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“We are only to Appear to be Fighting Corruption...We can’t even Bite”: online memetic anti-corruption discourse in the Ghanaian media

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Abstract

Purpose: The goal of this study is to explore how memes are used as tools to expose and shame corruption in Ghana. The Ghanaian media has used memes to criticize unhealthy governmental and social practices and advocated for alternative approaches to addressing these issues. Thus, we explore the qualities memes possess in contributing to the anti-corruption discourse in Ghana.

Methods: Using visual rhetoric and metaphorical analysis of five media memes purposively collected from the Facebook page of Tilapia Da Cartoonist of TV3, this study discusses the approaches memes employ to ridicule and humorize the fight against corruption in Ghana and suggests remediations for governmental corruption.

Results: We find that memes play crucial anti-corruption roles. As such, they criticize corruption by showing the impact of corruption on the average citizen. Memes reveal the suppression of anti-corruption agents and agencies and the lack of real commitment to the fight against corruption in Ghana. While memes expose and criticize corruption, they also provide utilitarian approaches to addressing corruption. Central to this study, the research finds that humor is a basic feature of memes. However, within the Ghanaian media context, the humor in a meme does not affect the seriousness of the message a meme conveys.

Practical implications: Memes can be used strategically as an advocacy tool and a good complement to daily news reports.

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Social implications: Media memes could be used as active media tools to produce, reproduce, distribute, and enhance complex socio-political narratives in society. This may have social and political implications for society.

Originality: This is the first study to explore memes as an anti-corruption media text. It is also the first study to examine the impact of humor on the message a meme conveys. This is done through a qualitative interpretation of the memes. Limitations and recommendations are provided.

Keywords: anti-corruption; Ghanaian media; memes; metaphor; visual rhetoric

1 Introduction

Memes have become central to social, political, and economic discourse in today's social media era, and their ability to influence change and raise awareness is still an untapped resource for most societies, especially in Africa in general and Ghana specifically. Memes, as from the word *mimic*, is a coined word by Richard Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976). He coined the word 'meme' from a Greek word, "mīmēma", meaning *'that which is replicated or imitated'*. Memes are employed as satirical elements used to address social, political, and economic issues of societies (Laineste and Voolaid 2017). Before the advent of memes, political cartoons are used to ridicule and criticize unhealthy socio-political practices. Taking after some nature and characteristics of political cartoons, internet memes like political cartoons contain "satirical and humorous elements of the internet and have a generative and viral nature" (Flores Borjabad and Ruiz del Olmo 2021, p. 246).

In Ghana, the growing nature of digital memes usage in media production has become noteworthy and memes have been used to expose, criticize, and ridicule social, political, and economic issues, especially governmental corruption. The role of the media as the fourth estate is more visible in our contemporary world than it has been. The 1992 Constitution of Ghana was a major victory for Ghana's media freedom and independence (Akpojivi 2014). Its inception saw the springing forth of more private media and increased discussion of national issues than it was under the state-owned media. In recognition of the strife toward a more liberal media in Ghana, the 2022 World Press Freedom Index rated Ghana at 60 among 180 countries (Reporters Without Boundaries 2022) while Freedom House ranks Ghana at 80% free according to the global freedom score (Freedom House 2022). While scholars and institutions of state describe the role of the media to include as "watchdogs" (Srivastava and Sharma 2016), entertainment, education, socialization, and information (Singh and Pandey 2017), the media in Ghana employ numerous strategies in fulfilling these roles, especially in discussing issues of corruption. Memes have simplified, ridiculed,

and generated public discussions on matters involving the works of the investigative journalist, Anas Aremeyaw Anas on the Judicial corruption scandal in Ghana in 2016, the corruption scandal of the Ghana Football Association in 2018, and the Ponzi schemes of Microfinance companies in Ghana. Political events and other social events in Ghana have also been ridiculed through memes. Thus, this study aims at extending the scholarship on digital memes usage on social media within the Ghanaian media context.

2 Related works

2.1 Memetic qualities and discourse in democracies

The role of memes in the media, especially electronic and new media, is multipurpose. The usage of memes in the media landscape enhances participatory culture as more people create and share memes through the new media platforms in narrating social events, participating in the political practices of their country, and deconstructing the colonial rhetoric of their society (Frazer and Carlson 2017; Milner 2012). Similarly, Wiggins and Bowers (2015) define internet memes as artifacts of participatory digital culture. Their definition is based on three elements: Firstly, memes possess virtual physicality and are produced, used, and reproduced. Secondly, memes play a social and cultural role in the new media landscape, offering information about the creation, usage, and behavior of its producers. Lastly, memes are purposefully produced and consumed (Wiggins and Bowers 2015).

The application of memes in the media has the essence of deepening the democracy of nations. As it is practically impossible to perceive democracy without the media, it is likewise complex for the media to exist without providing news to citizens. Mina (2019) asserts in her book *“Memes to Movement”* that

“in a democracy, memes reflect the sheer diversity of opinions and voices of the people, from right, left center alike...[and] in a democracy where the majority of people use the Internet, we should expect to see more memetic discourse on serious issues, as the artifacts of Internet culture spill over from social networking platforms and into our physical world and newscasts.”

As a tool of the media, memes are used to simplify the news for the audience and to project the views of the newsmakers on issues that are gaining or have gained public attention. Hence, memes are used to “tell the news” (Börzsei 2013). Despite the simplification of the news role of memes in the media, it is not all memes or their elements that are implicitly understood by their target audience. This, however, is a result of their complex multi-layered structure (Coulson 2013).

Major studies on memes identify humor as a key element of most memes. In Knobel and Lankshear (2007), it was discovered that humor was a central component of most viral memes. Among the nineteen (19) memes used in their study, seventeen (17) of them were found to be mostly satirical with elements of ‘biting social commentary’ humor. Shifman’s (2012) analysis of memetic videos proved that humor continues to be a vital element of internet memes and enhances virality. As posited by Burgess (2008), one factor that influences an internet meme’s ability to go viral is if it carries “inside jokes”. Humorous memes can be classified into; ‘quirky and situational’ humor, which can be in the form of bizarre translations, and ‘biting social commentary’ where humor is used to address different political and satirical issues (Knobel and Lankshear 2007). Shifman (2012) also classifies humor into three attributes: playfulness, where major characters in the meme are humorous in nature; incongruity humor, where comic is derived from two incongruent elements like a pun or irony, and superiority humor, a situation where characters in the meme are unintentionally funny. Onanuga (2020) expresses the influence of culture in the definition and approach to theorizing the presence, goals, and impact of humor in digital memes. This suggests the cultural implications of humor in memes.

2.2 Memes as a cultural element

Memes permeate cultural spaces and have commercial value. Given the cultural influence of digital memes composition and the goal for its composition, the cultural intricacies of memes are crucial for their design and understanding (Onanuga 2020). Beyond the context of social culture, organizational cultures also influence the depictions and use of digital memes. Advertising and public relations agencies adopt memes as tools for the publicity and marketing of goods and services (Kao et al. 2020). Internet memes carry connotations, judgments, and values, (Lombard 2013). With the emergence of the internet, memes have also become a tool for meaning-making and an avenue for people to exercise and express their religious beliefs, (Husted 2012). Beyond the internet enhancing space for the creation of a social community Bauckhage (2011) finds that memes are spread through homogenous communities and social networks rather than through the internet, a heterogeneous space. Politicians use memes as tools for creating a good image for themselves, shaping public opinions as well as promoting political ideas of themselves whiles slandering their opponents (Pidkuīmukha and Kiss 2020). In the political landscape, memes have been explored in the form of tweets, funny gifs from political discussions, and popular news, and they have a great impact on political discourse and public opinion (Leskovec et al. 2009). Memes are tools for mobilizing political movements and a conduit for expressing political dissent (Kobierecki 2014;

Mina 2014), and the popularity of most of these movements today stems from their communicative techniques of combining both mass media and social media (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). People adopt or use political memes and spread them as a way of expressing their individual political preferences (Bennett 2014; McLoughlin and Southern 2021) and these memes serve as an act of common ground or a reference point for political deliberations and actions (Hristova 2014).

2.3 Meme as a social construct for digital activism

Laineste and Voolaid (2017) posit the social functions played by memes in societies. Internet memes are very prevalent, and they tackle relevant and universal issues from problems of gender inequality, scandals, political and economic issues to mundane details about daily life. Within the political sphere and for activism campaigns, memes are used as “ammunition for political ends all around the globe” (Arkenbout and Scherz 2022, p. 13). In the same vein, Mina (2014) asserts social change memes as those memes that express a sentiment or feeling for changing a social or political issue and tackle issues like environmental pollution. The author notes that societal advocacy memes that come in diverse forms provide avenues for individuals and the community to express their concerns over issues that affect their lives directly. Mina (2014) proffers that social change memes are powerful, and they exert control over broadcast and internet media. She adds that “they (memes) provide a visual rupture in hegemonic state media and messaging by using the language of participatory creative media” (Mina 2014, p. 362). However, while some memes are universal, others are more cultural-specific, reflecting the beliefs and behaviors of specific groups (Knobel and Lankshear 2007).

Lastly, the advent of internet culture has devolved memes from their formerly perceived appearance. Memes were characteristic of the print media culture in Ghana. As such, it was popularly known as political cartoons. Through the internet and digital culture, memes have taken a more advanced form. Shifman (2012) views memes “as a prism for shedding light on aspects of contemporary digital culture” (p. 190). With the advancement of digital media culture, what was mainly characteristic of print and conceived as political cartoons have taken the shape and form of contemporary internet memes (Gallagher 2020). Thus, memes can be identified as the replaced version of political cartoons in digital formats, having a blend of text, image, video, audio-visuals, and performance (Frazer and Carlson 2017). What is classified as memes is also context-based and interpreted accordingly (Grundlingh 2018). Within the Ghanaian context, political cartoons are also known as memes. As opined by Nooney and Portwood-Stacer (2014) memes are “heterogeneous and

divergent bundles of communicative and aesthetic practices.” (p. 249.). As a heterogeneous artifact, memes have cultural implications.

Previous studies have demonstrated that memetic text advances discourse on socio-economic and political issues in societies. While people make merry with memes through the various media platforms for ecstatic and thrilling purposes, others use them to advance socio-political and economic discourses such as in Ghana. However, the growing trend of memes production in the Ghanaian media and the significant role they play in fighting corruption in Ghana is an area that has received less attention and is understudied in communication scholarships. Also, the focus on humor as a central element of memetic discourse has not studied its link with the general implicit and intricate meaning memes communicate. There is a dearth of research that evaluates how the element of humor in a meme impacts the general atmosphere and meaning that are likely to be made by the audience of the meme. Given these lapses, the present study seeks to focus on the role of memes in the media and how they are employed in the fight against corruption in Ghana. We also study how the element of humor impacts the message of the meme.

To achieve these, the following research questions are asked:

1. What specific roles do memes play as an anti-corruption text in the Ghanaian media?
2. What approaches do memes advance to address corruption within the Ghanaian media?
3. How does the element of humor affect the seriousness in the topic a meme discusses?

3 Visual rhetoric and critical metaphor

This study will adopt the theory of Visual Rhetoric. This theory was propounded by Foss (2005). This theory is chosen due to its explanatory adequacy under the subject of discussion. The theory discusses the features and purposes of communication artifacts. Foss (2005) defines visual rhetoric as a term used to describe the study of visual imagery (symbols and signs) as communication tools. Foss (2005) explained that the concept may apply to human acts, processes, behavior, or artifact that may build, sustain or change attention, perceptions, and behaviors. The theory also encapsulates symbols in all forms of areas including mathematics, music, dance, painting, and architectural styles, employed by humans as a strategic tool for influencing people's thinking and behavior. Foss (2005) also explains that the study of visual rhetoric has broadened the prevalence of visual images in contemporary cultures such as advertisements, television, film, fashion, and others. Foss (2005)

defines visual rhetoric as communication artifacts based on their purpose to communicate just like in advertisements and paintings. Foss (2005) classifies these artifacts based on their functions, whether for aesthetic purposes like paintings or utilitarian purposes like advertisements.

Foss (2005) explains that before a visual image can pass for visual rhetoric, it must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and must be presented to an audience to communicate to them. Symbolism as a factor deals with the ability of the visual image to stand for and connect to another object or its inference. That is, the image must stand for something else other than itself. Involvement of human intervention means that the image is consciously created or generated by humans like a painting or a sculpture and intended purposely to communicate. Finally, the image must be structured to go beyond being just a device for self-expression and communication with an audience not necessarily always external to the creator, either real or ideal.

The theory applies to this study because it validates memes as visual rhetorical text since they are symbolic, are purposely generated to communicate certain ideologies on social, cultural, and political issues, and are targeted to specific audiences. The sampled memes for the study were produced by *Tilapia Da Cartoonist* of TV3 news agency. The memes are symbolic, they highlight various national issues and ideologies of corruption and are purposely circulated on various social media platforms for propaganda, sensitization, education, and the stimulation of public opinion among the audience. On these grounds, Foss's (2005) theory of visual rhetoric is quintessential for this study. Further, critical metaphor will be applied to the interpretation of the selected meme sample. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) express that our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature (p. 3). They maintain that our understanding of concepts and phenomena around us is based not only on our intellects or popular assumptions but more, on the culture and context of the place. Thus, the cultural connotations of the memes are explored through metaphorical analysis to enhance understanding.

4 Methodology

The study employs multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) to explore the contents of the study sample. The study adopted a descriptive approach supported by details and illustrations drawn from the visual data. The MDA approach is used for this study due to its ability to explore multiple textual elements in context and with meaning. As O'Halloran (2011) asserts "MDA is concerned with theory and analysis

of semiotic resources and the semantic expansions which occur as semiotic choices combine in multimodal phenomena” (p. 2). The utilization of visual rhetoric and critical metaphor in this study presents a basis for the use of the MDA approach. The study sample was done purposefully on the premise that they reflected corruption stories or the theme of corruption. Regarding corruption, memes that reflected stories that happened between 2019 and 2020 were selected. Five memes were purposively selected out of a total of twenty memes that discussed relatable topics of corruption. The selection of the five was based on the rate of audience reactions to the social media posts of the memes. Corruption-related memes that garnered from at least a hundred to over a thousand reactions and comments or more within a day were selected for this study. Again, the seriousness of those corruption and anti-corruption instances and how they were discussed within the Ghanaian media and the general public was a factor for the selection. With this, corruption issues that were discussed in the media for over a week were deemed serious events. For example, memes on the dismissal of the Auditor-General (AG), the resignation of the Special Prosecutor (SP), the contract saga between the senior minister and Auditor-General, and the Australia VISA scandal received weeks of media attention and public sentiments. Also, those corruption-related issues that the media did not give much media attention to, yet had a meme developed for them were not selected in the analysis as these memes polled very fewer social media reactions and thus were not deemed significant for inclusion. The focus was on government corruption-related memes.

Also, the All five memes were sampled from the Facebook page of Tilapia Da Cartoonist where memes on national issues are published daily for public consumption and social media reactions. Tilapia Da Cartoonist is one of the very few people in Ghana whose satirical works on social, political, and economic issues of the country is acknowledged and well recognized with multiple national awards. At most, Tilapia Da Cartoonist’s work has often centered on some government events and his audiences are mainly Ghanaians, though his works extends to the broader global issues. These five memes are also posted on the Twitter page of Tilapia Da Cartoonist for public consumption. The authenticity of the five selected memes is identified by the generic *3News* feature embedded in each meme. The MDA was performed on each of the five memes selected for this study.

Again, essential for any content analysis is the category system used to classify media content. The category used to classify the contents of the five memes was based on the independent stories or messages they reflected. In the study, the content of each meme was coded and analyzed based on the physical features of the meme including color, texts, artifacts, and the background of the story or message behind the meme in tune with the research questions. Due to its complex multi-layered

structure as asserted by Coulson (2013), the complexity of some memes could inhibit the audience's understanding of the implied meaning of the meme. On that premise, each meme sample to be used for this study will be literally described to narrate the basic information the meme presents. Furthermore, to proffer a cogent understanding of the memes, rhetorical and metaphorical methods of interpretation as postulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Redden (2017) are adopted to enhance the meaning creation and understanding of the memes. The intersection between rhetoric, including visual, and metaphor is its human agency and influence on human perception. As Littlejohn and Foss (2009) assert "rhetorical theory cannot be divorced from questions about human agency, the role of symbols in the creation of the human world, and the power of audiences to co-construct that world" (p. 856). This also correlates with Foss (2005) that for an element to pass the test for visual rhetorical analysis it must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and must be presented to an audience to communicate to them. The symbolism associated with memes and the meaning an audience makes out of it is largely dependent on the contextual reification provided for it.

Also, the element of humor will be explored in each meme to evaluate how humor in a meme influence meaning-making. These procedures are necessary to contextualize the meme and enhance its understanding. It will also allow the audience to analyze the memes for how their structures act as anti-corruption texts. Coding for this study was done based on emergent coding which establishes categories after a preliminary examination of the data in the unit of analysis (Wimmer and Dominick 2011). The category was based on factors that identify the elements of a meme as (1) an anti-corruption agent (Its ability to expose, explore, and inform, its ability to ridicule, shame, or shun corruption), (2) based on its elements of humor (its ability to incite laughter, the level of pictorial exaggeration), (3) access how the element of humor affects the seriousness in the topic a meme discusses.

5 Data analysis and discussion

This chapter presents an in-depth analysis of each of the five sampled memes used in this study. The analysis is based on the physical features of the meme, the story or message behind the meme, and how it answers the research questions. Each sample is literally described, analyzed, and metaphorically interpreted in response to the study's objectives. For each meme selected, it is tested for its nature as a visual rhetoric object. The selected memes are visual texts, and they reveal or mimic some human conduct and behaviors (Foss 2005). Thus, all the selected memes are visual objects and are analyzed in line with the goal of the study (Figures 1–5).



Figure 1: Sample 1.

5.1 Description of the meme

The meme has a bold tag “Corruption as old as Adam reference – clarified”. The meme shows a green garden which is represented by a signpost as the “The Garden of Ghana” with a symbol of the Ghana flag beneath the caption of the signpost. In the garden stands a blossom tree, wrapped by a blue snake and with the tag “The Tree of Corruption”. In the garden of Ghana is a white-skinned woman handing a red ripe apple to a brown-skinned man who appears to be rejecting the apple being handed to him. The man in the garden is presented as the Former President of Ghana, His Excellency John Agyekum Kufour who happens to be saying “As Adam fell; so must man be careful”.

5.2 As an anti-corruption media text

The content of the meme is a metaphorical allusion to the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as recorded in Genesis 3:1–6 in the Christian Bible. Beyond this Biblical allusion, this meme lends itself to various levels of rhetorical and metaphorical interpretations, meaning, and understanding.

First, the meme speaks to the complexities of fighting corruption, its dilemma, and the Sisyphean task of uprooting the tree of corruption in Ghana. This assertion is presented by the blossoming nature of the “tree of corruption” as the meme portrays. The tree has a thick stem with flourishing green leaves all around it. Within the ripe green leaves are spots of red apples. This symbolizes the flamboyance and attractiveness of corruption in Ghana. This also represents the depth and breadth of corruption in Ghana. This is justified by the huge nature of the tree, as projected in the meme. The meme suggests that the blossoming nature of the tree will discourage

any attempt to chop it down. As such, no person looking upon such flamboyance of the tree of corruption and its mightiness can easily cut down such a tree without any difficulty or dilemma. This adds validity to the expression that a tree (corruption) that is as old as Adam cannot be easily uprooted.

Secondly, it speaks to the frustration of the main character of the meme, John Agyekum Kufuor, concerning the fight against corruption in “the garden of Ghana”. It is worthy of note that the very bold tag in the meme “Corruption as old as Adam” is a direct quotation of former President John Agyekum Kufour during his tenure as the president of Ghana. This statement was interpreted by the media and most political opponents as Kufuor’s endorsement of corruption. However, in the clarification of his statement, Kufuor professes that “as Adam fell, so must man be careful” hence his statement was a piece of advice. This response suggests Mr. Kufour’s confrontation with reality as against his ideals of fighting corruption when he was in opposition. When in Opposition and as the leader of his political party, the New Patriotic Party (NPP), Mr. Kufour played a crucial role in the organization of demonstrations such as “Kumepreko” to wit, “Just kill me” against the incumbent government, the National Democratic Congress. In 1998, Flt. Lt. Rawlings, the president of Ghana was accused of corruption by the opposition, Civil Society Organizations, and the media. The then-incumbent President, Flt. Lt. Rawlings was also accused of selling a state company, the Nsawam canary to his wife, Nana Konadu Agyemang Rawlings. With all these allegations of corruption, Mr. John Agyekum Kufuor’s leadership was thought of by Civil Society Groups as one that has a cogent plan to address the endemic government corruption in Ghana. Hence, Kufour’s statement that “Corruption is as old as Adam” is a testament to his confrontation with reality and an indirect acknowledgment of his own flaws in his fight against corruption. In succumbing to the complexities of fighting corruption in Ghana, a supreme court nominee, Justice Clemence Honye-nuga asserted during his vetting in 2020 that “Corruption is as old as Adam, we cannot completely eradicate it”, (GhanaWeb 2020). Thus, the meme seeks to ridicule Kufuor’s acknowledgment of defeat in the corruption fight.

Thirdly, the design elements and the characters in the meme also speak to the issue of moral corruption in the garden of Ghana. In the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, the complexions of the subjects were unknown. However, in contrast to what is known in the Biblical context, the author of this meme assigns a dark complexion to Mr. Kufour while assigning a light-skinned complexion to the unknown woman. In 2005, the Gisselle Yadiji scandal hit Mr. Kufour’s administration. In the scandal, Gisselle Yadiji alleged having two children – John and Philip Kufour – with Mr. J. A. Kufuor. The complexion of the woman in the “Garden of Ghana” is equivalent to Giselle Yadiji’s. This, therefore, gives credence to the topic of moral corruption in this meme. This is because the Giselle Yadiji scandal is one of an accusation of an extra-marital affair between Yadiji and the President who is already married to Mrs.

Theresa Kufuor, a dark-skinned woman. The Adam and Eve analogy was between a man and his wife. Therefore, for the meme to present the woman in light skin while Mr. Kufour's wife is dark contrasts with the Adam and Even scenario and a re-enactment of the Gisselle Yadjie adultery scandal. By this, the author seeks to reintroduce another subject of corruption, which is moral corruption.

In all, to clarify the situation presented in this meme, it can be fairly concluded that the meme is an anti-corruption media text which employs the mode of informing, ridiculing, and shaming the various acts of corruption in Ghana. The meme also presents an ideology that corruption is undesirable. In this meme, corruption is depicted as a “forbidden fruit” which makes it undesirable as it is a symbol akin to the root of all the troubles and miseries in life. This is in line with Mina's (2014) position on memes as a tool for social change, as this meme seeks to campaign in support of the eradication of all kinds of corruption in the country.

5.3 Humor and its impact on the message

As a characteristic of memes, the subjects are not accurately represented as they appear in real life. The nature of this meme raises more questions than answers: (1) what is the reason behind the color difference between the man and the woman? And (2) why is the man represented as a tree, unlike the woman? The presence of these questions reduces the possibility of humor in the meme. The nature of the meme appears to be addressing a serious national issue by a high-profile national figure. In such context, it could be said that the absence of humor shows the seriousness of the topic being discussed. This is to say that the absence of humor in a memetic text influences the general atmosphere surrounding the meme, whether serious or otherwise.

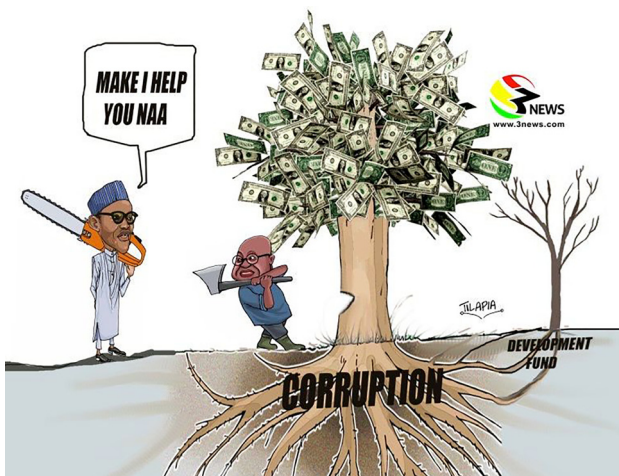


Figure 2: Sample 2.

5.4 Description of the meme

In this meme, a tree that has money (Dollars) as its leaves is being cut. The tree is portrayed to have sprung from the root of corruption. Standing left of the tree is a short man who appears to be chopping down the tree with an ax. Standing right to the tree is a withered plant with the tag “Severity Ivas” which has its root connected to the tree of corruption. The man with the ax is portrayed as the President of Ghana, Nana Addo Danquah Akufo-Addo. Standing behind Nana Akufo Addo is a man with a chainsaw on his neck saying, “Make I help you NAA”. This man is depicted as the President of Nigeria, His Excellency Muhammadu Buhari. And the word “NAA” in the statement “Make I help you NAA” is the abbreviation of Nana Akufo-Addo.

5.5 As an anti-corruption text

The meme can be classified as an anti-corruption text. First, it is an informative text that presents the deteriorated and devastating effects of corruption in Ghana and suggests an approach to dealing with it. The meme mirrors a withered plant with the tag “Severement Ivas”. The word “severement” is a French word, which means “severe” or “intense”. Thus, the information being put across is that the withered tree is showing the severity of corruption when not attended to early, as it can cause the riches of a nation to be diminished as presented by the withered tree in the meme. Based on that, there was a need to cut down the present blossom tree named CORRUPTION before it deteriorates.

As an anti-corruption text, the meme ridicules the approach toward the fight against corruption in Ghana and by extension, Africa. This is shown by the tool that Mr. Nana Addo is portrayed using to cut down the tree of corruption. The ax is a symbol of an archaic, tedious, ineffectual, slow, and time-wasting approach in the fight against corruption. This ridicule is heightened when the second character, Mr. Buhari is shown holding a chainsaw, a symbol of advancement in the approach to fighting corruption. This scene could also be interpreted as a further ridicule of Ghana. Mr. Buhari of Nigeria has not been spared of corruption tags in his own country, Nigeria. Nigeria media has largely labeled Mr. Buhari as a corrupt president. Thus, by presenting a corrupt Buhari as having an advanced tool for fighting corruption and seeking to help NAA, it heightens the ridicule of Ghana as far worse than Nigeria’s state of corruption.

Secondly, the meme suggests a far cry and exposes the sham in the fight against corruption in Ghana. A translated Ghanaian proverb says that one does not sharpen the stick that would pluck his eye, but instead, uproots it. This proverb exclaims the act of getting rid of potential risks than pampering its progression. Contrary to that, a

futile act of cutting down the tree of corruption is portrayed when Nana Addo is shown to be cutting the stem of the tree of corruption instead of uprooting the root. This shows the lack of real commitment to fighting corruption or an act of fighting corruption at face value.

Thirdly, the meme advances a better approach to fighting corruption by campaigning for a collective effort. The characters in the meme are the two leaders who upon assuming office pledged to fight corruption in their respective countries, Ghana and Nigeria. Hence, by putting them together in the meme, the meme suggests a collaborative effort of two or more countries adopting an advanced strategy in the fight against corruption. The meme shows that individually, the fight against corruption could be arduous but collectively it could be easier with a “Chainsaw” (advanced multilateral approach) than the “Axe” (archaic, arduous, simplistic, and ineffective approach) working together.

5.6 Humor and its impact on the message

The complexity of the meme renders the meme with little to almost no humor. The task of understanding the import of the visual representation with the two trees and the use of the French word “severement” creates little chance for humor for the lame viewer. This is because the viewer must understand these elements to make sense of the meme. However, the physical description between Nana Akufo-Addo and Muhammadu Buhari has been a longstanding joke between both Ghanaians and Nigerians. Hence, the physical representation of the two leaders may create some humor for those cognizant of that information. This is consistent with Shifman’s (2012) superiority class of humor. However, the general lack of humor shows the seriousness of the issue under discussion, and the little element of humor does not undermine the impact of the message.

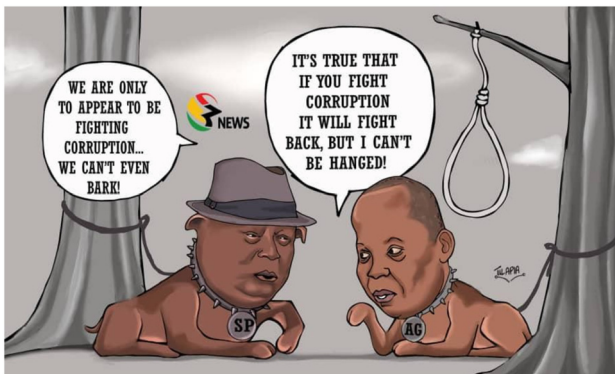


Figure 3: Sample 3.

5.7 Description of the meme

The meme captures two Ghanaian anti-corruption public officials represented as dogs (watchdogs) on leashes. The first dog wearing a hat and with the identification, “SP” which means Special Prosecutor has a resemblance to Mr. Martin Amidu while the second dog with the tag “AG” which means Auditor General has a resemblance to Mr. Daniel Domelevo. The first dog asserts that “We are Only to Appear to be Fighting Corruption... We Can’t Even Bark” while the second dog with a rope hanging on top of his head asserts that “It’s True that if You Fight Corruption, it will Fight Back, but I Can’t be Hanged!”.

5.8 As an anti-corruption text

The meme criticizes the “hollow” fight against corruption in Ghana. According to the meme, the two principal agents appointed by the state to fight against corruption express opinions of despair as corruption appears to be valued by the state beyond their authority, hence the expression “We are only to appear to be fighting corruption... we can’t even bark”. The metaphor expressed in this meme communicates the feeling of hopelessness of the two main national anti-corruption agencies concerning the fight against corruption in Ghana. This meme also invites the feeling of despair in the ordinary citizens of Ghana such that if the two main anti-corruption agencies are unable to fight corruption, then no amount of media criticism and public outcry can fight corruption in Ghana.

Metaphorically, the leash suggests the restricted authority and access of anti-corruption agencies’ “watchdogs” and their officials in their fight against corruption. The tree is a representation of state mechanisms, such as the appointing authorities and sources of funding, that act as a barricade to the war against corruption. On 8th November 2018, the Special Prosecutor (SP), Martin A B K Amidu published a column on Graphic Online News titled “Martin Amidu writes: Stifling Independent Investigative Agencies of Funds” (Amidu 2018) Subsequently, he published another article on 16th July 2019 on the same media website titled “Challenges in the office of the Special Prosecutor in fighting corruption in Ghana” (Amidu 2019). These two articles relayed information on how state agencies and other government officials act as a hindrance to his office, the Office of the Special Prosecutor. The meme therefore symbolically captures this information with the representation of the tree and the leash. The presence of the rope tied on top of the dog with the AG tag symbolizes the end of the power thresholds of the Auditor General. The 1992 constitution of Ghana states in Article 187

(2) The public accounts of Ghana and of all public offices, including the courts, the central and local government administrations, the Universities, and public institutions of like nature, of any public corporation or other body or organization established by an Act of Parliament shall be audited and reported on by the Auditor-General.

This power grants the Auditor General the authority to expose any forms of embezzlement or misappropriation of public funds by state agencies and state

officials. This makes the Auditor General a powerful anti-corruption agent. This article 187(2) duty makes the AG more prone to attacks by seeming-corrupt state officials than the office of the Special Prosecutor, hence the rope on top of his head. Though this meme was produced in 2019, it is worthy of note that both the SP and AG have indeed been “hanged” between 2020 and 2021. The SP resigned for the same reasons he stated in the two columns referenced above. Also, in a Press release, the Office of the President requested the AG to proceed on an accumulated leave on June 29, 2020, just at the inception of the AG’s investigation into an alleged corrupt deal. Subsequently, through a press release on March 3, 2021, the AG was directed to retire (Office of the President 2021). These dramatic incidents speak to the noteworthy nature of memes as having prophetic value and a foreshadowing sense. This is because the meme was able to predict the future of the SP and AG by putting them together and by using the expression “hanged” to describe their common future.

5.9 Humor and its impact on the message

The element of humor is visible in this meme. The symbolic representation of the two anti-corruption agents as dogs triggers some humor. Basically, the depiction seeks to heighten the expression of “toothless bulldogs” that is, powerless dogs. This statement is verified by the expression “we can’t even bark”. Their powerlessness is well captured by the leash that is holding their neck. Also, the capturing of the Special Prosecutor’s (SP) hat invites some humor as it makes room for easy identification of the person being referenced in the meme that is Mr. Martin A B K Amidu. However, these features do not downplay the seriousness of the meme on two grounds (1) the presence of the hanging rope suggests death or termination (2) the subject of corruption is a sensitive national issue and hence cannot be taken on a lighter note irrespective of how it is projected. Therefore, the element of humor in a sensitive meme does not affect the intensity and meaning of the meme.

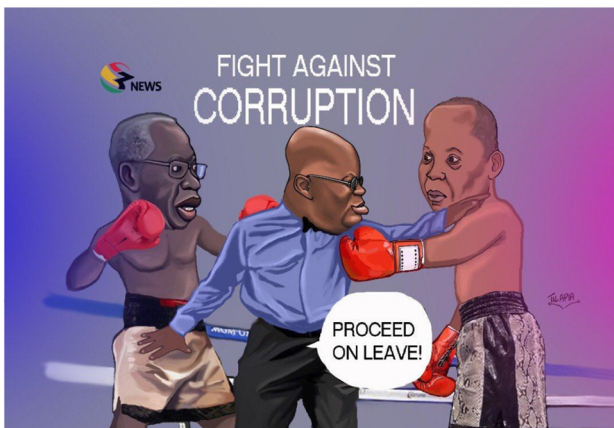


Figure 4: Sample 4.

5.10 Description of the meme

The meme captures a boxing match titled “Fight Against Corruption”. This fight features Mr. Yaw Osafo Marfo, the former Senior Minister of the Government of Ghana on the left, and Mr. Daniel Domelevo, the former Auditor-General of Ghana on the right. In the middle of the two boxers is a referee projected as the President of the Republic of Ghana, Nana Akufo-Addo. The referee is shown instructing Mr. Daniel Domelevo to “Proceed On Leave” while the fight against corruption is still in session.

5.11 As an anti-corruption text

The meme adopts the active metaphorical approach to analogize the fight against corruption with a boxing match between two opponents. In a metaphorical inquiry, it captures a realistic national situation between Mr. Osafo Marfo and Mr. Yaw Domelevo.

Following the 1-million-dollar Kroll transactions entered by Mr. Yaw Osafo Marfo, Mr. Domelevo, who sensed some corruption in that deal sought to investigate Mr. Osafo Marfo. It was when the investigation was to begin that the President, through a press release directed the Auditor General, Mr. Domelevo to proceed on an accumulated leave of 128 days, (Communications Directorate Jubilee House 2020). This speaks to the fact that memes are complex media structures that mirror the socio-political situations of a nation (Laineste and Voolaid 2017). Though the meme enlightens the public about the present socio-political issues of the nation, it also ridicules and shames the fight against corruption in Ghana. The meme does this by showing a form of partiality on the path of the referee who is expected to act fairly. The issue of prejudice in the fight against corruption in Ghana is shown when the president of Ghana, Nana Akufo Addo is shown taking the punch of the Auditor General on behalf of the opponent, a symbolic act of shielding the target of the investigation. Again, by asking the Auditor General to “proceed on leave” while holding the knee of the senior minister, it is as if the president is saying to Mr. Osafo Marfo “Relax, I am at your rescue”. By this, the meme seeks to further expose the instances of bias of the adjudicator in favor of one party against the interest of the nation. This idea was held by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) who felt that the president was shielding his corrupt officials when he asked the Auditor General to proceed on leave. Opposition political parties have also tagged the president as a “clearing agent” who clears his alleged corrupt officials of corruption without due diligence. It is fair to, therefore, conclude that the meme’s presentations are a reinforcement of the assertions of both CSOs and political oppositions and reveal and

criticize the lack of fairness and commitment to the “Fight Against Corruption” in Ghana as titled in the meme.

5.12 Humor and its impact on the message

The meme contains some humor. The conceptualization of the situation as a boxing match and the symbolic representation of the subjects as boxers with a referee identify the work as a successful political satire. This is because it succeeds in ridiculing the erring characters in the meme and campaigns for probity in the fight against corruption. The impact of humor on the message is that it simplifies the issue for the audience. This agrees with the assertion that memes are used to “tell the news” (Börzsei 2013), without distorting the actual meaning the audience can make of the meme. This is to say that the level of humor in the meme does not alter the meaning of the meme but rather enhances meaning-making for the audience.



Figure 5: Sample 5.

5.13 Description of the meme

The meme shows an image of the President of Ghana, Nana Akufo-Addo in the middle of two sets of people saying “Australia VISA scandal, and Ayawaso West reports in the Freezer! Enjoy and stop disturbing my kids!”. To the right side of the meme is an unknown toddler in pampers sitting on the floor with the identification “Ghana Ba” which means “Ghanaian child”. In the hands of this Ghanaian child is a big white feeding bottle with a yellow cork. The name of this feeding bottle is “Committee

Report”. However, to the left side of the meme is a set of three men, the “Dady’s Boys” with the identity of Mr. Pius Enam Hadzide, a former Deputy Minister for Youth and Sports, and others who were indicted in the Australia VISA corruption scandal. This set is sitting in a cot.

5.14 As an anti-corruption text

The meme presents a case of corruption and electoral violence that took place in Ghana in 2019. First, it presents a representation of the Australian VISA corruption scandal allegation against key government officials in Ghana in 2018. In this scandal, it was alleged that the then Deputy Minister for Youth and Sports, Hon. Pius Enam Hadzide, the board chairman for the National Sports Authority (NSA), Mr. Kwadwo Baah Agyemang, and the Director-General of the National Sports Authority (NSA), Mr. Robert Sarfo Mensah were involved in an Australian VISA racketeering to smuggle some 60 Ghanaians to Australia for the Commonwealth Games in Gold Coast. These 60 people who falsely identified themselves as journalists for the Commonwealth games were arrested and deported to Ghana. As a result of this incident, the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) of the Ghana Police Service launched an investigation into the matter with a focus on the three main alleged culprits. However, upon a report from the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) of the Ghana Police Service, these three main alleged culprits were cleared of any wrongdoing. This CID report which was, however, never made public sparked controversies even after the President of Ghana, Nana Akufo Addo had decided to free the alleged persons.

The meme, therefore, actualizes this scandal by lumping together the three cleared culprits into a baby cot and tagged as “Dady’s boys” with the president, Nana Akufo Addo standing beside it. This presents the idea that the president nurtures corruption. This idea was also held by Professor Gyimah Boadi of CDD-Ghana, who accused Akufo Addo’s government of pampering ruling party law-breakers (Dogbevi 2018). This is because the meme does not only speak on the Australian VISA scandal, but more, it speaks about the issue of violence that was festering under the Nana Akufo Addo’s government which is the second issue the meme sought to speak about. The meme’s reference to the “Ayawaso West Report” gives credence to the information about electoral violence in Ghana, precisely, the Ayawaso West Wuguan Bye-election violence in 2018. Thus, by showing the president saying “Enjoy and stop discussing my kids” the president is showing tolerance for deliberate financial malfeasance in his administration. Again, the projection of an oversized feeding bottle in the mouth of the ordinary Ghanaian citizen speaks to the idea that no matter how egregious a situation is, the President will always follow the dictates of his

conscience and not the opinions of the ordinary Ghanaian citizen. The term “Enjoy and stop disturbing my kids” and “Dady’s boys” gives essence to this. The incorrect spelling of the word “Daddy” as “Dady” also speaks to the inappropriateness of the act of fathering or nurturing what the general public largely considers as malfeasance.

5.15 Humor and its impact on the message

The subject treated in the meme invites little to no humor. However, the literal projection of the meme generally invites some humor. The oversized feeding bottle in the mouth of the toddler and the projection of the government’s appointees who are grown men with a beard as toddlers in a cot invite some humor. However, the meaning the meme seeks to project was not defeated by the amount of humor detected in the meme. Thus, the seriousness of the matter being discussed by the meme was not distorted by the amount of humor within.

6 Conclusion

The traditional role of the media as watchdogs is not limited to reporting issues, but more, identifying, exposing, exploring, and critiquing antisocial issues of the nation to stimulate public opinion which will lead to realizing recommendations to address these social issues. In this research, media memes have been identified to have the property to identify, expose, explore, critique, and recommend solutions to address the issue of corruption in Ghana. The exploration of the subject of memes as anti-corruption texts has shown that meme employs techniques such as disgusts, the concepts of togetherness, religious analogies, call-to-action elements, and the physical and symbolic representation of the implied characters to show the ills of corruption in society and how it could be addressed. It is identified that issues raised and discussed by a meme do not only speak to the present situation but also predict possible future events. *Sample 3* shows that political memes possess prophetic and futuristic values when characters can predict their future doom. The analysis of the meme has shown that the ability of the audience to comprehend the actual message a meme seeks to communicate depends on their prior understanding of the current socio-political issues of the specific society and within a particular time. This shows that memes generally possess spatiotemporal features and that scholars must provide a contextual feel to their analysis of memes to ensure audience comprehensibility of the memes and their analysis. This has implications for future studies on memes. Also, the design elements of a meme such as color, texture, symbols, artifacts used, and distortions in memes enhance understanding of the issues being

discussed and should not be overlooked in memetic discourse studies. Contrary to subsequent research on the centrality of humor in memes, this study has demonstrated that humor in memes is context-based. As shown in this study, memes that discuss complex socio-political and economic issues may have little to no humor within them. We advance the argument that the element of humor in a meme has an impact on the overall atmosphere the meme seeks to place its viewers, and its presence does not reduce the level of seriousness in the subject the meme discusses. Despite the findings of this study, the research did not evaluate the audience's interpretation of the elements of humor in the memes used for this study. Also, the few sampled memes used in this qualitative study make the findings ungeneralizable though relevant to the addition of knowledge on mimetic studies within different contexts. Thus, further studies could explore other methodologies to inculcate participants' experiences with complex socio-political memes.

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