

Social Media, Humour and Public Opinion in the Age of Digital Reproduction: The COVID-19 Example

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Abstract

The study was carried out to examine social media, humour and public opinion in the age of digital reproduction focusing on COVID-19 pandemic. Library research method was adopted. Being a position paper, the researcher depended solely on secondary sources of data to arrive at a conclusion made in this paper. It was argued that social media are a natural part of the everyday lives of people all over the world as they are known as fantastic tools for communicating with diverse audience, thereby making the public to unite on important issue such as the COVID-19 by injecting humour into the situation despite the anxiety in the country. It was concluded that the media have expanded the usage of internet that gave birth to social media which in turn, led to public opinion. Thus, it was recommended that government should make use of social media platforms more to pass meaningful information and also to reduce anxieties in the society.

Keywords: Social Media, Humour, Public Opinion, COVID-19 Pandemic, Media

Introduction

The world has become global with social media helping in this regard. Social media have become part of the twenty first century society. It is on record that virtually everything in the society today has been affected by social media. The convergence of the media has expanded the usage of internet that gave birth to social media. Social media are a concept that has given people a common platform for sharing their news, views and opinions regarding the happenings around them. Research has indicated that social media have changed the way we view and interact with the world and they have given power to individuals and small groups. Dewing (2010) opines that social media refer to the wide range of internet based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content or join online communities. He further stated the kinds of internet services commonly associated with social media include blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, social networking sites, status-update services, virtual world content, media sharing sites.

Humour is the quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech. It can also be said to be a mood or state of mind. According to the Cambridge dictionary humour is the ability to find things funny, the way in which people see that some things are funny or the quality of being funny. According to Shifman (2007), humour can serve as a unique key for the understanding of social and cultural processes. Humour has accompanied human society from its very beginnings, changing form, content and style in response to social, cultural and technological trends (Coleman, 2005) and that over a third of internet users in the UK use the internet to find jokes, cartoons and other humorous material (Dutton *et al* 2005).

Public Opinion is the expressed views and behaviour of the people towards an issue bothering or worrying them. It is simply the various views that citizens hold regarding a wide variety of issues. In the view of Utulu (2004, p.37) “public opinion is the beliefs, values of the public (masses) as spoken out, written via communication channels towards a particular development or innovation in the society especially change.” Public opinion from Utulu’s perspective brings change and oneness that is, when people come together to agree on a given cause until it is achieved. It is no longer news that in December 2019, the world woke up to the report of a novel viral infection, coronavirus (COVID-19), with its first case reported in China’s Wuhan territory. The upper respiratory tract virus has since been called a global pandemic after cases were recorded in most continents (Kolawole, 2020). Coronavirus also known as COVID-19 is a severe acute respiratory disease that is known to have symptoms such as pneumonia, fever, breathing difficulty and lung infection. Thus, this paper is an investigation of social media and humour in the age of digital reproduction using the COVID-19 as a focus.

Social Media: A Conceptual Clarification

Social media are part of the twenty first century society as virtually everything in the society today has been affected by social media directly or indirectly. It is an open secret that those in business use it to advertise their products, it is also a known fact that religious organisations most especially during the COVID-19 lockdown use it to spread the gospel, while politicians use it to sell their political ideas in order to achieve their political objectives. Social media is the interaction among people in which they create share or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks (Govender *et al* 2013). According to Asogwa (2015), social media are internet-based applications put together on the principles and technological fundamentals of Web 2.0 while Nwanton, Odoemalumn, Orji-Egwu, Nwankwo and Nweze (2013), cited in Asogwa (2015) define social media as those internet-based tools and services that allow users to engage with each other, generate contents, distribute and search for information online. Popular social media are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Whatsapp among others. They provide a way of keeping in touch with friends, relatives and communities. With social media, large number of people can be reached simultaneously, thereby changing the ways in which people interact with one another. Asur & Huberman (2010) note that social media have exploded as a category of online discourse where people create content, share it, bookmark it and network at a prodigious rate.

Social media have become ubiquitous and important for social networking and content sharing. Social media refers to the wide range on internet based and mobile services that allow users to participation in online exchanges contribute users created content or join online communities (Dewing 2012). Social media have enabled people to create content, share it, bookmark it and network it at a prodigious rate. Examples include Facebook, MySpace, Digg, Twitter and JISC listservs on the academic side.

Public Opinion: A Concept

A lot has been written on public opinion by different scholars in different fields to suit the different purposes for its definition and meanings. According to Utulu (2004, p. 37), cited in Okeya (2016), “public opinion is the beliefs and values of the public (masses) as spoken out, written, via communication channels towards a particular development or innovation in the society, especially toward change...” Public opinion is the collections of individual views,

opinions on an issue or topic that is raised and has the interest of the public at heart. The foregoing shows that public opinion has been designed in such a way that it must connect to a large group of people if it must be recognised. The reason for this is because it is simply the collective attitude of citizens on a given issue and the collection of opinions from many different groups of people. For instance, during the early period of the COVID-19 in Nigeria, the disease was not known at all, people had to rely on information gotten on social media and other types of media. In the view of Machinnon (2000) cited in Yarherhe (2000) in Utulu (2004, p.34), “public opinion may be that sentiment or any given subject which is entertained by the best informed, most intelligent, most moral persons in the society.” These set of well-informed, intelligent people are what we call opinion leaders. Broom (2005, p. 217) opines that “people always come together to elect one person that will represent them in expressing their opinions to the government or to the appropriate authorities this person is known as the opinion leader.”

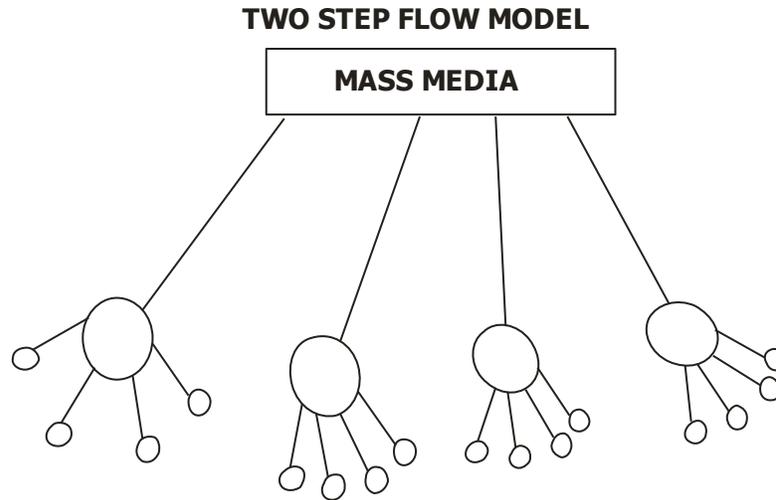
Theoretical Foundation

Uses and Gratifications Theory

This theory was propounded by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumber and Micheal Gurevitch in 1974. The theory according to Anaeto, Onabajo & Osifeso (2008) is concerned with what people do with the mass media instead of what the mass media do to the people. The theory is also about media use, in that, it is believed that there are many reasons why people use the media. According to the theory, media consumers have a free will to decide how they will use the media and how it will affect them. Applied to this work, this theory provides an explanation as to how people make use of the social media for their own personal use so as to relieve tension, especially during the intense period of COVID-19 lockdown when people were actually forced to stay at home to avoid the disease. Social media were used to send messages and also to receive humourous messages to calm the nerves of the people down. The theory perceives the recipients as actively influencing the effect process since they selectively choose, attend to, perceive and retain the media messages on the basis of their needs, beliefs and so on.

Two Step Flow Theory

The two step flow theory was propounded by Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson & Hezel Gaudet in 1940. The theory according to Anaeto *et al* (2008) state that individuals act as members of definable social groups rather than as isolates. In addition, the perception of opinion leaders tends to affect or colour the message and influence of the mass media. Applied to this work, this theory provides an explanation as to how people send humourous messages through the social media to one another during the lockdown to relief tension and also to put smiles on the faces of people despite the perceived anxiety in the country. The opinion leaders here are known as the senders of the messages while the receivers are known as the people.



Key

O = Opinion Leader

o = Opinion Seekers

Lazarsfeld's two-step flow. Theory

Multi-Step Flow Theory

This theory was propounded by Elihu Katz & Paul Lazarsfeld in 1955. This theory according to Anaeto *et al* (2008) state that the mass media affects its audience members directly and immediately as well as indirectly from the opinion leaders. This theory is a combination of three theories which include, the magic bullet theory, the one step flow and the two step flow theories. The theory assumes that information flows from the mass media to the audience through multi-steps or stages. Applied to this work, humorous messages were sent through social media platforms to different people in different places and countries during the lockdown to ease tension especially when people got to know how fatal the disease was.

Empirical Review of Related Literature

Adaugo, Ovute & Obochi (2015) in their study titled the influence of the social media on the Nigerian youth, focusing on the Aba residents experience noted that today's society is faced with the continual growing problem of electronics and social media. The findings showed that increase in unwanted female youth's pregnancies is as a result of exposure to social media pornography among youth's residents in Aba. Youths residents in Aba spend more time on social media network than other sites. Romero & Pescosolido (2008) in their study titled humour and group effectiveness looked at the importance of group in the work place and the demand from workers for a fun work environment. The researchers noted that there is no model that explains how successful organisational humour can impact work groups. The researchers explored the ability of successful organisational humour to influence groups through its positive impact on group productivity, viability and learning. It was observed that the model has the potential to both advance theory on organisational humour and to offer value to practicing managers by providing

an understanding of how two seemingly unrelated factors like humour and group effectiveness are in fact related in a meaningful fashion.

Howrigan & MacDonald (2008) in their study titled humour as a mental fitness indicator noted that intentional humour evolved as an indicator of intelligence. To test this, the researchers looked at the relationships among rater-judged humour, general intelligence and the Big Five personality traits in a sample of 185 college age students (115 women, 70 men). Findings revealed that general intelligence positively predicted rater-judged humour, independent of the Big Five personality traits. Extraversion also predicted rater judged humour, although to a lesser extent than general intelligence. General intelligence did not interact with the sex of the participant in predicting rating scores on the humour production tasks. Shifman (2007) conducted research on humour in the age of digital reproduction: continuity and change in internet based comic texts. They explored both the content and the various forms of comic-texts in 'humour hubs' large, dynamic, Websites containing verbal and visual humour. The results showed prominence of the visual humorous forms over the verbal forms, as well as to a global dominance over the local. This supremacy of the global is evident in the analysis of the humorous topics: Globally oriented topics such as sex, gender and animals are much more popular than locally-oriented topics such as ethnicity and politics.

Noble (2013) carried out a study on social media and the transformation of the humanitarian narrative: a comparative analysis of humanitarian discourse in Libya 2011 and Bosnia 1994. The scholars noted that at the beginning of the 21st century marks the expansion of the digital revolution throughout lesser developed states. The researchers found that Libyan Twitter users' representations of aid and aid recipients, as well as their use of disruptive images and humour, challenged the dominant hero victim narrative and had a limited, but meaningful impact on mass media discourse. Asogwa (2015) conducted research on social media as a voice to the voiceless: The Nigerian experience. The findings revealed that over 95% of the Nigerian youth were sensitised for the election through social media; that it was actually through the postings on the social media that created awareness for them to desire for change. Qazi, Qazi, Naseer, Zeeshan, Hardaker, Maitama & Haruna (2020) carried out a study on situational awareness through public opinion to predict adoption of social distancing amid pandemic COVID-19. Results suggest that information sources, formal ($P=0.001$) and informal ($P=0.007$) were found to be significantly related to perceived understanding. The findings indicated that social distancing is significantly influenced by situational awareness, $P=0.000$. The scholars concluded that an increase in situational awareness in times of public health crisis using formal information sources can significantly increase the adoption of protective health behaviour and in turn contain the spread of infectious diseases.

Methodology

Being a position paper, the researcher depended solely on secondary sources of data to arrive at a conclusion. The researchers consulted empirical and theoretical studies from other researchers and scholars in the field of health communication, mass media and other works related to the topic. Data and conclusions reached were derived from extensive consultation of textbooks, journals, newspapers, magazines and other online materials. This helped the researcher to arrive at the conclusions here.

Digital Reproduction and the use of Humour

Humour creates a positive mental state that serves as a social lubricant (Romero, 2005). Humour is the quality of being amusing or comic especially as expressed in literature or speech. It can also be said to be a mood or state of mind. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, humour is the ability to find things funny, the way in which people see that some things are funny or the quality of being funny. According to Shifman (2007), humour can serve as a unique key for the understanding of social and cultural processes. Humour has accompanied human society from its very beginnings, changing form, content and style in response to social, cultural and technological trends. He noted further that in the present era, the Internet has become a major actor in the production and distribution of humour. Countless Websites are devoted to humour, and an enormous traffic of emails containing humorous messages daily congest PC terminals all over the world.

Sending and receiving jokes was the most popular online political activity during the US 2004 presidential election (Coleman, 2005) and that over a third of internet users in the UK use the Internet to find jokes, cartoons and other humorous material (Dutton *et al* 2005). What about the COVID-19 that is currently ravaging the entire world, as serious as the disease is, there is still an element of humour injected into the society, especially with the lockdown imposed on the people for over two months now. It is also on record that people in order to beat boredom infuse humour in to the situation in other to calm the nerves of people down. Humour is an evolutionary enigma as people from different parts of the world and different culture enjoys it with smiling, laughing and mirth (Apte, 1985 in Greengross & Miller 2011). Humour impacts communication by signaling important or sensitive information by reducing resistant through the creation of positive effect and by increasing the persuasiveness of a message (Lyttle, 2001; Greatbatch & Clark; 2002). It also has the potential to make a message more inherently interesting, thus increasing listener attentiveness and reducing the need for repetition and additional explanation. Sharing humour creates a precedent of agreement between two or more people thereby making persuasion easier. Humour is also used to influence behavioural norms in order to foster an open environment, thereby encouraging people to speak their mind. This happened during the COVID-19 lockdown pandemic and it is still happening right now even though the pandemic is still there. Humour is known to equalise people as teasing and joking is permissible. Research has indicated that humour can be used to initiate social interactions and maintain relationships, noting that humour can be used to build morale and cohesion, good communication patterns and strong social bonds.

Social Media and Humour: The COVID-19 Example

The social media concept refers to a 21st century phenomenon that was brought about by the advent of the internet and world wide web. The origin of the social media could be traced to the emergence of the internet which in turn led to the emergence of the internet and the creation of interactive websites that enables the sender and the receiver of messages in shaping the message content. To Nations (2010), the social media are instruments of communication which are different from the conventional instruments like newspapers and so on. He further opines that while the regular media operate as a one-way street where a person could read a newspaper or listen to a report on television with very limited ability to give his thought on the content, the social media operate as a two-way street that gives a person or receiver the ability to

communicate too. The ABC (2011) has produced a Technology Explained website, where definitions and explanations are provided for modern technical and online terms.

Jacka & Scott (2011, p. 5) contend that it 'can be said that social media is the set of Web based broadcast technologies that enable the democratisation of content, giving people the ability to emerge from consumers of content to publishers' while the Oxford Dictionary (2011) opines that social media are websites and applications used for social networking. In turn, social networking is defined as 'the use of dedicated websites and applications to communicate with other users, or to find people with similar interests to one's own.' Through social media, humour is generated and passed across to different people to entertain, make them laugh or to make them relax. This is one aspect that was made use of especially during the early crises of the COVID-19. It was used to create more awareness on the disease and at the same time, inject jokes to make the people relax.

It is no longer news that in December 2019, the world woke up to the report of a novel viral infection, coronavirus (COVID-19), with its first case reported in China's Wuhan territory. The upper respiratory tract virus has since been called a global pandemic after cases were recorded in most continents (Kolawole, 2020). Coronavirus also known as COVID-19 is a severe acute respiratory disease that is known to have symptoms such as pneumonia, fever, breathing difficulty and lung infection. The World Health Organisation (WHO) used the term 2019 novel coronavirus to refer to a coronavirus that affected the lower respiratory tract of patients with pneumonia in Wuhan, China on 29 December 2019. The WHO announced that the official name of the 2019 novel coronavirus is coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The coronavirus belongs to a family of viruses that may cause various symptoms such as pneumonia, fever, breathing difficulty and lung.

Despite what the World Health Organisation (WHO) said concerning the disease, the social media has been filled with humourous things on COVID-19 to make sure that the people laugh and relax. This was done more during the lockdown. The place of humour cannot be over emphasised as it has actually helped the average Nigerian to face the challenges of the disease by using humour and re producing humour to everyone in social media.

Public Opinion and COVID-19 in Nigeria: Reporters' Position

The meaning of public opinion was remarkably crystallised by the ideological revolution in the 18th century. The ideas of Locke, Rousseau and other thinkers of 1650 to 1800 widened the base of public opinion. In addition, the political equality and individualism backed by major technological and economic changes of the 18th century gave the people the power to influence government. Public opinion according to research is a combination of two operational words namely public and opinion. The word public means the whole society, the people or the nation or a part of the country regarded from a particular viewpoint while opinion refers to the verbal response of an individual to a question and his belief.

Empirical evidence abounds to demonstrate that public opinion may not have so much influence on public policy given the fact that majority of the people are not aware of many government policies.... One basic point to note is that any government that consistently disregards public opinion in formations and implementation of public policy is not only unpopular but manifest overt and covert tendencies towards dictatorship. Public opinion is the aggregate of the individual views, attitudes and beliefs about a particular topic, expressed by a

significant proportion of a community. Again public opinion is the totality of the political orientation, beliefs, values and attitudes expressed by members of a group about current issues, actors and events in their political environment (Lowi, Ginsberg & Shepsle, 2004; Ayeni-Akeke, 2008). Johari (2005) avers that public opinion can be expressed in many ways such as writing letters to public officials, holding meetings, engaging in public demonstrations, editorial comments, election results, plebiscites and radio or television talk shows. It is a known fact that public opinion exerts considerable influence on government decision making. Research has also indicated that public opinion is a socially constructed representation of the public that is forged by the methods and data from which it is derived as well as how it is understood by those tasked with evaluating and utilising it. According to Okolie (2004):

While understanding the relevance of Public opinion, Machiavelli, among others declares that a wise man will not ignore public opinion in regard to particular matters such as the distribution of offices and preferment. Similarly, Thomas Hobbes spoke of the world as being governed by opinion and recognised the force of the public will. So did John Locke and other English contractualists.... He held that government depends upon the favorable opinion of the people governed.

There has been a lot of research on public opinion and the effect it has on people, most especially during the early stages of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The media is known to set agenda for the public's attention to that small group of issues around which public opinion forms (McCombs, 2000). Research has also indicated that the media agenda presented to the public results from countless day to day decisions by many different journalists and their supervisors about the news of the moment. In the case of Nigeria, the news of the moment then, was the COVID-19 issue which was foreign to an average Nigerian, most people even term it as the disease of the whites especially the Chinese since it originated from their own country, not knowing that it would spread to Nigeria and other countries and it would be what is known as a pandemic in the whole world.

Public opinion on COVID-19 has a tremendous influence on the way the people reacted and managed the situation as the National Committee on Disease Control (NCDC) tried its best to educate and inform the Nigerian public on how best to manage the situation. It is also on record that the NCDC did not account for the number of deaths of multitude as we see in other countries that have recorded a large number of COVID-19 related deaths. It is also an established fact that social media played a big role through the use of humour to pass messages across to the people, thereby making the tension in the society to go down. Even though it is recorded that the COVID-19 is still not gone, but the people now know that the disease is real and they are to abide by all the safety protocol by observing social distancing, using nose mask and all other safety measures as endorsed by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Humour is known to impact communication by signaling important or sensitive information. It also makes a message more inherently interesting thereby increasing the attentiveness of the listeners. In other words, the creation of humour creates a precedent of agreement between two or more individuals, thereby making persuasion easier. Social media have actually helped in creating

awareness on the COVID-19 pandemic by informing, educating and entertaining people. It is also an established fact that most people are on social media these days as we are in the age of digital reproduction. In addition, the injection of humour on COVID-19 has actually helped the people to relax and have strength to face the deadly virus. Drawing from the above discourse, the following recommendations are made:

1. This study has serious implications for Nigeria and the world in general. The government should make use of the social media platforms more to pass meaningful information across to the people as most people are on social media than the conventional media.
2. The social media should be used to pass educative and informative information to the people so as to reduce anxieties in the society.

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