976) classification of speech acts: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive and declaration. Assertive describes the real world, belief or state of affairs (claim, state). Directive makes the hearer to do something (request, advise, warn). Commissive expresses speaker's obligation to take a future action (promise, vow, threaten). Expressive explains the psychological state or feelings of the speaker about an action or state of affairs (congratulate,

blame, criticise, apologise). Declaration changes a state of affairs by uttering words such as pronouncements or condemnation. Thus, multiple functions of pragmatic devices, such as reference, speech acts, allusions, wordplay, im/politeness, presupposition and implicature, are analysed in relation to identity, ideology and power relation.

### **Analysis**

This section is subdivided into five thematic analytical categories: spirituality, corruption, social responsibility, conspiracy theory and morality.

### **Demystification of Spirituality**

Spirituality means an obsession with religious feelings and beliefs rather than the material life, especially for heavenly rewards. Whereas, an atheist does not believe in the existence of God or a supernatural being. Religion is an influential factor in the Nigeria's socio-cultural, economic and political affairs. Although religion is primarily a personal belief and a supposed beacon of hope, love and peace, it has become a powerful instrument for exploitation, slavery, hatred and (violent) conflicts in many parts of the country. For example, many Nigerian adherents of different faiths, including their leaders, engage in unhealthy rivalry with one another, while they blame the devil and pray for salvation at their religious centres against many socio-cultural and even political problems. Utterances discussed under this section criticise the religious obsession of Nigerians in an attempt to challenge long-time mythology and power abuse by religious leaders and effect social change.

**P1 Adede:** Where is that atheist who says “how do I worship the God I do not see”? Why hiding from the virus you do not see?

One of the bases of atheism is empiricism, the ability to feel or see anything that exists. In other words, atheism claims that, as one cannot directly feel nor see God, He does not exist. Similarly, with its associated health risks, including death, the COVID-19 pandemic is only detected through testing and the result is usually not released immediately. So the public perception is that the reality of the virus is uncertain but citizens have to adhere to guidelines against it, such as the use of face mask, social distancing and lockdown. Thus, the text producer criticises the atheist for protecting themselves from the virus that they do not perceive; and thereby, questions the basis of atheism. The post constitutes a declaration. Its author tries to condemn atheists as liars; and therefore, indirectly declares their belief as baseless.

**P2 WaleSa:** Has Satan regretted and turned a new being? How come nobody has linked him to Coronavirus Pandemic?

With the influence from different scriptures, especially the Bible and the Qur'an, Nigerians usually blame Satan for their (sometimes intentional) negative acts either to promote their spiritual image or to evade justice. Meanwhile, COVID -19 has been framed as an evil and public enemy by government officials and the media (Wodak, 2021; Moinani & Barasa, 2021).

So the author of the post taunts the excessively religious Nigerians to also describe the evil virus as the handiwork of Satan. This exposes Nigerians' hypocrisy, evil-mindedness, which is usually masked by their religiosity. Thus, the post is a declaration; it condemns Nigerians as evil doers.

**P3** Ok Mac: Now that your pastors can't lay hands on you to push or slap or wash away your sins because of Coro... If you have that disturbing feeling that you have sinned and come short of the glory of God and of man, just buy a big bottle of hand sanitizer and pour the content on your head and face, to sanitize yourself, to wash away your sins and become born again.

P3 is used to criticise the weaknesses of Nigerian religious faithful and their exploitation by many spiritual leaders through deliverance from sins. Deliverance is usually regarded as a shortcut to salvation from evils after an overwhelmed sense of guilt. Many prophets, however, have overstretched this religious act to introduce strange activities and objects, such as washing their congregants at streams, slapping or stepping on them in the temples or giving them different substances to drink in ways closer to that of spiritualists or magicians. As "coro" (Nigerian slang for COVID-19) has been described as evil, the author of the post plays on the belief of many Nigerian religious faithful that evils are caused by human's transgressions or sins. But "pastors can't lay hands" on the faithful for deliverance because all religious centres were closed due to the COVID-19 lockdown. Thus, the author recommends the application of hand sanitiser to prevent evils from themselves. The author specifically uses the adjective "big" in "a big bottle of hand sanitizer" to suggest how heavy are the heart and big are the sins of the faithful. Indirectly, the post challenges the deliverance power of religious leaders, as people lived a good life during the pandemic period despite the closure of churches. So the author attempts to condemn different acts of deliverance as exploitation. Therefore, the post is a declaration.

**P4** AA: Those of u washing ur hands every secs., I hope you know ur destiny is in ur hands. If u like, wash am finish.

This post expresses the conflict between handwashing (a part of COVID-19 guidelines) and the socio-cultural and spiritual belief of destiny in Africa. Human destiny is sometimes linked to one's hand, especially due to the inherent lines in it. As COVID-19 pandemic protocol requires frequent handwashing, the text producer warns people from washing away their destiny. The use of code mixing and netizen's graphology in the post (as in "ur" for 'your' and "secs" for 'seconds') is significant. These represent the language of the masses and somehow establishes the uncertainty about COVID-19 reality in the country. However, indirectly, the post could mean a criticism of the belief that destiny is in one's hand. Whichever way, the post is a declaration. It either declares COVID-19 in Nigeria as nonexistent and tries to challenge the perceived government's dominance and oppression through the lockdown or it condemns the

belief of having destiny in one's hand as baseless and tries to liberate people from misinformation.

### **Allegation of Corruption**

Corruption refers to illicit and dishonest actions perpetrated through power or influence. It encompasses illegal acquisition of wealth or other valuable materials, such as educational certificates, votes and so on. Corruption is one of the evil clogs in the wheels of Nigeria's development. Despite the establishment of different anticorruption agencies in the country, corrupt practices such as stealing or misappropriation of public funds, illegal award of contracts, kickbacks, examination malpractices and sex for marks in schools, persist because of poor enforcement. In fact, Aremu (2016) notes that corruption seems to be a cultural trait/value in Nigeria as this is exemplified in some Nigerian proverbs which establish taking undue advantage, favoritism and nepotism. Yet Nigeria's position in the 2021 corruption perceptions index worsens as it descended to 154 out of 180 countries on the list from 149 in the year 2020 report (TI, 2022). TI (2022) observes that, with high level of restrictions in civil liberties in many countries, including Nigeria, corruption has become systemic that transparency and accountability appear impossible, while it continues to worsen poverty rate among the masses. Texts below suggest the extent of corruption in the country.

**P5 Hambids:** He be like say NCDC credit don finish oooooo, dey no dey text person again. Dem don spend 1b finish?

**P6 Sunky OK:** After the pandemic, there will be a friendly match between NCDC & EFCC.

Pidgin, which is the language of the masses and of protest in Nigeria, is used to construct P5. The text seems to represent the ordinary people's voice. NCDC (National Centre for Disease Control) had during the COVID-19 outbreak started sensitisation about the virus through short message service (SMS) but it stopped abruptly. Thus this text producer challenges the stoppage of the messages and suggests that a huge sum of one billion naira (about 2.5 million US dollars) has been spent within a short period. This is a declaration because it condemns the government as corrupt. It suggests government's reckless spending, lack of accountability and lack of public trust in government. However, the non-specificity of the huge expense, whether it is in naira or dollar, intensifies the government's culpability. This contrasts with a part of Wodak's (2021) report which establishes that individual responsibility and mutual trust between Swedish government and citizens inform easy regulations, as against enforcement, in the fight against COVID-19.

Similarly, P6 expresses allegation of corruption against NCDC, through intertextuality. It predicts a corruption case against NCDC to be prosecuted by the EFCC (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission). However, the expression "a friendly match" also suggests no serious prosecution by the anti-corruption agency, whenever the elite are involved as opposed



to the commoners. This partly challenges inequality in the implementation of anti-corruption in Nigeria. A friendly match (in football or cricket context) is a ceremonial game played by a group of friends or socialites. Thus, the text producer tries to allude to poor enforcement of the country's anti-corruption laws, especially when friends or supporters of government leaders are involved. The speech act performed by P6 is declaration; the author indirectly pronounces NCDC as corrupt.

**P7** Omi Ori: Nigerians can rig anything riggable even Corotest they are rigging the result. Haaa! Olorun ma GBA wa lowo politicians wonyi ke.

P7 employs intertextuality to compare falsification of COVID-19 test results with the way that Nigerian politicians allegedly rig themselves into power. The second sentence is a switch to the Yoruba language specifically to express the author's psychological state about the reality of the virus in Nigeria. It specifically challenges the number of positive cases of COVID-19 released by the government. Thus, the speech act performed by the post is expressive. It criticises the perceived government's dishonesty and inflation of COVID-19 positive cases. The author portrays the Nigerian masses as helpless victims of politicians' dominance, corruption and power abuse. She therefore seeks heavenly liberation of the people from politicians' oppression and wickedness.

### **Dissimulation of Social Responsibility**

Social responsibility refers to efforts taken by individuals or businesses to benefit the public people and their environment. Aimed at improving humanity, it emphasises societal interdependence. But the term 'corporate social responsibility' is more commonly used in connection with large companies' obligations to their host communities. UNCTD (2001, p. 5) defines corporate social responsibility as "obligations that firms owe to the societies in which they operate". Among other salient issues of companies' social obligations (such as taxation, employment and consumer and environmental protection) humanitarian activities are the most prominent. However, Riano and Yakovleva (2019) opine that the so-called humanitarian acts of many companies are usually planned to deceive the host communities. To support the Nigerian Government in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, many well-placed individuals and corporate organisations made huge donations which eventually produced palliatives for the masses. Nevertheless, as exemplified in the following posts, many citizens decried the negative effects of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown such as inflation and retrenchment in some donor organisations.

**P8** AdeSal: Access bank and Dangote donated to fight Covid 19 but Dangote increased the cost of all its products and Access sacks some of its staffs and reduced the salaries of others. They simply make us the masses shouldered the burden of their contributions. What a wicked world?

During the COVID-19 lockdown, many of the companies that contributed to the COVID-19 endowment fund began to increase the prices of their commodities, while others downsized their workforce or reduced staff salaries. This strikes a contradiction as social responsibility is ideally meant to relieve the masses. Thus, the author of the post questions the companies' intentions of corporate social responsibility. He contends that the masses are made to suffer because the companies want to donate to the government. The commoners, not the companies, therefore appear to be the actual donors, as the consequence of their donations is masses' agony. The expression "What a wicked world?" describes the cruel benefaction of the donors. This post lampoons the companies' hypocrisy. It also challenges the elitist tradition of philanthropy, which is used to perpetually dominate the masses, disempower them and reduce them to pawns. Thus, the post reveals the psychological state of its author, which represents an expressive speech act.

**P9** SheSan: The day wey garri go finish for poor man house, corona go know say nobody de fear am. For now make he de brag shaa.

**P10** Anipkun: Breaking news!! 80 million Nigerians tested positive for hunger! Pls where is the isolation center?

In response to the biting economy, P9 predicts the masses' total resistance to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Garri is a common staple food for the poor Nigerian masses. Also, the post is rendered in Nigerian Pidgin English, which denotes a protest and the masses' language. So the text producer suggests that government's lockdown decision to prevent further spread of COVID-19 has caused hunger and that this may be resisted if government does not provide supports for the people. His argumentation pattern can be deconstructed as the saying 'a hungry person is an angry person'. Moinani and Barasa (2021) report similar attitudes of dissatisfaction, desperation and dejection by Kenyan citizens during COVID-19 lockdown in the country. The virus is trivialised; hunger is portrayed as being more dreadful. Thus, the author complains about the government's insensitivity to the people's plight. Therefore, the speech act performed by the post is expressive.

Similarly, P10 represents an expressive speech act because it indicates people's frustration and anger. The post uses intertextuality; it parodies a COVID-19 news headline: saying "80 million Nigerians" have contracted hunger. The post employs exaggeration, through the strategic mention of number, to reveal Nigerian masses' helplessness during the COVID-19 lockdown. This is intensified by a rhetorical question "Pls where is the isolation center?", which requires no answer but a predicted judgment by the reader. The author suggests that, as COVID-19 patients are less significant than the number of 'hunger patients' – hunger is more important and the government's prioritisation of COVID-19 over hunger is absurd. Therefore, he tries to criticise the government's inhumane treatment of the masses, keeping them indoors without support.

**P11** AdeSar: Shame on millionaires who did not give palliatives. Even Abacha gives Nigeria palliatives in hard currency.

Abacha was a Nigerian military ruler, whose loot of Nigerian wealth deposited in foreign countries keep coming many years after his death. During COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, a batch of the loot was received by the Nigerian government. So P11 describes this serious case of corruption as a COVID-19 palliative from the late president to the Nigerian people. This is an understatement. The expression “even in hard currency” suggests that the Abacha loot is better than what the so-called wealthy people would donate to the masses. The author indirectly criticises Abacha’s untold corruption; and at the same time, he taunts wealthy individuals, who do not support people around them. Therefore, the post performs an expressive speech act.

### **Conspiracy Theory as a form of Resistance**

Conspiracy theory is an assumption that some influential people secretly plan an unpleasant social event in order to perpetuate dominance and oppression. Initially, the COVID-19 pandemic was globally shrouded in conspiracy theory and denial. Due to its origin, the virus was tagged ‘Chinese virus’ to blame the Chinese government among other scapegoats (see Wodak, 2021). Even after records of many positive cases and deaths, many Nigerians echoed the global perception of the virus as a Chinese creation and doubted its existence in the country. Their argument is that Nigerian leaders plot COVID-19 as a conduit to perpetrate corruption, domination and oppression. Thus, as shown in the texts below, this mistrust informs their resistance and defiance to many COVID-19 guidelines.

**P12** Abey: To those of U that use to say that China products don’t last, I hope u’re enjoying dis long and lasting Coronavirus Season film?

**P13** AtiFol: Over 1000 people infected, but nobody knows anybody that know anybody that knows someone that knows anybody that is infected.

**P14** Komebi: Do you know the full meaning of NCDC? Nigeria Corona Distribution Company.

While P12 describes COVID-19 as a Chinese trademark, P13 and P14 focus on the perceived random recording of its positive cases in Nigeria. In Nigeria, Chinese products are commonplace, less expensive but are generally viewed as substandard and last for a short period. But the text producer challenges the thought and likens COVID-19’s span to the length of a season film, which has endless episodes. The metaphors (“China product” and “Coronavirus season film”) are employed to downplay the virus and governments’ efforts in combating it. The author specifically reduces government’s activities on the pandemic to a home video, which is usually meant for relaxation, enjoyment. By this, he assures the audience that the COVID-19 pandemic plan might take a longer period. Thus, the speech act performed by the post is assertive.

P13 and P14 express disbelief in COVID-19's reality in Nigeria. Emphasising Nigerians' communal lifestyle, P13 reveals that no one has been able to identify, at least, a single COVID-19 infected person. Indirectly, the author challenges the existence of the virus in the country. The strategic use of number "Over 1000 people infected" complements this notion. Thus, it represents an assertive speech act. Generally, this citizens' mistrust in government influences their resistance to COVID-19 guidelines and restrictions. Moinani and Barasa (2021), however, reports that similar attitudes by Kenyan citizens make the government to view them as the country's enemy along with the virus. Similarly, P14 parodies the full meaning of NCDC (National Centre for Disease Control) as "Nigeria Corona Distribution Company". By this, the author of the post asserts that the Nigerian government merely records COVID-19 positive cases without recourse to test results. Also, by referring to NCDC as a company, he implies that government makes profits from the pandemic. Thus, the post performs an assertive speech act.

**P15** Theway: Dear Oyo State government and health sector, give us mosquito net and other malarial preventing materials in Saki here, you will wonder that Covid 19 will disappear.

**P16** AdelSo: How I wish NCDC can also give us daily update on malaria as they do on Covid 19. Then Nigeria will know the real scores of our national disease "league".

Furthermore, P15 and P16 regard COVID-19 positive cases as mere cases of malaria fever. Due to the fact that both are types of fever with common symptoms, the text producers argue that Nigerian authorities and healthcare providers mistake malaria for the virus or deliberately do so to misguide the public and to promote elite domination of knowledge and masses' oppression. The author of P15 contends that if malarial prevention materials, such as mosquito nets, are provided to the citizens, no positive case of COVID-19 will be recorded again. This implies that the virus does not exist in the state. Thus, the post represents an assertive speech act. Meanwhile, the more formal style "Dear Oyo State government and health sector", the specific mention of a town "Saki" and the proximal place deictic element "here" suggest politeness, author's sincerity and certainty.

Conversely, P16 uses intertextuality; it draws on the context of sports to trivialise COVID-19 in Nigeria. It describes malaria and COVID-19 as sport teams that compete in a "national disease league" just as we have National Football League. During the pandemic, NCDC released latest reports about the virus every evening on the television and its website; and so, the author demands latest reports about malaria for comparison. The author's use of the adjective *real* in "real scores" implies that information produced by the agency has been fake. The post therefore indirectly claims that the existence of the virus in Nigeria is false. This represents an assertive speech act.

**P17** MosobaLa: Pls who has checked NCDC Livescore Today; what's Lagos and Kano Playing? I just come up online ni!!!

P17 satirises COVID-19 daily updates as a football match live updates in the popular website *livescore.com*. At a point during the lockdown, number of positive cases in Lagos and Kano were close on the NCDC COVID-19 table. This is likened to a fierce competition between the states. Coincidentally, both states contend to be the most populous state in Nigeria. Thus, this post tries to ridicule both states for competing in a bad thing, such as COVID-19; and therefore, appears to foreground the Nigerian government's incompetence. The author of the post thus invites the audience to make fun of the exercise. Therefore, the post constitutes a directive speech act.

**P18** Abkow: New subscription for Kano, 1week auto renewal for Lagos, FCT and Ogun. Insha Allah, we shall get over this together.

Similarly, P18 describes COVID-19 restrictions and guidelines for Nigerian states in commercial terms. Through the words "subscription" and "auto renewal", it implicitly depicts the Nigerian government as a service provider. A subscription is an agreement to receive a good or service, while its automatic renewal means its continuation and no change in the already set process. This suggests that the whole process of fight against COVID-19 is a business between the federal and state governments. Lagos, FCT (Federal Capital Territory) and Ogun, as the most affected (due to their primacy as the nation's economic and political capitals and as a boarder state respectively), retain their previous guidelines for another week, while Kano, which follows them on the table, gets new guidelines. Using the Arabic expression "Insha Allah", which means 'God willing', to express hope, the text producer predicts that they will outlive the pandemic period. Thus, the post performs an assertive speech act. However, it could not be determined whether the referent of the plural pronoun "we" is the masses or the entire country, including the politicians. Also, it could not be determined whether the deictic element "this" refers to the COVID-19 pandemic or the perceived government's plot against the masses. Both referring elements partly create a form of 'us' versus 'them' identity polarisation between the masses and the government and foreground governments' power abuse and domination.

### **Morality in Humour**

Morality is the personal and social beliefs that distinguish good behaviours or character from bad ones. It emphasises virtues such as honesty, humility, decency and other righteous behaviours. Humour is an important mild means of teaching morality. It trivialises serious societal ills in order to correct them. Texts below try to imbibe honesty, integrity, decency and humility in the society.

**P19** Abu Aish: Marrying a wrong person is like Covid 19. Every day you will be recording new cases.

P19 tends to advise the reader to be honest and meticulous in the choice of a spouse. It draws on the rising moral decadence and marital issues, which has led to series of psychological and physical violence and broken homes in the society. The text producer likens these to the everyday humongous number of COVID-19 positive cases recorded by the government. The similitude, especially the fear and uncertainty induced by the pandemic, is used to warn potential spouses against marrying an unsuitable person. This constitutes a directive speech act. However, the text could be said to mean that everyday recording of COVID-19 positive cases is due to the fact that Nigerians have elected wrong/bad leaders. Thus, the electorate is warned against bad leaders in another election period.

**P20** MosobaLa: As schools, churches, mosques, markets & Bars are closed, my sister, close ur legs too. All businesses have closed.

P20 exploits the COVID-19 lockdown situation, when all public places and businesses closed to prevent further spread of the virus, to ridicule promiscuous ladies and their nefarious acts. The text producer implicitly describes female legs as shops, equating them with other establishments such as schools, churches, mosques, markets and bars. This suggests that ladies earn profits from opening their legs. Therefore, the author of the post advises them to stop the immoral act. The use of the possessive *my* in the expression “my sister” implies a kind of close relation between the author and the addressee, sincerity and politeness. Also, this could be a warning against possible contraction of COVID-19, as a result of unsafe copulation. Thus, the post constitutes a directive speech act. However, from a feminist perspective, one could ask why the advice is directed only to women, instead of all people. After all, men also get involved in promiscuity and adultery. This reveals sexism and oppression of women in the Nigerian society.

**P21** Sunky OK: “No one knows tomorrow”. Imagine a bank security checking the temperature of a medical doctor.

P21 begins with a popular saying that demystifies (or expresses the limitation of) human knowledge, capability and arrogance. It reveals the anxiety, uncertainty and perplexity that surround the COVID-19 pandemic, where nobody initially knew its exact cause and medical solutions for it. This text portrays a turnaround caused by the pandemic, where security officers, who are among the rank and file in the banking sector, were empowered to determine the temperature (and by extension, allow or deny the entry) of customers, including doctors. The text producer’s mention of doctors is strategic. Doctors are powerful professionals, whose hegemony in the health sector has unsuccessfully been challenged by other health workers, such as pharmacists, dentists and nurses. So the post emphasises the limitations of doctors’ power; and by extension, all influential people in the society. Thus, the author indirectly tries to persuade the reader to be humble and respect others as no person is completely useless. The post therefore constitutes a directive speech act.

## Conclusion

In the critical pragmatic study of COVID-19 related humorous Facebook posts done above, five thematic analytical categories were outlined: demystification of spirituality, allegation of corruption, dissimulation of social responsibility, conspiracy theory as a form of resistance and morality in humour. The analysis revealed a preponderance of assertives and declarations, followed by expressives and directives. They were employed, respectively, to describe the pandemic as a conduit for corruption, domination and oppression by the Nigerian government against the masses; to condemn religiosity of Nigerians and corrupt tendencies of political and spiritual leaders; to reveal the masses' frustration, dissatisfaction and dejection about the donor companies' hypocrisy and the abandonment of citizens during the lockdown; and to advise readers on germane moral issues. In addition, issues of domination, power abuse and identity polarisation, especially between the elite (political and spiritual leaders) and the masses were foregrounded. The study therefore evinced that the social media are virile platforms for ideologies propagation, especially resistance to state domination and power abuse.

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