Internet Meme as Campaign Tool in Nigeria's Presidential Election

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Abstract

The democratization process in Nigeria witnesses a digitalized era of unprecedented campaigns. Citizens engaged in the promotion of their favorable candidates and to some extent vilifying others. In the contemporary dynamic society, we encounter and make use of an enormous variety of visual media. Many Nigerians used the social media during the 2015 election to express their political interests. Facebook appears to be gaining ground as one of the social media tremendously used by Nigerians. One of the issues that bedevil the social media usage in connection with the Nigerian 2015 Election campaigns included the creation, uploading and sharing of internet memes of the leading presidential candidates. This study discusses the application and implications of internet memes as a tool for election campaigns. The paper highlights the usage of photograph memes on the two leading presidential candidates during Nigeria's 2015 Presidential election. It is guided by the visual rhetoric of multi-participant popular online content theories in the analysis. Using content analysis on the premise of qualitative methods, this study finds the various ways in which internet memes were used to include attack, defense, digression, dissemination of sensitive information, among others. The article concludes that the Internet Memes served as an avenue for direct political communication which remarkably contributed to the citizen democratic engagement by candidates, politicians, citizen journalists, public relations practitioners, and the general public.

Keywords: *Internet Memes, Election, Campaign, Nigeria, Political Communication*

Introduction

Political election campaign communication seems to be more inclined to the explorations and expositions of methods and strategies adopted by political candidates in attracting voters during electoral process. However, the fact that citizens get involved in the democratic process is not unknown. The involvement of citizens in the democratization process can take place in a number of different

forms: overt, social relations, para-social relations and self-reflection. (Trent, Friedenberg, & Denton, 2016).

Technological transformation and netizens' participation in political communication is one of the notable aspects of contemporary election campaigns. Cinema, television, magazines, newspapers and most recently the social networking sites are awash with numerous visuals including, but not limited to, photographs. One of the distinct features of the social networks, especially Facebook, is its popularity, affordability, accessibility and the capacity of sharing and distribution of information, messages and photographs for the consumption of the users (Bignell, 2002; Taylor& Harris, 2005; Hand, 2012).

The proliferation of the information and communication technologies gadgets has contributed to the active participation of citizens in the creation and dissemination of media content (Girard &Siochrú, 2003), hence the emergence of what is globally recognized as citizen journalism. The usage of the social networking sites has facilitated the ventilation of opinions and improved the participation of the hitherto passive recipient into active members in the business of production and consumption of communication messages (Nnaane, 2014).

The use of information communication technology especially via social media has transcended the use of words alone to creation of images of the candidates. Many of the social networking sites users do so without regardto the issues of decency, decorum, ethics or playing politics according to its rules (Friend &Singer, 2007).

One significant effect of this development is that a Nigerian netizencan scarcely avoid noticing the presence of these Internet memes. The Internet memes are so ubiquitous and unavoidable part of networked social environment of the political campaign communication on the Internet which forced us to become, if not producers/distributors at most, consumer of these Internet memes.

There is paucity of research in the area. Most the researches done in related area were studies of photographs of political candidates as presented in Newspapers, News Magazines as mainstream media (Dahmen,2016; Moriarty, 1991; Hand, 2012).

This calls for a thorough study of the visual rhetorical analysis of the ways in which social media users apply Internet memes as tools in campaigning for or against the leading presidential candidates during the 2015 election in Nigeria.

Media's Role in Political Communication: A Literature Review

In an age of mediated communication, face-to-face political communication is becoming almost impossible to all the social groups constituting the society. The most common contact point between politicians and the audiences is through the mass media. The mass media offeravenue for information delivery in a comprehensible and accessible manner (Franklin, 2004). Esser, Reinemann, and Fan (2001) note that "For a long string of reasons, it has become increasingly difficult – and at the same time increasingly important – for government leaders and vote-seeking politicians to communicate effectively to the electorate through the mass media". Prasad (2003) also notes that the mass media are important in shaping the political process.

The power of the press in agenda setting and political discourse has been succinctly captured by White (1972, p.247) when he notes that:

> *"*the power of the press in America is a primordial one. It sets the agenda of the public discussion; and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. It determines what people will talk and think about – an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties and mandarins".

Accordingly, the media have a complex relationship with sources of power and the political system" (McQuail, 2005), and Barret (2001) says that a responsible nationwide democratic system requires a media system which can generate objective and nonpartisan discussion.

Omu (1978) wrote extensively about the historical development of the Nigerian press and politics. In Nigerian political scene, right from the British rule to the struggle for independence and up to the present democratic dispensation, the media have been central to all the processes (Omu, 1978; Abati, 1998; Ogbondah, 1994; Yusuf, 2001; Nwosu, 2003; Oso, 2010). Aro (2011) asserts the role of the press in nation building.

The pre-independence Nigerian press was not only a prelude and platform where the nation's journalism sprung from but also produced vibrant journalists who amply used their profession to provide the necessary oxygen for the fight against colonialism. The nationalist struggle saw journalists in the forefront which eventually led to Nigerian Independence in 1960. Kukah (1999) supports that journalism was the major vehicle through which anti-colonial struggle was embarked. Newspaper publishers, journalists, commentators and editors were the famous personalities in the movement. They included Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikwe, Ernest Ikoli, Obafemi Awolowo, Anthony Enahoro, Dutse Mohammed Ali, Mokwugo Okoye (Aro, 2011). The press of that day was seen as the "most distinguished intellectual forum in Nigerian history" (Omu, 1978). Hachten (1976) passes accolades to the pre-1965 Nigerian Press thus: "thebest examples of libertarian press in Africa have been ebullient and iconoclastic newspaper of Nigeria before1965". This was because the media provided public sphere for high standard debates and discussions which culminated in national Independence. Golding and Eliot (1979) expounded the connection between the media and politics in Nigeria maintaining that Nigerian journalism began with the struggle for independence, developed as a tool for inculcating nationalism and ended up as partisan politicking. Therefore, the separation of press and politics in Nigeria is unthinkable.

The contribution of the media in Nigeria's democracy can be classified into four segments. First prior to 1999, the press was engaged in the process of entrenching democracy. Second, the media focused on election process. Thirdly, the attention was

centered on monitoring of governance and finally the general interpretation of the democratic process (Pate, 2011). Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides thus: "The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people". Pate (2011) cited Enahoro's observationon the contribution of the press in the Nigeria's first republic.

Social Media and Political Communication

The social media renders enormous contributions in the political process in Nigeria. These contributions could be positive or negative. According to Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (2012), the 2011 elections in Nigeria witnessed a remarkable use of the social media as a tool for political communication. According to Oyenuga (2015) "aside from this, the social media were equally used as a weapon to undermine and even destroy the image of "other" political parties, especially the People's Democratic Party and All Progressive Party". More people are switching to this new media for information as they spend more time in the virtual platform (Nielsen, 2012).

Omoruyi (2015) observes the prevalence of internet memes on prominent personalities by the users of social media in Nigeria.According to Cromey (2010, p.1) "inappropriate manipulation of scientific digital images typically does not arise from an intent to deceive or to obscure information. More often the inappropriate manipulations are simply due to ignorance of the basic principles." It seemed to this author that often what is needed is an explanation of why manipulations are right or wrong. In more ways than the traditional media, social media networks, particularly Facebook and Twitter, played central roles in Nigeria's 2015 presidential elections. Omowole (2015) writes on "7 social media marketing lessons from 2015 Presidential election". He pointed out

how the social media especially Facebook were used in the campaign that culminated into the victory of an opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari. The election resulted into the defeat, for the first time in Nigeria, of an incumbent President (Kperogi, 2015, pp.28-29).

Omoruyi (2015) notes the use of internet memes in the campaigns via social media, especially the Facebook. From the Photoshop images of President Jonathan (GEJ) carrying his luggage from Abuja across a river to Otuoke village to General Buhari's (GMB) dictator-turned-democrat ludicrous photos, Nigerian youths brusquely captioned and captured the presidential candidates in whatever light they wanted the world to see.

Otherstudies on social media bordered on citizen participation in social media for political campaigns (Norwak, 2016; Nnaane,2014). Some of thestudies are on political opinion expressed in Social Media and Election Outcomes -US Presidential Elections (Barclay, Chinnasamy, & Pichandy, 2014). Dimitrova and Bystrom (2013) conducted a study on "The Effects of Social Media on Political Participation and Candidate Image Evaluations in the 2012 Iowa Caucuses". Oyenuga (2015) conducted a study on "Social Media Participation and Pollution of the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria", but this does not talk about photographs of candidates during the election. It is based on this that Dahmen (2016) recommends that "future research should consider the study of visuals on these devices, taking into consideration responsive design and how that affects the visual presentation of candidates via Web 2.O and Social Media channels.While research has already begun in this area, scholarship should continue to systematically investigate visuals within the context of political communication in the digital age". Another important issues noted in this study is the increased political communication/participation via photographs. The ephemerality of photographs has further been seen in the way in which these photographs can be altered depending on circumstances, users and intent of the users. This leadsto the issue of vanishing of

authorship (Hand, 2012). Norwark (2016) notes that "undisputedly, one of the most important aspect of the memes is the very complicated status of their authorship". Shifman (2014) advocates for the usage of multi-participants. Other things in the study show the application of unhindered freedom of expression and the regard to copyright and ethics.

Importance of Photography in Political Communication

We are in an era of avalanche of photography in our daily life (Hand, 2012). According to Asadu and Chime (2010), every election year hundreds of Nigeriansjostle to vie for limited elective positionsin Nigeria. Nigerian politicians use photographs and pictures while presenting messages aimed to attract target audiences and garner the support of the electorates. The issue that readily comes to mind is that Asadu and Chime (2015) were not clear on what type of or how could unexecuted projects be photographed. However, photographs of candidates vying for political offices are commonly seen while presenting posters, pamphlets, fliers, brochures, party manifestoes. Bucy and Grabe (2007) notethat photographs expresscrucial clues about status, viability and, physical fitness of candidates for particular political offices.

In political communication, pictures are essential in attracting viewers, quickening comprehension, providing easy recall of messages, influencing political opinion formation, reshaping attitude and facilitating decision making. Schill (2012, p.122) identifies 10 functions of visual symbols in political communication, thus:

1. Persuasive arguments
2. Agenda setting
3. Dramatization of policies
4. Emotional appeal
5. Building candidates' image
6. Creation of identification
7. Connecting social symbols
8. Transportation of audience (from the present to a future stage)

9. Adding ambiguity
10. Documentation function

Dahmen (2016, p.21) points out the "powerful roles of photographs in providing information and provoking emotions". Schill (2012, p.133) posits that "Images clearly play a foundational role in the political communication process". "Visuals are more than decoration; they perform important roles in communication such as conveying realism, credibility and attitudes".

Research Method

Using content analysis approach, the study seeks to critically examine the semiotics and discusses purposively selected sample units of analysis of internet memes on Goodluck Ebele Jonahan, the 2015 presidential candidate of the then ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and that of his main challenger of the All Progressive Congress (APC), Muhammad Buhari.



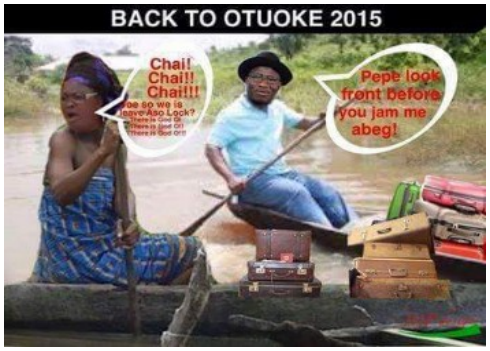
What makes the sampling purposive is the fact that there were fourteen candidates who jostled to clinch the position of presidency during the Nigerian 2015 election. Out of this number the most popular were two candidates. The two candidates got 98.9% of the total valid votes cast. They are what the research refers to as "the leading presidential candidates" and they are the former President Goodluck Ebele Jonahan of the then ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and that of his main challenger of the All Progressive Congress (APC), Muhammad Buhari.

The content categories of the study are similar to the proposition of Buchel (2012) that Internet memes are used as attack tools, platform for sharing sensitive ideas, a tool for responding to incidents/previous posts, pulling a prank and derailing a topic.

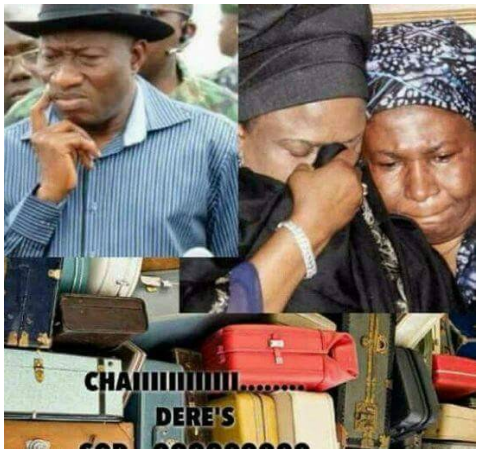
Findings

Internet Memes were used during the 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria in the following ways:

1. As an Attack Tool



Internet memes have been used to attack or attract the attention of other social media users. This is because getting attention is the first step for any meaningful campaign. Numerous Internet memes of the Presidential candidates have been used in this direction. For instance, an internet meme on Jonathan Goodluck and his wife, Dame Patience Jonthan, where they are shown on a canoe with their loads, about to cross a river. And a punch-line saying "Back to Otouke 2015". The candidate was speaking to his wife beside him saying "Pepe look front, before you jam me abeg".



Based on its intended message, the internet meme must have been produced by member(s) of the opposition party. It was meant to depict the climax of the election

where the then incumbent President was to be defeated and sent back home from the Presidential villa. It shows the candidate using canoe as means of transportation to depict primitiveness of the area the candidate came from as well as to show that the candidate did not construct modern transportation facilities to members of his locality. There were other memes which show the wife resisting going back to the village as well as those showing the members of his village coming to the river bank to welcome him after his "defeat" as the candidate of the ruling party.

Other memes in this category are those showing the candidate of PDP appearing sad, annoyed, and regretful by putting one of his fingerson the side of his cheek. His wife, Patience Jonathan, was shown using her veil to clean tears in her eyes. Then a tagline saying "Chai! There is God ooo". That was a popular expression by the wife as an exclamation mark when things get perplexed.



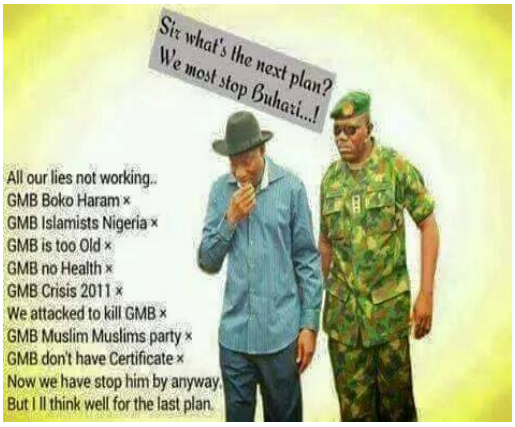
Another internet meme in this category showed Goodluck Jonathan walking through the river with his loads, and over the terrace, are people welcoming him back. And a punch-line which says "Welcome to Bayelsa, 29thMay, 2015".

This is saying indirectly that although he has been a president of the country, he is unable to bring about development.That was why still his home has no bridge to cross over to and fro the river. So the people are welcoming him happily, because finally he is coming back to that same home he forgot to develop when he was a president.

2. As Platform for SharingSensitive Ideas

Social Media users find the Internet memes handy in the process of disseminating otherwise awkward ideas. Because of the humorous nature of memes and lack of attribution to most of the Internet members, netizens find the Internet memes as a veritable campaign tools for the spread of otherwise scornful or nasty ideas which may warrant either legal tussle or societal detest. For instance, Internet memes were used to further amplify vilifying campaign ideas that the then ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) used against the candidate of the opposition All Progressive Congress (APC).

This Internet Memes show the candidate of the PDP, Goodluck Jonathan, looking confounded, with his hand on his jaw. He was flanked by Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Kenneth Minima. This indicatesthat the candidate was in power and supported by the Nigerian Military. The accompanying text shows the military man asking the candidate "Sir, what's the next plan? We must stop Buhari". The word "must" is also spelt wrongly to show desperation, confusion or lack of knowledge of the creator of the meme or to indicate that the Nigerian Military do not bother to speak correct English.



The Internet memes do not only show, but vividly summarize the major hate campaign ideas that were used by the PDP against the APC candidate. Some of the ideas that were not stated in the mainstream media included the allegation that a candidate was a member/supporter of dreaded Boko Haram terrorist group who was out to Islamise Nigeria. Other alleged ideas against the candidate

included that he was not healthy, and too old to rule the country, does not have the minimum school certification requirement to contest and that his party was not considerate of the religious diversity of the country on the alleged attempt to file in names of Muslims for both President and Vice President. The internet memes also claimed that the ruling PDP was behind an attempt to assassinate the APC candidate in a bid to scuttle the former's presidential ambition. After each "idea" a mark (X) was made. The sign (X) was to show that all the efforts did not yield any result. This necessitated the candidate of the PDP to think of the next workable alternative "Now we have [to] stop him by anyway. But I'll think well for the last plan".

Another internet memeunder this category was the one that shows Goodluck Jonathan with a coconut-open-head. And inside the coconut, there is no water. It's empty!



Actually, coconut is known to have sweet water inside thatcan be seen when broken. The sweet water is an important thing that makes coconut loveable, and of interest to people.

So, this meme showing Jonathan with an empty open-coconut head implies that Jonathan is a leader that has an empty brain to enable him to be creative and imaginative interms of leadership. This means that he lacks wisdom and intelligence, leadership skills, because heis shown as brainless, bereft of ideas, clueless, and incompetent of ruling Nigeria, as well as managing its resources.

A corresponding meme is the one that shows the candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC), Muhammadu Buhari, as poor, and hopeless man, in tattered clothes, sitting down on bare ground,

begging with two hands up, saying “people, please give me some change!”

Basedon meme, he appears to be a hopeless man by the roadside, who was pleading with people to assist him, that without their assistance, he cannot do anything.

So, this act of sarcasm implies that Muhammad Buhari was hopeless a manwho contested for election three times and had to get bank loan to enable him to pay for the party’s form.



The slogan of the APC is “change”. They want to change the government and bring changes/succor to the Nigerian citizens. Another common usage of the word “change” is the balance that one gets after paying for a commodity or service with higher currency. All the left over money one puts in the pocket is also called “change”. Here the creator of the meme portrayed the candidate as a beggar asking people to give him the remaining change, “people please give me some change”.

The ragamuffin appearance represents that the candidate is seriously in need of money to the extent that he is even kneeling down to earth. As a retired military officer who is believed to be an anti-corruption warrior, he received campaign supports from various Nigerians including funds. Such activities were here interpreted as not presidential ambition but self-enrichment efforts after being pauperized.

3. A Tool for Responding to Incidents/Previous Posts

One of the most controversial issues in the 2015 election is the claim laid againstthe candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC) that he does not have requisite certification to contest for the election. Members of APC said the candidate lost the document during the civil war, but has a photocopy of the said certificate. The matter was taken up to the school where the candidate studiedand his name was found in the register.



The PDP members have repeatedly claimed that he did not go to school – an allegation which Buhari and his party denied.

For this, the members of the opposition party began to shoot back at the ruling party's claim including the party's national chairman who was known to have said that 'even if Buhari has no certificate, he still prefers him over Jonathan'. However, the statement of the APC's nationalleader was manipulated by the PDP members as a testimony to the allegation they have made.

The impression thus given in the punchline 'WALAHI! TINIBU DON KILL ME NIGERIANS DON CATCH MY FAKE RESULT' is humorously showing Buhari referring to the statement of the APC's party nationalleader as validating the claims of the ruling party.

After realizing that more than half of the electorates were yelling for the support of the opposition party, the ruling party could be remembered to have rendered propaganda against the candidate of the opposition party. The impression thus portrayed in the humorous picture capturing Buhari and one of the popular Nigerian Nollywood actors as school boys wearing school uniforms in line with the punchline 'WHO TALK SAY I



NO GO SCHOOL' is to fascinatingly deny the declarative propaganda laid on the opposition party's contestant Buhari, by the ruling party that he did not go to school.In addition to that the punchline in the meme has also rhetorically visualized a witness for Buhari by stating that "Okon (the Nigerian Nollywood actor) is my witness".

4. Pull a prank



Nigerian Internet Memes creators use that to also pull pranks. Some memes humoredly depicted the failure of the PDP candidate in the general election after the result was announced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as the loser. Internet Memes were shown ridiculing him as a dead person lying in a coffin as seen in the meme above while people surrounded the casket in which the body is lying covered with the a PDP flag. This denotes the failure and death of the administration.





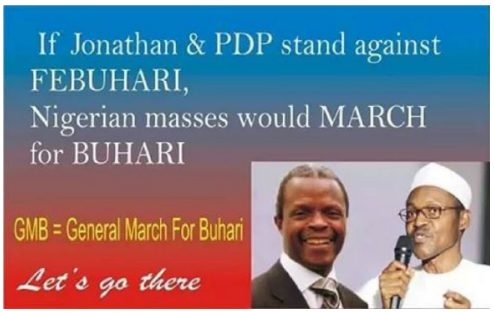
Another exampleof such meme is the one that shows the candidate of the APC will be in power. While in office, this meme showsAPC candidate making a call, and the punch-line which says, "Hello Kiri-Kiri, please I want to make reservation for 2000 people".

The message in this picture is that Buhari is known to be an anti-corrupt person, with strict action upon whoever is caught in any act of corruption. This implies that when he comesinto power, he willrealize the level of corruption done by his predecessor. So he was shown making calls to the Head of "Kiri-Kiri prison" to make a reservation for two thousand (2,000) people or empty two buildings.

5. Derail a Topic



It is a common knowledge that the 2015 Presidential Election was postponed for six weeks after the initial preparations. Many reasons were presented by the Government to include security challenges. The election was to take place on Saturday February 14, 2015 which is also celebrated as "Valentine's Day". The election was to "clash" with such celebrations. There were claims that the election was postponed because of the fear that the ruling party may lose the election. The following meme was designed to derail the discussion on the allegation. The PDP candidate and the then incumbent President was humoredly depicted as addressing the nation saying that "If you have Spent ur Girlfriend's Val money, because of The Election Prepare 4 Problem nd sleepless night. Election has been Shifted and Val must Hold"



The meme producer's sense of priority is expressed to be a supportive one to the opposition party's candidate, Buhari.As a reaction to the above meme or postponement of

the election date, the following meme shows APC candidate and his running mate smiling together. The punchline 'if Jonathan & PDP stand against FEBUHARI, Nigerian masses would MARCH for BUHARI' is metaphorically sending electorates message to the ruling party that is 'if the incumbent and his members have finally succeeded in devising a way to change the month and the date of the election which was scheduled to be February 14, 2015 before to March 28, 2015 which also affected the coinage "FEBUHARI", then they should know that they have come with another coinage again (MARCH for BUHARI) showing that they are still in support of BUHARI'.



Similarly, another meme in this category targeted at the members and supporters of APC party whose main slogan as a party is known to be CHANGE. On the verge of their campaign and very close to the day of the election, the election date was changed from 14 FEBUARY to 28 MARCH due to some inconveniences pointed out by the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in order toprevent possible controversies in the process of the election or after the election.

The meme's punchline thus reads: 'YOU PEOPLE HAVE BEEN SHOUTING FOR 'CHANGE', AND INEC CHANGES THE ELECTION DATE' is ridiculously saying that by changing the date of the election, the meaning of the word CHANGE has been actualized. Hence, the incumbent is shown metaphorically in the meme asking the
members of the opposition party 'WHATELSE DO YOU WANT?'

Conclusion

The study finds that the Social Media served as an avenue for political communication. The social media has remarkably

contributed to the citizen democratic engagement by candidates, politicians, journalists, public relations practitioners, and the general public.

The work highlights how the social networking sites served as avenue that contributed to the citizen democratic engagement, the application of unhindered freedom of expression, ephemerality of photographs, vanishing of authorship in relation to the creation, distribution and consumption ofinternet memes on the presidential candidates of the 2015 Nigeria's presidential election. It is evident from the study that Internet memes were used as a tool for conveying a myriad of election campaign messages. As a tool for political communication, the study finds that Internet memes were used to attack, respond to previous comments, pull a prank, derail a topic and share sensitive information which might have been done otherwise.

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