

DIGITAL #THEMATTER NARRATIVES AS PANDEMIC ESCAPIST NARRATIVE OF HUMOUR

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Abstract

The existing literature lacks a comprehensive understanding of how digital spaces enable the emergence of new narrative forms that blend cultural narratives, memes, emojis, and flash fiction as a means of coping with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study examines the digital narrative of *#TheMatter*, which was produced by netizens through the blending of cultural narratives and digital culture, with the aim of using humour as a therapeutic mechanism to escape the climate of fear and uncertainty caused by the pandemic. This study made use of random sampling technique and manually selected the texts under the hashtag *#TheMatter* for this study. Through the application of humour as a theoretical framework this study found that *#TheMatter* utilizes simple, high-arousal social mimicked and remixed narratives, without a complicated plot, in the interplay of memes and flash fiction, to convey humorous content. This narrative serves as a form of cognitive distraction and an escape for netizens, allowing them to cope with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic through the application of the concept of humour. The study also observed that *#TheMatter* represents an indigenous narrative that re-appropriates cultural lived experiences within the framework of humour.

Keywords: Digital, *#Thematter*, Netizens, pictures, pandemic, communal, Covid-19.

Introduction

Literary productions and consumption are informed by social interactions and provide the premise for analyses. This research takes a brief examination of the framing of humour and highlights the progression of humour in traditional African society from the point of written literature and its interface as a tool for social and political activism to the point of its redeployment as a tool for social distraction through the framework of laughter. The African oral environment before the advent of written literature made use of humour as a corrective measure for social ills. The African preliterate society also used humour as a form of check and balance through the creative deployment of humour as a form of social criticism.

Written literature and stand-up comedy employ humour as a technique and a medium for social and political intervention. Ibukun Filain and Michael Ajayi Temitope see stand-up comedy as an aspect of humour from an ideological point of view (141). They note further that "humour, itself, is a function of ideological inclinations—what humans find funny depends on their ideological beliefs on what is funny" (141). The foregoing illustrates that humour is a cultural product of shared beliefs and ideologies in relation to life and it provides the premise by which laughter is instigated. They further note that "the ideology of humour stems out of the nature of the phenomenon of humour. As a social phenomenon, humour is believed to be harmless" (144). With the ideological bent of humour, poets and dramatics over the years have used humour as a form of political activism and intervention in Nigerian political discourse.

Niyi Akingbe argues that contemporary Nigerian poets have addressed the country's social and political problems using satire, which is an aspect of humour... (183). Humour acts as a vehicle for the interrogation of social and political abnormalities. Sani I. et al. affirm the foregoing when they comment that "Humour in political cartoons is used as an instrument to highlight solely current political and social issues in society" (150). The foregoing highlights the roles of humour in tradition and contemporary society. Digital humour is still used as a tool for social correction as seen in flip side narrative of #NOTALLSARS. In commenting about social media humour, Onyekachi Onuoha submits that; "...#NOTALLSARS from one end of narrative justification to environment of narrative humour as a means of activism and advocacy for rape victims and survivors within the framework of police brutality of young men" (1071). Onuoha, seems to suggest that humour is mobile and its narrative re-appropriation to function as a corrective measure in digital humour. However, far from the premise of humour as a social activism and political confrontation, during the 2020 lockdown, humour was deployed as a form of social distraction providing hope for Nigerian netizens in the digital space.

Digital humour in this study is defined as mimicry and remixed memes in the interplay of flash fiction using cultural memory in narrative blend to elicit laughter. Digital humour is online memes, pictorial narratives, audio-visual short videos that elicit laughter. Humour is a community production of shared reality and acted as relief for Nigerian netizens during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Nitya Pandey notes in regard to humour that; "...is an essential part of human interaction and community building" (142). During the pandemic, humour was used through hashtag trended narrative of #Thematter to distract the populace through humour from climate of fear and netizens bonded through various remixed social narratives. Mathew Yates et al in regards to communal digital humour notes that; "An individual's emotional response to humour can forge a sense of community with others who likewise share a similar emotional response. For instance, a joke generally requires some relevant background knowledge in order to understand the humour "(2). Humour is a product of shared experience.

Yates et al in an attempt to categorise "Egoa" a form of Chinese online humour, suggest the nature of digital humour thus: "This contemporary phenomenon has gained notoriety in the form of multimedia...whereby Chinese netizens remix audio, visual and gaming materials in a satirical spirit" (2). The foregoing provides a premise for further definition of digital humour as narratives that make use of remix audio-visual and other materials for humorous effect. Victoria D. Smith et al in trying to capture the importance of humour in online classrooms seems to highlight the possibilities of humour to be a transmitted one mediated by the interface of technology. They note online humour as a form of virtual audio-visual use of humorous lessons by instructors (2017). This work focuses on mimicry and remixed memes and flash fictions Nigerian netizens trended during the lockdown as a means of providing humorous contents as a form of social relive.

Bradley E. Wiggins, drawing on Richard Dawkins' concept of memes, suggests that memes are cultural units or ideas that aim to replicate themselves for the purpose of survival. He emphasizes that individuals act as vehicles facilitating this replication process (2). *#TheMatter* as a form of factive narrative blends cultural memory with digital culture such as flash fiction, memes, and emoji to pass its message of humour across. Vyvyan Evans commenting on emoji notes that; "...emojis are the colourful symbols- the works, smileys, love hearts and so on embedded as a single character images..." (25). What this means is that emoji is an image language using symbols as representation of words and meaning. Evan went further to note that; "An Emoji... is a visual representation of feelings, Idea, entity status or event" (28). And this is in line with Marcel Danesi who sees emojis as; "...pre-constructed and largely standardised pictorial characters, they can be seen to constitute a new kind of artificial universally usable writing code" (4). Emojis is a pictorial language character known by the users' community.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on the discursive analysis of data. This study made use of random sampling technique and manually selected the texts under the hashtag *#TheMatter* for this study. The data for the study were manually collected from social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, and were then subjected to textual analysis. This methodological approach allowed the researchers to examine the digital productions of Nigerian netizens in their efforts to cope with the climate of fear during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study utilizes the concept of humor to analyze the literary content of *#TheMatter*, which is identified as an emergent form of new narratives during 2020 COVID-19. The researchers examined how the digital culture and indigenous memory were blended to create a sense of relief and escape from the fear and uncertainties associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

#Thematter As Digital Literary Texts and Social Function

#Thematter is a global trend having social nationalistic narrative within its framework. Nigerian #Thematter is a personal and variant narrative of the collective, structured through cultural memories and aid of humour as alternative narrative to Covid-19 climate of fear and death. Ben Okri in capturing the moment and the functionality of art during the outbreak of deadly disease submit; "It is not only through viruses that a people die. People also perish when they fail to keep alive the values that make them human—the wellsprings of their sanity. It may be that it is not only self-isolation and science that save us. We may also be saved by laughter, by catharsis, by optimism of being able to see beyond these times, with stories, with community, with songs." The foregoing is using art as stability to climate of fear and encouraging hope that is embedded in art through cultural memory.

Nigerian netizens' narratives are responding to its time through social media literature and implicate the practise of English literature. History has it that *The Canterbury tale* was motivated by the "Great Pestilence" of 1348-49, which killed half of England's population and the black world. *Canterbury tale* is an escapist narrative like #Thematter which acts as a medium of laughter and distraction amidst the pandemic and the resultant hardship of the lockdown. In the climate of fear and uncertainties as it is illustrated by Covid-19, #Thematter is a literary narrative fashioned by netizens to preserve their psyche from the ravaging effect of the pandemic. #Thematter made use of memes, emojis, memes videos and brief flash fiction of shared communal experience to distract the masses from the effect of the fear of what lies ahead. #Thematter seems to be Nigeria's own concept of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* where the storytellers in an attempt to survive the plague tell different stories on their journey to escape the plague.

The internet during the pandemic serves as a medium of fears as a result of the news report of the pandemic and it was also a medium of entertainment as seen in the trended hashtag of #Thematter. #Thematter seems to be a global trend by people around the world during May 2020 as a result of the lockdown due to Covid-19. However, most selected #Thematter narrative tells African stories and appears to be meant for African audiences given the content of the narrative as would be analysed below. #Thematter is a trend with social content of people who get involved in the predicament motivated by friends and family seeking for intervention. #Thematter is a hilarious presentation of human experiences trended on Facebook, twitter and other social media apps and brought temporary relief to Africans on the social media spaces. Two months after the lockdown due to Covid-19 pandemic, #Thematter trended as a global response to the pandemic and our focus is on individual #Thematter which makes use of cultural memory as a technique in telling humorous mimetic narrative. Kristen Over calls *Canterbury tales* as "Chaucer's Plague Tales." What this scholar infers is the role of the bubonic in the composition of *Canterbury tales*, which shapes and shares the same temperament with Nigerian Netizens' narrative.

#Thematter appears in the form of a memes flash fictional narrative in blend nature with written text and emojis which serves as a temporary escape for the masses who are temporarily preoccupied with it, thus diverting their attention from the Covid-19 pandemic. *#Thematter* is comical and uses shared cultural memories as narrative technique in the presentation of the theme. The plot is simple and psychologically developed through reimagining of the possibility bent of the narrative since the narrative is cultural and lived experience in Nigerian society. *#Thematter* is netizens' "social medium" used through cultural inference to relate to the thematic focus and shared narrative in the organic and virtual spaces. For instance, in *Canterbury tales*, Chaucer is the coordinating griot while in the trended hashtag of the title threads *#Thematter* becomes a coordinated response to Covid-19 pandemic by Nigerian Netizens storytellers in the digital space using their handles. What *#Thematter* did to the psyche of Nigerians is that it gave them the opportunity to laugh again in the face of adversity. *#Thematter* is alternative narrative and responses to the narrative of Covid-19 and its decimation of Netizens' economy and wellbeing. *#Thematter* provides a vent for man to laugh at the stupidity of his existence through shared memories of man's desire for love, wealth, friendship etc. Like Chaucer's characters were on a pilgrimage away from the bubonic plague, Nigerian Netizens were on a psychological pilgrimage away from the narratives of Covid-19 pandemic and some tell the stories through the trended hashtag while others listen like Chaucer's characters. *#TheMatter* is a personal and communal narratives like *Canterbury Tales*. It illustrates how the historical narrative of pandemic repeats itself in a unique way from the generation that sets the pandemic literary standard. It is of note that the *#Thematter* shares the same psychological temperament with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in terms of using storytelling to mitigate the effect and the fear of sudden death.

Nigerian netizens narrative is what literary scholars like Rob Gaylard and Martin Trump speak of in view of stories written in Apartheid South Africa: Black South Africans wrote majorly short stories as a result of the effect of apartheid. Most Blacks wrote short stories because of the uncertainties of human existence under apartheid. Apartheid was a form of disease like the bubonic plague in England, Apartheid through racism killed Black South Africans. However, Covid-19 pandemic seems to emphasis this short or rather micro narrative form as it is reminiscent of *#Thematter*. Netizens' short concentration span as a result of the pandemic did not allow them to compose long narratives and like South African Black writers, netizens wrote flash fiction in blends of memes and emojis; sometimes it includes meme videos with short write ups. In the climate of fear and uncertainties as witnessed during the Covid-19 in Nigeria, meme and flash fictional narratives were used by netizens to entertain themselves. This is because the pandemic which is a form of war and does not allow human to focus on extensive narrative.

#Thematter came handy within the netizens' community to provide temporary release from fear through humour. *#Thematter* is memes flash fictional narrative in

embedded memories of shared cultural experiences and anticipated responses. One of such is when Erigga @erigganewmoney story-tweets; "That matter na shrine dem take settle dem" and Samson responded, "Him younger broda done use soap take wash clothes, soap wey Baba give his elder brother for protection" a second look at the narrative indicate that it is indigenous and makes use of cultural memory as a narrative technique. What the narrative does to the psyche of the netizens is that some anticipate the fate of the elder brother. #Thematter is a fictive narrative told by members of the digital community making use of a multimedia approach to storytelling, and it has a lot of storytellers within the trending hashtag title, like Akachi Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*.

Cultural Memory and Shared Narrative in #*TheMatter* "art" is influenced by people's socio-cultural interaction, and it is this perceived interaction that motivates the language and thematic preoccupation of what is produced and consumed within the African literary space, right from oral literature to print down to the emergence of African digital literature. The beauty of this cultural memory is the concept of the use of a unique language that is peculiar to the people, and this is clearly illustrated in #*TheMatter*. The matter is a factual narrative that is a product of the people's lived experience and is re-enacted as a survival mechanism against the climate of fear as demonstrated within the climate of the pandemic. Cultural memory makes use of meme representation as a narrative medium. Bradley E. Wiggins, describing the function of Internet memes, notes that "the Internet memes... are a mixed iterated message that can be rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, or other discursive activity." An Internet meme is a more specific term for the various interactions it represents, such as images, macro memes, GIFS, hashtags, video memes, and more. Its function is to posit an argument visually in order to commence, extend, counter, or influence a discourse. Naturally, this can occur within humorous contests; however, humour is merely the surface-level entry point for social salience. Digging deeper, one can view the argument within the meme, which is usually, if not always, representative of an ideological practise (11). The Netizens make use of memes in blended flash fiction in #*TheMatter* to emphasise the message of their narrative. The memes used in most narratives of #*TheMatter* are consciously chosen to emphasise the temperament of the narrative.

Sproutsocial.com depicts memes as "a way of expressing a culturally relevant idea. A meme is an image or video that represents the thoughts and feelings of a specific audience." And this is the case of most Nigerian Netizens who make use of memes in social space. Sproutsocial.com went further: "Most modern "memes" are cultural inside jokes. They're a way of connecting with people across the Internet through unique photos that become instantly recognizable. Memes collect emotions, ideas, and actions into an easy-to-translate format. Memes are ideal for the digital age." This is illustrated in Abdulsalam's communal composition, which makes use of memes and flash fiction to communicate humour within the framework of shared

memory, thus: the plot of the narrative is left within the structure of cultural memory in the sense that the person who fell into the prison would try to convince the prison warders that he is not part of the prisoners but the prisoners insist that he is part of them and this matter they have tried to settle. *#Thematter*, which is not easy to settle, leads to laughter on the part of those who come in contact with the narrative. The face of the man implicates his gender and the plight he is facing, the emojis also indicate that the narrative is structured to induce laughter. The narrative is structured in Nigerian pidgin, which makes the masses able to relate with it.

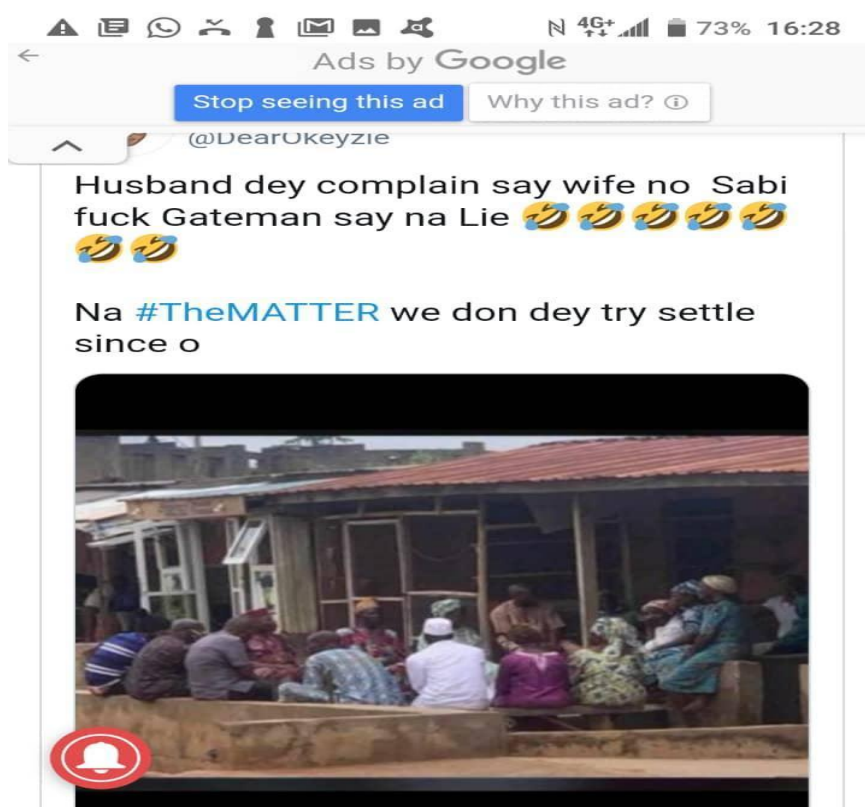
The narrative is humorous but the participants are allowed to have a part through shared experience by building the plot of the narrative and it is in the process of trying to figure the plot development of the narrative that the read-viewer becomes a part in the making of meaning within the narrative and this meaning is dependent on the individuals cultural background and exposure to the issue under discourse. Although the meme is created from the movie titled Prison Break, the content is further re-domesticated within the Nigerian experience. The narrator stops half way while it allows the participants to gradually picture the fate of the person who fell into the prison and the prisoners claiming that he is part of them. Abus Sneh introduces a new bent to the narrative thus; "Olosho don use the hand sanitizer rob dick, dick no gree stand again na the matter we dey settle since morning." Although lexically there is no possibility of the hand sanitizer to affect erect medically, what is narrative does is to implicate the period that motivates the narrative within the trended title hashtag *#Thematter*. What some narrators do with the trended titled hashtag is to highlight the setting of the narrative through an unscientific method of their composition in an attempt to achieve humour. Nana's narrative within the communal narrative of *#Thematter* provides a link to social tension and dishonesty in peoples relations to one another thus; "3 guys post 1 pikin for children's days... the matter we still dey settle am ooo." Although this is humorous, it is serious in the sense that three different guys posting the same picture of a child during Children's Day brings about conflict although it seems humorous but leads to conflict. Within the chain of the narrative people laugh at it and it is meant for fun but those who come in contact with it somehow anticipate the social tension that such revelation would lead to. With the chain of the narrative Andong Paul humorously assumed there is a judge by saying that; "Abeg all cases has been adjourned till tomorrow. Dem don steal judge wig" (the narrator uses emojis of laughing out loud to conclude it statement). What this does is to make people laugh so that the judge is preoccupied with looking for the wig rather than passing judgement and something as trivial as a wig would affect the pace of judgement. Dark humour is a diversion from the reality at present as illustrated by Dotun's tweet that:



Dark humour illustrates the plight of man which also allows one to see the tension that is associated with a final year student seeing that he or she is in 100 level and they are in the Dean's office trying to settle the matter. The beauty of the narrative is that it is told in Nigerian Pidgin English using Memes to illustrate the plight of the student. The face and tears illustrate the trauma the student has been through at the point of his or her encounter and they had to go to the office to settle the matter.

#Thematter has a way of including the title of the narrative, the narrative started without the title and uses the title in the creative way to indicate that it is part of the collective narrative. The narrative end thus; "we dey dean office now dey reason how we wan take settle *#Thematter*. So "*#Thematter*" functions in dual capacity as title of a narrative and as a measure to settle dispute between the student and the university as a result of them tagging him a 100level student. The narratives are linked together by a thread known as *#Thematter* and these narratives take different dimension like that Taofeek who wrote; "Tenant dog no allow LANDLORD enter house sleep since yesterday night. Na the matter we wake up dey settle since morning." It is humorous and we understand what the fate of such tenant would be from the perspective of cultural perfection of the relationship between a tenant and landlord in Nigeria, in fact the "lord" in "landlord" has greater meaning in this part of the world. The matter they are settling is imagined however, one can arrive at a conclusion where the landlord asks the tenant to pack out of his house as a result of what the tenant's dog did. Colletta in defining dark humour is of the view that; "...is characterised by the very concerns of modernism. It is generally defined by ambience, confused chronology, plots that seem to go nowhere, and a conflicting, or even unreliable narrative stance (2). The above-interrogated story and some stories within trended titled hashtag have the characteristics of dark humour.

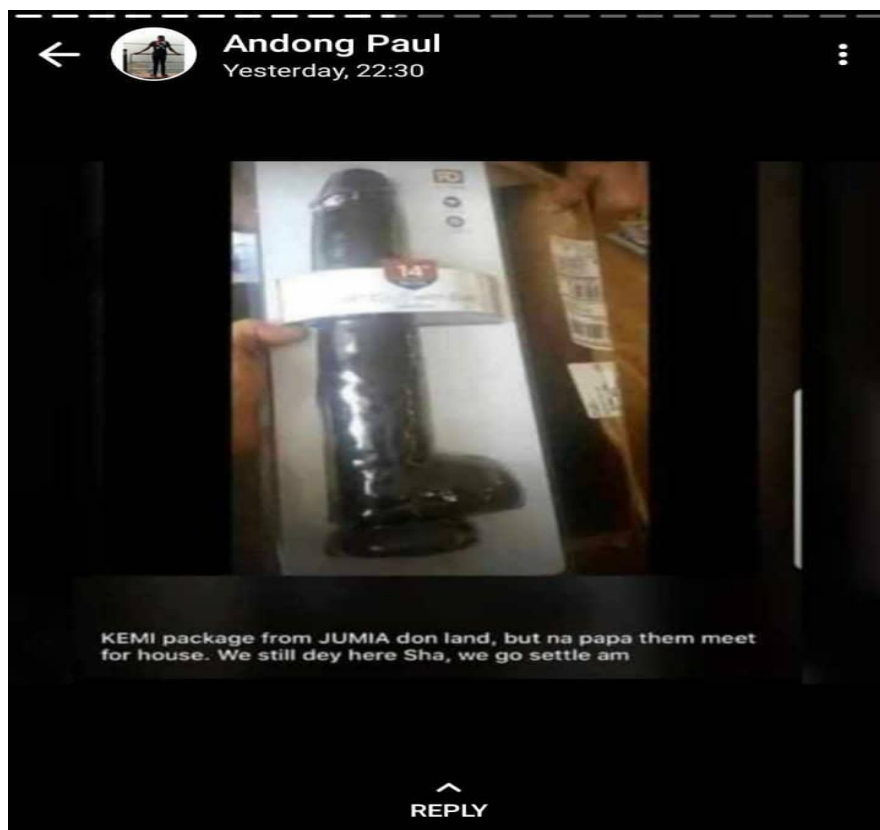
The escapist narrative continue and sometime it is meshed in charity as seen in the tweet of Bro Ola who narrates that; " My guy carry him babe go store make she go but Tecno. That one come Dey touch Samsung s10, na so the phone fall down break. Them don tie my guy say e must pay. Na #Thematter we dey settle since." The laugh induced stress as a result of the humorous content of the narrative. The narrative gives the society something to occupy themselves with as the pictorial flash fictional narrative below illustrates:



The matter the members of society are settling on is how the gatekeeper becomes aware that the woman can fuck very well when such an action is a private act. It allows the community to somehow participate in the narrative, and if one has to go further, one has to anticipate the action of the husband, who might accuse the wife of infidelity. The meme narrative and blended use of emojis show how members of the community have gathered to find a solution to the comment of the gateman. This narrative questions the value of the gateman's action and holds it up for humorous effect.

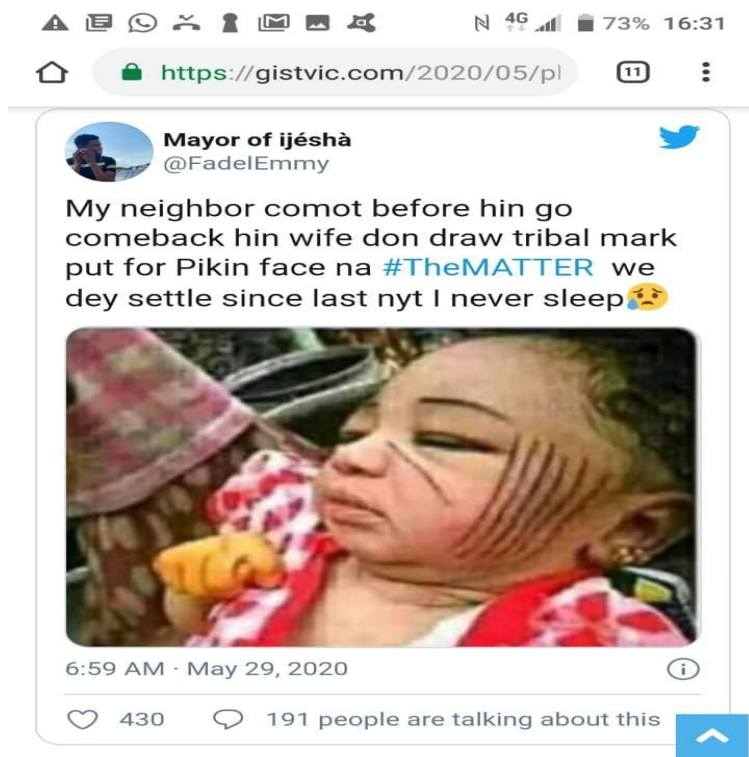
Andong Paul's narrative captures the effect and role of pictures in meaning-making. which is implicated in Barthes' submission that "a photograph is verbalised in

the very moment it is perceived; better, it is only perceived verbalised (if there is a delay in verbalization, there is disorder in perception)." (28). Kemi's parents would be amazed at what their daughter would want to do with a vibrator. This would bring up different concerns, and it might even lead to her parents disciplining her. Like Colletta's submission, this imposes a comedic order on the chaos through the laughter of Kemi's actions.



The understanding of this meme requires what Barthes called "cultural knowledge" about this object. Barthes, acknowledging what is required to make a case in the interpretation of the photograph that implicates, notes that "...require a generally cultural knowledge, and refer back to signified, each of which is global (for example, Italianicity), imbued with euphoric values" (35). Vibrator needs cultural knowledge, including the fact that it looks like that of a real man. Although the content of the storey is serious, it provides humour as the participant attempts to settle the matter. One thing that is necessary to note is that humour gives rise to multiple interpretations based on individual cultural understanding.

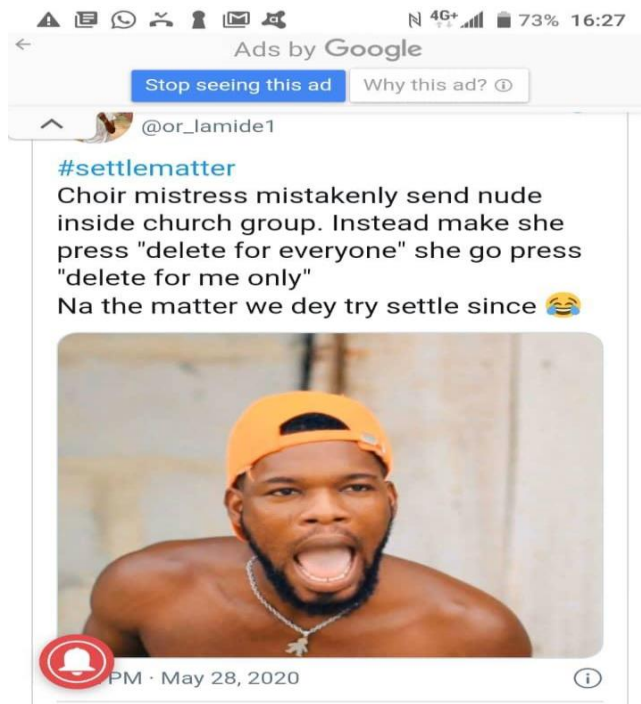
Mayer of Ijesha's narrative appropriates cultural practise and presents it as a site for possible dispute as a result of disagreement in practise or a lack of consultation in the humour narrative presented below, thus:



Through the humour structure of the presentation of a serious issue, there is a twist in the narrative in which the neighbours attempt to settle the matter as a result of the wife's personal decision. The meme mocks previous practice, presents it as a cause for conflict, and disfigures viewing it with the aesthetics of today, far away from the site of ancient practices. This is what Colletta calls "comic defiance." Like Janet M. Gibson, the above narrative uses playful incongruity or an alternative interpretation of cultural reality, which is the element of humour in flash fiction storytelling. The narrative and the picture are social activities, and they are used by the author as a tool to counter the stress caused by the pandemic. @Or_Lamide1 provides relief for the masses from fear by allowing them to laugh at the hidden side of our collective humanity.

@Or-Lamide1 tells the storey of a choir mistress who lives a double life and the mistakes she makes using technology. The man in the meme laughs at the congregational disgrace she would pass through as a result of her action. Irrespective of the seriousness of the action, it gave man the opportunity to laugh at life and not to focus on the narrative of the pandemic, which stifles the masses and kills them psychologically. Kurt Feyaerts calls the action of the choir mistress cognitive

involvement that allows for mean-making in which the church members would also engage.



The man's memes in a blended flash fiction narrative explain the shock that other church members would express as soon as they came into contact with the image. The funny part of the narrative is that the choir mistress has no control over the image on the platform because instead of deleting it for everyone, she deleted it just for herself. This humour does not call for pity but for humans to laugh at the lady's supposed mistake. The support picture captures Ramakrishna Raddy's submission that "humour brings amusement and laughter to a speech so that the audience is entertained" (14). Likewise, humour brings amusement to a story, as indicated in the picture above, and Raddy continues that "storey has the power to transmit emotion, and humour helps to deliver emotions" (15). The Choir Mistress' storey has a life of its own, full of newer definitions as a result of the extended definition of mobile number as a definition of the owner on social media. Through humor, @Or-lamide1 connects with his audience.

Nigerian Netizens are responding to global pandemic through humour in the trended hashtag of #Thematter and this illustrates Ben Okri's submission with regards to art that; "We need art to reawaken our sense of the wonder of being, to remind us of our freedom, and to highlight the things in our culture that enable us to withstand the dreaded visage of death." #Thematter narrative reawakens the community's lived experiences and preoccupies the minds of individuals to face life. @Simplyzull's

narrative validates Okri's submission thus; "Simi don gave birth ooo the pikin resemble FALZ we Dey ADKUNLE GOLD family house we dey settle the matter #Settlematter." While Simi has given birth, the baby does not look like the father and as such it raises concerns. This narrative gives the community an opportunity to laugh at the dishonesty of humans; it also acts as a temporary escape from the narrative of death through the framework of humour during the pandemic. Lisa Colletta highlights the nature of humour over the threat of pandemic thus; "...humour is the victory of pleasure...over the most threatening aspect of reality" (25). #Thematter amidst Covid-19 pandemic illustrate the "new" formed humorous trended titled Hashtag of #Thematter as an escapist narrative from the narrative of the pandemic.

This study makes use of situational humour, the incongruity resolution theory and Plato's superiority concepts which emphasise that laughter is induced by a sense of superiority over the plights of others. Incongruity resolution theory is of the view that humour is achieved at the moment of realisation of oddness between a narrative in certain situation and the character within the context of the narrative. Ronald A Berk in the book *Humour: as an instructional Defibrillator* describes the formula of humour and implicate the incongruity theory thus; "Basic formula for humour: the most basic structure of the humour... is incongruity (a.k.a contrast resolution). It consists of at least two elements: expected content, which is serious material to set up the humour. "unexpected content or punch line, which is an outrageous spin or a ridiculous outcome" (6). This is seen in almost all #Thematter narrative on the social media space. Berk continues the formula for humour thus: "expected serious set-up with commonly understood situation or content." (2) Expected buildup of tension (3) Unexpected twist punch-line" (7). What this illustrates is the structure of the text under study and implicates the theory in use in the analyses of the text of this study. Margareth Nnenna's composition collaborates Berk's formula thus; "Oga done sack gateman tell am say make em carry him property gateman enter inside carry junior na #thematter we wan go settle since." The tension is not expected but the gateman carrying junior intensifies the tension and this is an unexpected twist that needs explanation within psychological fashioning of the narrative.

Robin Mitchell Boyask in *Plague and the Athenian Imagination: Drama, History and the Cult of Asclepius* is of the view that the great Athena's plague had great effect on the imagination of its literary artists and the social imagination of the society as a whole. And this is a clear indication of how pandemic redirect the focus and form of art which is illustrated by various humorous narratives within the trended (#) hashtag of #Thematter which came into being as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic with its attendant lockdown and the Nigerian netizens needs a means to maintain their social interactions and communal existence so they are re-domesticate in their social media space in telling narratives that are humorous and act as escape for the masses from their fear. This is in line with Kobena Mercer's submission that; "laughter matters for all sorts of reasons.... It has the power to change feelings in an instant. (...) Humor lightens

our mood or shifts our spirit. "We acknowledge the way pleasure mitigates anxiety." *#Thematter* mitigates the anxiety of netizens in their responses to COVID-19 and gives them something new to focus on. Humor appears in a serious environment, but with the twist of an event, it evokes laughter within the structure. Accounting for the nature of humor, Elena Mendez G de Paredes notes that "its presence evokes the absence of seriousness, whereas seriousness would provide a possibility for the appearance of the humorous side without needing to evoke it." Humour and seriousness represent two sides of the same coin which are offered to the speaker when it comes to perform a communication act" (86). The foregoing illustrates the netizens' humour stories on the social media spaces that are held together by a unique hashtag and are trended on various social media platforms. Sometimes the turn is grabbed and appropriated into a newer narrative within the thread of trended hashtag narrative. Elena Mendez G de Paredes continues to describe the nature of *#Thematter*; thus, "Humour is an intentional communication event of a transversal simultaneously through the different levels where communication is realised" (86). Social media humour hashtag narrative occurs within the level of narrative where communication is realised and responded to by the netizens through laughter.

The social media is inscribing new forms of narrative by virtue of the cyber space and makes use of storytelling as a medium for humorous effect and a source of relief and entertainment. Social media storytelling makes use of real cultural events and engages in retelling, remixing, mimicry of memes and the blend of emojis with written texts to achieve humorous effect on the netizens' community in the digital space. The titled hashtag is recipe for laughter because it defines the intention that is for laughter purpose without any intention to correct with the caveat *na #thematter we dey settle*. Elena Mendez G de Paredes "Media information humour is a parody genre which takes real news and uses them in a humorous way. This is carried out by a stereotyped conversational structure that relates serious information to its humorous treatment. This new contest provides a target to be made fun of. "Everything is allowed within this communicative frame, and everything can be played with, consciously and intentionally" (85). *#Thematter* is a narrative of shared experience and stereotyped conversational structure, as illustrated in Nigga Daddy (Clown)'s narrative: "I no no how we want to settle *#Thematter* now." *Albino don go throw pikin up for afternoon, e no con see pikin catch again.*" It is a cultural stereotype that an albino does not see when the sun is out and this narrative is constructed with a serious issue of the albino being unable to capture the child he threw up while playing with the child. Even when the narrative discriminates against the albino because of their skin colour, still there is laughter even amidst a serious issue.

Within the humorous story, the narrator subtly tells the audience that it is a joke by inserting *#thematter* within the narrative and this is more or less a narrative contract that the audience would allow the writer to entertain them. Freud clearly illustrates the nature of humour and the social contract of such narrative between the

audience and storyteller thus; "... either the thought express possesses in itself the character of being a joke or the joke resides in the expression which the thought has been given in the sentence" (20). Covid-19 pandemic is a serious threat as a result of the finality of death, which is associated with the outbreak of the disease. The pandemic disrupted global and national perception of life and radically defined the survival of people based on self-isolation and quarantine to cushion the effect and spread of the disease.

This is where *#Thematter* came in, as a temporary respite on the psyche of the people. It allows the people to frame the narrative based on their understanding of social events as seen in the humorous narrative of Charles; "Pastor put 3k as offering and head usher says total offering for that day is 500 naira. Na the matter we dey settle since morning o. G.O. sef don dey involved." The narrative chronicles the dishonesty in religious houses and gives the netizens' community an opportunity to laugh through the medium of settling the matter. This narrative allows laughter amidst the climate of fear. Lisa Colleta in commenting on how art helps in the balance of narrative and the preservation of lives submit that: "...the comedic works of many British novelists between the wars are haunted by a sense of anxiety and powerlessness, marked by feelings of loss and uncertainty and shot through with the trauma of violence and threat of further brutality. However, despite the violent events and unhappy endings, many works from the period insist on being funny, exploring the central themes of modernism, alienation instability, mechanisation and fragmentation through grim form of comedy that according to Virginia Woolf, leaves readers laughing so hard they seek as grace as corpses (2). Nigerian Netizens seem to look beyond the tension and wrote brief narratives through their social media handles ignoring the anxiety that the Covid-19 and immediate lockdown present to them.

Many of the Nigerian Netizens writer in community narrative of *#Thematter* unlike British novelists did not focus on modernism and fragmentation par se but on the lived cultural experiences of the masses. Humour writers in digital like Andong Paul reconstruct cultural lived memory to achieve humour. Andong Paul; "I no even think say this one get solution oo (then it added emoji of lol). The egg wey Babalawo gives Yahoo Boy makes a break for him at junction for midnight. Him girlfriend don fry am chop bread..." the excerpt indicates traditional means of wealth and the implications of it when one fails to adhere to the rules of the priest. Like conventional humour the setting is structured amidst human society and it is not done for corrective purposes but to laugh at the folly and plight of man.

Conclusion

Nigerian netizens are producing and consuming a different kind of literature that is informed by the interface of technological apps and expands our perception of literature. *#Thematter* is a collective narrative using flash fiction and memes as counter-survival strategies and distractions from the ravaging effects of COVID-19 and

the destructive effect of its news on the psyche of Nigerians. Through *#Thematter*, Nigerian netizens adopt alternative means to reality through humour and collective storytelling in cyberspace, which engages their imagination and provides a form of catharsis for their existence. The social media narrative of *#Thematter* makes use of emojis, memes, and flash fiction with the blend of (auto) biographical memories as constructive narrative in passing humorous content as escapist narrative by netizens in the digital space. Social media storytelling in the case of *#TheMatter* is social reliving and preserving for Nigerian netizens. *#Thematter* employs a simple and high-arousal socially mimicked narrative to induce laughter. The plot of the matter, in its interplay of memes and flash fiction, passes on humorous contents across social media spaces. The matter is an indigenous narrative remediated through cultural lived experience within the framework of humour.

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