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**Decoding the Metaphor of Internet Meme: A Study of Satirical
Tweets on Black Friday Sales in Nigeria**

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Abstract

This study examined an emerging trend in Internet discourse as metaphorical constructs used by individuals for communication online. The Internet meme is an evolving trend used for satirical illustrations and expression of intents in multimodal ways. While previous studies have focused on verbal metaphors signaled by Internet discourse, none of these studies have examined the relevance of memes in communicative contexts. This study drew from conceptual metaphor theory of cognitive linguistics to investigate the use of visual metaphors across Twitter which reflected consumer's feelings on Jumia and Konga's Black Friday sales. Five tweets were selected at random from

ynaija.com, an online news blog for youths. Our study revealed that Internet memes serve as a strong rhetoric for ideological manipulations. This study will spur further research along the shores of Internet discourse.

Key Words: multimodal, metaphor, Internet Memes, Konga, Jumia

Introduction

The Internet is a virtual sphere where several activities take place. The freedom enhanced by this platform enables net users to express themselves in different ways. The language of the Internet, in recent times, has become the very creative with individuals resorting to innovative patterns of communication. One of the evolving trends in this sphere is the meme culture. A term first coined by Dawkins in his book, *The selfish gene*. The term meme was earlier used to describe the reduplication of genes in the human body. Dawkins thus explained cultural values such as music that move from one generation to another as memes. Memes represent cultural information that move from person to person until they become a shared social phenomenon.

Within the virtual sphere, internet memes refer to rapid uptake of a particular idea presented as written texts, images, which could be verbal, video and/or multimodal. Memes in this context are either passed directly or modified to suit a cultural context. One of the features of memes is that they share common characteristics (Shifman, 2003). While memes can be regarded as funny items in most cases, they are often used to express emotions indirectly. Internet memes construe strong metaphors which are found in everyday life not just in languages but through thoughts and actions (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Metaphors have been used in various fields to construe experiences and ideology (Goatly, 1997). In multimodal advertising, Sobrino (2014) observed that metaphors and metonymies are responsible in the constitution of a positive image of advertising products. Sobrino further noted that within the sphere of advertising, metaphor involves a degree of partial metaphorical mappings that either increase our knowledge or limit our thinking.

Within the Internet culture one would ask what are the predominant mappings embedded by multimodal images spread by social media interaction? While very little attention has been paid to this evolving trend, it becomes necessary to study the expression of thoughts and mental representation across the virtual platform. Within the framework of conceptual metaphor theory this study examines mental representations in visual metaphor such as the internet memes. This work thus sets to:

- i. Examine the roles of metaphor in multimodal platforms such as the Internet.
- ii. Identify metaphors used in expression of emotions in Internet memes
- iii. Identify ideological meanings construed by these metaphors.

Background Information of Online Retail Outlets in Nigeria

Jumia is one of the largest online shopping stores in Nigeria. Founded in 2012, this shopping store has over 500000 different products across 30 retail categories. It has over 700 weekly visitors and is one of the most visited sites in Nigeria (Jumia.com). Konga is also a Nigerian e-commerce company founded in 2012. In 2013 it expanded from a first party to a third-party platform and was ranked the most visited Nigerian website in 2015 (Konga.com). These trade outlets continually persuade Nigerians through seasonal discounts and sustained e-presence.

The Black Friday is a special day for trade activities in Nigeria following the Black Friday trend in the US. These trade outlets resorted to advertising a lower sales rate to persuade consumers and increase sales. Electronic advertisements on Black Friday sales were spread as spams in e-mails and appeared on every blog in Nigeria causing a high level of purchase awareness. Contrary to the purported reduction in prices, Black Friday sales were almost normal with difficulty to access Jumia and Konga sites, due to many users being on these platforms at the same time. This sparked anger among net users who resorted to the use of replicated messages, memes, to vent their frustration and displeasure.

Conceptual Metaphors

Recent developments and research in cognitive linguistics has shown that the human mind is capable of shaping its experiences in relation to other concepts. Beyond utterances, our thoughts can be conveyed through different modes. This process of construing our experiences in terms of other concrete referents is described as metaphor. Earlier studies referred to metaphors as abounding only in poetry; however, studies in cognitive linguistics (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson 2003) has shown that metaphors are prevalent in our everyday experiences. Within the concept of entity and substance, experiences as Lakoff and Johnson pointed out, are identified as entities or substances that can be referred to, categorized, grouped and quantified. Conceptual metaphor involves the understanding of one domain in the concept of another.

Kovesces (2010) outlined two mappings for conceptual metaphor as the source domain and target domain. Source domain usually provide the foundation of our mental representation such as wall, buildings, journey, war etc. while the domain we try to understand is the target domain. When we say 'I am where I am supposed to be in life' a picture of destination comes to our mind. This conception sees life in terms of a journey where our everyday experiences and struggles are like travelling through a long road which a period of career success represents the end of our journey or destination. In the same vein, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) conceptualized love and relationships in terms of a journey.

Look how far we've come

We are at crossroads...
This relationship is a dead end
We are just spinning our wheels
Our marriage is on the rock

In the lines above, relationship is described as a journey. Marriage is a sojourn taken by two people. Our understanding of a rough and bumpy journey gives a clear picture of the challenges faced by the couple in the text. Metaphors are classified based on conventionality, function, nature and level of generality (Kovesces, 2010). While previous studies have concerned the realization of linguistic metaphors, recent studies have emerged in studying other modes of realizing metaphor.

Multimodal Metaphor

Metaphors extend beyond concepts and abstract ideas. Previous works on pictures and films (Forceville 2008, 2012, 2016) show the different realizations of metaphors. Multimodal metaphors are metaphors in which target, source and mappable features are represented by at least two different systems. (Forceville, 2008). They are usually made of sound, gestures, pictures which are not found in verbal metaphors. Forceville's definition is restrictive as (Gibbons 2009) noted that multimodal metaphor should be regarded as integrative drawing from different modes to construct experiences. The definition offered by Gibbons extends multimodal metaphor to a collection of different modes of communication which are at interplay when meaning is construed. Thus, both text and other modes can be mapped collectively. In an advertisement for instance, the shots, text and soundtracks can all be regarded as target domain which can take their cue from an external source. This study however focuses on internet memes and realization of metaphors within this context. Just like films and advertisements, the internet uses multimodes to convey information and construe our understanding of cognitive concepts and emotions. Additional support for the internet as a rich source of metaphor is found through means that net users employ multimodes in communication. The use of emoticons can be used to construe feeling of sadness or happiness. Within the virtual sphere, images are often represented as below:



The smiley above can be described in terms of HAPPINESS IS SUNSHINE. Our experience of happiness (abstract concept) is understood in terms of sunshine (concrete concept) which is further represented by a smiley. The smiley here serves both as a source domain and a catalyst that enhances the mapping between sunshine and

happiness. This representation is typical of a multimodal metaphor. Internet memes in recent times have become viral media used by netspeakers to construe experiences and convey their feelings. Due to its ubiquitous nature, it is generally accepted but usually tailored to suit a net culture or particular context. It is therefore pertinent to explore tropes within this field. In what follows, I shall examine selected memes which were tailored to express disappointment of net users on Black Friday sales in Nigeria.

Methodology

For this study, we shall use selected tweets from *ynaija.com* a youth news blog in Nigeria. These tweets were retrieved on 28-11-15 following the end of the black Friday sales where net users took to their Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and other social media platform to express their disappointment on the supposed 50% price slash earlier advertised by online retail outlets Konga and Jumia. Each meme will be analysed using tools from conceptual metaphor theory.

Data Analysis

Image A



The image pictured above is an extract from Walt Disney's cartoon 'Tom and Jerry'. Tom is perceived as a mischievous creature that ensnares others and laughs at them from behind. This corresponds to the text *see mumu* (look at a fool). The source here is cued both visually and verbally. The text helps to interpret the image displayed. The

service providers are pictured here as the tricksters while the entire populace is fools falling for their tricks.

Future Is Up

The image also shows Tom pointing upward. This gesture implies that the prices of goods cannot be reduced at the moment. Perhaps that can be achieved sometime in an unknown future. It further serves to show that as advertisers, they would continue to be masters of their game for a long time. The construal of meaning here is culturally charged. The language *mumu* is culturally tailored to suit the Nigerian context where this meme is being used. Coegnarts & Kravanja (2012) suggest that the quality of a text should be represented either in terms of abstract or concrete concept. Within the image above, our source domain is concrete since the image can appeal to our sense of sight.

Image B



Mental representation is a spatial relationship/Psychological division between two persons is a spatial divergence of two entities

The first metaphor conveyed in this text is that of spatial distance as signal of disagreement. The image above is that of President Robert Mugabe and a colonial police officer. During the colonial era, Mugabe was known to be at war with the colonial government and went into exile after he was imprisoned. The image therefore directly compares how an increase in price is capable of creating a rift between consumers and producers as well as chasing consumers away from the producers and their products.

Inflation is war: If we map the text with the image, increased price is personified as a warrior engaging in a battle with consumers. The price hike is also represented by the economic policies of Mugabe in Zimbabwe that led to inflation level spiking from 1000% in 2004 to 40000000% in 2007 (Wiki, 2016). The result of this price hike saw people running away from the country. The increase in price also results in a conflict between the consumers and buyers. It is typical therefore that when prices are increased, consumers would flee for safety. The source is further cued by the text ‘konga and jumia be chasing people like...’ While this statement was not completed, we were left with a concrete metaphor to help us understand the scenario being played out.

Image C



Unity Is a Convergence of Two Entities

The picture here is a collection of past American leaders and notably Donald Trump, a renowned entrepreneur. The image shows a scenario of laughter and happiness which is typical of a successful meeting. America is one of the world’s largest economies presently. Despite the economic woes faced by other nations, it continues to stand tall in economic and trade relations. Jumia and Konga are described here to share a mutual relationship and common agenda of persuading and influencing consumers while they smile their way to the bank. The use of world leaders here can also be mapped in terms of SUCCESS IS POWER. The successful people exercise a form of control over their subjects. Despite the price hikes and anger expressed by consumers, the manager of Konga took to their website to announce that it made sales worth three billion naira within twenty-four hours during the 2015 Black Friday sales. The text also helps us to have a concrete experience of the profit being celebrated.

Image D**Anger is fire**

The image presents a burning building. What is mapped here is the height of anger expressed by net users. Anger leads to destruction. The image presents a desire for Konga and Jumia to just burn to ashes as reflected in the image above. The relationship mapped in this text is that of SOUCRE-PATH-GOAL. The deceit by these retail outlets is the source of a burning anger in consumers (path) which could result in destruction (goal). The picture of a less concerned child separated from the burning shops simply depicts a state of oblivion. In real life situation, when people are angry, they rarely pay attention to the consequences of actions borne out of rage. The net user through this meme expresses a stern wish for these sales outlets to suffer a huge loss as a result of their deceit.

Down Is Destruction/Defeat

The text 'When jumia and konga' are written above the image while 'are burning to ashes' are written beneath to show action and consequence. This spatial layout helps to convey the netspeaker's strong rage and hate for the outlets. These outlets which were highly accepted and patronized by net users have lost their place among consumers. This is reflected by disappointing comments and tweets which became a trending topic by Nigerian netizens after the Black Friday sales.

Image E**Ignorance is blindness; ignorance is down**

The image above is a picture of a black woman looking at a laptop. The expression on her face shows her inability to use the laptop. This is a satirical image set to depict the state of Net users who stayed in front of their screen looking for deals during the black Friday sales in Nigeria. The sales outlets are seen to be smart using every available opportunity to persuade consumers. Ignorance of consumers is construed in terms of blindness as they try to look through the web pages yet see nothing. The spatial position of the woman in the text is down which also shows that ignorance is down. Thus, the image depicts that of an ignorant person who bows her head as a display of her naivety. Consumers are depicted here as ignorant people who are manipulated by those above.

Conclusion

This study examined satirical tweets by Nigerian net users during the 2015 Black Friday sales. As earlier stated internet memes are ubiquitous and manifest in the virtual sphere in the form of text, music, images, videos and other media. All these are different modes through which our experiences can be construed or understood. Within internet culture, source is cued both visual and verbally. They are products of various cultures and contain ideological underpinnings. Our analyses showed that internet memes can be tailored to suit our contexts and are powerful tools for conveying satirical, emotive in-group metaphorical messages.

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