

Research Article

Online Humour as a Coping Mechanism in the Face of Corona Virus Pandemic: The Kenyan Context

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Abstract: WhatsApp as a social media platform continues to increase in popularity and constitutes a fundamental part of online discussions where user-generated content, often on topical issues, is shared and discussed by members of specific virtual communities. This study aimed to investigate the use of humour in discourses relating to the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) carried out on various WhatsApp groups as a coping mechanism to the impending threats and dangers posed by the confirmation of covid-19 cases in Kenya. Twenty five *memes* were collected from five WhatsApp groups populated by 921 participants majorly between the ages of 30 - 50 years between 13th March 2020 and 1st April 2020. These included: 1 professional group, 1 former high school students' group, 1 former college students' group, 1 county political forum and 1 religious group to which the authors belonged. The *meme* contents were subjected to Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis with a view to examining how the Kenyan public responded to the presence of the disease through the use of humour and deconstructing the semantic implications inherent in them. It emerged that humour on the COVID-19 pandemic transcended the domestic, educational, political, professional, religious, sexual and social domains of human existence. The study concluded that in the face of life-threatening calamities, people tended to resort to humour in order to evoke positive feelings and laughter by sharing funny content on the social media platforms. Laughter being a universal language and one of our first communication methods and considering the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic is still on-going, the findings of this study should therefore expand on the scholarly discourse on the potential psychological impact of humour in life-threatening situations and to inform pre-and-post-trauma counseling therapy sessions.

Keywords: CMDA, Corona Virus Disease, Humour, Social Media, Virtual Community.

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INTRODUCTION

Kenya announced its 1st corona virus disease infection on 13th March, 2020 (Ministry of Health (MOH), 2020). This being a novel disease reported to have high mortality rates worldwide, Kenyans' responses to the announcement was one filled with apprehension, uncertainty and fear (Kahongeh, 2020). The government introduced numerous health measures to help curb the spread of the disease. These included the dissemination of public health messages, self-quarantine for those suspected to have come into contact with infected persons and forced quarantine for those who fail to self-isolate, curfew and lockdown in specific counties, and social distancing that required the public to stay at home and minimise physical social interactions (MOH, 2020). In line with these directives, the Kenyan public adopted various ways to continue socialising with one another. These included using online social networking sites, such as the WhatsApp,

for social interactions, creating, sharing and sometimes forwarding similar messages on online communication platforms, as a way of creating awareness about the disease and the necessary measures needed to prevent getting infected (Hassan, 2020).

Within the online sites, the content shared assumed various formats including, but not limited to: memes; health notices from the government; videos and photos. The information covered diverse topics such as social, cultural, political, scientific, sports and entertainment (Nyakangi, 2020). As is common in any social groupings, interactions between participants within these groups often ended up taking a humorous approach based on the content shared and their subsequent interrogations. The net effect of these responses being the emergence and adoption of a humorous genre as a way of coping with the prevalence of depression, stress, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress

disorder amongst the online community (Njung'e, 2020).

This paper focuses on memes as one of the popular content shared on WhatsApp platforms, a popular social networking platform in the country and one that is accessible via smartphones (Nyakangi, 2020). First conceived by Dawkins (1976) to theoretically explain how a self-replicating cultural unit is transmitted through imitation, memes have evolved and now encompass a significant part of online communication and social engagement (Cannizzaro, 2016). This can be attributed to the fact that they enable the fusion of creativity, art and message (Aziz & Kariko, 2013), and exist in various forms including written words, tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, abstract beliefs (Dawkins, 2006), phrases, videos, images or image macro - a combination of images and text (Chandler, 2012). These forms have been found to have embedded in them certain salient features such as humour, repetitiveness and whimsical content (Shifman, 2012).

While linking the creation and dissemination of memes, Dawkins (1982) likened them to oral communication, where communicators rely on their senses to process information in their minds (encoding and decoding). In a similar manner, users of memes tend to become aware of them through their senses, process them in their minds, and then 'repackage' them in order to pass them along to others. However, this is not always the case; there are instances where the communicators might not repackage the memes, instead opting to spread them by forwarding, linking or copying them - key features afforded by the WhatsApp platform.

Thus, considering their popularity in different online networking sites, coupled with the fact that they are infused with cultural ideologies, symbols and practices, and that they self-replicate and mutate in response to social pressures (Aziz & Kariko, 2013), memes have the potential to disseminate cultural representations and ideologies regarding socio-cultural issues (Chandler, 2013). This presents a need for their critical analysis, especially where the concern would be to discern the implications of the content inherent in them. This study decodes the semantic implications of the memes as shared in five WhatsApp groups in Kenya during the period 13th March 2020 – 1st April 2020 as a way of coping with the stress of corona virus disease.

Online Humour

Due to its universality as an element of public culture and a central aspect of everyday life and interaction, the concept of humour has been extensively studied in disciplinary fields including psychology, philosophy, sociology, literature, and linguistics (Pickering & Lockyer, 2005). Humour aims at causing laughter, and laughter being a social human activity,

eases tension while creating a sense of unity amongst group members (Pascale 2004).

With the rising popularity of online social networking sites like WhatsApp, humour plays a significant role, where humour is extensively employed as a mechanism for establishing a sense of community, building connections, promoting positive interactions, enabling self-disclosure and defusing tension and conflict (Lefcourt, 2001; Yip & Martin, 2006). The humorous content created and disseminated on these platforms feature diverse forms, such as positive and negative humour and themes based on their potential impact on social relationships (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Humour is therefore no longer predominantly verbalized, but also features visual formats (Shifman, 2007; 2014). However, in line with the scope of this study, it is of importance to note that although not all memes are humorous or intended to make jokes, humour is a key component in many of them (Knobel & Lankshear, 2006). Thus, understanding the potential psychological impact of messages inherent in humorous content shared on platforms such as WhatsApp, regarding the corona virus disease, is crucial in guiding policies in public health communication even as the pandemic is still on-going.

Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the use of humour in discourses relating to the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) carried out on 5 WhatsApp groups, as a coping mechanism to the impending threats and dangers posed by the confirmation of COVID-19 cases in Kenya. The inherent messages in the selected memes were analysed by deconstructing their semantic implications in order to explain their potential impact on the psychological wellbeing of their consumers.

Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis

This study applied the tenets of Computer Mediated Discourses Analysis (CMDA) as propounded by Herring (2002). The assumptions underlying CMDA are similar to those of linguistic discourse analysis, where the goal is to identify patterns in discourses that are demonstrably present, but that may not be immediately obvious to the casual observer or to the discourse participants themselves. However, given that CMDA is shaped by the technological features of computer-mediated communication systems, it is therefore suited for empirical investigations in what ways, to what extent, and under what circumstances mediated technologies shape the communication taking place through them.

Accordingly, Herring (2004) opines that CMDA applies to four domains of language, ranging prototypically from smallest to largest linguistic unit of analysis: 1) structure, 2) meaning, 3) interaction, and 4) social behaviour. The social domain includes linguistic expressions of play, conflict, power, and group

membership over multiple exchanges. It is assumed that discourse involves speaker choices and that these choices are conditioned by linguistic, cognitive as well as social considerations and factors (Chafe, 1994; Sacks, 1984). It then follows that discourse analysis can provide insight into non-linguistic as well as linguistic phenomena. It methodologically allows the researcher to conceptualize, design and interpret a research project involving identifying and counting discourse phenomena in a corpus of computer-mediated texts. Thus, considering that online memes emerge as linguistic, social and medical discourses, CMDA is an appropriate method for analysing the textual content of the sampled memes.

METHODOLOGY

Twenty five (25) memes sampled between 13th March 2020 and 1st April 2020 from five (5) WhatsApp groups populated by 921 participants formed the corpus of data used in the study. The groups, which were purposively selected from those to which the authors belong, included: 1 professional development group, 1 former high school students' group, 1 former college students' group, 1 county political forum and 1 religious group. The political, educational, religious, professional, social, domestic and sexual categories were employed in coding the sampled texts. The text analysis involved the application of Snow's (2015) psychological theories of the power of humour in social media marketing. This helped in identifying the memes that elicited more than five responses from the participants in each of the identified groups. CMDA was then applied on the discourses to explain the communicative, linguistic and psychological attributes inherent in the content of the sampled memes.

DISCUSSIONS

1. **@CoronaVirusChallenge: After so many condoms, we really gonna die from sneezing.**
Friday 13th March 2020.

Given that the @CoronaVirusChallenge was an online challenge aimed at following up on the confirmation of the first corona virus disease in Kenya, the humour in this post lies in the deliberate contrast between HIV (which is preventable by using condoms and which Kenyans had generally learned to live with) and covid-19 which is a new respiratory disease with one of its symptoms being sneezing. To this participant, it is more serious and painful to die from HIV than COVID-19 which should be as simple as the common flu. Public health implications emerge since people do not seem to see the COVID-19 as a serious danger as this posting is shared one day after the confirmation of the first coronavirus case in Kenya.

2. **I never thought our death would also be: MADE IN CHINA.**
Wednesday 18th March 2020

Made in China is a marketing slogan for all Chinese products, a branding tag that is found on all imports from China. There is a common understanding (albeit unproven) among the Kenyan public that Chinese products are of lower quality than those of American or European origin. The public thus views anything from China as low-quality, inferior, not durable and sometimes "fake". Yet Chinese imports to Kenya have doubled over the last five years, growing from Sh167.2 billion in 2012 to last year's Sh390 billion (@trademarkea.com). Imports from China have flooded the Kenyan market to the detriment of local productions. It is therefore ironical that even death should be imported from China. This is with reference to China as the origin of the corona virus disease, and the humour in it is that given the assumed low quality of products emanating from China, in this respect, the coronavirus seems not to be of a low quality or that it is shameful that the participant's death will be caused by a low quality "product".

3. **These men should not be working from home. He works two hours n he's like "mama Nani kuja tulale kidogo" (come we sleep for a while).**
Thursday 19th March 2020

Upon confirmation of the third case of coronavirus infection in Kenya on 17th March 2020, the government announced certain public health measures that were meant to control the rapid spread among the public (MOH, 2020). These included the closure of all schools, colleges and universities, with the Government urging the public to consider working from their homes in order to minimise physical interactions. The pun lies in the "nature of work" that is going on in homes. Above is the voice of a woman complaining that the husband seems to have a lot of time to sleep rather than do official work, thereby becoming a hindrance to her.

4. **If schools are closed for too long, the parents are gonna find a vaccine before the scientists ...**
Thursday 19th March 2020

This meme was posted two days following the Kenyan government's directive to have all schools and institutions of higher learning closed. The humour is directed at parents who seem to be overwhelmed by the task of keeping their children at home when they should be in school. At the same time, the disease has no cure and the hope of scientists finding any vaccine soon is very slim. It is therefore the frustrated parents who will have to find a solution to this disease so that they can get the children back to school.

5. **Go home. Read a book. The world is closed.**
Friday 20th March 2020

The declaration of quarantine and curfew altered the daily operations of many Kenyans. People are generally used to working and socializing during the 24 hours of the day. Yet with the introduced measures,

people were finding it hard to work from home, self-isolate, maintain social distancing and obey the 7.00 pm – 5.00 am curfew. Home had therefore become the “prison” to which they are confined. Yet in spite of these challenges, the participant is reminding the members of his group that home is the best place to be, now that the outside world is no longer safe. He avers that, even if you have nothing to do at home, one can still read a book! The humour within this post encourages the audience to look for alternative ways of coping with their current situation at home because they have nowhere to seek refuge.

6. Gone are the days when people showed off with, “I just came back from UK, USA, China”. Brag now and get quarantined!! Friday 20th March 2020

Going abroad has always been seen as the mark of achievement associated with the emerging middle class in the Kenyan society. It was therefore common to find people boasting in social media platforms about the places they visited as a means of bragging. But following the government’s directive that all international arrivals, including Kenyan nationals, would be quarantined for 14 days at their costs, that kind of show-off was a sure sign of earning a ticket to mandatory quarantine. Hence the humorous warning that bragging about one’s international visits would earn them the unpleasant experience of being quarantined.

7. Someone is having sex right now despite all the problems we are facing in this country and continent, even adding styles. People are so heartless. Friday 20th March 2020

The corona virus disease is an epidemic that has captured the attention of the whole world; governments, researchers, families and individuals. The assumption is that people are so scared that if they are not looking for a solution then they should stay still and wait for a discovery or even pray for a miracle to stop the disease. The post therefore humorously posits that it is unimaginable that at such perilous times, someone should be engaging in sex, and even adding news styles! The meme presents this as being heartless and insensitive to the sufferings of the whole world.

8. I fully support Governor Barchok for burning markets and public caterings, even church surfaces should be burned until the disease get lost. Saturday 21st March 2020

This plays on the Kalenjin accent which finds similarity in sounds of words with different meanings thus leading to a totally different semantics in exactly the same syntactic structure. Actual syntax and semantics should present thus: *I fully support Governor Barchok for banning markets and public gatherings, even church services should be banned until the disease gets lost.* This was in response to Bomet County’s Governor banning public gatherings and ordering the

closure of markets as a way of responding to the need to adhere to the social distancing directive from the national government. The post further recommends that even church services should be banned. The pun lies in the play between the words: burned/banned, gatherings/caterings, services/surfaces. In the local Kalenjin dialect (where Bomet county is situated), the tonology of these words does not make any difference. The distinction is only realized in graphology, thus being a case of forced homophony.

9. Sex workers are confused! Work from home! Whose home? Our home or customers’ home? Sunday 22nd March 2020

Following the government’s order for self-isolation and later curfew, the Kenyan public were also requested to “work from home”. This order applied to all workers in public service and private sector, except for essential services providers. Sex workers fall under neither of these categories. In any case, prostitution is illegal in Kenya (Wiki 2020) Thus, the pun within the post is that since they consider themselves to be workers, if they were to choose to “work from home”, one wonders from whose home they should work.. This is paradoxical in the sense that their clients are grounded at home; the sex workers are themselves grounded at home; in essence they cannot work anywhere!

10. In the UK all those over 70 years to self-quarantine at home. If we do that in Africa, most countries will have no government. Monday 23rd March 2020

The Coronavirus disease is known to be very dangerous to people above 65 years with the age brackets of between 65 -74 years and above 74 years reporting 24.6% and 47.7% of world-wide deaths respectively from coronavirus disease (Worldometer, 2020). Most governments have therefore advised people aged above 60 years to take extra precautionary measures like self-quarantine. Similarly, the Kenya government advised employees aged 50 and above to take mandatory leave and stay at home. The pun in the meme lies in the observation that most African governments are headed by old men, some of whom are described as octogenarians. Asking all old men in Africa to self-isolate means most heads of African states would join the group thus nobody to run the state affairs.

11. Be nice to your wife. Restaurants are closed! Monday 23rd March 2020

A common practice for married Kenyan men is to “eat out” of their homes. However, following the ban on public gatherings, people being asked to stay at home and restaurants, hotels and bars ordered to close, men have no choice but to eat at home. It is therefore important to maintain cordial relations with their spouses. This is a pointer that if it were not for food, one does not necessarily need to be nice to their

spouses. In any case, a common saying goes: the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. This is an indictment on marriage and family life. Family life counsellors will find this interesting as a reference point for maintaining cordial relations between husbands and wives.

12. Imagine surviving all these unprotected sex only to die from unprotected handshake. Tuesday 24th March 2020

Prior to the corona virus disease, HIV and AIDS were the only major pandemic and the way round preventing being infected was to practice safe sex by having one faithful partner or by using condoms. However, there are still those who engaged in unprotected sex and luckily survived. And then coronavirus suddenly appears and that it can be contracted by an innocent act like handshake (WHO, 2020). The participant sharing this meme is exasperated that an innocent act like handshake should be the cause of our death.

13. Who knew it will come a time when churches and bars get the same warning? We are all sinners in the eyes of God! Tuesday 24th March 2020

Within the Kenyan context, bars are associated with sinners who partake of alcohol, drugs, sex and crime. Churches on the other hand are holy grounds associated with piety. As confirmed cases of corona virus disease continued to rise, the Kenya government ordered the closure of bars and churches among other public places. The humour in the meme is that while bars and churches serve different worlds and operate in quite mutually independent spaces, they ended up getting the same treatment from the government. Coronavirus therefore became an equalizer to both bars and churches. By extension, this is a disease that does not discriminate on religion, race, social class or nationality, and that we are all sinners in the eyes of God (borrowing from the scripture at Romans 3:23)

14. Million wives find out their husbands don't work late! Wednesday 25th March 2020

The common excuse for men who do not go home straight after work (usually after 5.00pm) is that they are "working late", meaning they work beyond the normal office hours, sometimes working late into the night. The pun is that now with the directive to work from home, it suddenly appears that men do not have to work for long hours as alluded and this is a confirmation to wives that the phrase "working late" has just been but an excuse for men to engage in other activities such as drinking and other escapades.

15. The current lockdown is how retirement may end up like! No cash, no friends around, lots of free time, anxiety, and the village people treating you like a suspect. #SaveForRetirement# Wednesday 25th March 2020

Since the Kenya government declared a cessation of movement in and out of certain counties in the country after they were noted to be hot spots for coronavirus infections, Kenyans took to various social media platforms to express their new experience of staying at home with no cash and restricted movement. This is a realization that retirement may just present one with the same experiences of no cash, no friends, lots of free time, anxiety and the village people treating you like a suspect. At retirement, one is normally too old to make new friends, while returning to the village is a whole new experience with its attendant culture shock. The hashtag *SaveForRetirement* thus is a clarion call for those in active employment to prepare for the eventual realities of life after work.

16. Our pastors are waiting for Covid-19 to pass so they can resume curing the sick. #ThugLife# Thursday 26th March 2020

Within the Kenyan context, pastors and preachers have claimed supernatural powers for healing the sick from untreatable conditions and even raising the dead. It is therefore humorous that they have all gone silent when coronavirus is ravaging the world, bringing to question the sincerity of their ascribed powers. One would expect them to have come up with an antidote against this pandemic. The truth is that this is a novel virus that even the best trained virologists are still struggling to find its cure. This meme is thus a mockery on the powers of preachers who claim to heal all sorts of ailments. The hashtag *ThugLife* thus equates the pastors to thugs who rob people of their money in the false pretence that they can cure them of any disease.

17. What do you call a Spanish man who ran out of toilet paper during lockdown? His panic! Thursday 26th March 2020

The impending lockdown in Kenya led to panic shopping with people stocking up on essential goods, including cleaning agents like soap, detergents and tissue papers, in preparation for a lockdown. This meme correlates the panic shopping to what the Kenyan public as witnessed the western world doing in the face of the pandemic- hoarding toilet papers. It juxtaposes the panic shopping with the word that describes a Spanish man, that is Hispanic. A panic buyer would thus be seen in the same light, where when faced with no chance to restock when one runs out of toilet paper, he ends up experiencing a panic. So, if the man is Spanish, *his panic* would be akin to the proper noun broken into two words his + panic = Hispanic. This is a play on words like the panic belongs to him because of his country of origin.

18. Day 6 of quarantine, my husband is starting to notice that one of our children looks like the neighbour. Friday 27th March 2020

In the rat-race life prior to the advent of corona, some men were known to leave home early and come back late, usually when the children had gone to sleep. Others were known to “work late” as meme 14 above alluded, thereby making these men ‘strangers’ to their own children. However, now that the pandemic has forced people to stay at home with their families, the meme alludes to the fact that a woman is worried that after staying at home for 6 days, her husband has started noticing that one of the children resembles the neighbour. Although humorous, the implication is that the woman committed adultery with the neighbour who ended up siring a child with her. However, the husband was not aware of this until the pandemic occurred.

19. Today’s match: GSU vs Kenyans 7pm Friday 27th March 2020

The declaration of curfew meant that Kenyans were to get home by 7.00 pm and stay there until 5.00 am the following day. The Kenyan police force (where the GSU falls) was mandated to ensure compliance to this new requirement. The first day of the curfew saw a few Kenyans brutalized by police across the country, with cases of deaths being reported. Thus on the second day of curfew, this meme shared in one of the groups captured the feeling of anxiety as the curfew hours approached. The pun is on the announcement that likens the situation to a big football match in which two teams are pitched against each other. The encounter that evening, including kick-off time is thus announced: Today’s match: GSU vs Kenyans 7pm, implying that the confrontation between the police and Kenyans that would ensue that evening was expected to be huge and explosive.

20. It’s in this quarantine that I realized that my hubby goes for 8 rounds, but I was getting only 2, so who was getting the other 6. Friday 27th March 2020

Now that people have been ordered to stay at home, people are beginning to notice things they took for granted. This meme suggests that the lady just realized that her husband is capable of providing 8 rounds of sex while all along she had been getting only 2! She is thus wondering who has been getting the other 6 rounds. The humorous implication is that the man has other women outside who were also getting their shares from the same source. Now that she is getting her full share, she is still complaining, and wants to know the other woman. Yet one would expect her to be contented now that she is getting her full share.

21. MESSAGE FROM THE AIIMS DOCTOR ON NDTV: “This virus has a very big ego, he will not come to your house unless you go out and invite him ...” Friday 27th March 2020

Here we witness the personification of the virus, where it is likened to a proud human being, who does not just get into people’s homes, unless “invited”. This is in line with the African culture, where it is deemed prideful when one does not socialise with their neighbours. The implication is that if you do not go out and contract the disease, you will be safe at home. Therefore people need to stay in isolation, stay safe, sanitize, and avoid crowds as this is how the disease spreads.

22. You’re not stuck at home, you’re safe at home. Tuesday 31st March 2020

Following the Kenyan government’s directives for self-isolation, curfew and cessation of movement, many Kenyans felt they were being forced to do things they would rather not. They wanted to be free to move to wherever they wish. However, the order to stay at home was given in their own best interest. People should not see home as a “place to get stuck” but rather as a safe place away from the public which exposes one to infections through contacts with other infected persons.

23. Stay at home, practice social distancing, wash hands ... or else you’ll end up in a dormitory in your former high school. Tuesday 31st March 2020

Following reports that the government had designated certain secondary schools across the country to be used as isolation centres for those who tested positive for coronavirus and that hospital facilities may not be able to take in the expected huge numbers of patients, this meme humorously served as a warning for people to take the public health message seriously. Otherwise they would end up in dormitories in their former high schools, where apparently the experience was not a good one when they were students. Now which adult would wish to go back to life in high school?

24. Corona has killed Only 1 person in 1 month. The curfew has lasted for only 4 days and police already killed 5 people! Wednesday 1st April 2020

By day 4 of the presence of the coronavirus in Kenya, only 1 person had been reported to have died from the virus. On the other hand, police who are supposed to enforce compliance to the curfew are reported to have caused the death of 5 Kenyans in their line of duty. The pun in the meme is the irony raised by the situation, where one wonders what is safer, corona or police?

25. Drunkards sacrificed their alcohol to make sanitizers to save lives. People of soda, God is watching. Wednesday 1st April 2020

Sanitizers are made of a given percentage of alcohol and other chemicals. Alcohol manufacturing companies are reported to have resorted to the production of sanitizers instead of alcohol to help fight the disease, with bars and clubs closed hence no sale of alcohol. This meme humorously alludes to the sacrifice made by the drunkards in the fight against corona. In the same spirit, one would expect those who take soft drinks like soda to “do something” about the same. Apparently this has not been forthcoming and so they are being urged to act before God punishes them and that the fight against the corona virus disease is a collective responsibility and everyone is expected to make some sacrifices on their comfort for the common good.

CONCLUSIONS

The main objectives of this paper was to investigate the use of humour in discourses relating to the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) and to deconstruct the semantic implications of humorous memes as shared in WhatsApp online communities as a way of coping with the dangers of the novel pandemic of corona virus disease in Kenya. It emerged that in the face of imminent threat to life, helplessness and hopeless humans resort to humour as a way of creating a sense of companionship amongst group members. Funny content gets shared more on social media. Humour was employed at unanimous levels for all viral memes. The emerging discourse of humour about corona virus disease and how the general public responds to the rapidly evolving world order is a rich source in which to apply the Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis theory to understand the linguistic and psychological realms of human communication. Humour in the social media has psychological implications in that it leads to laughter which creates the desired positive mental state as a way of coping with the threats posed by the corona virus disease.

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