Digital Semiotics and Visualised Narratology in #Endsars Protest's Facebook Images

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Abstract

This study explored the digitalised imagistic narratives on the most popular Social Network Site – Facebook- examining the undercurrent ideological impressions for the Nigerian nation's polity. Three digital #END SARS Protest images were directly sourced from Facebook Social Network Sites and subjected critical denotative and connotative discourse analysis. Findings reveal messages and meanings in the images as products of powerful artistic statement, and expressions of the nation's socio-cultural and political experiences. The blood-stained Nigerian flag fixes the ideational metafunction of the digitalized grammatical structures housed in the blood and the flag. The acronymic metaphor of #ENDSARS carries ideological load of the much talk-about restructuring which is believed to be the only instrument of rescue for the 1914 patchwork called Nigeria from the precipice. The crying toddler symbolises the innocent Nigerian youths who have, over the years, received 'stones' in place of 'bread', weeping for good governance. These uses of images as semiotic resources are indicative of language as intruder relaying the users' yearning for better life in a hitherto bitter society. It was discovered that messages and meanings in the images are products of the artists' (the Nigerian youths) ideological creativity and digital platform by which stories, experiences and powerful statements are relayed. Hence, importance of visual images as unique and powerful semiotic resources that have a number of advantages over words calls for more investigative efforts not only for their socio-political significance but also for their useful language pedagogy.

Key words: Digital Semiotics, Visual narratology, #END SARS,Language pedagogy, Ideational metafunction.

Introduction

Semiotics is the name we give to the study of signs through which man makes and creates meaning. Chandler (2007:2) says that in a broad sense, "Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign." He further explains that it "involves the study not only of what we refer to as 'signs' in everyday speech, but of anything which 'stands for' something else" (ibid.). In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gesture and objects; be it linguistic or non-linguistic, verbal or non-verbal, we have a "system of signs". These perhaps affirms Oduola's (2020) opinion on communication as "social interaction in which, at least, two interacting agents share a common set of signs and a common set of semiotic rules on purpose". Hence, man lives in a world of signs, and he is constantly creating, disseminating and consuming signs. It is therefore, necessary for us, as analysts, to examine the discourse bearing visual semiotic resources such as pictures and images indigital narrative processes. Doing such analytical enterprise with the current issue of #end SARS protest Facebook imagesappears a step in the right direction, looking at signs and signification as dynamic elements of Nigerian political and socio-cultural fabric.

Contextual academic briefing

More than ever, communication is taking on some kind of redefinition as, with the aid of global technological innovations, non-verbal communication appears to have taken over the communicative space. The internet, mobile devices, and all other devices before them with various ground-breaking communicative functions, have, obviously, not left the human world unchanged. This is explainable in terms of Mchulan's globalisation concept in which everything, includinghuman connection and communication, is digitalised. The effect is the spirally visual turn of events and activities such as business ventures, entertainment, storytelling and all sorts of social and political activities are taking place on diferent platforms of the social media Information Technology, Facebook, for instance.

It is therefore, required to contemplate a study that examines how images make meaning, tell stories by means of digital media, specifically through Facebook social media platformwithin the Nigerian socio-cultural or political context at this period of acute globalisation. In this regard, focusing on the Facebook images of #END SARS Protest with everything it represents as front burner issue in Nigeriaprovides useful avenue of investigating images as semiotic resources and means of effective signification of the socio-political context that produced them.

Puzzle in survey

In the attempt to prove the human species as sure *Homo significans*-meaning-makers, several scholars have made academic efforts in the attempt to point out the benefits and relevance of in-depth semiotic analysis of texts to reveal human interaction with the environment in term of meaning making and interpretation of signs, both verbal and non-verbal including the visual ones (Chandler, 2007:16). Abuya and Akinkurolere (2013), for instance, examined the meaning conveyed by images in *Tell Magazine* while Jolayemi and Mahmud (2017) considered the effectiveness of semiotics communication by the means of 'Road signs' using Gestalt theory of visual perception.Using visual social semiotics approach, Onugu (2019) exposes the underpinning ideologies behind the texts and images as Christians Handbills of selected churches and ministries are critically engaged and interrogated based on the various contexts in which they were produced.Ojebode's (2015) work on (still) photograph as a tool for storytelling adopting C. S. Peirce's semiotic model surveyed Ty Bello's Instagram, a rather limited social media platform. It is evident, however, that none of these studies makesserious academic commitment to digital storytelling through images on Facebook, the most popular Social Network Site. This study, therefore, explores the non-verbal signs (images) from the (different) perspectives of digital storytelling on the most popular Social Network Site, adopting an aspect of Barthes' theory of visual semiotics, examining a most recent front burner issue of #ENDSARS Protest images. In other words, it is a noveler attempt to unearth how images constitute modes of narratological expression of individual and, or collective socio-political or cultural experiences and ideologies through the digital medium of Facebook.#ENDSARSis an acronym morphologically processed to metaphorise the following items: **E**ducational and economic reform; **N**ational constitutional amendment; **D**ecentralise police; **S**ecurity reform; **A**nti-democratic policy reform; **R**estructure Nigeria now; **S**ave cost of governance

It is hoped a painstaking visual semiotic study from such perspective as this would illuminate the rich content inherent in images show that Facebook is an effective channel for communicating stories and messages of especially Nigerian cultural, social and political experiences and realities that spur the into demanding restructuring.

Research Questions

The study provided answers to the following questions:

i. What and how are the various symbols and images used and structured for meaning making during the #ENDSARS Protest?
ii. How are the forms, structures and the underlying ideological and socio-political records of human experiences conveyed through the images used during the #ENDSARS Protest arranged, presented and understood?

It is believed that, with the foregoing, visual semiotics as a sub-domain of semiotics shall have scrutinised the way visuals or visual images communicate messages or make meaning in digitalised personal stories told in various modes in the public space using the digital media.

Literature review

Language use in multimodal terms has come of age as an important aspect of applied linguistics especially in Second Language situation which Nigeria represents. It is the field of study which has, over the years, attracted appropriate responses to the question of how linguistic features serve as hermeneutic keys in the understanding of certain complex social phenomena. Studies abound that have dealt with countless number of social issues that affect people's lives with conceptual and theoretical promulgations in their understanding in visual term. It is, therefore, necessary to present series of opinions particularly as linguists have concerned themselves with accounting for the communication of meaning within texts (that is, issues arising from the consideration of semiotic resources other than language) in interaction.

Semiotics: signs, symbols and meaning creation

"Semiotics" or "Semiology" are conceptual terms of a common notion variously described as "the science of signs', of "sign systems" of "symbolic behaviour" or of communication systems and methods" (Godwin 2015:73). The term 'semiotics' is derived from Latin word 'Semio', absorption of the Greek word *"Semeion"* which means a sign or signal. "The term originally refers to an ancient use in medicines; In a more practical sense, semiotics involves the investigation of apprehension, prediction and meaning. "It delves into how is it that we develop meaning, making predictions and apprehend the world" Ezema (2013: 221). The main point with this is that, generally, the human world is said and known to be full of signs; semiotics is thus one fields of study that brings to the awareness of man that he lives in a world that is constantly creating, making and interpreting meaning.

Jolayemi and Mahmund (2017:2) state that "semiotics is concerned with the phenomena of signs in all their abundance and variety; acoustic signals, roads signs, verbal signs, non verbal, in short, signifying objects and artifacts of virtually every size, shape, colour and substance." It is how meaning is represented in its broadest sense. "Semiotics is concerned with how meaning is made and the various ways in which language, here broadly intended, can be used to represent reality and therefore also to tell stories" Aiello (2020:367).

Today, semiotics covers a wide range of fields like media, film, advertising, theatre, music, law, psychology, arts and artifacts, fashion, designs, the natural sciences etc. It is a discipline "that recognises the reconstruction and encoding of social and cultural nuances of "meaning" in "signs" and their roles in communication in the real life of the society" Godwin (2015:73). It examines how meanings are made, encapsulated, and encoded in signs and their communicative functions / roles as recognized by all members of the society.

Visual semiotics: between the signified and the signifier

Semiotics which is said to have begun developing to its present status during the 20th century has extended to include applications to social constructs and moved beyond the structural conventions of the traditional concepts of signifier and signified (Chandler 2007). Also, many scholars, Barthes (1993), Jewitt and Oyana (2001), Van Leeuwen (2001) have pointed out the inclusion of visual semiotics. "Building on Saussure's legacy, Roland Barthes in the 1960s was the first semiologist to look at signs and signification as dynamic elements of a social and cultural fabric" Aiello (2020:369). He was also the first one to focus systematically on 'texts' made of non-linguistic signs, particularly visual images but also fashion, music, photographs and a range of popular 'icons' of French culture as systems of sign. Aiello (2020) is also of the opinion that visual semiotics should be considered not only as a sub-field of semiotics, but also as a theoretical and methodological perspective that has been adopted and adapted across disciplines (e.g. art, history, media and communication studies, cultural studies, and both art and design etc.). Hence it is a multi-disciplinary field through which the humanities: philosophy, cultural studies, sociology, political science, religious studies etc. interact.

Considering visual semiotics, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006:1) says "We intend to provide inventories of the major compositional structures which have become established as conventions in the course of the history of visual semiotics, and to analyse how they are used to produce meaning by contemporary image-makers" Visual semiotics became a channel through which traditional semiotics enlarges its horizon for visual texts and other artifacts beyond images such as packaging, interior design, and layouts. Visual is a means of ideological and cultural representation. Oyama (1998) opines that specific cultural and ideological representations are manifested, materialized and produced through visuals – images, painting, art work etc. Visuals are used to produce specific social, political, cultural and ideological representations in specific socio-cultural circumstances. "Visual semiotics deconstructs the visuals while in its attempt to attain the meaning and ideology" Parsa (2002:851) as "the meaning comes out of an interaction between the message and its reader or audience" (Ojebode, 2015).

Hence, for one to interpret the meaning of images thoroughly the readers need to take the related social meaning system into consideration. Liu (2013) asserts. The reader is expected to look beyond the image itself to the

social, cultural, scientific, political background. Focusing on this various contexts of production is indispensable to arriving at a good interpretation of an image.

Digital story telling: Matter of Style and Innovation

Digital storytelling is motivated by the awareness that everyone has a story to tell! Digital storytelling is the modern way of expressing the ancient art of storytelling. From time past, storytelling has been used to share knowledge, wisdom and values. All through ages it has been produced in various ways and forms, "and has been adapted to every successive medium that has emerged in time, – from the circle of the campfire to the silver screen and now the computer screen" Isabel, Silvia and Maria (2013:2).Digital story telling is a workshop – based practice in which people are taught to use digital media to create short audio-video stories, usually about their own lives" (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009:3). It was initiated by Dana Atchley in California in the late 1990s and a centre was built for the programme – Centre for Digital Storytelling (CDS). "Atchley's intention was to develop an exportable workshop - based approach to teach ordinary people – from school students to the elderly with or (usually) without knowledge of computers or media production - how to produce their own personal videos" Hartley et al. (2009:4).

This field of study was said to have been "conceived independently but almost contemporaneously by two great theorists; Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sander Peirce on either side of the Atlantic Ocean at the beginning of the 20th century" (Elem 1980) as cited in (Godwin 2015).For the Swiss Linguist – Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913) – the field of study is Semiology, and the term is a working definition of the "sign" as a fusion of "signifier" and the "signified", a double-edged psychological entity of two components of "concept" and "sound image" Godwin (2015:74). Put differently, a sign is a union of the "signifier" (sound image) and the "signified" (concept or material object). Hence, sign relation is 'diadic'. This relation, Saussure saw as being essentially arbitrary. They are purely psychological, form rather than substance. For instance, the English word 'paper' is not in itself paper, or there is nothing 'papery' in paper to make it called as such. It is simply a product of socio-cultural convention.

#ENDSARS Protest: bleeding in the labour room

There are innumerable reasons for Nigerians to demand for change from their leaders,especially in the face of rising poverty levels, rising cost of living, systemic corruption and unabating abuses, crime and violence, human rights violations, extrajudicial killings. It was a reaction to one or all of these, police brutality in particular that brought up #ENDSARS Protest.

The Nigerian youths followed their pent up frustrations of unending human rights violations, extortion, torture, brutality, and extrajudicial killings with real action to demand an end to abuses and brutality by men of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF); especially those of the dreaded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit, who hold the record of unjustly ending a lot of young lives. SARS became uncontrollable by the same system that set it up. Rather than deliver their mandate in line with the rule of law, SARS reportedly weaponised itself into a national scourge focused on witch-hunting the Nigerian youth. The wave of #ENDSARS; a decentralized social movement and metaphor for the restructuring mantra culminates to series of mass protests against police brutality, swept through the nation following new revelations of abuses by the unit.However, what started as a peaceful protest became bloody on 20th October 2020, as members of the Nigerian Armed Forces opened fire on peaceful ENDSARS protesters at the Lekki toll gate in Lagos. As a result, some Nigerian youths were reportedly killed, and the whole nation was turned into mourning.

Facebook: probably the biggest of social media platforms

Our preference for "Facebook, an American company offering online social networking services" (Hall, 2019) in this study, is informed by its unrivaled status and popularity. Facebook was founded in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, an undergraduate student of Havard University USA, alongside his three school mates – Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Mokovitz, and Christ Hughes. Its original purpose was to allow Havard students use their "edu-email" addresses and photos to connect with other students at the school. The site was an immediate hit; many Havard students signed up for it within 24 hours and in about a month more than half of Havard undergraduates was said to have had a profile. It soon spread to other college campuses in the USA.

Today, Facebook accommodates varieties of content; it is a social media platform for forming personal relationships, sharing ideas and information, and building up societies as a whole. It should be noted also that the site allows its business users to connect their product easily with their consumers (a market place). Facebook is a semiotic resource, and has become a powerful communicative tool of global relevance for political movements, social activism, and for news feed.

Image as the Evidence of Paradigm Shift

Walter (2004) cited in Danielsson (2010:1), claims that post-modern society has been characterized by its "relentless traffic in images." We find ourselves surrounded by images. In every direction there are advertisements, logos, art, and constantly flashing flat-screen displays. It seems the number of images we encounter is increasing at the same rate as the technology to display them improves: (ibid.). The constant rapid advancement of science and technology has changed the ways of human communication greatly. We now live in an increasingly visual culture more than it was in the past. 'Images, paintings, sculpture, photographs, artifacts and other non – verbal resources are no longer used mainly to entertain and illustrate, rather they are becoming significant in communicating and meaning- making. Boorstin (1963) in Ojebode (2015) states that "images have become more interesting than the original and in fact have become more original: 'the shadow becomes the substance".

However, this paradigm shift between the visuals (pictures, images, graphics, and so on) is nothing new, we are only returning to our pictorial roots as Danesi rightly stated in his TEDx lecture (2016) that we are drifting back towards the pre-historic age. "Humans have used pictures to record their experiences for over 250 centuries, pictograms and ideograms for the next 20 centuries, and words for the

remaining 15 centuries" (Davies, Bathurst, and Bathurst 2) in Dewan (2015:1). Hence, this goes to suggest that visual communication has been used for the vast majority of human history.

However, Mitchel (1986) in Oyama (1998:27) gives more comprehensive modes or types of image as he proposes a typology of images in the form of a family tree. It is divided into 5 different categories: graphic (pictures, statutes, design) optical (mirrors, projections), perceptual (sense data, "species" appearances); mental (dreams, memories, ideas, fantasmata), verbal (metaphors, descriptions). He argues that the first two categories are called by that name in a literal, strict and proper sense and the last two categories 'involves some extended figurative or improper use of the term'. The images used in this study fall under the category of graphic which, by Mitchel's description, means visual images as opposed to other images.

From the above, the convergent scholarly views seem that images are ways of re-enacting cultural experiences and history in the bid to communicate them to others. Therefore, they are hardly free of cultural conditioning; they are mostly culture-specific. Truly, "**One picture is worth a thousand words. Yes, but only if you look at the picture and say or think the thousand words**" – William Saroyan.

Theoretical Consideration

Barthes Theory of Semiotics

To facilitate adequate qualitative content analytical design that looks at signs and signification as dynamic elements of a social and cultural fabric, aspect of Barthes' semiotic theory is adopted in analysing how the meanings attributed to images are not a "natural result of what we see; that is, images are not self-evident and universal in how we understand what we see". It is very difficult to attribute meaning, for instance, to a photograph" (or an image) "without a caption or accompany text" (Curtin 2002: 54-55). However, this latter point has been disputed and proved wrong. In other words, visuals – images - can be read meaningfully without an accompanied caption or written text. It is also one of his claims that the meanings we give to images are linked to culturally specific associations. To be more specific, Barthes functioning of images can be articulated into two separate levels, also known as the two process of signification in semiotic - denotation and connotation - referred to technically as **"Layering of Meaning".** In this regard the first layer is **denotation**, while the second layer is **connotation.**

Denotation

Denotation, often referred to as the "first order" meaning, is the most basic meaning of a sign, which corresponds to its literal, universal, definitional, obvious and specific meaning. This study relies on thisin visual terms asit "is what all viewers from any culture and at any time would recognize the image as depicting"

Connotation

On the other hand, "connotation is used to refer to the socio-cultural and 'personal' associations (ideological, emotional, and so on) of the sign" Chandler (1994:89). Our interest is thus informed by its strength to correspond to the symbolic or ideological meaning or range of possible meanings of an image inscribed by cultural codes" (Aiello 2020:370). This is quite suggestive of the polysemic nature of meaning or interpretation. For example, the meaning of 'rose' can shift from being a kind of flower to becoming a signification of 'love', 'romance', 'beauty', or 'passion' based on context which, as a rule, hinges on our unique cultural experiences and ideologies.

Ideational metafunction

Such theory as above requires a complementary frame provided in Halliday's insights from the analytical search-engine of ideational metafunction to takes to pieces the associative complex ideologically contained in the real world of the Nigerian experiences.

Methodology

For the purpose of adequate clarification of concepts, meanings and observations, the study adopts a methodology with the kind of research design that facilitates descriptive qualitative analysis. Consequently, the study adopts a layout method of data presentation that assists in fostering detailed description, accurate interpretation of the images,and exposition of the intended meanings. These are done to achieve the targeted qualitative content analysis of the carefully selected images importedfrom the Facebook.For sufficient back-up commentaries, library and archival resources are relied uponfor secondary data.

Analysis and Discussion

These are the three randomly selected graphic images of #ENDSARS protest from Facebook:



Image 1

On a denotative level, the image is a graphic illustration of a lady (presumably, Aisha Yesufu) wearing hijab and four others – three placard carrying ladies and one flag-in-hand young man – at the background. The lady is in navy blue colour with her right hand fist raised partly symbolising comradeship and partly symbolic of Islamic insignia.Handbag hung across her chest is a representation of the haste of youth. The five youths, having their nose guards on tells of the time.

Connotatively, the graphic design is a representation of civil unrest in Nigeria. The position of the lady presents her as a courageous leader. Her posture with her bag across her chest, depicts boldness, courage, resilience fearlessness and readiness to move as occasions serve; she is ready to damn the consequences of her action knowing full well that hers is a religion which has no place for anti-establishmentarian activism. The fist raised is suggestive of comradeship against intimidation, tyranny, violation of human rights. In spite of her extremely patriarchal setting and religious indoctrination, she is not deterred from her social responsibility and actions of common good.

Here is a reflection of gender balance in the expression of social struggle and exploit. The raising of the Nigerian flag by one of them is a sign that they still believe in the country as one and indissoluble entity. The cloudy blue sky is the gloom form which hope is expected to rise as the youths embark on this mission of saving a giant (Nigeria) standing on the feet of clay with call for restructuring metaphorised in the #ENDSARS slogan.



Image 2

The graphic is two in one; there are three Nigerian flags with splashes of blood, then the Nigerian map within which there is a toddler crying. The map is in colour green, and at the base of the map written NIGERIA.

Connotatively, this image could rightly be tagged: Agony in the Land. The crying toddler represents the innocent ones bruised and brutalized by bad governance and the failing leadership. The three Nigerian flags reveal the national coverage of the #ENDSARS agitations. The blood-stained symbolizes a nation that relishes in killingher own future as "the dog and baboon are endlessly soaked in blood"

The blood stained flags presents the Lekki Toll Gate massacre as the only response of the Nigerian state to the peaceful demands of the protesters and thereby denying hope to the hopeless and taking help from the helpless and voice from the voiceless.



Image 3.

The graphic is the face of a black old woman obviously shedding tears of sorrow. She is holding in her lower lip with the help of the upper one. The lacrimal sac is heavy with tears. The tears are flowing uncontrollably. The woman is seen gazing into the distance.

Connotatively, the old woman's face being black represents the whole of African continent. Because of what was taking place at the time (#ENDSARS Protest and the violent attack that ensued later), the continent is in sorrow. The protest and the fatal attack was worldwide news. So seeing the country, Nigeria known as the giant of Africa killing her younger generation was a pain so unbearable for

the entire continent of Africa, and she wept bitterly for the mother land.

Considering the image, this seems to be the peak of all agonies with dropping tears from an elderly woman. Her situation is so critically bad and very pathetically sad. Hence, this is what the African continent feels for the Nigerian nation at this time. How the woman shapes her mouth or lips depicts the deep sorrow and agony the continent feels for the country. She is indeed in a devastating state! Her look and gaze into the distance could suggest a state of despair.

Summary of findings

From the analysis done so far in this study, it is observed that:

(i) images are veritable semiotic mode;

(ii) They are signs that encapsulate meanings and messages in a very deep remarkable and polysemic way;

(iii) in order to interpret the meaning of images thoroughly, the readers need to look beyond the images;

(iv) the social meaning systems and of course the context that gave birth to the texts must be taken into consideration;

(v) for they usually contain The hidden meanings other than the literal ones as evident in the foregoing must be perceived and foregrounded for their ideological purposes.

From our analysis, it is evident that people could tell their stories digitally the way they choose, whether verbal or non-verbal as has been done via Facebook with its very rich semiotic resources borne on acronymic metaphor of #ENDSARS.

Conclusion

Conclusively, it is clear that analyzing Facebook images using an aspect of Barthes' semiotic theoretical lens is rewarding in discovering that the artist, in his creation, is always motivated by something compelling from his socio-political and cultural experiences and ideologies; none of his or her works comes into being by accident, and none is created out of vacuum. The artistic impressions have been digitalized semiotic expressions of topical front burner issues of Nigerian socio-political experiences. They are representations for the agitations to have Nigeria as a good house full of good things. What a powerful means of making meaning and communicating messages for which words have limited space to convey.

Recommendations

From the findings in this study of #ENDSARS digital visual narratology, it is obvious that, contrary to the official impression created at the dawn of this administration in 2015, the Nigerian youths are not lazy after all; they have found more modern and more dynamic ways of demanding their inalienable right – good governance. More digitalised impressionistic images should, therefore, be produced to make their ideological expressions loud enough for the analog generation since the very proof of wisdom is the readiness to learn even from children.

Besides, learning from the #ENDSARS protesting youths, every responsible language users should rather be more professional in packaging the messages and meanings of their codes and channels in order to be more communicative.

Finally, judging from the fact that the present study largely focused on how graphic images on Facebook encode and communicate meanings, it is recommended that further studies can be carried out focusing on any other forms of visual mode (painting, sculpture, architecture etc.) on any other digital platform,twitter andInstagram, for instance. This area of study can also be expanded to coverother perspectives or approachessuch as pragmatics and multimodal discourse analysis.

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