

Humorous Comments on Social Media on the Nigerian Government's Removal of Petroleum Subsidy

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Abstract

Humans often seek relief from anxiety, depression, and stress through humour and Nigerians are no exception especially with the economic hardship they experience as a result of the fuel subsidy removal. The paper therefore sets out to ascertain the essence and extent of usage of humour comments in the discourse of a critical national issue such as the subsidy removal. Anchored on Attardo's (2017) General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), the paper analyses discursive humorous comments on fuel subsidy removal using twenty online humorous comments purposively selected from four social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, X and Telegram). The findings show among other things that through the language of humour used on fuel subsidy removal, Nigerians create jocular effects to ease tension, stress and depression from the economic hardship experienced in the country. The paper concludes that humorous comments are employed not only to ease stress and tension but also to subtly construct criticisms and direct same at the country's political leadership on the socio-economic cum political policy issues on fuel subsidy removal.

Key Words: Humour, Subsidy removal, Social media, Discourse

Introduction

Language has always remained a vital tool for expressing human experiences and varied phenomenal situations worldwide. It enables man as a social being to interface with all facets of life including psychological, economical, cultural, and philosophical. This explains why Sapir would readily conceptualise language as a "purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols" (p.8). Clearly speaking, human feelings are packaged in a language, not minding either the mode of the language-whether formal and serious, informal and jocular, as the case may be- or the subject to be discussed. Sometimes, serious subjects attracting heated debates are expressed in humorous language and comments.

Humour has been seen as a linguistic tool that makes people laugh, or that intends to induce amusement or laughter. Its purpose is to break the monotony, boredom, and tedium, and make the hearer's or reader's nerves relax. According to Mindess (2010), it is "a frame of mind, a manner of perceiving and experiencing life; It is a kind of outlook, a peculiar point of view, and one which has great therapeutic power" (p.41). There are different perceptions of the concept as conceived by different scholars but one thing that has served as a point of convergence is that humour is a piece of language or text, that make people or readers laugh.

Towards the end of the tenure of former President Muhammadu Buhari, the administration pronounced a subsidy removal on Premium Motor Spirit (PMS), but this was, however, not sustained as his administration later promised it would take effect at the dawn of

another administration. When President Ahmed Bola Tinubu took over, he made it clear in his inaugural speech on the 29th May 2023 that the subsidy regime was over, a pronouncement that set the pace for series of hardship experienced by households, families and individuals, with the prices of food items and other goods and services skyrocketing; transport fare increased and most car owners had to park their cars and resort to public transportation as the pump price of PMS hit the threshold of 620 naira and even more than that in some places. Many civil servants found it difficult to go to work, as there was no corresponding increase in their wages and salaries to cater for the destabilising effect of the removal of subsidy on PMS. This singular economic policy of the government had a ripple effect on all other facets of the life of average Nigerians.

Be that as it may, Nigerians have never been hesitant in expressing themselves and their experiences in the wake of the unprecedented hardship occasioned by the subsidy removal regime. What is even more interesting is that despite the tense atmosphere, the high cost of living in the country, the seriousness of the situation and the untold hardship that Nigerians are facing, discourse on the subject matter of subsidy removal is replete with humour comments on the lips of Nigerians and in the social media space, thus, chronicling the popular adage that “Nigerians suffer and smile”.

Humour and humorous comments are rather often taken for granted by most people who see them as jokes meant for casual talks, discourse, and conversations. Thus, they are often treated with triviality, and this explains why humour dominates informal domains of language use. But far beyond the jocular mode of these humorous comments is the subtle truth that is usually concealed with a lot of messages to be conveyed. More so, several attempts have been made to study humour but to the best of our knowledge, none has been carried out on humorous comments on subsidy removal in social media discourse. It is in this light that this paper sets out to examine humorous comments on subsidy removal in social media discourse. It intends to ascertain the essence as well as the extent of usage of humour comments in discussing a critical national issue such as the subsidy removal.

Review of Previous Studies

Literature on online humorous comments has been approached from varying perspectives, such as sociological, psychological, and more importantly pragmatics and multimodality. From the pragmatic perspective, Ekundayo and Adeoti (2011) analysed “Nigerian Pidgin proverbs as humour and philosophical comments about life”. The study posits that pidgin has come a long way and has passed through various stages of linguistic development from its inception as a contact language between the Europeans and Africans. The paper documents and annotates many Pidgin proverbs which pour into Pidgin from several different sources. Data used for the study was gathered from both written works and live linguistic events. The findings disclosed that Nigerian Pidgin has a flourishing body of figurative expressions which are humorous. The study further underscores the fact that Nigerian Pidgin is not a variety of English but a language of its own, competing strongly with and threatening English and other Nigerian languages. The study differs from the present study since its concern is on humour in Nigerian Pidgin proverbs. In a related study, Adetunji (2013) analysed the interactional context of humour in Nigerian stand-up comedy. The paper highlights the major pragmatic strategies employed by Nigerian

stand-up comedians to involve their audiences in the creation of interactional context. The analysis of the data reveals that saliency of linguistic coding, stereotyping, formulas, call and response, self-deprecation and shared experiences involve both the comedian and the audience in humour production and consumption. The study concludes that Nigerian stand-up comedy's interactional tenor could be uniquely hinged on linguistic coding, especially the code-alternation of Nigerian Pidgin and English language. Like the previous study, this too is a departure from our work because it is preoccupied with humour in Nigerian Stand-up comedy. Unlike Adetunji (2013), Oyebola Folajimi Kehinde (2016) examined humour in "A Night of thousand Laughs" from a pragmatic point of view using Grice's cooperative principle. The study analysed the transcription of five episodes of the popular comedy series: "A Night of a Thousand Laughs (ANTL)". It found out that the Gricean maxims were applied and violated. Most of the time, during performance, the comedians would have fulfilled the maxims before consciously or unconsciously defying those maxims in their conversations. These two studies are related because they both fall within the same theory of pragmatics and their data comprises of live events. Though, while Adetunji examined pragmatic strategies employed in humour, Kehinde employed the cooperative principle. These studies however differ from the present study in approach even though they are all concerned with humour.

Chimuanya and Ajiboye (2016) studied the "Social Semiotics of Humour in Ebola Awareness Discourse on Facebook". The study posits that the digital world has become a vibrant society with various discursive practises where unrestricted self-expression thrives. The study identifies and analyses specific symbiotic patterns in Ebola related graphic posts in Nigerian online social discourse, particularly Facebook. Using Kress and Leeuwen's (2006) approach to multimodal discourse analysis, the study found that such posts are not merely a bunch of humour; rather, they are informal awareness campaigns that are even more apt than explicit verbal or written messages. This study is related to the present study in that both look at humour on the social media. But while their study pursues humour from a social semiotic perspective the present study analyses humour comments not from the semiotic angle.

Joshua (2020) also conducted a pragmatic analysis of the discourse of humour and irony in selected memes on social media. Guided by the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), thirty (30) conversational memes were purposively selected for analysis using the guises of forms of humour as the unit analysis. Findings from the study indicated that three guises of humour namely, sarcasm, witticism and pun were prominent in the data, with sarcasm constituting the major form used. Joshua's work is related to the present study because it draws its data from social media platforms, although both employed the same theory but the type of data analysed differs as Joshua analysed memes while the present study analyses humour comments. Besides, the present study is preoccupied with humour comments on subsidy removal which is not the concern of Joshua's study.

Furthermore, Okunade, (2021) studied the discursive functions of Nigerian societal humour on social media from a multimodal perspective. The study argues that social media humour and jokes are not just designed to make people laugh. There are underlying critical societal issues that the humour and jokes are also designed to mirror or draw attention to. The data comprises 10 humours and jokes randomly selected from the purposively data collected on humours. The selected humours centre on politics, education and marital relationships from

Twitter and Facebook social media platforms. Using O'Halloran (2008) Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis, the findings show that a number of semiotic figurative devices such as semiotic metaphor, semiotic irony, semiotic hyperbole, semiotic euphemism and semiotic sarcasm were employed in the humour communication. While Okunade's data is multimodal and from various spheres of life, the present study pays particular attention to the issue of humorous comments on fuel subsidy removal.

Abdulalam and Jaáfar, (2021) carried out a "Pragmatic Analysis of racial humour in online Discourse". This study attempts to advance the understanding of how racial humour can be triggered in online intercultural communication. The data for the study comprises 312 racial jokes connected from eight different racial joke accounts on Twitter. The findings revealed that three types of racial jokes were found. These are. Superiority based triggers in Congo. Incongruity based triggers and blended triggers. Also, it was discovered that these different types were found to perform two different functions: column racial stereotype reinforcement and racial stereotype challenge.

Ishaya, (2022) studied humour in peter Enahoro's *The Complete Nigerian*. The study explores humorous contents in the novel through John Searle's Speech Act Theory. The data comprises 10 humorous utterances extracted from the text. In analysing the data, frequency count was conducted and the results showed that representatives and directives accounted for 70% and 30% respectively. The preponderance use of representatives is an indication that the author knows who the complete Nigerians are by always making factual utterances and asserting his stance on the complete Nigerian.

The review on previous studies on the subject of humour thus far, has proven to the best of our knowledge that no study has been carried out previously on humour comments on subsidy removal in social media discourse. This study therefore, fills an existing gap in scholarship.

Theoretical Framework

The theory adopted for this study is the General Theory of Verbal Humour (henceforth GTVH) espoused by Attardo, (2017) a revision of the Semantic-Script Theory of Humour (SSTH). The GTVH is a broadening of SSTH out of semantics to a broader multidisciplinary theory of humour. The GTVH aims to be a joke representation model, indicating all aspects of the joke from the abstract joke-concept identified by the SSTH, to the language it is being expressed in. This theory defines humour by focusing on the semantic/pragmatic content of humorous utterances and texts and not their paralinguistic or prosodic aspects. Attardo claims that "unlike the SSTH referring to only jokes, the GTVH is broadened to include all humorous texts, of any length. Specifically, it is not limited to narrative texts, but also dramatic and conversational texts" (p.5). Since it is adaptable to every kind of text type, it unites the methods of several linguistic disciplines, like textual linguistics, the theory of narrativity, and pragmatics.

The authors of this theory have added new elements into humour-competence, which is "knowledge resources" (p.5). There are six knowledge resources which are the script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative strategy and language. Our investigation will focus on only one of these knowledge resources, the "Target". It can be stated that the presence of the target in humour implies that humour can be considered as the

expression of an aggressive intention. The superiority/hostility of humour maintains that humorous effect results from cooperation between us and the others or between our former self and our present self. Humour occurs when this comparison reveals that we are in some way “superior” to the others or that our present self is “superior” to our former self. Through humour, “the ‘superior’ person can ‘attack’ and attempt to modify the behaviour of the ‘inferior’ one and vice versa “(p.18). Target, as a knowledge resource is relevant to this study as the comments analysed in this study are all humorous texts and have targets. Thus, they aptly fall within the purview of GTVH.

Methodology

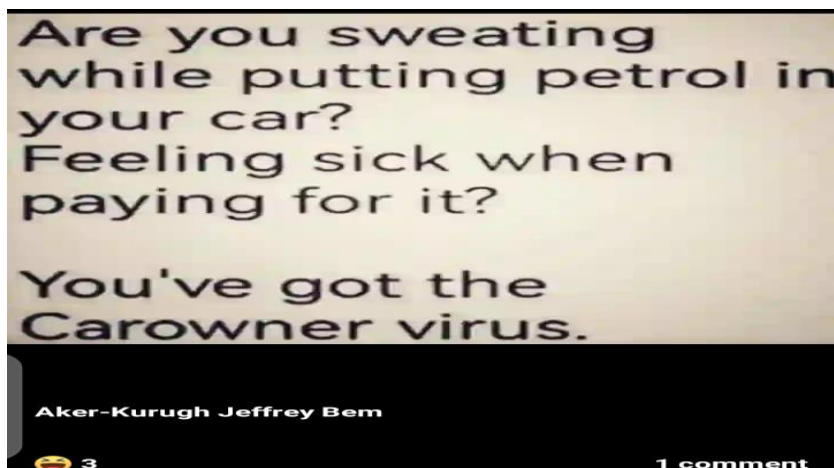
The data for the present study are humorous comments drawn from Facebook, WhatsApp, X and Telegram. These humorous comments were obtained by the researchers who are active users of these social media platforms. This was achieved through screen shots using an android phone over a period of four months. Twenty (20) humorous comments were purposively selected for analysis out of over sixty-two (62) humorous comments initially obtained for the study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

For the purpose of a robust analysis, the humorous comments are categorized into four, namely: sarcasm, witticism, unsolicited advice, and incongruity. Humour of sarcasm basically ridicule/ create mockery and irony while those of witticisms are amusingly wise comments. Those that are unsolicited advice come in the form of warnings. Humours of incongruity exhibit deviation from the features of vocabulary and grammar of the language. There is however no watertight demarcation between these categories as humours generally have these characteristics cutting across them, hence overlapping. The demarcation here is for the convenience of analysis. The humorous comments are presented and analysed using Attardo’s GTVH.

Sarcasm

In this instance, language used in the data collected expresses the opposite of what is meant in order to insult, scorn or to make fun of somebody.



Datum 1

This humour sarcastically draws an analogy from the symptoms of ailments and likens such symptoms as “sweating, while putting petrol”, “feeling sick while paying” for petrol as the symptoms of “carowner virus”. The coinage “carowner virus” itself is a humorous creation to prove that car owners can be infected by a virus caused by the petrol subsidy removal and the consequent hike in the cost of petrol.



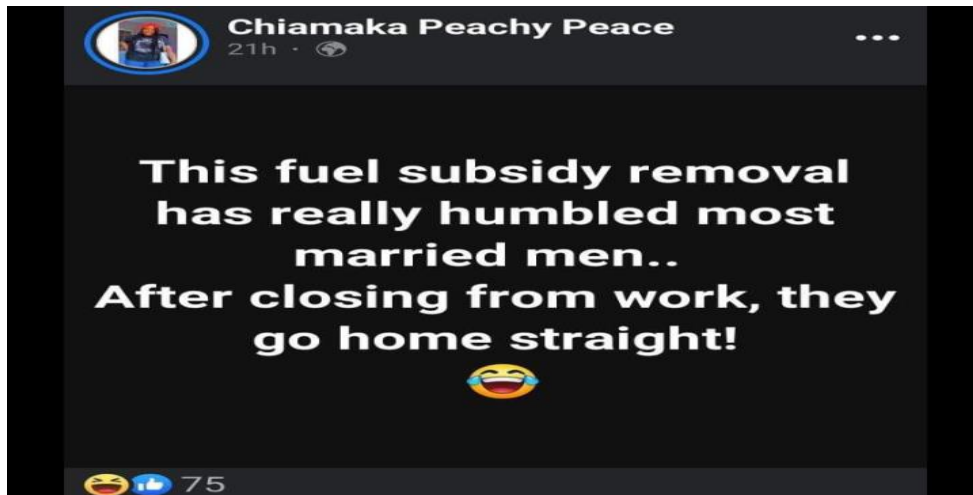
Datum 2

Here, fuel which is semantically narrowed to petrol is seen as essential to the point that it is a strong determining factor for people to get engaged in relationships. 200 litres of petrol, if given to a person, can start a relationship. Relationship is ridiculed and reduced to the ability to provide petrol.



Datum 3

The cost of fuelling a car is obviously more than that of a motorcycle which is called “okada”. But for one to suggest that a motorcycle conveys him and his car to any destination is a mockery to the petrol situation as it affects Nigerians.



Datum 4

With the removal of subsidy on Premium Motor Spirit, the social life of married men has been stifled to the extent that hanging out after working hours has become impossible. This humour comment mocks married men while trying to decry the subsidy removal.



Senior Bro
@SeniorBro11

...

“Let the poor breathe” but Feul na ₦620 per liter.

How the poor wan take breathe?



Datum 5

“Let the poor breathe” is a clause extracted from President Bola Tinubu’s Democracy day speech of June, 12th 2023 and has been on the lips of the Nigerian political class to win the support of the poor masses. The sarcasm however is posed by the question “how can the poor breathe?” when the price of petrol is beyond the reach of the poor masses. To the poor, “fuel” is likened to oxygen/life which in this context is out of the reach of the poor.

Witticism

Witticism as found in the data simply refers to a remark that is both clever and humorous. It is a message whose ingenuity or verbal skill has the power to evoke laughter.



Kparev Terhemem

3h · 👤



👍 7

2 comments

Datum 6

Family members provide daily bread for themselves and their families. Ironically, the increase in petrol pump price has led to a hike in transportation fares such that the cost of transportation to get daily bread has surpassed the cost of daily bread itself. This is quite witty a humour.



Inveztor Peter

10h · 🌐



Datum 7

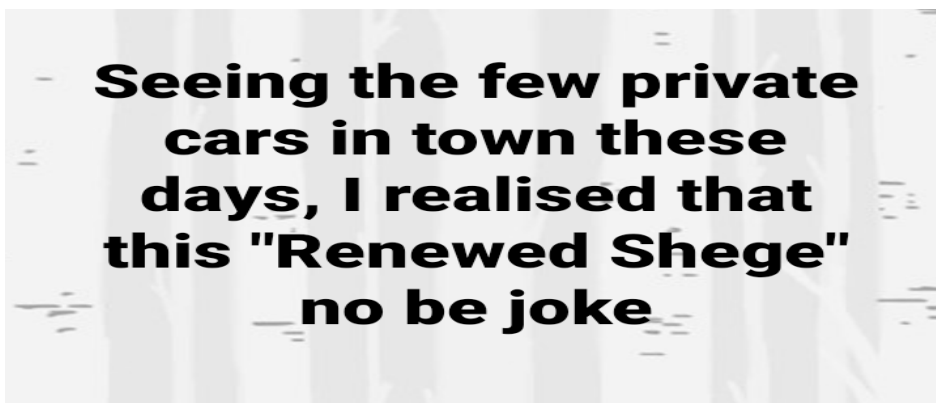
It is expected that one who buys a new car a week ago should be swimming in the euphoria of his new car, driving it all around town. On the contrary, the new car owner in this comment is seen trekking because he possibly cannot afford to fuel the car. He downgrades from Lexus

which is a car brand, to “legsus,” which is a means of trekking. This is a witty remark to underscore the effect of increase in the price of petrol.



Datum 8

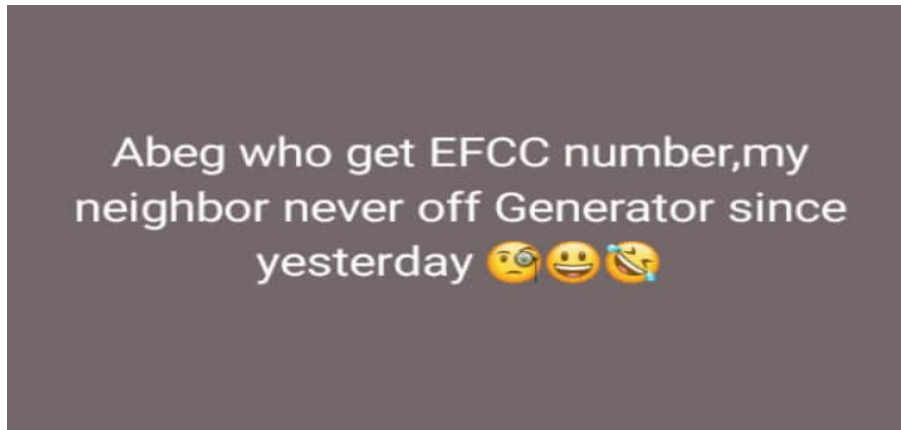
Impediments have been placed on people’s social life as a result of the increase in the price of petrol and this humour wittingly reveals how the speaker is constrained in driving his girlfriend crazy because of the cost of fuel. “Drive crazy” here, whether taken to mean either driving her in a car or giving her a treat is inhibited by petrol price increase.



Datum 9

President Tinubu introduced the slogan “renewed hope” when he won the presidential election, as a way of rekindling the people’s hope in his government. This hope has, however, been replaced with the Hausa word “shege” which loosely translates to trouble/ hardship. The

witticism here is that what was supposed to be a renewed hope is rather causing hardship and people cannot afford to drive their private cars anymore.

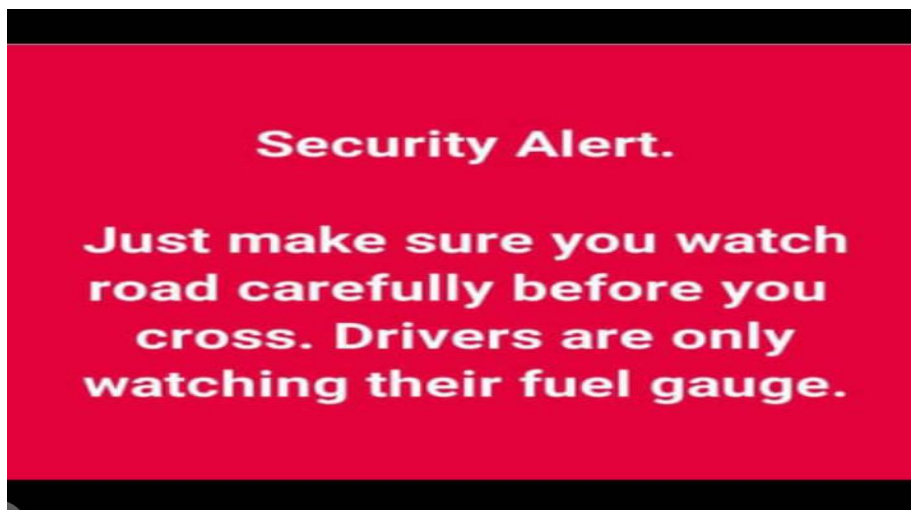


Datum 10

That the neighbour of the commentator has not switched off his generator since yesterday calls for the attention of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). In such a period of economic hardship where petrol price is very high, it is expected that people do not run their generators for too long; else they would be suspected of being involved in financial crimes. This is a witty humour on the hardship created by the subsidy removal.

Unsolicited Advice

These are remarks made about the state of affairs in the society that bother on the general welfare of the populace however, they are made even when not requested for in such a way that evokes laughter.



Datum 11

A humorous advice is unsolicitedly given here for pedestrians to watch carefully before crossing the road. It is funny from the comment that drivers only watch their fuel gauge. Probably worried about the exorbitant cost of petrol and carried away by the manner the gauge drops, drivers are ridiculed to be watching only their fuel gauge and not the road, hence the advice.



Senior Bro
@SeniorBro11

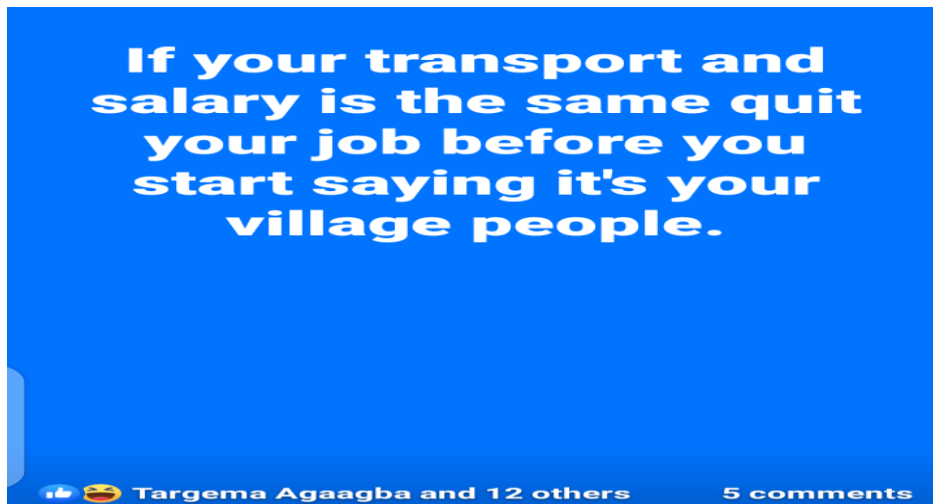
...

Make sure you eat well before stepping out.
Because If you collapse, ambulance no get
fuel o! 😂



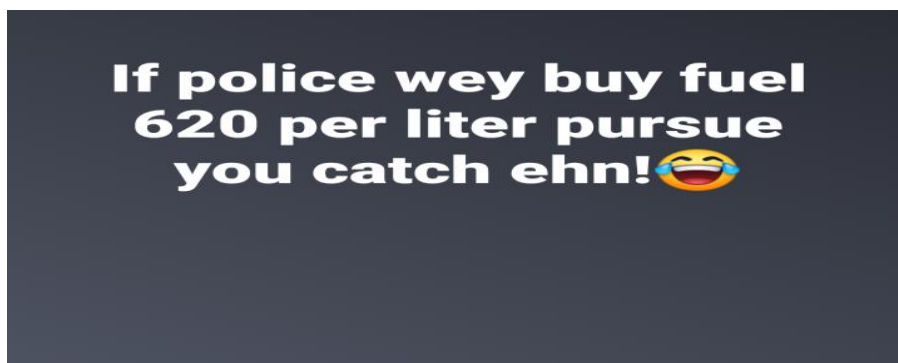
Datum 12

The ambulance is an emergency service van that is expectedly supposed to be reliable always. The subsidy removal on petrol has, however made it almost impossible to rely on this emergency service as the cost of petrol has skyrocketed. This humour advises people to always eat well before leaving their houses, so that they do not collapse. In the event that they collapse, the ambulance that is expected to convey them to the hospital will not have fuel.



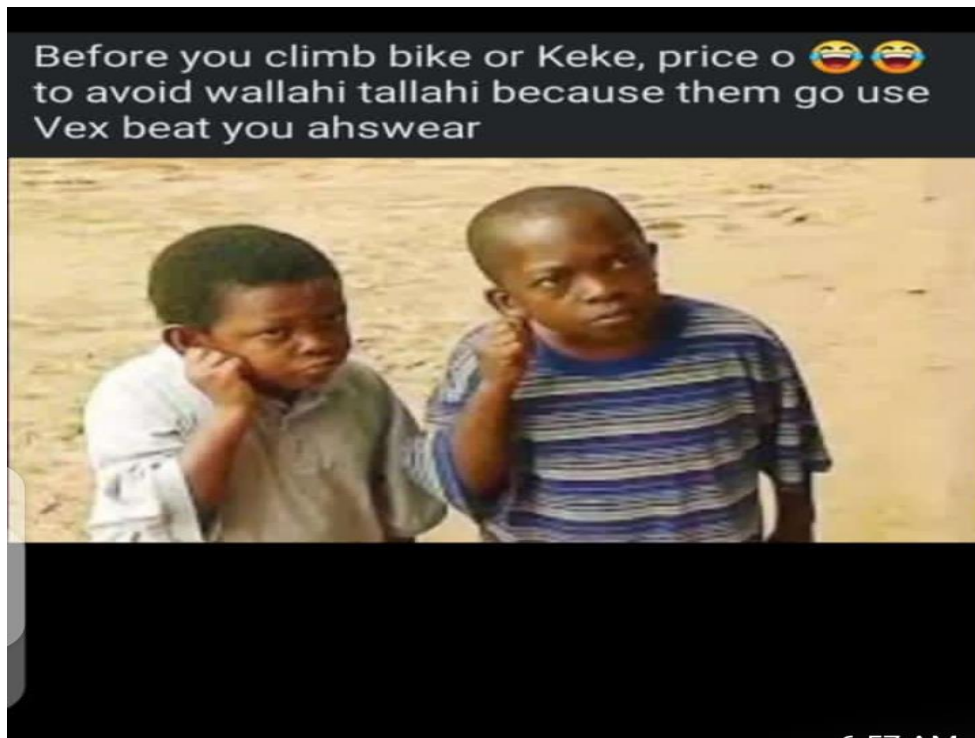
Datum 13

In the wake of the subsidy removal on petrol, some workers are now spending equivalent of their salaries to get to work. This humour advises that they quit their jobs before they start attributing their hardship to witchcraft from their villages.



Datum 14

Criminals and offenders of the law are often chased by the police. Such people are humorously advised to be careful so the police who have bought petrol exorbitantly at N620/litre do not go in pursuant of them as the consequences would be unimaginable.



Datum 15

This humour advises passengers and commuters of motorcycles and tricycles to always bargain and agree with the cyclists on the cost of their fare, before they embark on any journey to avoid been beaten up by the cyclist, in the event they cannot pay the overpriced fare they will be given afterwards. It uses the Hausa swear phrase “wallahi tallahi” to ridicule the kind of lexicon that characterise such arguments in the Nigerian context.

Incongruity

Incongruity operates at any level of language, this means that it can be found in the narrower features of vocabulary and grammar, or, in the wider context, in the broader units of discourse organization and social interaction (Simpson & Mayr 2010). In the data under analysis, most of the instances of incongruity are found at narrower features of vocabulary.

We have passed the SHEGE stage (#550/ liter)and we are now at SHEGE BANZA stage (#650/liter)the SHEGE BANZA DANBRUBA stage will be (#1000/ liter)😂😂😂

It will reach everybody !😂

Datum 16

In this humour comment, the hardship occasioned by the subsidy removal is categorized into three stages of “shege”(N550/litre) which is in the past, the “shege banza” stage (N650/litre) which is the present and the “shege banza danbruba” stage (N1000/litre)which will come soon. The terms “shege” “banza” and “danbruba” are Hausa words. “Shege” is loosely interpreted in this context as hardship/tough situation, “banza” to mean a tough situation gone bad and “danbruba” to mean an extremely bad situation of hardship.



Datum 17

Using the Hausa code “shegye,” this humour creates a question tag that is incongruous to the rules of language. By buying petrol at N650/litre means we have seen tough times. “Shyegen’nt we?” is a bastardization of “haven’t we” that would have appeared in the question tag.

The Shege Level Has Become Shege Banza



Datum 18

This is interpreted to mean that the hardship posed by the subsidy removal regime has gone to a worse situation.



Aondoternguavese Emmanuella is looking for **Trouble Trouble** with **Theophilus Waave** and **Tachia Jennifer**.

1d · 👤

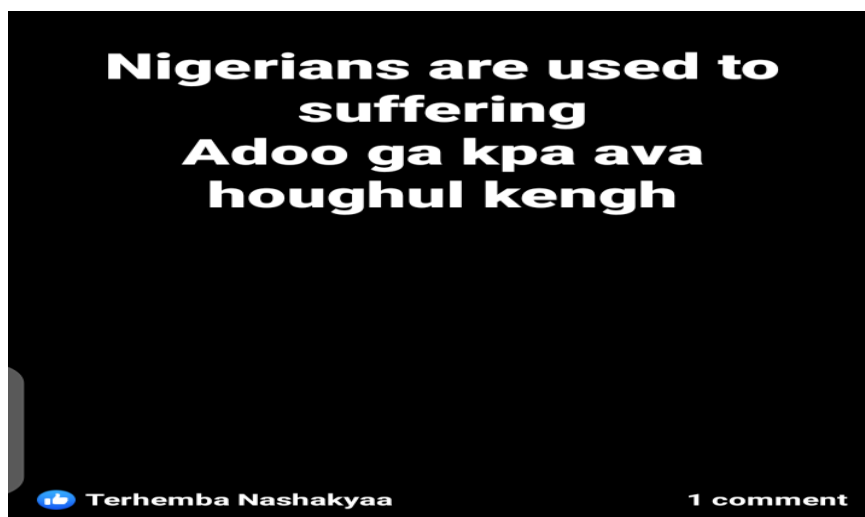
Tachia Jennifer if you don't know how to propose love just leave it.

Which one is baby you are my fuel subsidy. 😞



Datum 19

Here, there is a creative vernacularisation and a humorous contortion of the phrase “fuel subsidy”. The catch phrase referencing a lover to fuel subsidy captures the hardship and the helplessness of the Nigerian masses that have consciously gained a linguistic awareness of the word subsidy and are quick to create humour out of it.



Datum 20

This is a humorous-bitter comment rendered in an inter-sentential code-mixing of English and Tiv languages. It is interpreted to mean that Nigerians are used to suffering and that even though they are not happy, they will get used to it. This, obviously, is a bitter humour expressing the helplessness of Nigerians not just in the hardship created by the subsidy removal. It shows that suffering is central to the life of the Nigerian citizenry but to say that they will get used to it is laughable.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of the data presented in this work shows that on a general note, the comments on subsidy removal are funny, whether they come in the form of sarcasm, witty saying, unsolicited advice or even when they are incongruous. The comments qualify as humorous because they make the audience laugh and they intend to induce amusement. Their purpose is to break monotony, boredom, and tedium, and make the audience's nerves relax.

The findings from the study also show that through the language of humour, the subject of fuel subsidy removal which is of national and international concern has engaged the attention of Nigerians, including on social media platforms, thus, creating jocular effects to ease tension, stress and depression from the present economic hardship experienced in the country.

More so, humorous comments are employed not only to ease stress and tension but also to subtly construct and direct criticisms at the country's political leadership regarding the current socio-economic and political policies on the issue of removal of fuel subsidy.

Also, the findings of this study are in tandem with one of the six knowledge sources discussed in the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) as espoused by Attardo (2017). The humorous comments analysed in this study all have 'targets'. This precept of 'target' knowledge resource explains that through humour, a person can 'attack' and attempt to modify the behaviour of another person. In the light of our data and analysis, the commentators on Facebook, WhatsApp, X and Telegram who posted their thoughts on their timeline are the 'inferior one' whose humorous comments and reactions are targeted at the 'superior one' which

is the political leadership that has put in place such economic policy of subsidy removal that birthed the economic hardship Nigerians are facing.

Conclusion

The paper sought to investigate humorous comments employed by Nigerians on fuel subsidy removal on various social media platform. The study was informed by the nature of language behaviour exhibited by Nigerians in the wake of this serious national issue. While different studies have investigated the features and function of the language of humour, there may be few instances, or even none, that has looked at humour comments on social media discourse regarding a national issue such as the removal of fuel subsidy. The significance of this paper lies in the fact that, aside the therapeutic functions of humour, the study reveals the need to engage the use of language in tackling national issues and policy formations that affect the citizens of the country.

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